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# Sinking or swimming? Surveying community based catchment groups in England and Wales

Laurence Smith (SOAS)  
Hadrian Cook (consultant) presenter  
Alex Inman (consultant) presenter  
David Benson (UEA)  
Andrew Jordan (UEA)

**Part of project : Catchment Management for Protection of Water Resources  
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# Community-based catchment groups: key questions

- Are they suited to 'third sector' status?
- How geographically and thematically focused are they?
- How inclusive is their membership?
- Are they well supported by the community at large?
- Are they moving towards a formalisation of their structures and operation?
- Do they work well with existing institutions?





## Part of a new governance paradigm?

- Depends upon understanding and fostering networks, communities and markets
- Implies stronger participatory democratic involvement
- Preferable to 'top down' regulation and management (normative view)
- Is cross-sectoral (private, public, third sector)
- Is cost-efficient in delivering environmental services: better decisions with local ownership?



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# Status quo - UK

- Often described as rather ‘top-down’ policy implementation in response to EU/national regulation
- Statutory catchment groups (e.g. RFERAC, REPAC, WFRBLP, CSF): largely advisory and non-executive
- Voluntary groups are erratic in geographic and thematic coverage, yet respond to perceived problems and, in qualitative terms, they are effective and supported



# Catchment Group Survey

- **Survey of non-statutory catchment groups undertaken across England and Wales during second half of 2009. Defined as:**

***‘An assembly of stakeholders who convene (periodically or regularly) to discuss, negotiate, plan or implement the management of water courses (including land based measures and best practices designed to influence water quantity or quality) on a catchment-wide basis’***

- **39 groups contacted which represents more a census than a sample. Coverage of survey therefore comprehensive**

- **Objective was to obtain understanding of funding mechanisms, capacity, activities, representation and working practices**

- **Respondents interviewed by telephone using a structured questionnaire. Data collated and analysed in SPSS**



# Key Findings – Capacity Profile

- **The sector is young with 6 out of 10 groups established since 2001**
- **Groups are cash poor (6 out of 10 with an annual income 20,000 or less). However, income trend is upwards for the majority**
- **Funding sourced opportunistically from a multitude of channels: main sources being private donations, grant giving trusts and government agencies, most notably the Environment Agency**
- **Total number of full-time staff across the sector totals 75; with an additional 28 part-time staff. Two-thirds of groups have no full-time staff**
- **Number of volunteers is considerable at around 1,500**
- **Number of members and informal supporters impressive at around 15,000 individuals**



# Key Findings – Institutional Profile

- **Groups very much positioned within the Third Sector. Instigated locally to deal with a local problem. Community level activities very evident**
- **Most have (or are working towards) charitable status and are, therefore, required to deliver public benefit**
- **Most groups have been initiated by landowners and fisheries interests but broader representation is now growing rapidly**
- **Two thirds of groups have formal members. However most decision-making is confined to governing bodies**
- **Generally very positive working relationships with the statutory agencies although some frustrations expressed with access to data and level of influence in development of catchment management plans**



# Key Findings – Activity Profile

- The groups pride themselves as ‘doers’
- Most have so far focused on water quality, quantity and habitat enhancement, rather than broader sustainability issues linked to economic development
- However, there are noticeable exceptions such as Westcountry Rivers Trust which takes an Ecosystem Approach, directly promoting initiatives to link rural livelihoods with water resource protection
- Delivery of education programmes is a key activity for most groups
- Groups increasingly see themselves as offering a brokering role between different interest groups to develop partnership projects



# Summary conclusions

- **As charities, groups are non-bureaucratic and see themselves as achieving local goals; find their functions and status in the third sector appropriate**
- **Participation, once landowner and fisheries dominated, is widening through membership schemes**
- **Community engagement role is demonstrated by growing educational activities, role in brokering and partnership formation**
- **Statutory agencies evidently recognise such advantages**
- **Vision is widening, from fisheries conservation to wider water quality, habitat protection and rural development**
- **Cost effective, yet environmental management ‘on the cheap’, economic sustainability of groups is a serious issue, professional technical staff a scarce resource**
- **Decision-making tends to remain with governing bodies; their statutory role and relation with democratic process can be unclear; wider local trust and acceptance is important**
- **There remains the potential for duplication of action through different agencies**



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