

# Emotions & Gender in Water Diplomacy

2026

POLICY BRIEF

## Emotions in water communications and gender implications



### Key Action Insights

- **Make space for emotions:** Emotions are already active in water policy. Emotions are a source of “evidence” (just as public opinion research is a source of evidence for how specific groups may respond to an intervention) or barometer for understanding what is important to certain individuals, stakeholders, or representatives.
- **Frame and consider audience:** Think about what is important to the audience. We respond and react to information, statistics, and evidence in emotional ways, not with pure, objective rationality.
- **Find a champion** who is respected and supportive of understanding and incorporating emotions within water stewardship and policy.
- **Practice and prepare** for how emotions may show up in water stewardship discussions, how to respond to intense reactions to emotional content, and how to engage specific emotions (such as awe or mindfulness in an opening activity).

## Key Messages:

- **Emotions are deeply intertwined within water** diplomacy, policy, and stewardship. Working with water means working with a life-sustaining resource.
- Water availability, accessibility, and security are **under threat** due to climate change, urbanization, socioeconomic inequities, and geopolitical stressors.
- **Emotions influence policy** actions and outcomes, and ability to engage in meaningful ways, increasing collaboration or exacerbating differences.
- Certain emotions, such as fear, can **increase polarization** and interfere with collaborative water stewardship and policy-making efforts.
- **Diverse groups** make more **sustainable, effective**, and **equitable** decisions, but merely bringing women or other marginalized voices to senior water management is insufficient without ensuring they can be heard and taken seriously in male-dominated spaces and elite spaces.
- **Emotions are not limited to women or feminine traits** but are rather embedded in all decision-making spaces and practices.
- **Intentional, careful attention to specific emotions** (e.g., awe, empathy) in water communications and diplomacy can help to **foster collaboration and decrease polarization** in an intensely divided political climate.
- The **combination** of personality, **values**, and **emotion**, along with **intensity** and **self- and collective-efficacy** present, determines what **behavioural outcomes** (e.g., water conservation behaviour, water stewardship support) result.

## INTRODUCTION

Canada holds the third largest renewable freshwater supply globally yet is falling short on 2030 climate<sup>1</sup> and water conservation targets<sup>2</sup>. Canadians use twice as much water per capita than the UN's recommended limit and climate change will increase droughts in some regions and damaging floods in others, exacerbating existing safe water access challenges across the country<sup>3-5</sup>. Although the current government has been non-committal regarding climate and water stewardship goals, there remain opportunities to build and maintain trust and good relationships around Canada's water. The recently established Canada Water Agency is mandated to work collaboratively with provinces, territories, Indigenous peoples, local authorities, scientists, and others to address freshwater challenges. An important opportunity that is often overlooked in policy circles is the potential for increasing collaboration and cooperation through intentional emotional applications<sup>6</sup>. Understanding how emotions influence water policy and policy-makers - across political lines - is essential for protecting our water and reaching cross-partisan agreements.

