

Summary of International Joint Commission Hybrid Listening Session

November 2025 – Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario



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Submitted April 10, 2026

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Disclaimer

This report represents the views of the authors who have attempted to summarize what was heard from participants of the hybrid International Joint Commission Listening Session held in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario on November 13, 2025, and the subsequent virtual Report Back and Validation session on February 24, 2026. This report is not meant to be representative of all “Indigenous Peoples in the Great Lakes” or any specific Indigenous Nation, organization or Tribe. Additionally, this report does not represent the views or official positions of the International Joint Commission.

Introduction

Indigenous Great Lakes Network Background

The Indigenous Great Lakes Network (IGLN), formerly the Indigenous Great Lakes Network initiative (IGLNI) has acted as a resource and support service for participating Indigenous communities, Nations, Tribes and organizations, facilitating collaboration and knowledge-sharing with the aim of advancing Indigenous environmental research and monitoring needs in the Great Lakes region. The Indigenous Great Lakes Network Initiative was created in response to the recognition of the lack of inclusion of Indigenous voices and perspectives in Great Lakes environmental and sustainability initiatives and governance – this was done so in collaboration with Great Lakes Observing System, Smart Great Lakes Initiative and the Indigenous Environmental Institute (IEI), at Trent University.

Now, the IGLN is co-led by Dr. Barbara Moktthewenkwe Wall and Dr. Mary-Claire Buell and supported by Network Director Lydia Johnson and Engagement Coordinator Heléna Mauti. The network is currently built on a partnership between the Great Lakes Fishery Commission, and the IEI at Trent University. There are currently 165 network members from 74 unique Indigenous or ally Nations, Tribes and organizations.

Network Intentions

1. **Fostering Connection and Collaboration:** To act as a central hub that fosters connection between Indigenous communities, Nations, Tribes and organizations around the Laurentian Great Lakes.
2. **Funding Support and Resource Accessibility:** To provide network participants with needed resources to address obstacles impacting the advancement and pursuit of their environmental research and monitoring priorities.
3. **Inclusivity and Transparency in Network Structure:** To ensure that the network's decision-making processes (e.g., priorities, vision, mandate, funding) are transparent, fair, and accountable, and to work for and support individual participants (communities, Nations, Tribes, organizations) as well as the collective.
4. **Intergenerational Knowledge Sharing and Sustainable, Indigenous-led and Indigenous-focused Initiatives:** To create, promote, and support opportunities for Indigenous youth to actively engage in environmental research and monitoring initiatives.
5. **Training, Capacity-Building, and Community-focused Sustainability:** To assist in capacity-building and connect participating Indigenous communities, Nations and

Tribal Organizations with the right people, skills and expertise to support environmental research or monitoring.

IGLN – IJC Relationship

In the summer of 2025, the IGLN and IJC entered a partnership, based on the background and intentions of the IGLN and the IJC’s commitment to stand with and further incorporate Indigenous science and knowledge into associated activities under the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement (including the Triennial Assessment of Progress (TAP) Report on Great Lakes Water Quality). The deliverables associated with this partnership were as follows:

1. Lead, with IJC staff collaboration, the planning, organization and execution of a hybrid listening session, to be conducted as a half-day event in conjunction with the Indigenous Great Lakes Network's fall 2025 meeting (November 2025)
2. Lead, with IJC staff collaboration, the delivery of a virtual report-back and validation session of the draft synthesis from deliverable 1 (February 2026)
3. Deliver a written synthesis of the November 2025 listening session (April 2026)

IJC Listening Session

IGLN held its 4th Network Gathering in Baawating / Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario on November 12 – 13, 2025. The Gathering brought together approximately 60 participants representing First Nations, Tribes and Organizations from around the Great Lakes. The goals of the gathering were to: *foster community and relationships, learn with and from one another, and turn vision into action*. The initial day and a half of the gathering included 1) network members sharing work happening within their communities, 2) a large group visioning session, 3) a youth panel, and 4) two workshops.

In the afternoon of November 13th, the International Joint Commission hosted their hybrid listening session. The goal of this session was two-fold: 1) to gain perspectives from IGLN members about Great Lakes water quality, and 2) building relationships to strengthen long-term collaboration between IJC and Great Lakes Indigenous communities. After a brief presentation from IJC staff and Commissioners on the background of IJC and their intentions for the day, participants were broken into small discussion or breakout groups. Each breakout group had at least one IJC staff member who facilitated the discussion, in addition to an IGLN staff or student helper whose main role was notetaking.

