Community Participation in River Restoration in the UK - Case Study from the River Lowther

Participation communautaire à la restauration des rivières au Royaume-Uni – Étude de cas sur la rivière Lowther

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RÉSUMÉ

Trop souvent, la restauration des rivières est effectuée pour les communautés locales plutôt qu'avec elles. Les consultations, si elles sont menées en commun, prennent des informations et des connaissances locales sans rien donner en retour. Le pouvoir de décision est conservé par ceux qui sont les moins touchés par les conséquences de ces décisions et les connaissances locales sont ignorées au profit de l'avis des experts. Les communautés locales sont perçues comme n'étant pas équipées pour contribuer à une prise de décision complexe. Les communautés se retrouvent privées de leurs droits par rapport aux agents du pouvoir, déconnectées de leur environnement et se sentent menacées par le changement inévitable que l'avenir apporte. En conséquence, au lieu d'être considérée comme un héros, la restauration des rivières et de la nature est devenue le méchant d'un drame qui se joue entre les défenseurs de l'environnement et les communautés locales, dont la crise de la biodiversité et du climat est la victime. Cette étude de cas explore une approche alternative adoptée dans le cadre d'un projet de restauration de la rivière Lowther dans le nord de l'Angleterre. Suite à une rupture des berges de la rivière en février 2024, une approche de recherche-action participative a été adoptée pour tenter d'impliquer la communauté locale dans le processus de restauration. Pendant une période de six mois, la communauté a été invitée à prendre une part active à la planification du processus de restauration, en l'incluant dans le processus de prise de décision afin d'améliorer les résultats pour la communauté, la nature et le climat.

ABSTRACT

All too often river restoration is done to local communities rather than with them. Consultations, if they are done at all, take information and local knowledge without giving anything back. Power for decision making is retained by those least impacted by the consequences of those decisions and local knowledge is ignored in favour of expert opinion. Local communities are perceived as not being equipped to contribute to complicated decision-making. Communities become disenfranchised from agents of power, disconnected from their environment, and feel threatened by the inevitable change which the future brings. As a result, instead of being seen as a hero, river and nature restoration has become the villain in a drama played out between conservationists and local communities, where the biodiversity and climate crisis is the victim. This case study explores an alternative approach taken as part of a river restoration project on the river Lowther in northern England. Following a breach of the river's flood banks in February 2024 a participatory action research approach was taken to try and engage the local community in the restoration process. Over a 6-month period communities were invited to taken an active part in planning the restoration process, including them in the decision making process in order to improve outcomes for the community, nature and climate.

KEYWORDS

(5 keywords, in alphabetical order, separated by a comma)

Climate change, community participation, nature democracy, regenerative governance, river restoration,

Changement climatique, démocratie naturelle, gouvernance régénératrice, participation communautaire, restauration des rivières

1 INTRODUCTION

The river Lowther is a tributary of the river Eden, a Natura 2000 site in northern England inside the Lake District National Park. Rising from 500m in the Shap Fells it flows for a relatively short distance before joining the river Eden 25km downstream at Eamont Bridge. Around the village of Bampton the river is perched and straightened with a 8m floodbank protecting the villlage and adjacent farmland. In February 2024 the floodbank was breached and the adjacent fields inundated (see Figure 1).

Fig 1. The breach on the river Lowther February 2024

This resulted in a flurry of activity from statutory government agencies keen to ensure compliance with legislation associated with protected sites in the UK. Despite landowner interest in rebuilding the floodbank, as a Natura 2000 site consent would not be given by Natural England. Furthermore even if it were not a protected site, changes in policy meant that no funds were available through the U.K. Environment Agency and given estimates of €10,000 for the capital work, the owner could not afford to fund the works himself. Therefore from a very early stage it became apparent rebuilding the floodbank was not an option. However, as the breach interrupted a popular footpath and affected a significant area of farmland as well as posing a potential flood risk to the villaige of Bampton itself it was clear that some mitigation would be necessary.

