

CASE STUDY

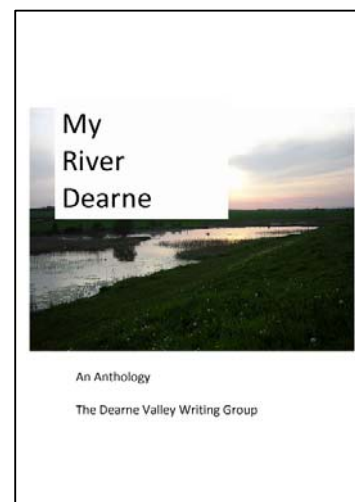
Engaging local communities in the sustainable planning and management of rivers

OVERVIEW

This project explored the connections between people and rivers in sustainable communities. There has been a great deal of media coverage about flood risk, sustainable drainage and water quality. Most people agree that the problems and opportunities of living close to rivers cannot generally be dealt with by 'hard' engineering solutions alone, or even by experts alone. Attempts to manage river flows by straightening and reinforcing watercourses, for example, have taken away much of their amenity and conservation interest and have in some cases exacerbated flooding. Now, many rivers are being restored to something like their natural condition, often as part of attempts to create a new image for areas that have been damaged by industry. Sustainable approaches to water basin planning require negotiation between a range of professionals, as well as involving local communities in alternative future options. However, rivers are part of large and complex systems, which are not easily understood by non-experts. Also, people have become less aware of rivers, as their reliance on them for a variety of functions such as transport has declined. Consequently, it may be difficult to engage a diverse public in dialogues about the long-term sustainable development of rivers.

Our research looked at ways of building on current experience of participation in river basin planning. To begin with, we completed a wide-ranging review of the existing 'toolkit' of methods in order to consolidate and share information about what is already known. Then, we trialled the use of an innovative

approach to participation based on 'imaginative engagement'. This entailed recruiting a creative writing group from the River Dearne valley in South Yorkshire, who spent three months producing an anthology based on their research into the history and environment of the river. We found that this was an enjoyable and effective way of helping people engage with future options and practical issues. It appears to offer a new addition to the participation toolkit which is particularly useful for longer-term social learning, and for helping experts and non-experts to share information on an equal footing. It may therefore have an important role to play in assisting the transition to sustainability.



BACKGROUND

River catchments are highly complex systems which are not well understood by the general public. Indeed, many people may be unaware of the existence of a local river – until perhaps there are problems such as flooding or pollution. Hence, it may be difficult to involve non-experts in discussions about the future sustainable management of rivers. This is because many current approaches to urban drainage, flood control, groundwater replenishment and river restoration require an understanding of wider catchment processes.

However, effective participation is required by the EU Water Framework Directive, and it also leads to better solutions and improved acceptance of innovative options. Our project looked at one way of ‘reconnecting’ people with their river by using a relatively untested approach, namely, ‘imaginative engagement’ through the use of creative arts. It has been suggested that this may be an effective way of involving diverse stakeholders in dialogues about complex issues relating to sustainable development. Imaginative engagement may help non-experts to regain what the Environment Agency has referred to as ‘catchment consciousness’. Equally, it may help professionals draw upon local knowledge and cultivate skills in expressing information in simple, effective language.

Public participation in environmental decision-making is now widely practised. However, there is a growing view that sustainable communities will need to go beyond participation, into ‘social learning’. This is especially important in relation to river basin management. Diversifying away from traditional ‘hard’ engineering solutions may require changes in people’s behaviour and their acceptance of risk, and this is unlikely to be achieved by ‘one-off’ participation or publicity activities. Also, it is important to appreciate that information transfer is not uni-directional: experts learn from local people as well as the other way round, and this requires

a sustained meeting of stakeholders on an ‘equal footing’.

Consequently, although imaginative engagement methods can be adapted for routine public participation within a time-constrained context, this was not the primary focus of our project. Instead, we emphasised the scope for an extended engagement process to explore sustainable futures, build social capital, and possibly cultivate community leaders and co-researchers.

THE PROJECT

Our case study was based in the Dearne Valley, South Yorkshire. This area was at the heart of Yorkshire’s coal and steel industry, which declined rapidly during the 1980s, although it has since undergone major regeneration. The river had been seriously polluted but has now recovered and become an important recreation and conservation asset, although it is still prone to serious flooding. The Environment Agency is currently implementing a strategy called ‘Dearne Valley Green Heart’ in the area, requiring extensive participation to unlock environmental and community benefits.