Example questions that were asked to IGLN members during the listening session included

- Imagine it's 2028. How do you envision the IJC conducting its assessment of Canadian and US governments' progress in a way that stands with Indigenous peoples' science and knowledge? What does the IJC need to do to get there?
 - In the short term (<3 years)?
 - In the mid-term (< 6 years)?
 - In the long term (< 9 years)?
- Share your story: How have changes in the Great Lakes water quality affected your quality of life, economic well-being, or how you recreate in and engage with the Great Lakes?
- If you had a magic wand, what actions would you have the governments of Canada and the United States take to make progress on Great Lakes water quality issues that affect how you live, work, and engage with the lakes?

It is important to note that the responses reflected in this report do not necessarily answer these questions directly, as each of the breakout conversations took their own direction.

What we heard from the IGLN

Notes were taken at the breakout tables by IJC and IGLN staff, as well as 5 completed participant handouts that the IJC distributed and collected. IGLN staff reviewed and reflected on the compiled notes and identified the following four themes:

1. Outreach / Relationships
2. Inclusion of Indigenous Knowledges / Science (IK/S) into IJC's use of science
3. Financial Support
4. IJC Clarity

Table 1. Summary of Key Messages

Category	Outreach / Relationships	Inclusion of Indigenous Knowledges / Science	Financial Support	IJC Clarity
Key Message	<i>Relationships are missing</i>	<i>Indigenous cultural values and goals are missing from the IJC</i>	<i>Accessible funding for Indigenous-led projects is needed</i>	<i>A need for increased understanding of the IJC in accessible language and transparency of their intentions with Indigenous communities</i>

A summary and themes of listening session discussions were shared with the IGLN membership on February 17, 2026. IGLN members had a review period of 2 weeks to provide written feedback; no written feedback was received. Network members were also invited to participate in a virtual Report Back and Validation session on February 24, 2026. Four IGLN members participated and provided additional insights. A summary of what we heard at the International Joint Commission’s Listening Session at the November 2025 IGLN Gathering and the Virtual Report Back and Validation Session in February 2026 is presented below.

Outreach / Relationships

We heard relationships are missing

<p>Summary of Section</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships need to be less formal, more meaningful, and done on an on-going basis (i.e. not only when it is reporting time) • Outreach with Indigenous communities should be constant and discussions should always be happening outside of reporting timeline • Engage informally with the intention to build meaningful relationships instead of coming with an agenda and expectations • Collaboration needs to be ground-up, not top-down • Collaboration should be co-creation instead of commenting on reports or work that are already done
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Overwhelmingly, each breakout group discussed the need for stronger and enhanced relationships between Indigenous Nations, Communities, Peoples and the IJC. These relationships need to be less formal, more meaningful, and strengthened/maintained continually, with meaningful outreach to Indigenous communities and subsequent discussions ongoingly and not only when it is reporting time. Engagements should also happen informally with the intention to build meaningful relationships instead of arriving with an agenda and expectations for discussion that satisfies the needs of IJC. For example, make time when gathering to intentionally ask people how they are doing, hearing about what they are seeing on the land, and host informal meetings to connect and share in this way.

Suggestions were offered for establishing and engaging in relationships. Participants expressed that the nature of the collaboration and engagements need to be built from the ground-up (i.e. listening to what people need) versus the top-down, ‘status quo’ approach that is currently not working. Building off this re-orientation to relationships, collaboration

should be focused on and prioritize co-creation rather than asking Indigenous peoples and communities to comment on an IJC report that has already been completed, or on priorities that have already been established. To help achieve this, it was suggested that the IJC visit in community and host in-person discussions to foster trust and authentically demonstrate to communities that they are indeed listening.

Guidance on what is needed for these relationships to be improved was also given by participants. The need for meaningful relationships with “the people who have control” (i.e., IJC and government agencies) was mentioned in examples such as the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Adaptive Management (GLAM) Committee meeting with First Nations, and the desired relationship from Garden River First Nation with “the people who control the St. Mary’s River water levels”. Improving the connections between the IJC, Anishinabek Nation, and Union of Ontario Indians was also mentioned. These relationships, once improved and established, also need protection so that they can be sustainable and resilient, which can be done in part by creating a “framework of connection” and a protocol for connection that is durable for personnel turnover on both sides of the relationship. Lastly, participants mentioned engagement that goes beyond the TAP Report to aid in relationship building that would honour the oral transmission of knowledges by community, Elders, and youth. For example, creating a documentary that asks “what does Indigenous science mean to you?”

