

Trash Talkers: Environment and Local Initiatives Report

The Students Commission of Canada

**The Students
Commission
of Canada**
*Centre of Excellence for
Youth Engagement*



**La commission
des élèves du
Canada**
*Le centre d'excellence pour
l'engagement des jeunes*

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Trash Talk & Systems Change: Act for People and the Planet

Over four days, the Trash Talkers: Environment & Local Initiatives theme team came together to dive into one of the biggest challenges facing young people today, the environment. We started as a quiet but open group, grounding ourselves in shared community guidelines built around the Four Pillars: **Respect, Listen, Understand, and Communicate™**. Through honest conversations and a safe space to share, we explored how environmental issues connect with our everyday realities. Even though climate change affects communities differently, we discovered that understanding these connections can make the challenge feel less overwhelming and help us see where individual and collective action is possible.

Our team focused on a “both/and” mindset recognizing that while climate change matters, so do issues like housing, food security, affordability, and equity. Using the CWW Conference guiding lenses, we explored how progress in one area can spark progress in others. By listening to different perspectives and experiences, we found shared direction: environmental action doesn’t happen in isolation, and the most impactful solutions support both people and the planet. Together, we set out to think big, challenge assumptions, and design local initiatives that make real change proving that systems change and evolve when we learn, listen, and act on the leadership of youth.

Local Initiatives and Creating a Sustainable Future

Meet Team 5: Trash Talkers: Environment and Local Initiatives Report

The Trash Talkers Theme Team consisted of 14 youth from across the country, travelling from British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, and New Brunswick. The youth in our group brought different perspectives through their lived experiences coming from large cities like Vancouver (BC), rural communities like Golden (BC) and reserve land in Alberta and Manitoba. Together, we discussed the intersectional issues such as housing, the economy and the job market that are a part of the environment discussion but not always included in the conversation. Many of us joined the theme team because we wanted to discuss the environment and local initiatives, with the goal of building skills and confidence to feel like there was something that we can do to act.

“I'm really proud of the work that we have done, and it's been amazing to see what people are passionate about, and how we each approach the final goal in different ways. I'm really happy with the project I chose, and the collaboration within my group.”

– Youth participant

Themes: What did Young People Discuss?

Centering Indigenous Elders and Leaders

As a one of the CWW guiding lenses *Truth leading to Reconciliation*, our group spent a lot of time discussing the role of Indigenous elders and leaders in the decision-making spaces of the issues involving the environment. As the stewards of Turtle Island, Indigenous peoples since time immemorial have resided on this land embracing it, their culture, whilst being resourceful and caring. We discussed the need for systemic inclusion of Elders in the decision-making spaces that involve aspects of our lives impacted by climate change. We also spoke about the role of non-Indigenous allies in advocating for Indigenous people to oversee global land preservation.

“Indigenous communities have lived on this land for over 30,000 years. In a matter of decades, Europeans imposed control, claiming land and deciding its future without consent.”

– Youth participant

Transparency around Artificial Intelligence Data Centers Impacts on the Environment

A key theme of our theme team discussions was around the environmental impacts of artificial intelligence (AI) data centers. Youth across the country shared the different ways in which data centers were impacting their communities. We expressed the need for greater transparency around government regulations for AI data centers, and addressing the inequitable allocation of resources. Some youth that live on reserves in Manitoba and Alberta shared that they thought it was unfair that clean drinking water was going to fuel these data towers while hundreds of reserves across the country are on boil water advisory. We recommended the development of an AI policy for Canada so that there is something that the government can hold companies accountable to.

“Today, [...] worldwide billions are being invested into AI development, while nearby Indigenous communities still face boil-water advisories and

food insecurity. The land continues to generate wealth, just not for those who have protected it for generations.”

– Youth participant

Creating Pathways for Youth Decision-Making and Influence

Our team discussed the importance of there being more accessible pathways for us to be a meaningful influence in decision-making when it comes to the intersecting issues of the environment. We play just as important of a role in decision-making as adults and there aren't positions designated to youth at even the local levels to advocate for our voice. Opportunities that meaningfully engage youth are crucial to ensuring that we have a clear, and accountable space to share our experiences and concerns.

“We want there to be designated groups with both volunteer and job opportunities, to encourage both youth and adults to get out into their community, aid in public area clean ups and people to look after the area and the kids so they feel safe and not scared to go play with friends.”

– Youth participant

“A lot more people match my level of outrage with environmental issues which has shown to me that these kinds of issues are a lot more wide reaching than I thought - especially AI

– Youth participant

Products: Art to Micro Grants

Our Trash Talkers team brought their ideas to life through a range of creative and practical products that reflected the conversations in our theme team.

