



A MEETING OF
SACRED WATERS

A Global Gathering of Indigenous Voices

March 12-13, 2024 | Pueblo of Isleta, New Mexico

Rio Grande Gorge
Photo courtesy of William Horton

GATHERING SUMMARY

Land and Water Acknowledgment

We respectfully acknowledge the meeting will be held in the Southern Tiwa Territory on the traditional homelands of the Pueblo of Isleta and their descendants. We honor the land and waters of the Rio Grande Basin and all Indigenous Nations and Peoples who maintain historic ties to the basin, and persist as stewards throughout the generations.

REDSTAR
INTERNATIONAL



Why Now? Why Us? Why Here?

Water is at the center of the climate crisis, according to the [United Nations](#). Essential water sources such as headwaters, rivers, and wetlands are [found](#) on the traditional territories of Indigenous Peoples, who steward about one-quarter of the world's lands. Climate change is causing unpredictable rainfall, floods, and drought, which is impacting people's ability to live healthy lives, farm, maintain cultural practices, and earn a livelihood. It is now more urgent than ever to support Indigenous stewardship locally to impact change globally.

Nearly 200 people representing 46 Indigenous Communities from Turtle Island and across the Pacific traveled to the Pueblo of Isleta in New Mexico for A Meeting of Sacred Waters held March 12-13, 2024. From this gathering place, one could see the Rio Grande River, or as it is known in Isleta, the Mother Blue River. Sadly, the river is no longer safe for drinking or cultural purposes due to pollution caused by the City of Albuquerque. Twenty-three sovereign Pueblos and Tribal Nations have fought for decades to protect the Rio Grande River Basin. However, a recent U.S. Supreme Court decision has left more than 90 percent of the state's surface waters without environmental protections, making them the [most threatened waterways in the U.S.](#)

This story is just one of many shared at the gathering. Indigenous-led solutions are needed to address today's water challenges and shift power dynamics in a way that respects sovereignty and Indigenous knowledge systems.

We acknowledge and appreciate the leadership of Isleta Pueblo, including Governor Max Zuni, the Tribal Council, and the Cultural Committee. We also acknowledge all those representing Tiwa/Tewa territory who came to present, support, and share their knowledge and experiences.

We also appreciate the leadership and support of our local partner, the Pueblo Action Alliance, a community-driven grassroots organization that protects Pueblo cultural sustainability and community defense by addressing environmental and social impacts in Indigenous communities.



Indigenous identities and knowledge systems, in all their diversity, are intricately woven within and across our ancestral lands and waters. They are the foundation upon which our cultural, physical, and spiritual survival depends.





Introduction

In March 2024, Red Star International, Inc. (Red Star), an Indigenous-led non-profit organization based in Tucson, Arizona, hosted its third Meeting of Sacred Waters (Sacred Waters) at Isleta Pueblo in New Mexico. Through the experiences of Indigenous Peoples from the US and abroad, Sacred Waters explored Indigenous-led solutions to restore balance at the intersection of health and critical climate responses. By coming together as a global community, Sacred Waters aims to promote systemic change through law, policy, economics, and management practices that are centered on Indigenous values and perspectives by:

- Highlighting the interconnectedness between the well-being of humanity and the environment.
- Sharing examples of Indigenous-led guardianship, stewardship, and management practices.
- Providing a space to engage, exchange, and explore new ideas.
- Exploring pathways to heal our ancestral waters through Indigenous-led systems change.