Finally, there were also reflections shared on what has gone well in this category of outreach and relationship building. Participants shared having the IJC in the same room as Network Members at the IGLN November Gathering was meaningful from a relationship building standpoint. There was encouragement for the IJC to continue attending more in-person events to be more likely to establish relationships that will be less formal. A balance, respect for, and understanding of the right time and place is still required though, as it was mentioned it is still important to have spaces dedicated exclusively to community members and Indigenous peoples.

Inclusion of Indigenous Knowledges / Science into IJC Science

We heard Indigenous cultural values and goals are missing from the IJC

Summary of Section	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Include interconnected understanding of watershed ecosystems, inclusive of humans• Validate Indigenous Knowledges and place-based understandings of territories• Utilize Treaty Rights, Treaty Relations as indicators• Create separate Annex for TEK• Include Indigenous languages and art in communications• Advance research with Indigenous Knowledges
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Indigenous Knowledges and Sciences are place-based ways of knowing, being, doing and relating to the natural world that are valid alongside western sciences. Knowledge collaboration requires an understanding of this validity and a commitment to Knowledge Equity and Ethical Space.

Participants shared that Indigenous cultural values and goals are missing from the IJC's science. Cultural values need to be incorporated into the Great Lakes Areas of Concern (AOC) and Beneficial Use Impairments (BUIs). Specifically, cultural values and goals need to be included in the AOC delisting process and BUI removal criteria – for example the cultural use of rivers is currently not included in BUIs. A participant shared the AOCs were created in the 1980s without considering Indigenous community consultation and rights. Deciding indicators without community involvement creates culturally irrelevant measures. Another example is addressing the impacts of water levels and water health on communities should be included in the Water Quality Context.

Including Indigenous Knowledges within the IJC cannot be done without equitable co-creation and collaboration. Participants shared they want to see IJC's science incorporate a more interconnected understanding of watershed ecosystems, inclusive of humans. Indigenous Knowledge Systems are inextricably connected to place and relationships to that place (inclusive of all living beings) intergenerationally. Separating people from nature and categorizing the environment into silos to be independently studied is a common practice in western science that is not inclusive of nor compatible with Indigenous Knowledge Systems and worldviews. Applied examples of this interconnected understanding would include inland rivers, lakes and groundwater, with emphasis on Lake Nipigon and Lake St. Clair, in the Great Lakes basin; and the Great Lakes Water Quality

Agreement including riparian zone and shoreline quality and considering flooding of down-river communities.

Further, IJC science needs to validate place-based Indigenous knowledges and understandings of their territories. Participants shared some of these specific place-based concerns. Concerns in the Bay of Quinte include blue-green algae, microplastics, contaminants, droughts, water scarcity, and wildlife loss (fish, turtles, birds, frogs), with a stated need of establishing Indigenous Guardians to protect the Bay. Concerns in Lake Huron include water levels dropping, less ice coverage, and a need to be more proactive and less reactive in responding to community concerns. Concerns in Lake Superior include increased pressure of algal blooms and uncertainty around climate change impacts. Additional Great Lakes place-based concerns include effects from ships and dredging, with communities knowing that stirring sediments will affect communities and More-Than-Human Relatives of the Natural World (i.e. fish, birds, plants, insects, mammals), and water levels dropping which is a risk to community health and quality of life as it impacts the ability to hunt and fish.

Participants also suggested utilizing Treaty Rights and Treaty Relations as an indicator to assess if the United States of America and Canada are being good Treaty Partners to First Nations and Tribes. Included in this would be assessing if First Nations and Tribes can exercise their hunting and fishing rights. Specifically determining if the land has been taken care of and the waters are healthy to do so by assessing contaminants, pollutants, and habitat disturbance/destruction that might be impacting the species important to First Nations and Tribes. Participants suggested that the IJC list all Treaties in the Great Lakes Basin in the TAP Reports and work to learn and understand treaty worldview differences.