We prepared a pitch for the National Showcase, designed a youth-friendly pamphlet breaking down Canada's Federal Sustainable Development Strategy, and drafted a micro-grant application to support future community-led environmental initiatives.

Some of our team members also created info boards and art pieces that visually captured the themes, insights, and emotions shared throughout our discussions. Together, these products show how youth can turn dialogue into action in meaningful, accessible ways.

Recommendations for Action

Recommendation 1:

The Government of Canada should develop and AI policy that holds companies accountable for the environmental impacts of AI data centers.

Recommendation 2

Intentionally include youth in decision-making, an example being to appoint a youth council in every city where they can reflect the voice of youth to create the Canada they Want.

Recommendation 3:

Government action is needed to restore and maintain safe, clean spaces like parks so children can exercise their right to a healthy environment and return to using these essential community spaces.

Showcasing Safety, AI's threats to Water, Indigenous and Children's Rights

Imagine turning on your tap and nothing comes out, For some indigenous communities, this isn't imagination this is reality. Imaginez que vous rencontrez un enfant blessé qui a trouvé une aiguille dans un parc. C'est horrible, certainement, mais les possibilités que cela arrive est plus possible que vous pensé. À seulement cinq heures de route de cet hôtel, 27 000 aiguilles ont été récupérées dans un parc communautaire en seulement six mois. If it isn't safe for you, how could it be safe for your children.

Something has to be done and it needs to be now. This is not the Canada We Want.

Indigenous Communities:

Indigenous communities have lived on this land for over 30,000 years. In a matter of decades, Europeans imposed control, claiming land and deciding its future without consent. Today, in Olds, Alberta and worldwide billions are being invested into AI development, while nearby Indigenous communities still face boil-water advisories and food insecurity. The land continues to generate wealth, just not for those who have protected it for generations. The crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls reminds us that disposability did not end with colonization. Families have had to demand the right to search landfills for their loved ones. When systems treat land as expendable, they begin to treat people the same

way. Unless we say no together. Le Canada que nous souhaitons protège la terre et les vies avec la même urgence. Il investit dans la guérison culturelle, les huttes de sudation, les pow-wow communautaires, les programmes pour les jeunes, et place les aînés et les jeunes aux tables de décision. We want to heal. We need to heal.

Artificial Intelligence:

AI can be a great tool, but the way it is used has a possibility to be detrimental to both our environment and the future of our children and youth. Some benefits of AI include its efficiency, reliability and sustainability, but with pros, comes cons, which includes the straining of local resources in water stressed areas. 500ml of water is used for a chat GPT 100-word response, as surprising as that may sound, it's true, and unknowingly to most greatly contributes to climate change in our area and around the world. Le Canada que nous souhaitons est prêt à mettre en œuvre un changement dans ce système en recourant aux sources d'énergie renouvelables. Nous voulons que le gouvernement mette en place des règles et des réglementations pour le Canada concernant l'utilisation de

l'Intelligence Artificielle afin qu'elle soit utilisée de manière responsable par nos communautés et qu'elle n'ait aucun impact négatif sur notre avenir.

Children's Rights

Children have a fundamental right to grow up in a clean and safe environment, yet many of our public parks no longer reflect that reality. Nearly half of children no longer visit parks, a significant increase over recent years. One major reason is the growing concern around unsafe playground conditions. Without meaningful government action, these spaces will continue to decline, quietly taking away an important part of childhood.

The freedom to play, explore, and connect with others outdoors. Le Canada que nous souhaitons envisage des parcs sécuritaire, propres et accueillants pour tous les enfants. Cela comprend des structures de jeux améliorées et bien entretenues, des clôtures conçues pour renforcer la sécurité, des mesures de sécurité appropriées et des heures d'ouverture claires afin d'assurer une surveillance pendant les heures de pointe, comme après l'école. Nous proposons également des programmes structurés après l'école, dans le cadre desquels les élèves du secondaire peuvent acquérir une expérience en matière de leadership en aidant à entretenir les espaces verts. By prioritizing safety, maintenance, and community involvement, we can restore public parks to be a place where children feel protected.

The Canada We Want is a place where Indigenous Elders and leaders have a seat at the table with the people who make our decisions and where their presence is encouraged and not discouraged. At those same tables, passionate youth of all backgrounds and ethnicities should have the chance to speak up, share their ideas, and be heard. Young people are not just the future, they are the present, and their voices matter now. Nous devons également investir dans les énergies renouvelables avant qu'il soit trop tard pour protéger la terre, l'eau et l'air qui nous font vivre. Enfin, les enfants ont le droit d'être simplement des enfants. Ils méritent des environnements sûrs, des parcs propres, des communautés solides et la liberté de grandir, d'explorer et de rêver sans crainte.

This is the Canada We Want.