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The value of experiential knowledge and the impact of scale in river management processes

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It is now widely acknowledged that involving those with experiential knowledge in catchment management can have multiple benefits ranging from a more efficient decision making process to a greater sense of community ownership around projects. Many statutory bodies for the environment in the UK and Europe are now expected to work with local people to a certain degree. But to what level do we define 'participation' and can we realistically include public knowledge as part of an accepted scientific procedure? This paper presents a case study of a competence group in the catchment of the Derwent River, Northumberland, who have lobbied for the repair of a broken weir within their community. Their extensive knowledge coupled with scientific analysis of flow and geomorphology (using a 2-D flow model, DELFT) has allowed us to investigate potential immediate and future impacts of the restoration on flow and habitat. However, the process has led to a series of questions, such as: How do we get others to trust work we do that involves public knowledge? How can we account for uncertainty in that knowledge? Who should be involved and to what level? Further questions arise around the relationship between scale of a project and its success. The case study is compared to a number of cases operating on a much larger scale throughout Europe, some of which have been less successful and conclusions are drawn over the importance of scale. It is suggested that the co-production of knowledge process can have great value at a local scale, but an increase in the number of people affected or involved can be to the detriment of the level of involvement possible. This can have major implications for environmental governing bodies who are increasingly expected to involve participants and account for local knowledge in procedure and planning.