Participants included suggestions and guidance for how the IJC can better include Indigenous knowledges and cultural values. This importantly begins with respecting and affirming Indigenous self-determination:

- Allowing and supporting Indigenous communities to do their own tests to inform the TAP Report
- Including Indigenous languages and art in various IJC communications

Participants shared ideas on how the IJC can advance research with Indigenous Knowledges:

- Host conferences for Indigenous students with funders present
- IJC to leverage opportunities to act on what communities are saying they need and have conference audiences act on those

Additional suggestions include:

- A scoping review of Great Lakes science and political structure
- Creating a separate Annex in the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement for Indigenous Knowledges / Traditional Ecological Knowledge. Currently cooperation and consultation with Tribal Governments, First Nations, and Métis is under Annex #10 (Science), but they shouldn't be lumped together
- Collaboration with Indigenous Peoples and Knowledges requires a commitment to data sovereignty and participants
- There needs to be safeguarding of Indigenous Knowledges with government agreements and establishing partnerships to help do so

Financial Support

We heard accessible funding for Indigenous-led projects is needed

Summary of Section	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create grants and scholarships for Indigenous youth that are easily accessible• Create opportunities for Indigenous Knowledges• Fund spaces like the IGLN• Fund for capacity not just progress or project-based
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Creating opportunities to fund and support Indigenous-led initiatives in the Great Lakes was prevalent in the discussions. This involves creating grants and scholarships for Indigenous youth that are easily accessible – doing so could provide connections to invite them to work with the IJC as well. The key part of discussions on this category is that the opportunities to receive funds are accessible for Indigenous youth and community – this means the application process and requirements are straight-forward, free of jargon, not exclusionary to levels of education or career experience, open to different ways of knowing, and lived realities and experiences are valid in how applications are evaluated. Another suggestion is to create opportunities to fund projects that involve Indigenous Knowledges. For example, Indigenous-led fellowships that exist outside of post-secondary/academia. Importantly, when thinking about funding for Indigenous peoples and communities, capacity building opportunities must be funded instead of only creating progress or project-based funding. Lastly, it was shared that funding of Indigenous-led spaces like the IGLN should continue.

IJC Clarity

We heard a need for increased understanding of the IJC in accessible language and transparency of their intentions with Indigenous communities

Summary of Section	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Need to increase understanding of the organizational structure of governance in the Great Lakes<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ What is the IJC's role?○ Who does what?○ What are the priorities of IJC and who is taking action towards them?○ Where are First Nations and Tribes?• A simple and accessible description of governance is needed to be able to share with community
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The complexity of the IJC is challenging to comprehend easily. Participants shared there is confusion on Great Lakes governance structure and there is a need to increase understanding of the roles and responsibilities of who is involved. For example: what is the role of the IJC? Where are First Nations and Tribes? Who does what? How do all these government agencies fit together and work together? What are the priorities and who is taking action towards them? How do these organizations, governments, institutions work for and with community? In addition to clearly answering these questions, a simple and accessible description of governance is needed to be able to share in community. Finally, there are many acronyms within the IJC – making and sharing a list of common acronyms, as well as how they may be relevant to Indigenous peoples and communities would help increase accessibility.

There is also a need for clarity and transparency in how the IJC communicates their intentions of building relationships with Indigenous communities. For example, is the IJC compelled by the Crown to have these relationships? What is the intention? What can Indigenous Peoples and communities expect by engaging with the IJC? Is the IJC happy with what they have now, or do they want more feedback and engagement from grassroots level voices?

Recommendations

We received the following additional suggestions from IGLN members that fell outside of the four themes categorized above:

Indigenous Liaison

It was suggested that IJC hire an Indigenous staff member(s) whose role would be “Indigenous liaison” or “community champion” that could act as a bridge between IJC and Indigenous communities around the Great Lakes. There was specific mention of inclusion of youth and Two-Spirit individuals in these roles. It was also suggested that regional representatives get hired as Commissioners to offer more regional perspectives and representation.

Forum

We heard that communities want a forum to express their needs in relation to their concerns about water quality. It was mentioned that there once was a Lake Superior forum and a concern is once AOCs are removed other lake-wide advisory committees will be lost too. A suggestion was to replicate the IGLN in all 5 Great Lakes.

Care and Safety

Ensuring care and safety when including Indigenous peoples and communities in these processes is essential. Historical and on-going settler colonialism has resulted in misuse of information, lack of trust and harm to Indigenous people, Nations and Tribes. The IJC must lead collaboration with care and ensure that mistreatment of knowledge and data is not perpetuated.

