

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN MANAGEMENT OF WATER RESOURCES: WHO CARES?

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Abstract:

An emphasis on encouraging more public engagement in the management of water resources has been one novel aspect of the introduction of the European Union Water Framework Directive (WFD). Responsibility for delivering the Directive in Scotland rests with the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA), who have developed a structure of advisory forums set within a framework of river basin management plans, including national and regional advisory boards to represent stakeholder interests. Although concentrated stakeholder groups with commercial interests, such as electricity generators and fishing groups, are well organised and highly motivated to engage with these advisory forums, the question remains of the extent to which the views of the 'general public' could be represented in an inclusive, equitable, and effective way. The current study reports the results of a structured survey of 629 members of the 'general public' in four regions in Scotland, two rural and two urban, which assessed strategies and policies for water resource management and the level of public interest in engaging in local water management initiatives. The study found clear differences between rural and urban areas in the perceived water environment problems identified by members of the general public, in the numbers of citizens expressing interest in being involved in addressing water problem issues, and in the characteristics of those interested in becoming involved. Urban residents were more likely to perceive rubbish and sewage related problems, whilst those in the remote rural area of North West Highlands identified a particular concern with drinking water quality. Although respondents from higher socio-economic groupings were significantly more likely to be interested in becoming involved in addressing local water management issues, within each region the issues identified as important did not differ between social strata, suggesting that although grassroots participatory fora might appear to attract socio-economically unrepresentative participants, these fora may still address concerns that are shared across the whole community. However despite this presence of shared interests, significant differences were still observed between socio-economic groups regarding appropriate policies for addressing water-related problems. In general, those in higher socio-economic strata were more supportive of environmental policies that might cause price increases or job losses, less in favour of job creation at the risk of environment change, and more in favour of restrictions on local industry than those in lower socio-economic groups. This raises an important question regarding the democratic legitimacy of participatory fora for providing recommendations on specific environmental policies. Whilst the environmental concerns identified by residents in particular geographical areas were shared in common across the socio-economic spectrum, residents' views on acceptable management policies in relation to these concerns could still be differentiated along socio-economic lines. We would suggest therefore that the democratic case for the use of participatory fora in advising on preferred management strategies needs to distinguish carefully between two objectives, a potentially unifying one that identifies the priorities for management in a particular region, and a potentially divisive one that seeks to identify the preferred mechanisms by which those priorities should be addressed.