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A place to disagree:
using social science
methods for engaging
communities
and exploring
contestation in
changing landscapes

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Abstract

Environmental, social and political factors continuously exert forces of change on places. In the UK currently, there is an increasing sense that the way land is managed needs to change – and urgently – to deliver for people and nature on multiple fronts: food, infrastructure, housing, energy provision, carbon sequestration, access to nature for health and wellbeing, space for nature in its own right, and more. Directives from central government – like the Land Use Framework, Local Nature Recovery Strategies, and Landscape Recovery schemes – signal a clear intent to catalyse large-scale change in the management of this finite resource. The assumption at the heart of these policy interventions, implied or explicit, is that places will change as a result.

Given the unavoidable personal and political implications of (prospective or actual) place-based change, we should accept that disagreement between different parties – on how land should be managed and to what end – will be more or less inevitable as governmental and non-governmental bodies try to affect change under the umbrella of nature restoration. This paper advocates for moving away from consensus as a default aim in environmental engagement and negotiation processes, and instead proposes the use of social science methods to support people to disagree well in contentious restoration contexts. The Restoration Partnership Development (RPD) toolkit, developed by the author with colleagues from the universities of Edinburgh and Cambridge, is a user friendly and adaptable tool designed to help stakeholders with diverse viewpoints discuss challenging and sensitive issues around nature and land management, including identifying areas of consensus and potential conflict. Incorporating such approaches into engagement processes can help proactively identify risk, increase stakeholder buy-in, build relationships and generate useful insight into stakeholders priorities – in turn making nature restoration projects more fair, effective and place-sensitive.

Key words: place, nature, land management, engagement, perspectives, relationships, priorities, conflict, consensus

Beyond conflict and consensus

Disagreement, deliberation and democracy

In the context of land use change, stakeholders' stated positions are usually not solely a question of resource allocation or material impacts. They are also a function of that person's "inner worlds" – their values, thoughts, emotions, identities and beliefs¹ – which in turn is informed by their relationships to the landscape in question and other stakeholders in it.² Stakeholders' stated positions in environmental contexts are, therefore, inextricably tied up with their personal identity. It follows that technical approaches to managing land use change – whether making a plan, drawing up an agreement or managing conflict – may fail to address some of the deeper, more values- or identity-based dimensions of stakeholders' responses to prospective or actual change.³

Finding ways to respectfully and productively engage with stakeholders' identities and values is challenging, particularly in contexts of land use change where the implications are both personal and political. Deliberative democracy – where participants engage in deliberative group conversations – has potential to redress this in environmental contexts. Advocates of deliberative democracy suggest that policy resulting from deliberative activities will reflect the perspectives of those who have participated, and by extension the wider stakeholder groups whose views align with them.⁴ Deliberative democracy has been critiqued, however, for being too consensus-oriented, depending on the principle of 'rational' debate to reach a compromise between different perspectives, and overlooking the fact that some positions may simply be irreconcilable.⁵ In response to this critique, some environmental scholars are drawing from political scientist Chantal Mouffe's ideas around agonistic pluralism,⁵ and advocating for confronting and embracing a diversity of ideas, rather than simply including more (and more diverse) people in participatory activities.^{6,7} Crucially, this includes embracing those ideas which "exist in tension with, or directly challenge, our own".⁸ Engaging with diverse perspectives may also help avoid some of the pitfalls of consensus-building processes which, if not managed well, can in fact serve to further marginalise already-marginalised ideas, and impoverish conservation planning and policy-making processes.⁷⁻⁹ Similarly, conversation scholarship about stakeholder conflict places less emphasis on technical approaches to reaching agreements than it does on objectives relating to stakeholders' "fundamental, non-material social and psychological unmet needs", particularly with regards to "status and recognition, dignity and respect, empowerment, freedom, voice and control".³ In this way, those we disagree with can come to be seen as adversaries, rather than enemies.⁸

In short, there is a critical mass of social science scholarship arguing that there is value in bringing people who do not agree into dialogue with one another, and in addressing – rather than ignoring – disagreement. To find practical ways forward for place-sensitive nature recovery, we may need to recalibrate our expectations around what meaningful and productive stakeholder engagement looks like, and what it can realistically achieve. For this project, the researchers began from the premise that disagreement is not necessarily bad, and consensus is not necessarily good.⁵⁻⁹ Rather, we trained our attention on the management of the social processes around disagreement. In particular, we wanted to engage stakeholders' "inner worlds"¹ and their emotional and psychological needs to feel heard and understood by their peers.^{4,10} We designed our social science based toolkit with this in mind, with a belief that supporting people to disagree well is a critical first step for setting tone, and building trust and understanding between stakeholders, before entering into more technical negotiations about specific place-based interventions.