## WATER STEWARDSHIP, WATER DIPLOMACY

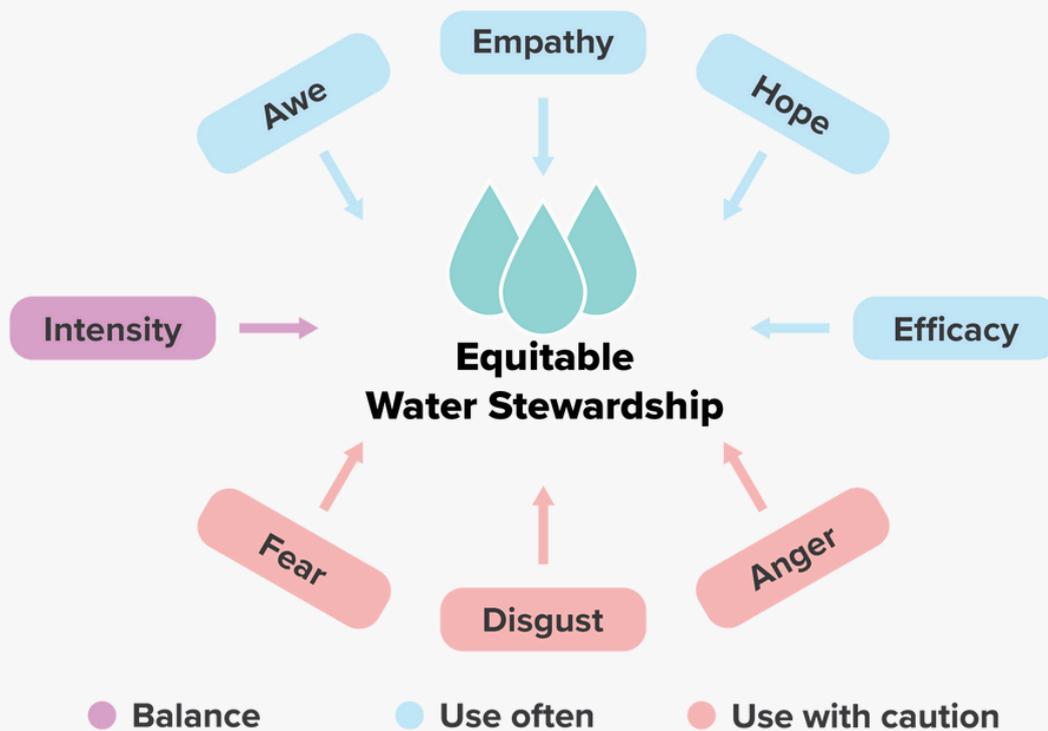
In this brief, we use the terms "water stewardship" and "water diplomacy" to refer to water's use that is "*socially and culturally equitable, environmentally sustainable and economically beneficial, achieved through a stakeholder-inclusive process*"<sup>7</sup> and "*not only... the official, state-sanctioned negotiations that happen in formal settings, but also to being diplomatic in the everyday, local, and often informal circumstances in which water is governed and managed*"<sup>8</sup>, respectively.

We use these terms to highlight the diverse nature of interests and needs surrounding water's use and issues relating to water decisions.

### A Note on Gender

We recognize that as Western scholars and settlers we are not the first or only knowledge source on the importance of emotions and gender in water relations. For instance, some Indigenous and spiritual groups have long held, intimate water relations and identify the importance of emotional and spiritual connections with water<sup>9</sup>. In addition, women hold important water roles in various Indigenous groups<sup>10</sup>. Yet those with most power over water relations today are more often male; the field of water management is often viewed as masculine given its focus on control over water via technological methods<sup>11</sup>.

Gender and feminist works that have challenged key dichotomies, such as rationality versus emotions, have highlighted ways that emotions have been marginalized in scientific debates that value objectivity and 'facts'. In contrast, these approaches have offered tools to engage with embodied, emotional, and affective aspects of social and environmental issues<sup>12,13</sup>. These dynamics of water politics, activism, and diplomacy remain gendered: while women have long been marginalized and under-represented in formal water policy and diplomacy<sup>14,15</sup>, women remain at the forefront of water related activism<sup>12</sup>. Emotional responses to water issues might emphasize building relationships, care work, and reproductive tasks (often coded as feminine), rather than solutions, facts, and engineering infrastructural approaches (often coded as masculine<sup>11</sup>).



## HOW EMOTIONS SHAPE WATER POLICY

It may seem intuitive to lead water negotiations by describing the problem in vivid detail, grasping the audience's attention with the dire consequences of inaction. This has mixed results. For example, Johnson and Tversky<sup>16</sup> found that negative emotions amplify threat perceptions, which could be viewed as beneficial as recognizing the threat of water crises is critical for action, but this can easily go too far. Too much threat or fear, particularly if individuals already experience high levels of negative emotions such as anxiety, can lead to denial or apathy, as we discuss below. Within water policy, some emotions that frequently emerge within negotiations and discussions may be counterproductive to the desired sustainable, equitable water stewardship.

Beyond the emotions that may hinder water policy success, there are others that show promise for promoting cooperation, increasing sustainable and pro-environmental preferences, and building trust<sup>17,18</sup>. The figure above summarizes this process, and is explained throughout this brief.

