

# First Nations Water Security

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## Security for Mother Earth

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*Le problème persistant pour plusieurs Premières Nations au Canada se traduit par le manque de sécurité autour de l'eau du à une implication limitée de la gestion de l'eau. Le savoir traditionnel des Anishinaabekwe peut prendre en charge une approche équilibrée et sa protection en suggérant des principes qui reconnaissent, maintiennent et établissent des relations socio-écologiques essentielles.*

How can First Nations perspectives and Indigenous<sup>1</sup> knowledge enhance water security? In this paper, I investigate the inter-relationships between First Nations and Western approaches to water, and the opportunities and barriers to collaborative water governance to support First Nations water security. I focus on the ways that traditional Anishinaabe perspectives on water within the Great Lakes region can support water security by providing important guiding principles that recognize, maintain, and make paramount critical social-ecological relationships that are necessary for more responsible natural resource and environmental management practices. Interviews with five Anishinaabe Elders conducted in 2010 and 2011 form the basis of the paper, and document sources fill gaps and elaborate on the themes and elements that emerged from the interviews. In several instances, included are comments from government actors and water “experts,” so-labeled for their extensive knowledge and experience with both Indigenous and Western approaches to water. The names of those who participated in the research are excluded to maintain the confidentiality assured during data collection. However, I do wish to acknowledge and express my deep sense of respect and gratitude for the honour of listening to the Elders and for learning from their water wisdom.

*Chi-miigwetch; Niawen'kó:wa* to all that contributed; without you this paper would not be possible.

### Background

The concept of water security is an emerging paradigm gaining increasing attention in the natural resources, academic and policy arenas. Commonly defined as “sustainable access on a watershed basis, to adequate quantities of water of acceptable water quality, to ensure human and ecosystem health” (Norman et al. ii), water security requires a balance between resource protection and sustainable use, and is an important component of social and economic development. For First Nations, access to safe water is not only essential for contemporary needs but is also critical for the preservation of a traditional way of life. However, the lack of water security or the inability to access the quality and quantity of water required for basic human needs is a persistent problem for many First Nations in Canada. Approximately 92 of the 617 First Nations communities across Canada are under a drinking water advisory (DWA) due to confirmed or suspected microbiological or chemical contamination in their drinking water.<sup>2</sup> While some DWAs last only days, others persist as long-term advisories (Health Canada).

First Nations concerns for water extend beyond drinking water and relate to access to territories to maintain a traditional way of life, protection of water within traditional territories, and involvement in “the decision-making processes that affect their lives, lands and waters” (McGregor i). For First Nations, water is a sacred gift, the life blood of Mother Earth, and all water, not just water for human

use, needs protection (see, for example, Chiefs of Ontario 2008a, 2008b; Union of Ontario Indians). Through Indigenous ceremonies, laws and protocols, First Nations have exercised inherent responsibilities to fulfill obligations to the Creator to ensure clean water for all living things since time immemorial (Chiefs of Ontario 2008c). However, water governance in Canada today, defined as the processes and institutions<sup>3</sup> for making decisions that affect water (de Loë), is a shared responsibility between the federal and provincial governments, and First Nations are limited

First Nations on activities that may impact their treaty and Aboriginal rights (practices, customs and traditions) including inherent rights of self-determination and self-governance is a critical driver that will influence future water policy, and whose affects with respect to water are yet to be fully realized. This complex bundle of rights is intricately connected to water security, since many depend on access to water resources and an abundant clean water source. In the international arena, instruments such as the 2007 United Nations Declaration of Rights of

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in the extent to which they can exercise these inherent responsibilities. First Nations are generally excluded from water decision-making, lack meaningful involvement in water governance, and water pollution and degradation continue to impact all aspects of the their way of life (Union of Ontario Indians).

