

Living Sustainably with Water: An Interdisciplinary Challenge

Water and Value - Discussion Paper

Dr Jill Robbie, University of Glasgow; Prof Andreas Bieler, University of Nottingham; Kirsty Holstead, University of St Andrews

Introduction

This discussion paper originates from the Water and Value Workshop held at the University of Glasgow on 13th May 2022, organised by Dr Jill Robbie and Prof Minty Donald. This interdisciplinary Workshop explored different framings and ways to understand the value and meaning of water. The presentations, discussions and activities investigated how different conceptualisations of water feed into water governance, and how alternative framings of water's economic, environmental, and socio-cultural value might facilitate living sustainably with water.

There were 33 Workshop participants from a diverse range of disciplinary backgrounds. Short presentations were given by Dr Rachel Clive, University of Glasgow and Dr Kirsty Stansfield; Prof Veronica Strang, Durham University; Prof Andreas Bieler, University of Nottingham; Emma Ash, Consumer Scotland; Prof Andrea Ballesterio, University of Southern California; Dr Kevin Grecksch, University of Oxford; Dr Diana Valero, James Hutton Institute; and Kirsty Holstead, University of St Andrews.¹ The group then participated in a series of semi-guided actions or “micro-performances”, designed by Prof Minty Donald and Nick Millar, entitled “Attuning to the Aqueous Urban”.²

Throughout the Workshop, several common themes emerged, and the three themes of agency, ownership and responsibility are explored below. This discussion paper is intended to outline the shared concerns of several disciplines regarding value and water, and provide a platform to discuss future research directions on this topic.

Agency

The agency of both humans and non-humans was a subject raised throughout the Workshop. The participants were invited to consider water's agency and what freedom humans give to

¹ For the programme, abstracts and biographies of the presenters see: https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/research/sustainability/events/headline_847762_en.htm

² These activities drew on Donald and Millar's on-going practice-research project, *Guddling About*: www.guddlingabout.com

water. The presentation by Clive and Stansfield provided an overview of their project *For Freedom Space with Rivers*,³ which highlighted the extent to which we have confined and constrained rivers within an urban context and questioned how we might collectively allow water more space and autonomy in our creative and social practices. Clive and Stansfield had explored these issues with diverse human artists and groups, some of whose material conditions affect their autonomy, and who were therefore well placed to reflect critically on the extent to which water can be controlled and devalued by human processes. Project collaborators had generated experimental artworks which raised important questions about how we recognise the agency, diversity and value of non-humans as well as humans in our collective processes.

When participating in the activities of “Attuning to Aqueous Urban”, the Workshop participants engaged directly with water such as by passing around a handful of water from a bucket. Water fell through the participants’ fingers, where it made patterns on the ground. Donald, who provided guidance, asked the participants to what extent the water was a collaborator in the activities and how the water itself was creating these patterns.



Image by Evangelia Tavoulari-Matthiopoulos

These issues feed into the governance of water because they question the predominant Western perspective that water is an element to be harnessed and controlled to provide a service to humans.⁴ While protecting and fulfilling human rights, such as universal access to clean and safe water,⁵ is undoubtedly crucial, humans have ignored the needs of non-humans with dramatic consequences for the health and wellbeing of the environment.

Recognising the agency of water challenges the divide between humans and non-humans or between nature and culture. To reflect this in systems of governance, Strang discussed instances where rivers are recognised as persons,

³ For more information see: <https://forfreedomspacewithrivers.wordpress.com/freedom-space-with-rivers/>

⁴ A quote which demonstrates this was provided in Bieler’s presentation: “Our emerging technologies will enable Europe to reach previously unimaginable levels of control, manageability, and exploitability of our society with regard to water”, Water Europe, “The Value of Water: Strategic Innovation and Research Agenda” (2016) p7.

⁵ In a Scottish context, see E Ash, “Private Water Supplies: A Framework to Deliver Universal Access to Safe and Affordable Drinking Water for All” Citizens Advice Scotland (Sept 2021).

appreciating the rights of non-humans, with examples from New Zealand and Australia. She argued that we need to see non-humans as active participants and re-imagine our communities as including waterbodies.

Participants also highlighted that the agency of humans to take action or change their behaviour in the context of water-human relations might differ widely due to inequality between humans. For example, localised community management of water could require more individual engagement and time, and some individuals may be more capable of doing this than others. Further, emphasising the responsibility of individuals to change their use of, or engagement with, water can divert attention away from the broader systemic dynamics involved at a societal level. In his presentation, Bieler focused on how water services have been captured by private businesses which seek to maximise profits, thereby creating further inequalities rather than ensuring the fulfilment of human rights within ecological boundaries. This emphasised that in considering the theme of agency, there are significant inequalities between human groups, as well as between humans and non-humans.

Ownership

Ownership was a theme which ran through many of the presentations and discussions. One way this theme was addressed was to ask, can we “own” water? Clive and Stansfield quoted Michael Dawson:

“what perplexes me is the notion that we own water. We don’t. We exploit it in rather brutal ways [...] I am interested in the notion of leisure and recreation with rivers, especially by urbanites, and what does that mean. Why are we drawn to rivers so powerfully? Why do we poison and exploit them?”⁶

Indeed, arguably, to reflect the agency of water and its physical characteristics, means rejecting the view that we can own water in any meaningful way. Water readily and constantly evades our attempts at control and constraint.

