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Replacing Concrete with Natural and Social Engineering: Learning the Lessons of Stakeholder Engagement from South West Water's Upland Catchment Management Programme

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Peatlands in the South West of the British Isles have been extensively drained for agricultural reclamation and peat cutting. The improvement in food production resulting from this management practice has never clearly been observed. Instead, we are now faced with several detrimental consequences on a whole suite of ecosystem services, such as the delivery of water, water quality, biodiversity and carbon storage. Alongside the direct environmental implications, poor water quality is increasing water treatment costs and will drive significant future investment. As a result, water companies now need to find appropriate solutions to varying water levels and decreasing water quality through catchment management.
The Mires Project, the catchment management programme used by South West Water (SWW) is working with a wide range of stakeholders to restore the hydrological functioning of peatlands, and the ecosystem services they provide. This programme is driven by overarching legal requirements (i.e. the water framework directive, Natura 2000), future climate change predictions, corporate responsibility and commercial needs. Post-restoration scientific monitoring is at the heart of the project improving of our understanding of the eco-hydrological and chemical process driving changes in management practice.
The challenges faced from the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders will be explored, focusing on the benefits from stakeholder involvement in catchment management and hydrological research, but also considering the difficulties to be overcome. SWW is working with private land-owners, government agencies, local and national park Authorities, community and single interest groups and research institutions to achieve its catchment management objectives. To achieve this it has replaced the traditional water company approach of hard engineering solutions with a mixture of softer natural and social engineering.