At a time when natural resource and environmental management call for more participatory, ecosystem-based, and integrative approaches, recent activities indicate a shift toward greater water collaboration among multiple levels of governments and First Nations. One of the guiding principles of the 2012 Great Lakes Strategy, crafted to protect and restore ecological health, is the explicit recognition of the spiritual and cultural relationship First Nations maintain with the Great Lakes. Also, the proposed 2015 Ontario Bill 66, Great Lakes Protection Act, contains provisions for the inclusion of traditional ecological knowledge and First Nations participation on the Great Lakes Guardian Council—a forum that will establish priorities, partnerships and funding measures. Furthermore, the 2014 renewal of the Canada-Ontario Agreement on Great Lakes Water Quality and Ecosystem Health contains for the first time an Annex for engaging First Nations which includes collaboration on the delivery of the agreement and support for traditional knowledge projects. While the substantive and procedural effectiveness of these and other initiatives to include First Nations and their knowledge within water governance require further investigation using both Western and First Nations measures, it is evident that a policy shift toward great collaboration is beginning.

The Crown's obligations to consult and accommodate<sup>4</sup>

Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the 2010 Declaration of The Human Right to Water further strengthen this legal argument, and perhaps more significantly indicate a global recognition and commitment in support of Indigenous rights and involvement in decision-making. As First Nations water governance opportunities expand in Canada, so too will the challenges associated with the harmonization of Western and Indigenous approaches. This raises some very practical policy development and implementation questions. What are First Nations perspectives on water and how can traditional knowledge support water security?

#### **Anishinaabe Relationship with Water**

For the Anishinaabe, water, or *Nibi* in the Anishinaabemowin language, includes “the rain waters, waterfalls, rivers, streams, creeks, lakes, mountain springs, swamp springs, bedrock water veins, snow, oceans, icebergs, the sea” (Chiefs of Ontario 2008c 1). From the traditional perspective, water is highly respected and revered for reasons far greater than its physical properties. For the Anishinaabe, water is life; it is the Anishinaabe lifeline and the bloodline of Mother Earth. The Anishinaabe have an innately deep connection to water to which they are mutually and spiritually bound. Water itself is believed to have a spirit; it is an entity unto its own, with a consciousness. The Elders communicated how the spirit of water gives life, it nourishes, it cleanses... In its essence, “water is medicine for us” (Elder 5).

*I believe that water is our lifeline. Without water we*

*can't live for very long. We can live without food, we can live without a lot of things but we cannot live without water. Water to me is just—it's our lifeline. (Elder 1)*

*From my perspective and teachings, water is spiritual. It is part of who we are, it is part of why, it is what binds the natural world with life. (Elder 4)*

In exploring this perspective on water, I was reminded that through traditional knowledge and teachings the Creator has given the Anishinaabe the ways toward a “good life”—harmonious living with nature, which means taking care of the water and all things on earth.

*The perspective is fundamentally of our traditions and teachings and how life is and how the well-being of creation itself and how nature has naturally occurred or evolved. (Elder 4)*

The traditional Anishinaabe relationship with water involves beliefs and philosophy rooted deeply throughout the traditional institutions because water permeates every part of the Anishinaabe way of life. The Anishinaabe “respect the water and how it brings life for us and there are teachings around that in terms of how to protect it” (Elder 1). Traditional teachings provide the informal and unwritten rules which guide the Anishinaabe interactions with water and all of creation. These rules are transmitted through the traditional Anishinaabe stories whose meanings provide the lessons toward the Anishinaabe way in life.

*Through Indigenous perspectives and philosophies and through our own rituals and teachings that we understand and be respectful of the stories—but not just stories ... but the realization of this life. (Elder 4)*

Traditional teachings and stories also tell of water responsibilities and appropriate behavior for Anishinaabe interaction with water. For example, the Anishinaabe Creation story reinforces the powerful cleansing role of water and expresses the enduring relationship the Anishinaabe have with water.

*Each of the Nations has their own creation story and water was always part of those creation stories. So water has been with us and in a relationship with us since time immemorial; its forever. And even in our creation story when the giant flood came, that's what the Creator used, he used the water for cleansing, so that tells me that's what water does for us, it cleanses out who we are. So we drink. (Elder 5)*

“Creation stories are the means by which cultural communities ground their identity in particular narratives and particular landscapes” (Johnston 2). The Anishinaabe creation story speaks to the significance of the spiritual connections to land, water and animals. The version presented by Darlene Johnston describes how, for the southern Great Lakes Anishinaabe, the centre of creation is in the strait between Lake Huron and Lake Michigan on Michilimackinac Island. As the story goes, after the big flood, the original human beings were created from the corpses of the first animals or “the First Ones” who formed the land around the Great Lakes. The story tells how after the animals created the land, they moved to places where the land and water would provide for them, from these locations the animals died and the original human beings were born. The creation story thus details a basis for the innate connection and responsibilities to traditional lands and water, and also the spiritual relationship the Anishinaabe have with their animal relatives, which is a fundamental part of the clan system and traditional governance.