As an interdisciplinary group of water scholars and advisors specializing in emotions and policy, we present an overview of the emotions that are most commonly elicited and have the greatest impact on water relations, and those that we are best equipped to speak to. Our goal is for this summary to increase understanding of how emotions affect water stewardship efforts and provide guidance on when to avoid or utilize certain emotional framing in water relations.

### A Note on Anger & Hope

Although we are not experts in anger or hope, their prevalence in stewardship and policy discourse requires we take some time for these potentially linked emotions. When we imagine negotiations on challenging, symbolic, life-essential matters like water, heated tempers and passionate outbursts can easily be envisioned. At the same time, so can instances of fervid hope for change - perhaps even seen within the same individual. Some may argue that anger has no place in diplomatic conversation, and others that hope is futile, but we cannot simply turn our emotions off (as we argue throughout).

Anger and frustration have been found to be beneficial in certain cases. Anger about environmental concerns has been connected to climate activism, engagement, and policy support<sup>19,20</sup>. Some scholars categorize this variety of anger as 'righteous'<sup>21</sup> or 'morally appropriate'<sup>22</sup>, which can motivate positive political action and engagement in a hopeful way, rather than destructive or vengeful, as other forms of anger may encourage. However, anger is also linked to increasing stereotyping and prejudiced behaviours towards out-groups<sup>23</sup>, which can make diversity efforts in water stewardship more challenging. Meanwhile, hope can temper eco-anxiety; reduce psychological, emotional intensity (which can paralyze engagement if too high); increase self- and collective efficacy; and encourage action<sup>24</sup>. The potential for radical and collective hope to motivate climate action and policy support - particularly when an opportunity to act is made clear - in face of situations that can evoke great anger, is an area worth further investigating to better understand the connection between these two emotions.

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***Anger often responds to disappointed hopes. We invest hope in other people to live up to the demands of morality and justice, and when they fail to do so, anger tends to ensue. But anger about injustice is also often accompanied by the formation of hopes for repair.***

Stockdale, 2021

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## FEAR

Fear is an intense emotional response to a perceived danger (real or not; psychological, physical, or emotional). Fear serves to keep us safe; our senses heighten and we can avoid or combat the perceived danger quickly. If we know how to cope with the danger, the fear can lessen. With greater intensity, fear can become terror.

Complex, threatening problems like those involving water stewardship and management have been found to evoke intense fear and existential dread, often leading to “eco-anxiety”<sup>25</sup>. In a water crisis, our access to a life-sustaining substance is threatened, thus thinking about this possibility can be deeply troubling. To manage and cope with the intense fear and anxiety, we may deny that the problem exists or that we are even at risk. When an issue is repeatedly framed in a fear-inducing way, we may even become apathetic in effort to control our internal fear when we cannot control the external danger<sup>26,27</sup>. Alternatively, we may also cope with this fear by reinforcing symbolic ingroup values, engaging in behaviours that are important to and valued by our social groups to leave a lasting impact on and contribution to what we believe is important. Actions could include supporting a legacy fund, large infrastructure, or a major water project. Depending on the impacts, however, these may be helpful or harmful for water stewardship outcomes. If the ingroup values water conservation, for example, a fear message may reinforce commitment to these projects. Conversely, if the ingroup values economic growth above all else, water stewardship may be at risk when fear is engaged.

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***Fear makes strangers of people  
who would be friends.***

Shirley MacLaine

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Reinforcing these ingroup values could also include strengthening our connections to those most like us and distancing ourselves from those who are different. In male-dominated water management and negotiations, fear may make it more difficult to increase diversity and foster inclusion of those who are currently less well-represented. For equitable, sustainable water stewardship, when we consider the need to increase gender diversity amongst those in power over water decisions, negative emotions like fear can exacerbate pre-existing gender biases and social group differences. This creates a barrier to the cooperation, trust, and relationship-building that are essential to water stewardship. So, while fear can be an effective motivator, using fear-based messaging can have the opposite, unintended effect on individual and group actions.

