

Science for Environment Policy

Neutral organisations play a positive role in facilitating participatory water management

Public participation is an essential part of integrated water management. In a recent study, researchers following the development of a UK catchment management plan found greater cooperation between land managers and environmental regulatory bodies as a result of a participatory process.

This study followed the participatory process of a group of land managers ([farmers](#) and estate managers) and regulatory agencies in developing a sustainable catchment management plan (CMP) for the Bowmont-Glen catchment in the UK. The area suffered major floods in 2008 and 2009, causing significant damage to farmland, and land managers disagreed with regulatory bodies on how to proceed with flood risk reduction plans for the area.

A local NGO promoting integrated water resource management, the Tweed Forum, was asked to oversee development of the catchment plan. After a series of meetings, workshops, discussion groups and farm visits for all stakeholders, a CMP was drawn up. The researchers carried out 44 interviews with land managers, NGO staff and representatives from regulatory and administrative bodies, both during the participatory process and after the CMP had been finalised.

Participants gave a variety of reasons for their involvement in the CMP. Most land managers said they wanted to manage their own flood defences and they wanted to see a change in how government agencies managed the river itself. In contrast, the government agencies and NGOs wanted to raise awareness of the impact of farming practices and flood defence measures on the aquatic environment, and improve compliance with environmental regulations.

Most stakeholders agreed that the CMP was a good compromise between the demands of land managers and regulatory bodies. The plan involved restoring wetlands, planting woodlands, and allowing some areas to flood. Flood reduction measures, including sediment removal and growing plants on riverbanks to reduce erosion would be carried out in 10 flooding 'hot spots'. Nevertheless, some regulatory bodies thought that changes in land use did not go far enough, and some land managers felt that the CMP did not address their flooding issues.

Most land managers (12 out of 19) had been encouraged by the collaborative process, suggesting that this had improved their relationship with the regulatory agencies. Similarly, a major outcome for regulatory bodies was seeing that land managers were more willing to engage with them. Both land managers and regulatory bodies were positive about the role played by the Tweed Forum, highlighting its value as a neutral coordinator as well as an information distributor.

After the participatory process, 17 out of 19 land managers were willing to carry out some of the plan's measures. However only nine were prepared to change their land management practices, provided external funding was available, and few believed that the process significantly changed their core views.

Interviews with stakeholders after publication of the CMP suggested that the participatory process meant that land managers became more compliant with environmental regulations. This was because they were more willing to contact regulatory bodies before carrying out flood defence work, and knew more about the regulations. In turn, regulatory bodies cut bureaucracy and streamlined the decision-making process.

The study concludes with two recommendations for improving implementation of flood risk management at a local level: (1) the role of voluntary organisations, such as the Tweed Forum, is important and (2) more flexible policy and institutional arrangements may be required to foster meaningful long-term public participation.



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