



Going With the Flow: Participatory Action Research and River Catchment Management

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Public participation, now mainstreamed as a desirable goal in research and policy has a wide variety of different models, classifications, approaches, tools, mechanisms and processes that are utilized across science and social science utilise. Demands for public participation in environmental issues have found particular resonance within recent European water legislation, specifically the Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC). In the UK River Basin Plans are under the jurisdiction of the Environment Agency (EA) and the practice of their management is currently being trialed through the EA's management of 10 trial catchments. In these trials, the Environment Agency has outlined its wish to explore improved ways of engaging with people so as to develop shared understandings of problems within catchments. In this work, we report on project outcomes funded under the Rural Economy and Land Use Program (Relu) in which we worked with the Lune Rivers Trust. The project was the first in the UK to use a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach to understanding and creating tools to address problems in river catchments. PAR is a distinct approach to participation because it is driven by participants (people who have a stake in the issue being researched) rather than an outside sponsor, funder or academic (although they may be invited to help); it offers a democratic model of who can produce, own and use knowledge; it is collaborative at every stage, involving discussion, pooling skills and working together; and it is intended to result in some action, change or improvement on the issue being researched, towards more socially and environmentally just outcomes. Both the project and the tools we coproduced resonate very strongly with current policy objects for river catchments as outlined above. We argue that PAR has particular resonance with the above focus of catchment management particularly in light of future uncertainties with climate change. As such, it offers a critical reflection on approaches to catchment management that characterize themselves as 'participatory'.