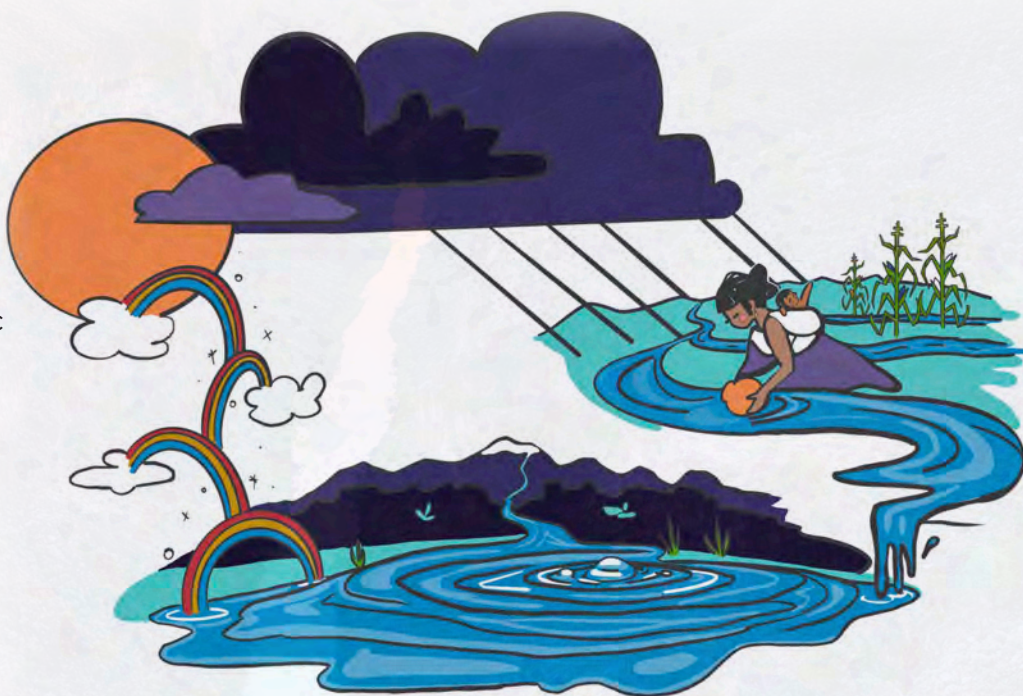
About this Gathering Summary

A Meeting of Sacred Waters' 2-day agenda was designed to facilitate Red Star's four-phased approach to transforming systems. This approach honors the significance of direct experience and interconnectedness while addressing the misalignment of values that often exists at the interface between Indigenous and non-Indigenous systems. The four phases include: 1) bringing people together to identify shared values, 2) nurturing ideas and learning the capabilities of others; 3) acknowledging our interdependence and working together to identify solutions, and 4) promoting commitment by sharing what is learned with others.

Summary Structure

This Gathering Summary is structured around these four phases, inspired by the teachings of the desert water cycle, which also has four phases. Each phase begins with a guiding question that was explored during the gathering followed by keynote and session highlights, as well as a thematic summary of participant responses to the corresponding question. These highlights serve as examples of Indigenous thought and practices that were shared during the gathering.

This summary is to be understood within an Indigenous cultural context that is distinct from Western or colonial constructs or interpretations.



Water cycle artist: Autumn Dawn Gomez (Comanche/Taos Pueblo). Read Autumn's reflections about the desert cycle and water design [here >>](#)



*"Unless we start from values and ceremony, we miss the target.
Our political struggles cannot be separated from ceremony and values."*

*- Restoring Balance Collaborative,
Advisory Council Member*



A Meeting of Sacred Waters always begins and ends with water, acknowledging its sacred life-giving power. This year, participants brought water from their homelands to be blessed. All waters were collected in the olla (pictured above) and placed in the center of the stage. Elder Kathy Wan Povi Sanchez (San Ildefonso Pueblo) Sayain Circle of Grandmothers and Wisdom Keeper of Tewa Women United, and her husband blessed the water.

There, the waters remained throughout the gathering to listen and hold our hopes, aspirations, and prayers.



Water is Living - Source

What are the core values that guide us in our work?

Water is sacred. It is the source and lifeblood of ecosystems and living beings, flowing through rivers, streams, and washes, forming lakes and oceans. Without water, life would be impossible.