## DISGUST

Disgust is an intense rejection response to avoid exposure to contamination, pathogens, and disease<sup>28</sup>. We are repulsed by and distance ourselves from stimuli that we perceive as disgusting or something that we think could put our health at risk. Disgust can keep us safe from sickness and death by motivating avoidance of contaminated objects. Disgust also has moral and cultural connections; acts that transgress social norms may evoke disgust responses and what those acts are vary by cultural values<sup>28</sup>.

Dirty water can evoke disgust responses, but so can water reuse (transforming wastewater into drinking water) or water conservation messages that encourage less water use in washing - potentially increasing perceived contamination risks<sup>29</sup>. Even with detailed, evidence-supported information on the safety of reclaimed wastewater for drinking or agricultural purposes, disgust responses lead people to view these options as less healthy than those with conventional water sources<sup>30,31</sup>. When deliberating water stewardship concerns, it will be important to consider if the topics might evoke disgust responses among those present. This involves considering cultural differences as what might be disgusting to one group may not to another.

There may also be ways that disgust can help water stewardship. If the undesired behaviour or outcome is framed as disgusting, the sustainable option may be preferred. For example, litter and water pollution can evoke disgust and moral motivations can encourage people to reinforce sustainable water policy or actions<sup>32,33</sup>. It is important to consider if disgust may be a reaction within water stewardship conversations and whether it is a desired one. With the right framing, it may be helpful to encourage desired water outcomes. Without this framing, a risk of intense rejection remains.

***All is disgust when [one] leaves [their] own nature and does what is unfit.***

Sophocles

## AWE

***Awe arises in evanescent experiences. Looking up at the starry expanse of the night sky. Gazing out across the blue vastness of the ocean... By diminishing the emphasis on the individual self, awe may encourage people to forego strict self-interest to improve the welfare of others.***

Piff et al., 2015

Awe is commonly defined as a sense of vastness or self-diminishment and a need for accommodation<sup>43,44</sup> when exposed to something sublime or incomprehensible<sup>45</sup>. Awe, like compassion and gratitude, is a self-transcendent emotion. These emotions can reduce perceived barriers between people and increase a sense of connection to others, and self-transcendent emotions lead one to think of and care about issues, concerns, and needs beyond the self. Awe, therefore, can help encourage collective social goals, such as action on climate change or water stewardship - complex problems that require action from many to make a difference.

Experiencing awe has been found to increase pro-environmental behaviour<sup>46-48</sup>, particularly alongside greater feelings of connection with nature. This nature-awe blurs the dichotomy between nature and human, allowing for collective valuation of nature's protection. In water stewardship and diplomacy, intentional experiences of awe could increase cooperation by increasing understanding of others' perspectives and enhance water protection by expanding our sense of self to include the bodies of water in question. Similar to empathy's ability to help us take nature's perspective, awe may be useful in feeling more connected not just to others involved in water stewardship and policy, but to water itself.



## EMPATHY

Empathy has been defined as the reflexive ability to understand and share the feelings of another without pity and may have developed to strengthen social bonds<sup>34</sup>. As with emotions, empathy can be conceptualized as having both a malleable, context-dependent state component, as well as a relatively intractable, baseline trait component. A common way to evoke empathy involves perspective-taking - considering the perspective, emotions, and needs of someone else<sup>35</sup>. Empathy is associated with social bonding<sup>36</sup> (and various prosocial, altruistic behaviours<sup>37</sup>, including behaviours that involve acting for a communal goal, such as water stewardship. Further, belief in cross-partisan empathy - believing in the value of taking the perspective of an out-party member - can decrease political polarization, especially when empathy is viewed as a political resource rather than a weakness<sup>38</sup>.

