

Surveying Community Based Catchment Management Groups in England and Wales

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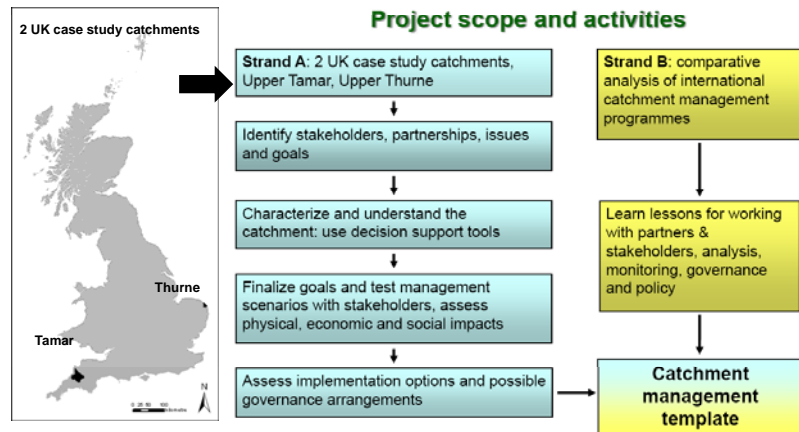
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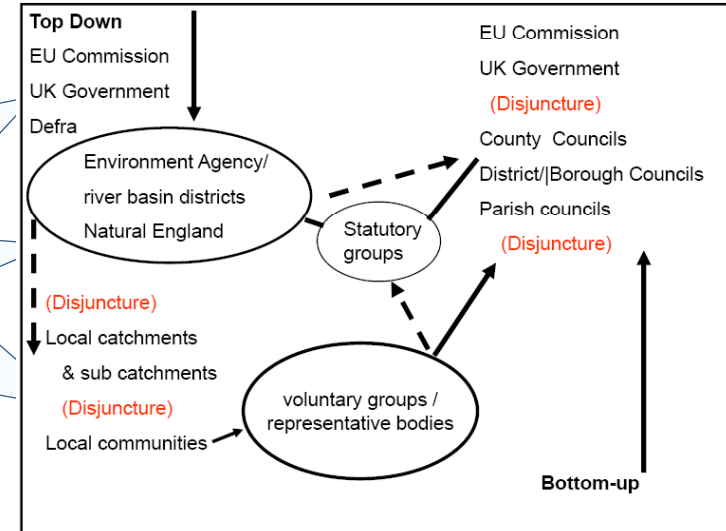
Figure 1: Overview of the parent project for this survey



Breaking news!

At the Defra Water Stakeholder Forum in London on 23 March 2011 a new 'catchment management approach' was launched by the Parliamentary Under Secretary for Natural Environment and Fisheries. This was response to criticisms received of River Basin District scale planning for the WFD. The detail is still to be worked out but includes: 10 pilot catchment management projects to be led by the Environment Agency; an invitation for other organisations (including 'third sector' groups) to lead other pilot catchments; compatibility with the Government's approach to the 'Big Society'; and commitment of all Defra implementing agencies to more effectively engage stakeholders in the process.

Figure 2: A view of catchment governance



Introduction

As part of an assessment of governance arrangements for catchment management:

- a survey of non-statutory catchment groups across England and Wales in late 2009 to understand funding mechanisms, capacity, activities, representation and working practices
- defined as: 'an assembly of stakeholders who convene (periodically or regularly) to discuss, negotiate, plan or implement the management of water courses (including land based measures and best practices designed to influence water quantity or quality) on a catchment-wide basis'
- 39 groups contacted (close to a comprehensive census)
- key informants interviewed by phone using a structured questionnaire.

Why?

Such groups are part of a new governance paradigm that:

- may capture substantive, instrumental and normative (Fiorino, 1990) benefits of stakeholder participation
- develops necessary collaborative partnerships and local coordination
- can be cost-effective in delivering environmental services: with local ownership, acceptance and commitment.

Key Questions:

- are they suited to 'third sector' status?
- how geographically and thematically focused are they?
- how inclusive is their membership?
- are they well supported by the wider community?
- are they moving towards a formalisation of their structures and operation?
- do they work well with existing institutions?

Water governance in UK – the 'status quo'

- often described as rather 'top-down' policy implementation in response to EU and national regulation; involves public consultation but not 'participation'
- statutory catchment groups are used (e.g. RFERAC, REPAC, WFRBLP, CSF steering groups); but these are largely advisory and non-executive
- voluntary groups are erratic in geographic and thematic coverage, yet respond to perceived problems and, in qualitative terms, they are effective and supported
- a number of disjunctions can be observed between government led environmental management programmes, community based initiatives, and representative multi-level government and planning processes (Figure 2).

Key findings – capacity profile

- the sector is young with 6 out of 10 groups established since 2001
- groups are cash poor (6 out of 10 with an annual income of £20,000 or less), but the income trend is upwards for the majority
- funding sourced opportunistically from a multitude of channels: main sources being private donations, grant giving trusts and government agencies, most notably the Environment Agency
- total number of full-time staff across the sector totals 75; with an additional 28 part-time staff, two-thirds of groups have no full-time staff
- number of volunteers is considerable at around 1,500
- number of members and informal supporters impressive at around 15,000 individuals.

Key findings – institutional profile

- groups very much positioned within the 'third sector'; instigated locally to deal with a local problem and with community level activities very evident
- most have (or are working towards) charitable status and are, therefore, required to deliver public benefit
- most groups have been initiated by landowner and fisheries interests but broader representation is now growing rapidly
- two thirds of groups have formal members, however most decision-making is confined to governing bodies
- generally very positive working relationships with the statutory agencies although some frustrations expressed about access to data and level of influence in development of WFD River Basin Management Plans.

Key findings – activity profile

- the groups pride themselves as 'doers' and on practical action
- most have so far focused on water quality, quantity and habitat enhancement, rather than broader sustainability issues linked to economic development
- however, there are noticeable exceptions such as the Westcountry Rivers Trust which takes an Ecosystem Approach, directly promoting initiatives to link rural livelihoods with water resource protection
- delivery of public education programmes is a key activity for most groups
- groups increasingly see themselves as offering a brokering role between different interest groups to develop partnership projects and coordination at local level.

Summary conclusions

- as charities, groups are non-bureaucratic and see themselves as achieving local goals; they find their functions and status in the 'third sector' to be appropriate
- participation, once landowner and fisheries dominated, is widening through membership schemes
- community engagement role is demonstrated by growing educational activities, role in brokering and partnership formation
- statutory agencies evidently and increasingly recognise such advantages
- vision is widening, from fisheries conservation to wider water quality, habitat protection and rural development
- cost effective, 'environmental management on the cheap'; yet financial sustainability of groups is a serious and continual challenge, and professional technical staff are a scarce resource
- decision-making tends to remain with governing bodies; yet their statutory role and relation with democratic process can be unclear
- establishment of broad-based local trust, plus legitimacy and standing conveyed by both recognition from statutory agencies and local acceptance is essential
- without coordination there remains some potential for duplication of action through different agencies.

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References

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Published Paper

The method and results of this survey are now published as:
Cook, H., Benson, D., Inman, A., Jordan, A. and L.E.D. Smith (2011), Catchment management groups in England and Wales: extent, roles and influences, *Water and Environment Journal*, first published online: 23 MAR 2011 | DOI: 10.1111/j.1747-6593.2011.00262.x