In all their diversity, Indigenous identities and knowledge systems are intricately woven within and across our ancestral lands and waters. They are the foundation upon which our cultural, physical, and spiritual survival depends.



A Meeting of Sacred Waters opened with a prayer and welcome from Isleta Pueblo Governor Max Zuni and Cultural Historic Preservation Director Stephanie Zuni. Indigenous Elders were then invited to speak about water and the significance of our values in decision-making.

Poemahau: Cosmic Stream Of Heart Energy And Soulfulness River Of Life

Elder Kathy Wan Povi Sanchez (San Ildefonso Pueblo), Sayain Circle of Grandmothers/Wisdom Keeper, Tewa Women United, shared the importance of teachings and practices that maintain two-world harmony. In this framework, the energy of all things in nature, including our water, is respected and seen as important for generations to come. She shared examples of advocacy work to protect the Valles Caldera in Northern New Mexico.

Healing Through Sanctified Kindness And Ethical Space

Piikani Blackfoot Elders (Chief) Drs. Reg and Rose Crowshoe (First Nations, Canada) discussed the stark differences between Western and Indigenous approaches to decision-making for people, nature, and animals. They highlighted the importance of asking for permission from all beings, human and non-human, before making any major decision. Today, both Western and Indigenous approaches must work together to support ethical decision-making.

"We are told to act like we are in ceremony all the time. Be in prayer, speak in a good way, and help where you can. Live like your ancestors are always in the room with you because they are." - Participant

Our Common Values

Place ♦ Culture, Traditions, Language ♦ Love ♦ Trust ♦ Reciprocity ♦ Abundance

Deconstructing the systems and practices that reinforce colonialism and prioritize profit begins with value realignment. Participants were asked to share the values that guide their work.

Session: Sacred Waters: Hopi Springs Restoration Through Pa'angni

The Water Resources Program, Hopi Tribe (US) shared the meaning of "water is life" from a Hopi perspective. They discussed the values, projects & relationships surrounding the protection of sacred waters through restoration and culturally respectful initiatives using traditional ecological knowledge.

Session: Navajo Ecological Knowledge Systems: Spirituality, Ceremonies, Practice, and Interacting with Nature Ecosystems

Dr. Perry R. James (Navajo), Assistant Professor of Bilingual Education at Western New Mexico University (US) talked about Nihok'aa Diyin Dine'é Bila' Ashdla'ii (Sacred Five-fingered People of the Earth Surface) as they relate to Indigenous knowledge systems, language and culture. It is our responsibility to lead and teach others to be stewards of the land.



Water Breathes - Evaporation

In what ways do you put your core values into practice?

The sun drives the evaporation and transpiration of water from the sea, from surface waters like rivers and streams, and from living things. The water condenses forming clouds.

Our values drive our systems and practices. When the Indigenous law and values form the basis of our practice, we begin to restore balance, moving towards sustainable, systemic, and transformative action towards an abundant future.

Indigenous Leaders were invited to share how Indigenous law, self-determination, and values guide their stewardship practices to restore balance in their traditional homelands.



Decolonizing The Whanganui River (Aotearoa/New Zealand)

Turama Hawira, Te Pou Tupua (Human Face and Voice of the Whanganui River) and Raukura Waitai, Te Puwaha Project, shared the developments of the Whanganui River Strategy Plan based upon the Te Awa Tupua River Settlement Act 2017. Highlighting the journey over the last five years by the Whanganui River Tribes, they shared their challenge to create the paradigm shift required to ensure the well-being and prosperity of their ancestral river (awa) for future generations.

Indigenous Women As Stewards Of Our Rivers

Chairwoman Amelia Flores Colorado River Indian Tribes. As women, we carry life from generation to generation. We are the link that binds the past to the future in this life. We are perfectly positioned to convey the message of our spiritual connection to the water, lands, and resources for the future. The Colorado and Rio Grande River Basins are suffering due to climate change, chronic overuse, inter-state conflicts, and failure to engage Tribal Nations in decision-making. Numerous promises have gone unfulfilled. We must remain resilient and take a warrior stance in caring for and fighting for our waterways.