Water services and infrastructure are subject to different ownership structures, and the division Bieler discussed was between public and private providers. The damage caused by the privatisation of water services was emphasised, and Bieler argued for the need to develop alternative water provision models which have democratic public ownership at their core. In this sense, the value of water can then be respected in a holistic sense rather than merely being a source of profit-making. Experiments of this type of democratisation were mentioned from Naples, Paris and Terrassa, as well as the British campaign “When We Own It”.⁷ This

⁶ Michael Dawson, an artist collaborator with the *For Freedom Space with Rivers* Project.

⁷ See further: <http://weownit.org.uk>

latter initiative appreciates that water services are just one part of a broader transformation which needs to take place at a societal level to tackle the root of inequality between humans mentioned above. One concrete proposal for enhancing the democratisation of water services is to increase the representation of the public interest on the boards of the organisations involved in providing water services.

Holstead showed in her presentation that even if we take community engagement seriously in the context of public bodies to advance the public interest, this can be practically challenging to implement consistently. By discussing case studies in Scotland, she showed that the workers of public organisations negotiate and adapt the conditions for delivering public services through their interactions with communities and that this delivery is highly contextually dependent. These discussions made clear that ensuring the effective and consistent representation of the public interest in the delivery of water services requires ongoing attention and consideration at both a systemic and practical level.

Responsibility

A final theme which arose throughout the presentations was responsibility. Many participants in the Workshop emphasised that we all have responsibility for valuing water and we are all involved in the sustainable use of water. Ballestero considered how the physical characteristics of water itself challenge the concept of responsibility. To illustrate her point, Ballestero explored the difficulty of attributing responsibility for the chemical contamination of aquifers in Costa Rica, where there may be many contributors to the pollution, and when plumes of pollution change shape as well as cross various legal and political boundaries. Ballestero asked us to consider how we should remodel our concept of responsibility in the context of water.

When considering the responsibility of individuals in relation to water, the importance of cultural and political narratives was discussed by both Grecksch and Valero. Using examples from the German North Sea coast, Grecksch highlighted that different regions have identities which have been formed by historical water events and the human response to them. These identities affect the capacity of communities to adapt to environmental change such as climate change.⁸ Valero demonstrated the importance of this issue in the context of Scotland. She noted that Scotland has an “almost idyllic” conception of a water-rich country with high-quality water and a public service provider. However, this conception is being threatened by climate change and extended periods of dry weather. In her presentation Valero tracked how policy

⁸ See J Holzhausen and K Grecksch, “Historical Narratives, Myths and Human Behaviour in Times of Climate Change: A Review from Northern Europe’s Coastlands” (2021) 12(5) WIREs Climate Change e723.

narratives are evolving in this context of climate change, and there is an ever-increasing focus on water security and a need for behavioural change to build resilience amongst communities. Nevertheless, this change in the policy narrative does not immediately translate into difference in the public perception of water.

Finally, the presentation by Ash confirmed this clash between the cultural narrative of Scotland as a water-rich nation and the increasing need for individuals to take measures to save water. She showed that individuals may still not be aware of the carbon and environmental costs of water services, and they may not always understand why behavioural change is needed in relation to water use. In this sense, Ash questioned how we ensure that individuals “value” water when the natural environment is undergoing rapid transformation. Using the insights of Grecksch would mean that we should be careful to connect to the cultural identities of Scottish communities when attempting to influence behavioural change. As with the discussion on agency noted above, these discussions highlighted that when considering individual behaviour and capacity to act with respect to water-human relations, we also need to pay attention to the broader influences on individuals at a societal, regional and community level.

Conclusion

The presentations and discussions in the Workshop showed the multi-faceted ways water can, and should be, valued. Many perspectives beyond the economic value of the water were discussed and the importance of taking a broad approach to the different ways in which water can be valued was emphasised. To reflect the value of water in our governance systems, the presentations also showed that we have to appreciate the physical characteristics of the element itself, as well as its significance for human and non-human communities. This is not an easy task as many fundamental conceptions of governance such as agency, ownership and responsibility are challenging to apply in the context of water.

As a way forward, future research could focus on the way these notions of agency, ownership and responsibility are inter-related. For example, what forms of ownership are conducive to a broader understanding of agency including humans and non-humans? Whether organised privately in order to profit from water as an economic good or publicly managed by technocratic expertise, nature and thus water is regarded as an external resource to be exploited for human use. Could perhaps managing water as a commons, i.e. a resource jointly managed, jointly enjoyed and jointly preserved for future generations, be a way of taking into account the interests of non-humans? Equally, future research could enquire whether there is a connection between various forms of ownership and different understandings of responsibility for sustainable development. Neo-liberal economics tells us that provided we attach the right price to water, this resource will be used in the most efficient and sustainable way. Yet evidence

shows that those with the necessary financial resources will not be affected by the price regarding their amount of water consumption. Could the commons here too provide a better answer in that direct participation in the process of managing water instils a much better personal commitment to sustainable use? There are small-scale examples of water being managed as a commons from around the world, as there are examples of water being managed with more direct, democratic participation by workers and users in Europe and beyond. These examples could be relevant case studies for such enquiries.

Furthermore, the cultural dimension of how humans relate to water and water services was seen as central both to understanding how governance systems currently attempt to manage water and how these systems need to change to live sustainably with water. To relate this to the location of the Workshop, in Scotland the cultural narrative of the past in relation to water has been one of pride in the abundance and quality of the resource. However, climate change and water scarcity were highlighted as growing threats to water availability and this makes the discussion on how to value water in a holistic sense an increasingly important challenge in the Scottish context.



Image by Evangelia Tavoulari-Matthiopoulos