For the Anishinaabe, the knowledge of natural systems is embedded within the traditional teachings, which emphasize rules as reminders of their position within the world. Water is understood to be one of the four original sacred elements along with the wind, fire, and the earth that are interconnected and bound together on Mother Earth. Human beings are children of Mother Earth and she provides the water that nourishes the earth which in turn provides for her children.

*I'll go back to our teachings about the Earth... The Earth is really our first mother and the water is her veins and everything about the earth is nourishing. The water nourishes the food that we need. It grows the plants so that they are healthy. (Elder 5)*

Ecological relationships such as those between water and plants and the linkages to human health are also a significant part of the traditional ways. The Elders spoke of the significance of water in the context of the sacred plants. Tobacco, sage, sweet grass and cedar are considered the four sacred medicines the Creator gave to the Anishinaabe to be used for ceremony and healing (Beaver). Each sacred element has a role and their functions together contribute to human health.

*We need our plants. We need our plants healthy because—Elders talk about plants that are here and are meant to be in this area for these people. And what if the plants are not getting the nourishing, the nourishment that they need to be strong and to thrive in a healthy way? So if*

*our plants, if our land base, if our water is not healthy we are not either. The plants can't do what they're meant to do; we can't do what we're meant to do.* (Elder 5)

The Elders frame their teachings on the interconnectedness of water and Earth's creatures in relation to the Circle of Life and the cycles of nature. For the Anishinaabe, the Circle of Life is represented by the Medicine Wheel which is used for teaching about the Anishinaabe place in the universe and the relationship to all things. The

Men's and women's specific responsibilities and knowledge related to water are important for protecting and maintaining the Anishinaabe relationship with water. The Anishinaabe believe the spirit of water is related to the feminine aspects of creation, nature and spirituality: "So the water is definitely feminine according to our teachings" (Elder 5).

*And so there's a gender difference in the knowledge that you get from water, from a man, and from a woman...*

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**"The role that we [women] have ... [is] caring for the water and speaking for the water and praying for the water that it always stays healthy and maintains us because without water we would not live. Without water, Mother Earth wouldn't survive, our four-legged and our two-winged friends would not survive."**

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Medicine Wheel offers vast teachings about the interrelationships between its four quadrants which represent different "concepts" such as the four basic elements and seasons, the sacred animals and medicines, and the stages of life and direction of human growth (Kemppainen et al.). It is through the context of the circle of life that future generations are taught the Anishinaabe practices and customs. The youth receive oral teachings from the Elders who share their wisdom about the sacred world, their place within it, and the inherent responsibilities. These social relationships are critical for the transfer of knowledge and cultural perseverance.

*Life goes in a circle. From baby, toddler, youth, adult and Elder... So when the Elders and youth are interconnected, it's apparent that the knowledge is shared. And vice versa when the youth are mentored by the Elder, the youth are mentoring the Elders. Both characters of an Elder and youth have to symbolize each other in a relationship to teach and share and focus on the importance of those teachings.* (Elder 4)

Women have an important connection to water as the givers of life and play a vital role in the circle of life. It is during the stage of birth that the personal relationship with water is believed to begin.

*You've got to remember that you are first introduced to water in your mother's womb... You've got to remember that. That's how important water is to us. That's life. That bag of water protected you in your mom's womb. That's the whole start of it, right there.* (Elder 1)

*there is gender difference in the knowledge that people can hold.* (Expert 4)

*We [women] talk about the different forms of water that water can teach us about change and each of the different seasons. We talk about the water that comes from the sky. We talk about the water that comes from here, your eyes. We talk about the breast water. We talk about the cleansing; the blood water that women have and that nurturing time.* (Elder 5)

Anishinaabe women are the "Keepers of the Water," and attached to this role are the responsibilities for conducting ceremonies to honour the water spirit.