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***Empathy is seeing with the eyes of another, listening with the ears of another, and feeling with the heart of another.***

Alfred Adler

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Higher levels of empathy have also been associated with greater support for water resilience<sup>39</sup>. Providing space for and encouraging empathy in water decisions and policy conversations could be massively beneficial for cross-partisan cooperation and sustainable water stewardship. This must be an intentional and targeted activity, as empathy can be costly to engage; people are more likely to feel day-to-day empathy for those most similar to themselves and there is a risk that perspective-taking can reinforce negative out-group stereotypes<sup>40</sup>. Encouraging those involved in water stewardship to consider the perspectives of those in opposition to their stance or of those with differing values, while highlighting positive similarities between groups, could be helpful for reaching mutually beneficial water outcomes. Likewise, making space for feeling empathy toward water itself may be a useful strategy. When empathy towards nature is evoked, greater pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours emerge<sup>41</sup>. This perspective-taking has helped various nature components (forests, rivers) gain legal rights - efforts often spear-headed by Indigenous communities<sup>42</sup>.

## HOW TO GUIDE EMOTIONS IN WATER STEWARDSHIP & DIPLOMACY

We have provided some examples of emotions in water stewardship activities above and give more detailed possibilities below. Some options will be better suited for certain discussions and groups than others. The options are not prescriptive or exhaustive but are presented as suggestions and starting points for being more aware of how emotions can help water stewardship and policy. There may be individuals in your team or network that can help or have their own strategies for increasing emotions' recognition within water stewardship.

### MAKE SPACE

Acknowledge that the discussion and deliberation will involve and engage emotions, positive and negative. Water is an essential good and holds symbolic and physical importance. Rather than ignoring the influence emotions may have or holding on to false beliefs that rationality is immune to emotions, recognize that emotions are valid and real without judgement. Emotions are a source of "evidence" (just as public opinion research is a source of evidence for how specific groups may respond to an intervention) in understanding what is important for certain individuals, stakeholders, or representatives.

Awareness of emotions and practices to increase empathy can help build relationships and improve the nature of collaborative and participatory action in water stewardship. Acknowledging and being grateful for past water stewardship practices by others at the beginning of a meeting to discuss a new project can elicit a sense of pride, belonging, and trust which can affect relationships among different partners in a positive way.

Given the importance and deep connection many hold with water, being prepared for and recognizing the intensity of the discussion is important. Be aware that individuals come in with a baseline set of emotions, some of which are distressing (e.g., anxiety), so adding to that distress can sometimes push individuals past the point of being able to act. While some level of physiological activation is necessary in order to spur action, there is a point at which excess activation can inhibit action.

### EXAMPLE: OPENING ACTIVITY

Upon start of water stewardship committee meetings or deliberations, open with a descriptive vision exercise or story about the water body at hand. This provides awe and perspective-taking opportunities and opens with a positive interaction, demonstrating shared values and common ground. Potential opening activities could include:

- shared stories or memories of water bodies that are/were important to those present;
- a detailed, vibrant description of the water body being discussed - using language to evoke awe rather than fear, perhaps by focusing on the desired state for the water;
- thanking the water for all it has provided and showing gratitude to those who have been working on its management or protection;
- holding the meeting physically at the water being discussed;
- asking participants (either independently or in small groups, with facilitation) to envision themselves as a stakeholder or representative with differing values about water, or even as the water themselves, and to look for commonalities.

Some options may require more facilitation or help from others to ensure shared positive traits are the focus rather than group differences and that desired emotions are brought forward rather than those that may hinder sustainable water outcomes.

## FRAMING

Consider your audience, their values, and their perspectives. How the water concern is communicated will depend on the desired outcome and where your audience, colleague, or committee member, and whether they share your values or not. Recipients of information often react to information, statistics, and evidence in emotional ways, rather than the predominant model of 'rationality' that still dominates many of our science and policy communications spheres. For this reason, we need to be highly attentive to emotional messaging and responses. Consider the emotions and likely responses provided above and decide which would be most helpful for who you are engaging with. This can be very nuanced and highly dependent on socio-demographic and other considerations (history, experiences, memory, etc) so consider what you know (and don't) about who you are communicating with.