Cumbria Connect is an Endangered Landscapes and Seascapes Programme working with partners to carry out nature restoration at a landscape scale across 40,000ha of the eastern Lake District. River restoration is a core activity for the programme and with government agencies having limited resources to work on this project, we decided to work with a local NGO, Eden Rivers Trust, to create and deliver a vision for the future of the river which could be adopted by all stakeholders.

2 THE ACTORS

The project required collaboration and co-ordination across multiple stakeholders, divided into several communities. The approach to governance adopted by Cumbria Connect is outlined below and in Figure 2 :

- **Technical task and finish group** – working with river restoration consultants, this group included statutory agencies and worked to ensure that options from feasibility studies complied with the relevent government legislation and policy
- **Land manager task and finish goup** – this group was composed of the 11 landowners and tenants whose land was directly affected by the breach. The breach was an opportunity to reset the floodplain and reduce the potential impact of climate change. However, in order to do this all stakeholders in this group needed to agree to any actions and be compensated accordingly. Without this group cooperation there would be no river restoration
- **Community task and finish group** – living in the shadow of flood risk, with predictions of more frequent and heavier rainfall the community are highly vulnerable, but with no control of land management around the village, the community at Bampton was a key stakeholder group for the project.
- Project management – this was done by Cumbria Connect
- Steering group – the project was overseen by a steering group composed of key stakeholders representing each of the groups above.

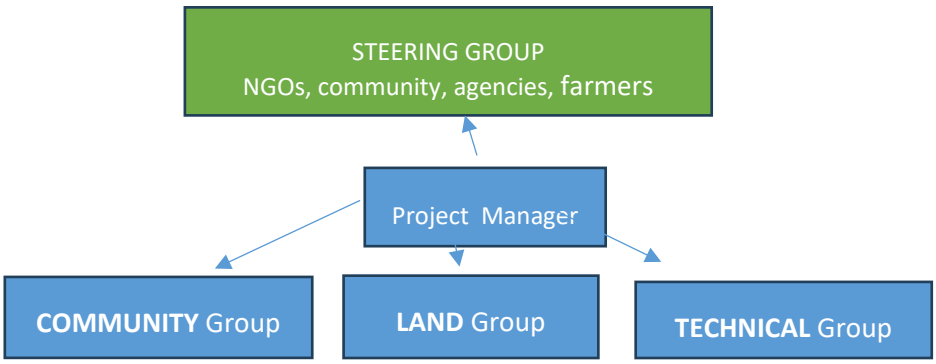

Fig 2. The governance approach for river Lowther restoration

3 THE APPROACH

Initial feasibility studies showed a potential dramatic shift in the river Lowther's course under climate change scenarios (see Figure 3) resulting in significant impact on all stakeholders in the project, but also opportunity for mitigating impact and winning gains for natural capital through river restoration. The stakes were high on all sides. From the start Cumbria Connect set out to co-design the solution. All too often river restoration is done to local communities rather than with them. Consultations, if they are done at all, take information and local knowledge without giving anything back. Power for decision making is retained by those least impacted by the consequences of those decisions and local knowledge is ignored in favour of expert opinion.

