

How we talk about hatcheries: what discourses can tell us about conflict over the River Wye salmon stocking debate, and why some disagreements get worse over time

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In 2014, Welsh salmon managers made the controversial decision to end all voluntary salmon stocking in Wales. Stocking is the process of hatching and rearing fish in an artificial environment for eventual release back into the wild environment. Managers made this decision based upon the best ecological science available, but those groups who supported salmon stocking for conservation and angling purposes felt that the process and evidence used to support the decision were unfair. As a result, conflict between pro and anti-stocking groups escalated even after the decision to end stocking was made. When we visited the River Wye in Wales in 2016, we were surprised to find that some stakeholders were still upset about this decision, so we decided to study this case to find out why the conflict over stocking still persists today, and how the conflict came to be in the first place.

Our study revealed several important findings.

First, we found that the stocking debate on the River Wye was about more than just the effectiveness of stocking (i.e., does stocking put more spawning adults in the river?). The debate also includes complex and intertwined ideas about the overall health of the River Wye, the historical stock abundance of Wye salmon, and beliefs and values related to how humans and salmon should interact that vary between user groups. In essence, the stocking debate is about far more than just salmon ecology and reproduction.

Second, we found that the conflict was based on discourses, or how groups of stakeholders talked and wrote about stocking. These discourses arose in different areas where stakeholders communicate, such as in conversation, print and online social media, and through policy documents. The transference of discourses between these areas caused certain arguments to appear, evolve, and disappear as well as gain or lose strength

(and supporters).

Finally, we found that the conflict became worse instead of being resolved because the process used to arrive at the decision to end stocking in Wales was perceived as unfair and exclusive by pro-hatchery stakeholder groups. To address this, we recommend that managers prioritize social, economic, and ecological aspects of salmon stocking when making policy decisions. We also suggest that they include stakeholders from all sides of the debate in experiments and knowledge-building that will help determine whether stocking is appropriate for conserving River Wye salmon.



Plain language summary from article:
Harrison, HL, Kochalski, S, Arlinghaus, R, Aas, Ø. 'Do you care about the river?' A critical discourse analysis and lessons for management of social conflict over Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*) conservation in the case of voluntary stocking in Wales. *People Nat.* 2019; 1: 507– 523. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10049>