## FINDING A CHAMPION

For new initiatives, having a respected leader or "champion" on board can help encourage those who may be reluctant and to signal that this work on emotions is worthwhile<sup>49,50</sup>. A champion should be someone who is supportive and dedicated to the cause and also seen positively and trusted by those they will engage with. This could be a manager or director in water policy, a relevant community member, a water non-profit executive, or municipal leader, among others. Champions help the new initiative (in this case, recognizing the importance of emotions in water stewardship and diplomacy) be taken seriously and be adopted by others, perhaps recruiting additional champions along the way. They can help convince those who are reluctant by listening to concerns and by leading by example - actively demonstrating that they understand emotions' importance in water stewardship.

## PRACTICE

Like any presentation or strategy, practice will help you feel better equipped and help discussions run as planned. Further, some people may be more or less open to recognizing emotions, particularly in a more formal setting such as water policy. Practicing how to manage those who are reluctant will make this process easier. Writing down potential responses, role-playing, and perspective-taking can help identify potential paths forward. Similarly, practicing negotiations with various perspectives could help identify the common ground, values, and emotions that can be helpful for the cooperation, trust, and relationship building needed for sustainable water stewardship. Rehearsing opening activities with others can also be helpful to ensure the desired emotions are engaged and that the process runs smoothly.

## CONCLUSION

Water has always been important to human society, for nearly every aspect of life. Our deep history with and reliance on water means we may experience a wide range of emotions including fear, anger, and empathy when considering what is needed to keep water safe for current and future generations. Recognizing and working with these emotions can help improve sustainable water outcomes and guide water stewardship and diplomacy that can meet the needs of many. We hope that this brief introduction to how emotions function in water stewardship scenarios encourages further exploration and engagement with emotions within policy settings. The great need for sustainable, inclusive, and equitable water stewardship means we can no longer ignore the role of emotions in this space.

## APPENDIX: CONTEXT

Emotions are already involved in policy - from discussions about the need for policy reform, a new area of interest, or about a community affected<sup>6,18,51</sup>. They can influence policy and diplomacy and can complement - rather than act against - deliberate, rational thought<sup>6</sup>. There are two distinct categories of emotions. The first, state emotions, are more fleeting and in response to a specific context or experience, but we also carry baseline levels of emotions that are largely enduring across the lifespan, called trait or dispositional emotions. These state and trait emotions work in concert to shape our behaviours. In water policy, policy advisors tend to use descriptive examples that elicit a strong emotional response (e.g., major flood or drought; impacts on a specific person or community) to make convincing arguments about the importance of certain actions. Governments are involved in disaster and emergency management, where emotions of affected communities may play a role in the recovery and rebuilding processes. Acknowledging these emotions within communities is an important first step in rebuilding after a disaster. Further, water management and stewardship depends on building and maintaining good relationships; water is a shared entity, necessary for survival, and ignores geopolitical boundaries. It is thus essential that those who make decisions about water conservation and management maintain relationships built on trust<sup>52</sup>. While the need for trust has been recognized in transboundary water diplomacy, the presence of other emotions in policy is not often recognized nor are responses to these emotions fully considered.

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### ***Thinking always includes feeling.***

**Hutchison & Bleiker, 2014**

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These emotions and their effects are already impacting policy and stewardship. Water stewardship and management can be a highly sensitive and fervent milieu; the passion or arousal around these deliberations can influence how emotions lead to behaviour. Emotions can emerge in response to how a stimulus or target, such as a water policy or water problem, is appraised<sup>18</sup>. Emotions then motivate or encourage a response and lead to a physiological response (e.g., faster heart rate, specific facial expression)<sup>18</sup>. The intensity of the emotion influences whether and what behavioural responses occur. For example, inducing strong negative emotions such as fear or guilt through targeted messaging can motivate individuals to change their circumstances. However, depending on the baseline levels of emotions (e.g., anxiety) experienced by an individual, these same emotions can also elicit an inhibitory response whereby individuals become less likely to act<sup>20,26</sup>. As such, it is critical to consider the complex relationship between emotions and behaviour when developing policy around an emotionally-charged issue such as water stewardship and management.

For collaborative, sustainable water relations, policy-makers must understand the opportunities and consequences of various emotions in water stewardship. There are subtle but powerful ways emotions can influence the framing and reception of water concerns that can hinder and bolster water stewardship and policy.

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