*The role that we [women] have ... [is] caring for the water and speaking for the water and praying for the water that it always stays healthy and maintains us because without water we would not live. Without water, Mother Earth wouldn't survive ... our four-legged and our two-winged friends would not survive.* (Elder 3)

Ceremony, the "set of relationships with the spiritual world from which we learn the teachings that guide our behaviour as Anishinaabe" (Lee 1), is an important aspect of the Anishinaabe culture. Water is a part of many Anishinaabe ceremonies and ceremonies and songs are dedicated to honour water. For example, in the spirit of reciprocity, fishermen conduct a ceremony by offering tobacco as a sign of thanks and respect, and a part of the traditional way of life is daily thanksgiving to the Creator that includes water and all that she sustains.

*There's a place for it at the beginning of our ceremonies—ceremonies don't begin until you bless the water. And then our songs. We have songs dedicated to the water on the Earth. We talk about the different forms of water, that water can teach us about change, and each of the different seasons. (Elder 5)*

A particularly significant water ceremony is the Moon Ceremony, which honours Grandmother Moon who watches over the water on Mother Earth. As one elder detailed, the Moon Ceremony also tells of the sacred way for cleansing water.

*Women get together and have their ceremonies, their Moon Ceremonies when it's the full moon, so that it gives you an order; an ordered time in creation to do that. So when you're honouring the moon, you're honouring the feminine, you're honouring the woman. Water is so much a part of that ceremony, so that the moon controls the tides of the water. So we take water with us, that medicine because that's what it is, its medicine for us. So we'll take that water, a little bit of water in a bigger jar and we'll hold that up and we'll go through ceremony and we'll ask for creation to cleanse it and then we'll put that into a larger container and drink from that for the whole month. And when that comes down, we come back, you do that again. So that tells us that there is a sacred way to have the water cleansed. We use that water say if we're not feeling well, if we're sick. That tells us the water is very key to assisting in our health and the purity of it. (Elder 5)*

The critical linkages between sacred water cleansing and the significance for Anishinaabe health are further revealed. Water is a medicine used for healing and if the water is unsafe, the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being of the Anishinaabe is greatly affected.

To talk about water within the traditional Anishinaabe context means to talk about relationships, the circle of life and the interconnectedness of all things. In the traditional view, water security is not looked upon in the context of water for human and society needs, rather, water security is seen as it relates to Mother Earth. Water security means security of water for Mother Earth.

*When we talk about security of water, we're talking about security of water for who or for what? That leads me to say it's the security of water for Mother Earth. It's not for the people or the deer or for the industry; it's for Mother Earth. When that context becomes the focus then all the other things become incorporated into it, in that circle. . . . If we're going to secure it I think on a fundamental basis*

*it's wrong to secure it for people. What we should be doing is securing it for Mother Earth. (Expert 6)*

Guiding the Anishinaabe relationship with water, with Mother Earth, and with all of creation is a spiritual connection that manifests within the beliefs and informal rules that emanate from a higher order. Water is life and there are no formal written rules that define this relationship with water. At an early age, through oral tradition, the Anishinaabe are taught their role and responsibilities as caretakers of Mother Earth. It is believed that through a life of honoring the sacred gifts of creation, by practicing the teachings and conducting the ceremonies, the spiritual relationships and natural order of the universe are maintained. From this perspective, water security involves respecting water and enabling it to fulfill its role to provide for Mother Earth, and in doing so, she will provide for all her creatures, including humans. Conversely, insecurity of water results when water cannot perform its natural role because of disrespect or mistreatment from pollution or withdrawals which alter the natural character of water.

### **Anishinaabe Approaches for Water Security**

Anishinaabe approaches can support water security by providing important guiding principles that recognize, maintain, and make paramount critical social-ecological relationships and support a balanced approach to resource protection and sustainable use. The Anishinaabe worldview, or cognitive model for how the world is seen, places value on water as a life-giving entity, and from this emanates codes of behavior for the appropriate relationship with water. Through ceremonies and songs, the relationship with water and all of nature was maintained which ensured that all of creation could conduct their responsibilities. There is a general belief that the Anishinaabe worldview may contribute in the development of a water ethic that places value on the protection and preservation of freshwater above all other priorities.

