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Riverscape conviviality: An agenda for research and action

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Riverscape conviviality: An agenda for research and action

1 THE NEED TO ENGAGE WITH RIVERS IN NEW WAYS.

Over the past two centuries, most of the world's rivers have been heavily transformed to meet various human needs. They have been dammed, diverted, channelled, deepened, polluted and dried up, with serious consequences for landscapes, hydrology, biodiversity, ecosystems and related services, as well as for the lives, livelihoods and human well-being that depend on rivers. In response, river conservation and restoration has received increased attention in policy and practice. The urgency to act is underlined by the large number of local and broader civil society and grassroots river conservation and restoration initiatives around the world. These initiatives are advancing alternative new ways of engaging with rivers.

2 RIVERSCAPE CONVIVIALITY

Within this context riverscape conviviality is proposed as a new research and action agenda that aims to open new and promising approaches to engage with rivers from an ethically and politically grounded positionality that advances human and biodiversity well-being. It does so based on two central concepts:

Riverscape: This notion recognizes that rivers are part of dynamic socio-natural landscapes. Rivers are conceptualized not as water channels, but as riverine landscapes that are shaped by the natural environment, climate, plants, animals, and importantly human beings. This means that 'riverscapes' are not external to society but that they are part of it. Riverscapes are co-constituted by the dynamic relations that exist between the different social and natural elements that compose it. This notion recognises that the implications of river conservation and restoration efforts: a) go beyond the spatial reaches of the intervened places and extend to whole rivers and related landscapes; and b) implicate not only water flows, recovered or naturalized meanders, shores or floodplains, improved water quality, returned species or biodiversity, but the whole set of socio-natural relations, values and uses that coalesce around rivers.

Conviviality: Recognizes the richness of interaction and interdependence of all the human and more-than-human actors that constitute a riverscape. It is an ethical and political project which aims to consider and integrate disparate needs, desires and actions of humans and nonhumans. This notion aims to break away from problematic visions of conservation and restoration as returning to a human-void past and ‘pristine nature’. Conviviality inquires about ways to make both human and non-human uses and well-being of riverscapes viable now and in the future. This premise recognizes that human societies and their well-being are always embedded in larger interdependent and networked communities of life (e.g., humans, animals, plants, climate, water flows, sediments, geomorphologies). It states that it is a moral and political obligation to not only take the interests of all humans into account when making decisions, but also those of other species and forms of life as serious ‘justice claims’.

Riverscape conviviality therefore departs from the notion that rivers are complex historically grounded socio-ecological systems and that river conservation and restoration initiatives are inherently political and contested in nature as these transform and rearrange existing socio-natural relations. However, in these rearrangements riverscape conviviality aims to advance processes, new orders and relations that are inclusive and increase the well-being of both humans and non-humans through the creation of relations of care and reciprocity.

3 ELEMENTS FOR AN AGENDA OF ACTION AND RESEARCH

Stakeholder engagement through Riparian Assemblies: Citizens are often encouraged to participate in public water policies, without always having the means to do so effectively. As a consequence, the voices of riverside residents – both human and non-human – tend to be underrepresented when it comes to talking about relationships and aspirations with and about riverscapes. Riparian assemblies aim to overcome these pitfalls of representative democracy by encouraging the exploration of attachments and controversies as a base for constructing river restoration projects and policies that are more caring and inclusive of humans and non-humans. It aims to activate new forms of dialogue and relationships between scientists, experts, citizens, and rivers with the aim to design and implement socio-ecological transitions. The aim is to encourage the emergence of places and encounters that foster dialogue on water and become spaces

for problem-solving and exploration, making it possible to take advantage of controversies. The actual form of implementation will strongly depend on local contexts and complexities. Working on the creation and development of diverse Riparian Assemblies forms the first step towards riverscape conviviality while giving important insights on how these can best be established.

Citizen science and impact monitoring: Citizen science has the potential to generate valuable biologic and ecologic data for use in river restoration design and monitoring, while also providing a unique opportunity for public engagement in local restoration projects. Citizen science also aims to empower local communities in the design and monitoring of riverscape restoration efforts, while concurrently quantifying and understanding the effects of these efforts. By building on existing best practices on citizen science for the design and monitoring of river restoration projects these will be both used and refined within the context of dialogues and processes taking place around these in the riparian assemblies.

Mapping riverscape multifunctionality: For understanding and approaching possible trade-offs as well as synergies associated with river restoration, it is crucial to unpack how rivers are entrenched in multiple uses, users, and perspectives, on numerous scales. River restoration efforts tend to mainly focus on a selected locale or river stretch, without sufficiently considering the surrounding landscapes and wider (geographical and other) scales as an intrinsic part of rivers and thus riverscape restoration. Participative mapping methodologies will allow not only to understand and illustrate riverscapes and their different functionalities whilst bringing stakeholders into contact and conversation. . In line with the notion of multispecies justice, both human and non-human stakeholders, perspectives and functionalities will be considered, exploring what they are and how they can be known and represented. These (mapping) methodologies will bring important methodological insights whilst advancing more inclusive proposals that allow for the incorporation of contentions questions

Building shared understandings and co-designs: Aims to develop, test and validate a methodology and tools for the integration of different (often divergent and conflicting) knowledges, interests and aspirations for riverscape futures to co-design alternatives. Humans and non-humans will be considered as actors in co-design processes, exploring what that can look like and with what implications in practice (e.g. how can fish or sediments or other riverine beings partake in decision-making?). For this, principles of

design justice will be guiding, such as “centering the voices of those directly impacted” and considering everyone as “an expert based on their own lived experience”. Building a shared understanding of riverscapes and shared consensual aspirations for its future development is key for sustainable collective action from within the RAs. This will result in the generation of experiences, tools and practices for: a) the representation and where possible integration of diverse and sometimes conflicting knowledges, experiences and aspirations; and b) co-designing socially embraced alternatives to advance riverscape conviviality.

Building on these building blocks will advance and generate a better understanding of riverscape conviviality implementation in practice through valuable action-research experiences and the synthezation of what can be learned from these.

