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The construction of reference conditions under the EU Water Framework Directive

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With this contribution we connect to the 3rd theme of the session, 'hydrology as practiced within society'. Based on our recent article Linton & Krueger (2020), we demonstrate how the reference conditions and subsequent water quality targets under the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) do not exist 'out there', waiting to be discovered, but are outcomes of complex negotiations between hydrological, ecological, technical and socio-political realities.

Treating reference conditions and targets as naturally given, as WFD implementation does at least implicitly, upholds a false sense of authority that obscures the manifold choices in the creation of the reference conditions while denying the people charged with implementing the targets or having to live with the resulting water quality an influence over those choices.

We argue that the concept of reference conditions must be abandoned in a world where water everywhere bears the traces of human presence. Instead, water quality targets should be set openly, location-specific and involving those for whom water quality is a matter of concern. We will give examples from other jurisdictions where such an approach is established practice.

References

Linton, J. and Krueger, T. (2020), The Ontological Fallacy of the Water Framework Directive: Implications and Alternatives. *Water Alternatives*, 13(3): 513-533.