"We are fierce in the love of our Land. The water we have has traveled the world." - Pua Case

WATER PROTECTOR PANEL Moderated by Frank Te Mihinui Kawe, Red Star International, Inc.

Pua Case (Kanaka Maoli), Program Director, Mauna Kea Education and Awareness /

Julia Fay Bernal (Sandia Pueblo/Yuchi) Executive Director, Pueblo Action Alliance

Pua and Julia shared stories from their communities where direct action has been key to defending and protecting the spirits of our lands and waters. In Hawai'i, Pua has worked with relatives near and far to Protect Mauna Kea. In New Mexico, Julia works to increase the diversity of actors in climate mitigation and protect sacred sites such as Chaco Canyon. Community is at the center of both these movements and Pua shares, "Alliance building is everything."

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Our Common Values Into Practice

Reconnecting with Place ♦ Protecting Our Communities, Culture, Traditions, Language, and Spirit ♦
Building Relationships by Establishing Trust ♦ Multi-Generational Learning

Healing and transforming colonial systems require a journey of reclamation and resilience. This process involves constructing our collective futures from within our traditional cultures, and exercising sovereignty based on our values, norms, and lived experiences.

Session: Waipuna aa Rangi (Aotearoa/New Zealand)

Ngāti Manuhiri Settlement Trust is a voice for mana whenua (Indigenous land rights) across “Entity A” as defined in the Water Services Reform Programme in Aotearoa. As such, they must prioritize solutions that give effect to Te Mana o te Wai (a framework compassing the fundamental importance of water) and address Iwi/Māori rights and interests under Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Session: Wolastoq: Beautiful and Bountiful River Wolastoqey Nation (Canada)

Wolastoq is the beautiful and bountiful river whose watershed expands and encompasses areas across Atlantic Canada and the Northeastern US border. Despite ongoing colonial efforts to assimilate and eliminate inherent and Treaty-protected rights of the River and its People, the Wolastoqey Nation is asserting self-determination and sovereignty.



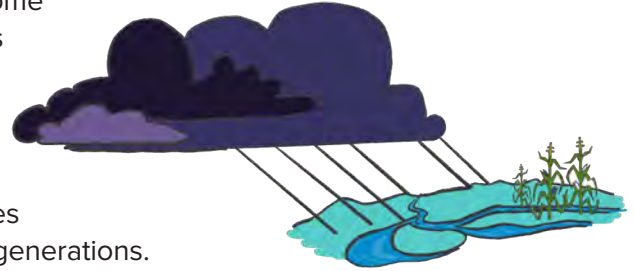


Water Nourishes - Precipitation

What is your vision for the future? What changes do we need to make to get there?

As the water molecules condense and form clouds, they eventually become so saturated that rain returns to the earth. Bringing new life, the water is soaked up by the plants, flowing into washes and streams and seeping into the land well below its surface.

Indigenous leaders often prioritize collective well-being and stewardship of their community and environment. This form of leadership involves mutual exchange and a collective will that is passed down through the generations.



On the second day of A Meeting of Sacred Waters, presenters spoke to the cultural responsibility we all must safeguard our environment. Emerging Indigenous leaders reflected on how we can create opportunities to rematriate, reconcile and protect our natural water sources to ensure a sustainable future for all.

Transforming Challenges into Growth

Verna Teller (Southern Tiwa – Pueblo of Isleta), Former Governor of the Pueblo of Isleta New Mexico, offered insight into the struggles faced in protecting the Rio Grande river from pollution caused by entities in Albuquerque. “They are trying to erode our sovereignty. She stressed the urgency of protecting our rights and our rivers and calling upon our Tribal Leaders to confront entities that are actively harming our waterways and our peoples.