Our fieldwork commenced with a stakeholder workshop at a local nature conservation centre, and we subsequently recruited volunteers to join a creative writing group whose work would focus on the past, present and future of the Dearne catchment. The group involved a mix of professional environmentalists, amateur enthusiasts (e.g. local historians) and ‘ordinary’ public. Over a series of six two-hour late afternoon workshops, led by an expert in creative writing, the participants undertook a number of directed tasks. These required them to engage with the heritage and dynamics of their local river, seek out social and environmental information, interpret images and literary extracts about rivers, and respond to ‘official’

documents, as well as develop their writerly skills.

Eventually, the group's collected writings were edited into an anthology. The project concluded with a dissemination event, which served a dual purpose – to report the results of the research to stakeholders and to celebrate the group's anthology through a public reading of their work.

Although our project only involved a small number of people in relation to one environmental issue, it has far wider implications. First, it produced a substantial review of theory and practice in participatory river basin management, which will provide a resource for future researchers and practitioners. Second, the problem of engaging non-experts effectively in decisions about complex issues is not unique to water catchments – the approach is equally applicable to many other challenges of sustainable development such as climate change. Third, whilst our specific method of imaginative engagement may not be immediately suitable as a basis for rapid, large-scale participation, it can form part of a broader strategy for stakeholder involvement. It can also be adapted for use in more routine, 'time-constrained' participation processes. Fourth, the use of this particular method has highlighted the importance of 'social learning' as a mechanism for the transition to sustainability. It provides a means of achieving deeper understanding and, perhaps, building leadership capacity. Finally, it is important to note that it was fun – the approach has great potential for replication within communities as an activity that people might want to pursue for enjoyment, so that capacity for sustainable development is 'caught' rather than 'taught'.

THE IMPACT

During the course of the workshops, we observed how the group's awareness and concerns changed and how they gained confidence, shared knowledge and ideas, and developed a group dynamic. To do this, we conducted a number of evaluations, questionnaires and interviews with our writing group as well as observing each session.

We found that using imaginative writing as a tool for active engagement and learning was a positive and valued experience for all participants. The explorations of how people felt and imagined issues and aspects around rivers gave them insight into their own and other people's feelings, knowledge and personalities. In several cases, imaginative engagement also triggered a change in their own perceptions, thinking and experiences. Several participants also noted that they had started to write much more, whilst all participants noted some sort of change to their attitudes and thinking due to participating in the project. Maybe most significantly, spending more time thinking and writing about the Dearne and other rivers was actually a stimulus for some of the participants to try out new things in their personal and/or professional life. Learning took place through listening to others and discussing written work, as well as through gathering information as a basis for homework tasks. There were some particularly interesting instances of knowledge-sharing between the generations, and between experts and non-experts.

As well as learning more about their river and options for its sustainable use, local people were able to share knowledge and ideas about the kind of changes they would like to see. They undertook writing exercises based on 'official' documentation and provided revealing comments on how these could be made more interesting and accessible. They became co-researchers, and provided 'insider' perspectives on the values that were attached to local environmental and social assets.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Imaginative engagement can be an enjoyable and effective way of involving local people in sustainable development options.
- It can 'give them something back' rather than just taking information from them – in this case, becoming more accomplished creative writers, so that they gained skills and confidence.
- Undertaking such work requires skilled facilitation with careful selection of appropriate materials.
- Imaginative engagement can provide a two-way flow of information, and it works best if 'professionals' engage with 'locals' on an equal basis.
- Imaginative engagement can help people investigate and comprehend complex sustainability issues.
- A sustained and active social learning process can motivate people to learn more about their environment, and potentially lead to changes in their perceptions and behaviour.
- Participation is not just about contributing ideas to a plan – it is also about a deeper process of social learning, which can embed sustainability in communities and institutions.

Paul Selman and Rowena Bailey, Department of Landscape,
University of Sheffield

Anna Lawrence and Claudia Carter
[Forest Research](#)

Clare Morgan, Kellogg College
[University of Oxford](#)

REFERENCES

Further information on the research can be found at:

<http://www.shef.ac.uk/landscape/staff/profiles/paulselman/research.html>