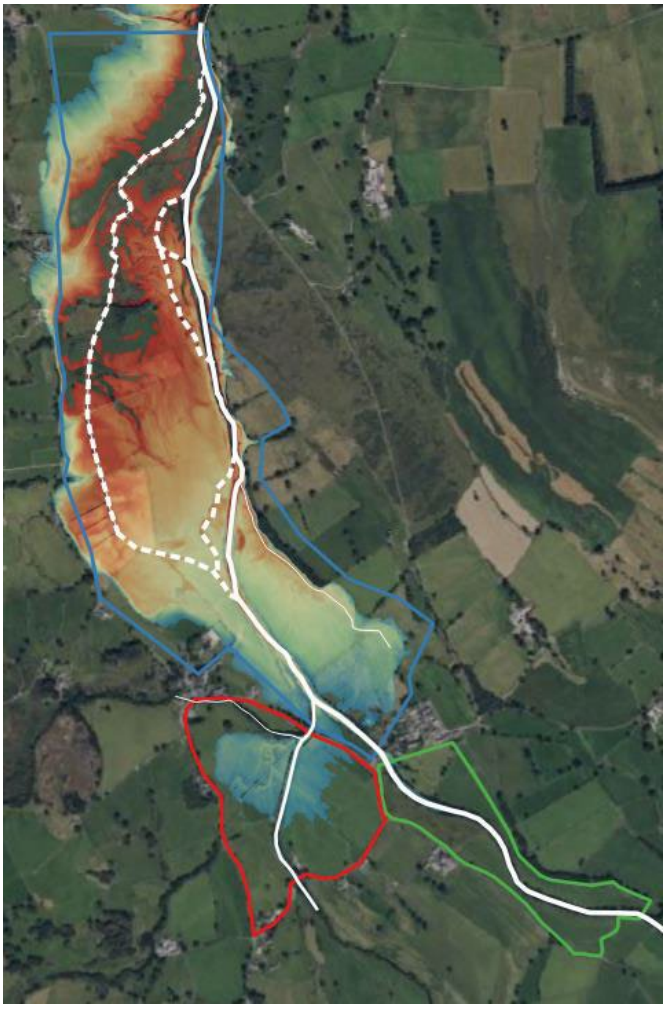

Fig 3. The predictions for flood risk in the Lowther valley from the feasibility study showing the current river course (solid white lines) and potential changes to that course under climate change scenarios (dashed white line)

Local communities are perceived as not being equipped to contribute to complicated decision-making. Communities become disenfranchised from agents of power, disconnected from their environment, and feel threatened by the inevitable change which the future brings. As a result, instead of being seen as a hero, river and nature restoration has become the villain in a drama played out between conservationists and local communities, where the biodiversity and climate crisis is the victim.

Using participatory action research methodology this case study explores an alternative approach to try and engage the local community in the restoration process. Over a 6-month period the communities were invited to take an active part in planning the restoration process, including them in the decision making process in order to improve outcomes for the community, nature and climate. A 6-stage model similar to that outlined in Figure 4 was used to guide the communities through the co-design process which will result in the selection of a preferred design for river restoration agreed by all stakeholders and benefit communities, nature and climate.

Example participatory research methods/tools for each step in the research process

Steps in the Research Process	Example Participatory Research Methods/Tools
PARTNER • Develop a research partnership • Build relationships • Evaluate and sustain partnership	Warm calling (Lapierre et al., 2018) Stone soup (Ndulue et al., 2012) Boundary crossers/co-researchers (Kilpatrick et al., 2009) Community advisory boards (Newman et al., 2011) Synergy model (Brush, Baiardi, & Lapides, 2011)
DESIGN • Develop research questions • Plan research design	Action learning sets (Munns et al., 2017) Storytelling group (Kankainen et al., 2012)
COLLECT • Assessment of community needs, resources, and priorities • Data collection • Idea generation	Community risk assessment (Van Aalst, Cannon, & Burton, 2008) Group Level Assessment (Vaughn et al., 2011) Concept mapping methodology (Vaughn et al., 2016) Arts-based, co-created fotonovelas (Hidalgo, 2015) Narrative workshops (Lykes & Crosby, 2014)
ANALYZE • Data analysis • Data interpretation	Participatory group process for data analysis (Jackson, 2008) Community-based participatory data system (Main et al., 2012) Participatory data analysis and interpretation (Cashman et al., 2008)
DISSEMINATE • Telling and showing • Dissemination	Decision guide (Van Eerd et al., 2016) Collaborative GIS tool (Driedger et al., 2007) Ethnodrama (Taylor et al., 2017)
ACT • Enacting change • Sharing impact of project • Policy-level outcomes	Urban community action planning (Ross & Coleman, 2000) Participatory forecasting (Gudowsky et al., 2012) Participatory monitoring and evaluation (Holte-McKenzie, Forde & Theobald, 2006) Framework to Assess the Impact from Translational health research (FAIT; Searles et al., 2016)

Fig 4 : Outline of the participatory action research approach taken by Cumbria Connect at part of the river Lowther case study (taken from Vaughn, L. M., & Jacquez, F. (2020). Participatory Research Methods – Choice Points in the Research Process. *Journal of Participatory Research Methods*, *1*(1). https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.13244)