

## Engaging with rivers: using imaginative and creative approaches as a learning tool

Using creative approaches and imaginative engagement to involve people in shared learning experiences can help increase awareness and understanding and build capacity for building sustainable communities. In the RIVERS project we tested the use of creative writing as a tool to engage with river catchments and their past, present and future use and management. This one-year project was commissioned by the Joint Targeted Initiative of Skills and Knowledge for Sustainable Communities of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Homes and Communities Academy (HCA).



*"...whereas I started off feeling fairly confident that I knew all this stuff and I didn't need to learn anything myself, I realise there's a lot more to think about and to understand."*

(Male participant, 51, working in environmental management)

### Background

Public participation is now widely practised but little attention seems to be given to its impacts on participants (both temporary and longer-term) and their capacity for social learning and transformation. When using participation to help build sustainable communities, the process needs to go beyond one-off events and allow expert and lay participants to meet on an 'equal footing' to communicate, share perspectives and take action.

We chose the Dearne Valley, South Yorkshire, for our case study, which is currently experiencing regeneration after the rapid decline of the coal and steel industry in the 1980s. It is an area susceptible to flooding and our project included several participants who had witnessed the severe flooding of June 2007.

### Objectives

The main aims of the research project were to:

- conduct a selective but systematic review of research evidence on innovative approaches to participatory river basin planning
- investigate the potential of 'imaginative engagement' to raise 'catchment consciousness' and facilitate social learning
- assess whether project participation leads to identifiable changes in perceptions, values, knowledge and personal actions or community involvement

### Methods

Our approach used the following methods:

- **review of literature** and projects on participatory river basin planning and other innovative engagement activities
- **stakeholder workshop** at the project start to gather local evidence and support
- recruit participants for and run a series of **imaginative engagement workshops** led by an expert in creative writing
- **evaluation** of the process, outputs and impacts of participation through: *surveys* to profile the lifestyle, behaviour and perceptions of participants and their general environmental and river management knowledge; *workshop evaluation forms* to capture perceived learning and changes in each session; *diaries/work books* kept by some participants for use between workshops; semi-structured telephone and face-to-face *interviews*
- **stakeholder and participant workshop** at the end of the project to celebrate the project outputs (anthology) and disseminate research findings

## Findings

The literature review uncovered extensive experience of applying diverse participatory methods to river basin management and restoration, but few exercises have enabled public and professionals to spend time sharing stories, local wisdom, hopes and fears in a personally engaged manner. Where this has happened, through arts-based projects, the results have rarely been critically documented.

The use of imaginative writing as a tool for active engagement and learning was a positive and valued experience for the seven core participants. The exploration of how people felt and imagined issues and aspects around rivers gave them insight into their own and other people's feelings, knowledge and perspectives. Several participants noted some change

in their attitudes and thinking due to participation in the project. Perhaps most significantly, spending more time thinking and writing about the Dearne and other rivers stimulated people's exploration of new interests (e.g. registering for English literature course) and behaviour (e.g. exploring and documenting different parts of the river/valley; joining a local environmental group) and changes in their professional life (e.g. using creative approaches; engaging more with different public perspectives). Learning took place by 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 lay people.

## Recommendations

The following project findings and lessons are of potential interest to environmental agencies, local authorities, planners and researchers.

- Imaginative engagement could be used more widely as an enjoyable and effective way of involving local people in sustainable community and environmental management issues.
- Satisfaction of participation may be improved by using approaches that 'give something back' rather than just use participants' time and information.
- Undertaking creative work requires skilled facilitation and careful selection of appropriate materials to stimulate imaginative engagement and learning.
- Using engagement approaches that put locals and experts on an equal footing can help two-way flow of information.
- 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.
- Taking participation beyond 'consultation' and 'contributing ideas to a plan' can provide a deeper process of social learning, which can help embed sustainability in communities and institutions.
- Embedding evaluation in participatory processes will help to highlight what works or changes for whom, when, how and why; using a range of evaluation methods helps bring out the range of impacts that active engagement can have or trigger.

### Reports and publications

Selman, P., Carter, C., Lawrence, A. and Morgan, C. (2010). 'Re-connecting with a recovering river through imaginative engagement', *Ecology and Society* 15 (3), 18 [www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol15/iss3/art18/](http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol15/iss3/art18/).

Selman, P., Lawrence, A., Carter, C. and Morgan, C. (2009). *Engaging with Rivers in a Period of Uncertainty*: End of Award Report to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), project reference number: RES-182-25-0006. Department of Landscape, University of Sheffield.

The Dearne Valley Writing Group. (2008). *My River Dearne, An Anthology*. Edited by C. Morgan. [www.shef.ac.uk/content/1/c6/09/13/23/Anthology%20for%20Printing%20web%20version.pdf](http://www.shef.ac.uk/content/1/c6/09/13/23/Anthology%20for%20Printing%20web%20version.pdf)

Project website: [www.shef.ac.uk/landscape/staff/profiles/paulselman/research.html](http://www.shef.ac.uk/landscape/staff/profiles/paulselman/research.html)

### Partners

University of Sheffield, Forest Research and University of Oxford.

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