Transparency

More transparency with Indigenous communities and peoples was suggested during the listening session/report back process to allow for a better understanding of what tasks IJC is undertaking but also to aid in building trust. For example, communities can feel involved and aware of work and initiatives that are happening in their territories and that they have agency to participate. To hold IJC accountable to their goal of continued engagement with Indigenous communities and peoples we suggest that the IJC create a public “progress of braiding knowledges” living document or report. This could include a timeline and the intentions for IJC’s engagement with Indigenous Nations. For example, demonstrating what has been done already and what are the next steps.

Other recommendations or suggestions we heard during the listening session/report back process were:

- A desire for more regulations and monitoring in the Great Lakes
- Development of Indigenous Led Source Water Protection Framework
- Educating Indigenous and non-Indigenous people about good practices

Looking Ahead

The IGLN will continue to advise the IJC on its practices when collaborating and engaging with Indigenous communities, Nations and Tribes in the Great Lakes Region. Additionally, the IGLN is planning two training sessions for some IJC staff regarding cultural competency as well as ethical/equitable relationship building practices.

Collaboration with Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples can be a daunting task that feels difficult to do successfully. It involves humility, listening, transparency, challenging our biases, and flexibility. The IJC mentioned their listening sessions in 2025/2026 are “just the beginning” and that they want to work toward an eventual “fully braided knowledge TAP Report”. The IGLN supports the IJC striving towards ethical and equitable knowledge collaboration and encourages the IJC to consider the voices of the IGLN Members that are summarized in this report as they continue their journey to move forward to meet this intention.

Appendix A – Summary of Recommendations

Table 1A. Summary of all recommendations to IJC from ‘What We Heard’ section

Outreach / Relationships	Inclusion of Indigenous Knowledges / Science	Financial Support	IJC Clarity
<p>Make time when gathering to intentionally ask people how they are doing, hearing about what they are seeing on the land, and host informal meetings to connect and share in this way.</p>	<p>Demonstrate an interconnected understanding of watershed ecosystems, inclusive of humans by including inland rivers, lakes and groundwater, with emphasis on Lake Nipigon and Lake St. Clair, in the Great Lakes basin; looking at riparian zone and shoreline quality; and considering flooding of down-river communities.</p>	<p>Create grants and scholarships for Indigenous youth that are easily accessible</p>	<p>Create infographics that would allow for an increased understanding of the roles, responsibilities, and priorities of IJC and how IJC collaborates with other government agencies</p> <p>Ensure that these documents are explicit in demonstrating intentions in relationship building with Indigenous communities</p>
<p>Visit in community and host in-person discussions to foster trust and authentically demonstrate to communities that they are indeed listening.</p>	<p>Utilize Treaty Rights and Treaty Relations as an indicator to assess if the United States of America and Canada are being good Treaty Partners to First Nations and Tribes.</p> <p>List all Treaties in the Great Lakes Basin in the TAP Reports and work to learn and understand treaty worldview differences</p>	<p>Create opportunities to fund projects that involve Indigenous Knowledges. For example, Indigenous-led fellowships that exist outside of post-secondary/ academia</p>	<p>Create an accessible description of IJC’s governance</p>
<p>Ensure engagement that</p>	<p>Allow and support</p>	<p>Fund capacity building</p>	<p>Create and share a list of common</p>

<p>goes beyond the TAP Report to aid in relationship building that honours the oral transmission of knowledges by community, Elders, and youth</p>	<p>Indigenous communities to do their own tests to inform the TAP Report and including Indigenous languages and art in various IJC communications</p>	<p>opportunities instead of only creating progress or project-based funding opportunities</p>	<p>acronyms, as well as how they may be relevant to Indigenous peoples and communities</p>
<p>Continue attending in-person events to be more likely to establish relationships that will be less formal. A balance, respect for, and understanding of the right time and place is still required, as it is still important to have spaces dedicated exclusively to community members and Indigenous peoples</p>	<p>Advance research with Indigenous Knowledges by hosting conferences for Indigenous students with funders present and leveraging opportunities to act on what communities are saying they need</p>	<p>Ensure accessibility for Indigenous youth and community – this means the application process and requirements are straight-forward, free of jargon, not exclusionary to levels of education or career experience, open to different ways of knowing, and lived realities and experiences are valid in how applications are evaluated</p>	
	<p>Conduct a scoping review of Great Lakes science and political structure</p>	<p>Continue funding Indigenous-led spaces (like the IGLN)</p>	
	<p>Create a separate Annex in the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement for Indigenous Knowledges/ Traditional Ecological Knowledge</p>		