*I think Indigenous people have their traditions and their points of view, and the Elders have a lot to teach everybody on what some of those fundamentals are again. (Expert 1)*

Interviews with the Elders highlighted a powerful moral code that guides Anishinaabe relationships with creation. The Anishinaabe traditionally managed their relationship with water and maintained spiritual relationships by following the “Seven Grandfathers”—messages from the Creator to the Anishinaabe for human conduct with all of creation (Beaver). The gifts of respect, wisdom, love,

bravery, honesty, humility and truth are arguably the most significant teachings of Anishinaabe tradition. The moral code embedded in these teachings could provide guiding principles in support of current water security ,and I offer an example below (see Table 1) to illustrate the potential for how the Seven Grandfathers might guide the development of written water security principles.

While there are clearly strengths of Anishinaabe principles to support current water security, the implementation or harmonization of these teachings and ways of knowing into formal water governance is not without challenges. Fundamentally, there is a difference in values systems between First Nations and Western cultures that is evident in the institutions that govern their respective relationship with water and nature. Generally speaking, traditional First Nations principles value water as an autonomous living being with a spirit and rights of its own, whereas Western institutions regard water as a resource, a commodity, where ultimate value is subscribed to its economic potential, rather than its life-sustaining character. These opposing views can create barriers to the recognition of the benefits Indigenous knowledge provides. To overcome these challenges, First Nations require a strong collective voice to actively communicate the positive contributions traditional knowledge systems and practices offer.

*First Nations have to be able to articulate that they have something unique and sustainable to offer the situation. Like your value added to the whole process. Not only are you integral to it because of Aboriginal and treaty rights and because there's treaties that demand a certain kind of relationship, but also that First Nations can actually contribute to the process rather than be some impediment to the process or some problem to be solved. (Expert 1)*

Cultural diversity, the large numbers of First Nations, and the breadth of their knowledge also pose challenges that will require First Nations ability and willingness to articulate traditional knowledge in ways that can be translated into formal policy for implementation at an operational level. Government water actors are bound to policies and procedures founded in legally binding state legislation and regulation that do not easily incorporate Indigenous approaches grounded in oral tradition.

In water—the inherent right. That's something that's talked about—I have an idea what the inherent right to water is. I'm just not too sure how you start talking about incorporating those discussions into legal regulatory regimes or programs. The approaches too—if

**Table 1: Seven Grandfathers and Water Principles**

**Truth—to recognize the work of the creator in all things**

- Value water in all its forms and all its uses

**Humility—to know that each of us is part of creation and that all people are equal**

- Equity of all people, equity of nature → nature's rights to water

**Respect—to take care of all things the Creator has given on Mother Earth**

- Respect water and all of nature, and one another's views and ways

**Wisdom—to seek and share knowledge**

- Use water wisely and consider all forms of knowledge for decision-making

**Honesty—to speak right of things – not to lie, cheat or deceive**

- Accountability and transparency of actions, decision-making and motives

**Love—to care and help one another**

- Commitment to collaboration and shared benefits

**Bravery—to be ready to face all things that are hard to do**

- Address immediate problems, new conflicts, and resistance to change
- Shortest/quickest route is not always the best path for sustainability

each First Nation had the same approach it would be easy. (Federal 4)

Furthermore, existing federal instruments, and new land and water-related legislation purported to support First Nations economic, social and cultural development do little to support or encourage First Nations traditional perspectives.

*First Nations Land Management Act, Self Government Act, or Indian Act bylaws—you don't really see promotion and enhancement of traditional knowledge and philosophies and ethics.* (Expert 3)

Another area that presents significant challenge for traditional knowledge integration is the conflict caused by differences in the source of authority for rules and laws. Western approaches to water obtain their legitimacy from formally written laws that have roots in a long history of British statutes that evolved from common law. Western laws emphasize the concept of rights, and disputes are mediated through court intervention that draws on previous rules and decisions. Conversely, First Nations traditional approaches are founded on customary law and involve “responsibilities” rather than “rights.” Responsibilities to take care of water for Mother Earth come from the authority of the Creator. While First Nations now speak of “Aboriginal rights,” these are Western terms used to assert the protection of responsibilities within Western law. Traditional First Nations approaches address water responsibilities rather than legal requirements, and the connection between rights and responsibilities is not clear (Expert 4).