Designing the Restoration Partnership Development toolkit for exploring disagreement

Researchers from the universities of Edinburgh and Cambridge worked together to create the Restoration Partnership Development (RPD) toolkit. The RPD toolkit is based on social science data collection methods, and designed to support respectful and productive deliberation on land management and nature between stakeholders in complex restoration settings. We wanted the toolkit to be simple enough that it could be used, eventually, by people with little or no social science training. We also needed the toolkit needed to be adaptable to context.

We formatted the toolkit in two elements:

- A survey for perspective elicitation
 - The survey element of the toolkit is statement-based, with participants indicating their level of agreement or disagreement with a set of statements about various aspects of land management and nature, in an anonymous online platform
 - The emerging data can be analysed to highlight areas of consensus and points of disagreement among survey respondents
 - Survey statements can be changed, making the survey easily adaptable to different contexts
- A workshop structure for perspective deliberation
 - In workshops, points of disagreement can be discussed in more depth, with the survey results presented in simple visualisations to prompt and support deliberative discussion

Restoration in Cumbria: a case study for place-sensitive nature recovery

In adapting and testing the first iteration of the Restoration Partnership Development (RPD) toolkit, the researchers worked with a multi-partner restoration project in eastern Cumbria aiming to affect change in an area of over 30,000 hectares of upland land. The project has potential to impact a variety of stakeholders with diverse perspectives on how the land should be managed, and to what end. This section sets out the context of place-based sensitivities around land management and (potential) land use change in Cumbria, and outlines the process of working with the restoration project case study to develop and test the RPD toolkit.

Cumbrian context

Cumbria is home to one of the most treasured landscapes in the UK. A significant part of the county is covered by the Lake District National Park, inscribed as a World Heritage Site, and singled out by UNESCO as possessing a unique cultural aesthetic curated by traditional farming and husbandry practices which have persisted over several centuries. For some observers, however, much of Cumbria – including the national park – is an ecological disaster zone. While UNESCO formally designates the sheep that dot the rolling hills as emblematic of the cultural heritage of the region, for others they are emblematic of a post-war agricultural policy which is no longer fit for purpose in the context of the UK's more recent commitments to nature and climate. For these people, a desirable vision of the future for Cumbria would entail significant land use change: technologies old and new would be deployed to manage the fells primarily for nature; there would be fewer sheep, and more forests; some areas might even be 'rewilded'.

While the polarised perspectives set out above are caricatured, debates about the Cumbrian landscape which play out publicly – in the pages of national newspapers or live debates – are often reduced to these extremes. Added to this is a rapidly changing policy landscape: the UK's departure from the EU has catalysed a transformation in the government's approach to farming support, now pivoted to include the delivery of public goods, including clean water and thriving plants and wildlife. These changes may have far-reaching implications for upland farmers in Cumbria, economically and emotionally, practically and psychologically, and are already causing uncertainty and stress for farmers.

Land management stakeholders in Cumbria operate in an increasingly febrile atmosphere, where relationships between different groups can carry a sense of unease – even distrust – and where the issues at stake feel existential. This is the context in which any prospective land use change takes place in Cumbria, and in which our restoration project case study operates.



Image 1: High Loop Mardale Common, Lake District, Cumbria. Credits: Patrick Neaves.

Testing the Restoration Partnership Development toolkit

In designing and testing the RPD toolkit in Cumbria, the researchers worked with the staff of the case study restoration project to identify who should be targeted for the statement-based survey. In this case, we elected not to gather data from the wider community living and working in the project area, and chose instead to focus on those stakeholder groups who had a direct decision-making control, or high level of indirect influence, over land use and management in the project area. While non-landholding community groups are important stakeholders in land use change, and may be included in applications of the RPD toolkit approach in other contexts, focusing on high-interest, high-influence stakeholders¹¹ aligned more accurately with the strategy of the case study restoration project itself, which aimed to encourage and affect changes to land management regimes across a largely agricultural area. We identified four particularly important stakeholder groups, based broadly on professional background: farmers, restoration and conservation professionals, heritage and cultural professionals, and landowning estates. We used professional background as a proxy indicator for diversity of perspective on land management and nature in the project area, and used this to inform our highly targeted and purposive sampling strategy.

Survey statements were generated and refined by the researchers, using a combination of primary data (semi-structured interviews, mainly with farmers) and secondary data (desktop literature review), with strategic input from project case study staff. The final survey had 30 statements relating to land management and nature in the restoration project area. 49 respondents from the four key stakeholder groups completed the survey. Over a third self-identified as farmers.