Emerging Leader Panel: The Next Generation

Moderated by Shannon Seneca, Haudenosaunee Environmental Engineer, University of Buffalo

Amber Souza, MSW, Kali’uokapa’akai Collective Coordinator Huliauapa’a

Macy Duxfield (Ngā Rauru, Te Ātihaunui-ā-Pāpārangi, Ngāi Tahu) Environmental Policy, Whanganui, Aotearoa

Reyes DeVore (Jemez Pueblo), Program Director, Pueblo Action Alliance

The emerging leaders exemplified that we are working towards, not one, but many visions in our communities. How we achieve these visions may look different, but what connects us are the values, tools, and skills we share. Emerging leaders are listening to stories shared by elders, collecting additional data to support policy development and envisioning our communities, lands, and waters healed. They desire to build a world where Traditional Indigenous Knowledge is built into the foundation of our societies and is respected as such. There needs to be a change in policy and governance and how we move through the world.





"[I envision] a world that prioritizes Indigenous knowledge to create a healthier and more sustainable Earth." - Participant

Our Vision

Children-Centered - Next 7 Generations ♦ Lead with Indigenous Knowledge and Values ♦ Everyone has Enough

When asked about their vision, participants shared many visions with common themes.

The Kali'uokapa'akai Collective: An Indigenous-Led Collective Impact Initiative in Hawai'i

Huliauapa'a (Hawai'i) leads the Kali'uokapa'akai Collective, a community of practice for advocates, leaders, and change agents committed to the responsible, pono (righteous) stewardship of Hawai'i's wahi kūpuna (ancestral places). Ka li'u o ka pa'akai, translated as, "the essence of salt," was described by a revered Hawaiian elder as a metaphor of pa'akai (salt) being an agent of protection, preservation, healing, and bringing people together.

Radioactive Waste in Our Backyard: Water Walking for a Nuclear-Free Future

The nuclear weapons complex has created long-lasting impacts, from mining to weapons testing and waste disposal. A radioactive waste site sits on Cattaraugus Creek in western New York, upstream from the Seneca Nation Cattaraugus Territory. Trained Indigenous scientists and engineers at the University of Buffalo walk with local water protectors to fully understand the complexities and environmental impact on the community. Together, they share knowledge and uphold their responsibilities to their waterways for many generations.

Rematriating Our Waters

Ohneganos (Canada) addresses the connections of well-being and water utilizing an innovative research framework informed by the Indigenous community partners to facilitate the sharing and integration of Western Science (WS) and Indigenous and Local Knowledges (ILK). This process of 'co-creation' enables them to develop appropriate, place-based, sustainable solutions to the water crisis impacting their partner communities and other Indigenous communities across Turtle Island.

Water Relations

OJI:SDA' Sustainable Indigenous Futures (US) are Water Protectors, and spokespeople on the issues of Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women/Relatives. They support the healing and thriving of our communities and the respect and connection with the land and waters through sharing circles. Water connects us all, and the reverberation of our waters within these circles allows us to recognize one another. This is between us and all beings with water.





Water Returns - Infiltration

What commitment can we make today for the health and healing of our ancestral waters?

Beneath the desert lie massive aquifers that store groundwater. Over millennia, Indigenous Peoples have applied practices to slow water flow allowing time for water to seep into the surface, regenerating the aquifers.

Today, humans are pumping groundwater faster than it can replenish, threatening the health and longevity of our natural water sources and the ecosystems they support.

The closing keynote called for a new way of thinking and living. We are at a pivotal moment, a tipping point that calls for sustainable, systemic, and transformative action to ensure an abundant future. It is our call to action.