*The way that we look at this is the concept of responsibility. I need no lawyer to tell me my responsibilities. I know when I'm not doing it because I've been taught all my life what my responsibility is. And most native people even in Canada today still have those traditional teachings going on and still understand what their responsibilities are, even though sometimes we neglect them, but we're only human too.* (Expert 4)

For First Nations, traditional responsibilities are very powerful institutions; when applied to water they can support water security far more than formally written laws.

*The other side I would say the concept of rights is always based on the minimum; the minimum level of protection that the society will adhere to. It never works to the maximum and that's where the conflict comes in because if you're talking responsibility you always have to do more than the minimum.* (Expert 4)

Despite these challenges, there is a sense that an era of collaboration is on the horizon. Traditional knowledge instructs the Anishinaabe to be prepared for a time when Indigenous and Western people must come together and work together on activities that protect and preserve Mother Earth. The teachings tell of a time when the dominant society will see how their ways have negatively affected the environment and come to realize their relationship with water is unsustainable. The Anishinaabe Seven Fires Prophecies have foretold that eventually the “light-skinned race” will be given a choice between two paths; one is the path to destruction and the other to eternal peace, love and brotherhood (see, for examples, Benton-Banai, and Beaver). If they choose to take the latter path of a spiritual relationship with Mother Earth, and approach the Elders with respect and sincerity, the Anishinaabe Elders will fulfill their responsibility and aid those who seek their guidance along this journey (Beaver).

*There'll come a day when they will come back to us and say “how do we take care of it?” So one of our responsibilities is not to forget; our responsibilities to remember to do those ceremonies, those activities to keep those things of higher value like water close to our hearts and our bodies. And when they come back and ask us, one of our responsibilities is, we have to teach them. So they will come back. It's just a matter of when and how.* (First Nation Organization 1)

## Conclusion

Traditional Anishinaabe knowledge tells us that water security or the delicate balance between sustainable use and resource protection is ultimately achieved when water institutions that structure our relationship with nature are designed to support the security of water for Mother Earth. If we respect and enable Mother Earth to fulfill her role, in turn her natural character (e.g., form and function) will provide secure water for all of creation. To articulate Indigenous knowledge into water policy requires that governance processes are inclusive of First Nations interests, and institutions value and incorporate traditional knowledge and ways of knowing into practice. This paper has just touched upon the potential for harmonization of Western and Indigenous approaches to water based, for example, on the Seven Grandfathers. Further research that looks in greater detail at opportunities within specific water laws, policies, and procedures is needed to proactively create a more collaborative approach that ensures future water security for all.

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<sup>1</sup>I use the terms Indigenous, Aboriginal and First Nations interchangeably to be consistent with the source or more importantly the original context. “Indigenous” refers to the living descendants of pre-colonial inhabitants who may be Indigenous peoples, nations, or communities (Anaya 2004). “Aboriginal” and “First Nations” are terms created by the dominant colonizing society to describe Indigenous peoples (Phare 2009).

<sup>2</sup>Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada recognizes 617 First Nations as of June 5, 2014. For updated figures see <http://pse5-esd5.ainc-inac.gc.ca/fnp/Main/index.aspx?lang=eng>. Health Canada reports 92 First Nations communities across Canada are under a Drinking Water Advisory as of February 28, 2014. For updated reports see <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fniah-spnia/promotion/public-publique/water-eau-eng.php>.

<sup>3</sup>Institutions are “the rules of the game in a society” that guide human interaction (North 3). Specifically, environmental institutions are conventions, norms and legal rules that structure the relationships between people and nature and their access and use of environmental resources (Vatn 2005).

<sup>4</sup>In Canada, *Haida Nation*, *Taku*, and *Mikisew* are landmark rulings where the courts held the provincial and federal Crown have an honourable duty to consult and accommodate Aboriginal interests where proposed activities may interfere with proven and potential Aboriginal and treaty rights.

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