"All is born of water....All is sustained by water" - Vernon Masayesva

Call For A New Water Paradigm

Vernon Masayesva (Hopi), Founder and Executive Director of Black Mesa Trust

Sípàapu, located at the bottom of Öngtupkya, is the Hopi place of emergence. Once a vibrant river, the Little Colorado River (LCR) and the groundwater have sustained Sípàapu. However, today, the LCR only runs during the monsoon season or after a snow melt. The Hopi people have learned many things from their experience, including how to survive in a water-scarce environment, how to grow food that is dependent only on rainfall, and how non-native companies exploit groundwater for energy production. The Black Mesa Trust is dedicated to protecting and preserving Sípàapu, guided by the Hopi spiritual belief that "Water is Life." Elder Vernon believes that all of humanity needs to learn to "think like water" and use it wisely.

Our Commitments

Practicing, Respecting and Supporting Indigenous Laws, Cultures and Values ♦ Investing in Youth ♦ Support and Value Cultural Work ♦ Sharing Gratitude ♦ Contributing to the Greater Good

Participants were asked to identify a commitment they could make today and write it down. They were then encouraged to share that commitment with two people in the plenary session. The act of sharing our commitments increases the likelihood of following through with them.





Indigenous Water Ethics: Indigenous Water Declarations & Statements

The Indigenous Environmental Network (US) explored: the impact of the uses of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act in environmental justice litigation; the need for Indigenous Water Ethics and Principles that recognize and support tribal sovereignty and cultural autonomy; and the ways in which Indigenous Water Ethics and Principles are influencing change in attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs about water.

Wangu Purinya Kayini: Song of Living Waters

The Wangu Purinya Kayini panel introduced a Cultural Water Paradigm, a powerful and holistic way of knowing and caring for water that unites the relationships between sovereignty and self-determination, healthy Country, healthy people, cultural economies, and cultural responsibilities. This was followed by a discussion regarding a cultural knowledge exchange among Traditional Owners from Australia, Māori from Aotearoa New Zealand, and Tribes from the US.

[I commit to being]...at leadership tables [at the] local, state and federal levels - advocating for sovereignty; shaping infrastructure and equitable distribution of resources." - Participant



About the Artist:

Autumn Dawn Gomez they/ she (Comanche/Taos Pueblo) was born in Oga PoGeh Owingeh, Santa Fe, NM and calls the Northern Rio Grande Valley home, from Albuquerque to Taos. Autumn studied art and writing at the Institute of American Indian Art and now supports Pueblo Youth through Tewa Women United. Here artwork can be found at pimikwusii.com.



The Voices of A Meeting of Sacred Waters

Red Star International, Inc. is grateful to those who traveled from near and far to share their knowledge and experiences at A Meeting of Sacred Waters! We also acknowledge the contributions of our **Restoring Balance Advisory Council** whose names are in bold. Listed in alphabetical order, we acknowledge the following individuals for their contributions:

- Dr. Sarah Abney (Jamaican/Taino/Yoruba), Water Resources Program Manager, Hopi Tribe
- **Julia Bernal (Sandia Pueblo/Yuchi) Executive Director, Pueblo Action Alliance**
- Pua Case (Kanaka Maoli), Program Director, Mauna Kea Education and Awareness
- Norma Cayuga (Six Nations), Grandmothers Council, Ohneganos
- Claire Charlo (Confederated Salish & Kootenai), Land/Water Defender, Indigenous Environmental Network
- Dominique Cordy, (Pake-haole), Deputy Director, Huliauapa'a
- Dr. Reg Crowshoe (Piikani/Blackfoot) Elder and Former Chief of the Piikani Nation
- Dr. Rosemary Crowshoe (Piikani/Blackfoot), Piikani/Blackfoot Elder
- Reyes DeVore, (Jemez Pueblo), Program Director, Pueblo Action Alliance
- Marco Doselo (White Mountain Apache), Water Resources Technician, Hopi Tribe
- Macy Duxfield (Ngā Rauru, Te Ātihaunui-ā-Pāpārangi, Ngāi Tahu), Environmental Policy, Whanganui Aotearoa/New Zealand
- Amelia Flores (Mohave, CRIT), Chairwoman, Colorado River Indian Tribes
- **Turama Hawira, (Whanganui Iwi) Te Pou Tupua (Human Face and Voice of the Whanganui River)**
- Dr. James Perry, (Navajo), Assistant Professor of Bilingual Education Navajo
- Melissa Kennedy, (Tati Tati, Australia), CEO Tati Tati Kaiejin
- Thomas Kennedy (Tati Tati, Australia), Senior Landscape Manager, Tati Tati Kaiejin
- Lee Wayne Lomayestewa (Shungopavi Village), Research Assistant, Cultural Preservation Office, Hopi Tribe.
- Makasa Looking Horse (Mohawk & Lakota), Youth Leader Ohneganos
- Nicola MacDonald, (Ngāti Wai, Te Rarawa, Taranaki) Chief Executive, Ngāti Manuhiri Settlement Trust
- Dr. Dawn Martin Hill (Mohawk), Professor Emeritus & Lead Scientist, Ohneganos
- Vernon Masayesva (Hopi), Founder & Executive Director, Black Mesa Trust
- Maria Maybee (Seneca), Water Walker
- Dr. Amy McCoy, Founding Partner/Adjunct Research Scientist, AMP Insights/University of Arizona
- Tahila Mintz (Yaqui), Founding Director, OJI:SDA' Sustainable Indigenous Futures
- Macadio Namoki (Hopi), Non-Point Source Coordinator, Hopi Tribe.
- Joel Nicholas (Hopi), Archeologist, Hopi Tribe
- Adrianna Nicolay (Diné), Graduate Student, Oregon State
- **Ken Paul (Wolastoqey Nation), Lead Fisheries Negotiator, Wolastoqey Nation, Canada**
- Mona Polacco (Colorado River Indian Tribe), Indigenous Water Ethics Coordinator, Indigenous Environmental Network
- Kathy Wanpovi Sanchez (San Ildefonso Pueblo), Elder: Sayain / Circle of Grandmothers, Tewa Women United
- **Dr. Shannon Seneca (Mohawk), Haudenosaunee Environmental Engineer, University at Buffalo**
- Kaelana Smoke (Mohawk), Researcher, Ohneganos
- Amber Souza, (Kanaka 'Ōiwi), Kalí'uokapā'akai Collective Coordinator, Huliauapa' a
- Remi Still Smoking (Little Shell Chippewa), Two Spirit Youth Water Protector, Two Eagle River High School
- Ailani Swentzell (Santa Clara Pueblo), Singer/Songwriter
- Verna Teller (Southern Tiwa - Pueblo of Isleta), Former Governor of the Pueblo of Isleta New Mexico
- Nicky Thompson (Seneca Nation), Community Advocate, Whispering Winds: MMIW/R Healing and Justice Program
- **Kelley Lehuakeapuna Uyeoka, (Kanaka 'Ōiwi), Executive Director, Huliauapa'a**
- **Raukura (Naani) Waitai (Ngā Rauru Kīhahi/Whanganui Awa), Te Pūwaha Project – Whanganui Port Revitalisation**

Red Star International, Inc. and Team

Aleena Kawe (Yoeme), President & CEO
 Frank Kawe, (Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāti Kahungunu) Waka Captain/Cultural Advisor, Aotearoa/New Zealand
 Theresa Cariño, (Yaqui), Senior Project Coordinator
 Krystin Poitra (Turtle Mountain Chippewa), Meeting Planning Consultant
 Danielle Lucero (Isleta Pueblo/Turtle Mountain Chippewa), Consultant, Summary Contributor
 Agency Mabu, Native-Owned Event Planning



A MEETING OF SACRED WATERS

A Global Gathering of Indigenous Voices

This gathering is a privileged space that the conveners have created to uphold the innate relationships that Indigenous peoples hold with their ancestral lands and waterways. We all rely on natural water sources for our sustenance, and therefore, we are all responsible for their care. By coming together, we aim to open doorways to learning, reflection and insights that support a sustainable future for us all.

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