From the resulting statement based, Likert-style data, we calculated consensus index scores for each statement.^{12,13} Consensus index scores can range from 0 to 1, and indicate the level of agreement among participants around the issue contained within the statement. Consensus index scores closer to 0 indicate a lower level of inter-respondent agreement, and scores closer to 1 indicate a higher level of inter-respondent agreement.[†] Quantitative survey data could therefore be analysed to produce indicative findings on which issues were consensus issues for the survey respondents, and which were divisive issues. These findings informed the structure of deliberative workshops, where a subset of survey respondents would discuss survey data in more detail.

* For example, if 50% of respondents selected 'agree strongly' in response to a statement, and 50% selected 'disagree strongly' this would elicit a consensus index score of 0.

Workshops began with short introductory presentations to set the tone: we emphasised that everyone's perspectives were equally welcome and valid; we reassured participants that they would not be required to address the whole room in order to participate; and we explained that all workshop data would be non-attributable. Crucially, we stressed to the workshop participants that we were not presenting our analysis of the survey results to them; rather, we were inviting participants to help us interpret the survey results.

Workshops then continued with small group activities. First, participants were given individual handouts of the full set of survey results presented in an easy-to-interpret visual format on A3 sheets. They were asked whether they found any results particularly surprising or unsurprising. In this way, participants were eased into qualitative analysis of the quantitative survey results. Second, each group was given a set of specific statements from the survey to discuss in more depth. These statements were pre-selected by the researchers and informed by consensus index scores, making sure that each group would discuss a range of statements. Examples of discussion prompts for the pre-selected statements are provided in Box 1. Third, the whole workshop was brought together in a forward-looking plenary discussion, inviting participants to consider how they might individually or collectively begin to take positive action for this landscape, based on the preceding discussions.

Box 1: Examples of discussion prompts for RPD deliberative workshops

For less contentious statements:

- What might be the reasons behind the high level of stakeholder consensus with regards to the issue in this statement?
- If people tend to agree with one another about the issue in this statement, is there anything preventing us from making positive changes with regards to this issue?

For more contentious statements:

- Why do you think people tend to think so differently from each other about the issue in this statement?
- What might motivate someone to (dis)agree with this statement?
- What challenges, if any, might arise from people not agreeing with each other about the issue in this statement?

Changing places: cultivating empathy, building trust and enhancing mutual understanding using the Restoration Partnership Development toolkit

Identifying common ground and contentious issues in survey data

The survey suggested that there was a broad level of agreement between survey respondents on specific elements of care for the environment. For example, there was widespread agreement on managing water for the benefit of people downstream both through water provision and flood management (Figure 1), and around wanting to see more birds and trees in the project landscape (see Figure 2, Figure 3). There were also significant levels of agreement around the positive role farming can play in tackling biodiversity loss and climate change, and on the project landscape's potential role in contributing to domestic food security (Figure 4).

Figure 1: Example of survey result with a higher consensus index score (0.798)

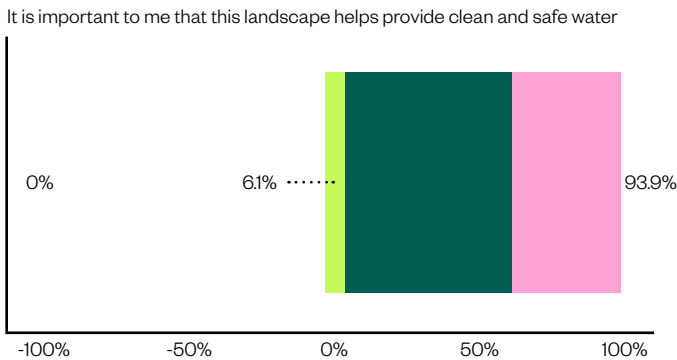


Figure 2: Example of survey result with a higher consensus index score (0.750)

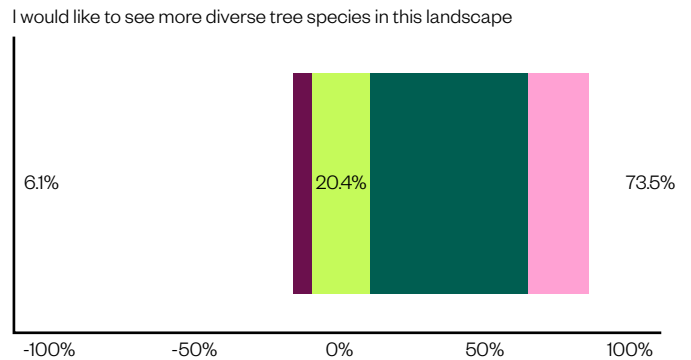


Figure 3: Example of survey result with a higher consensus index score (0.715)

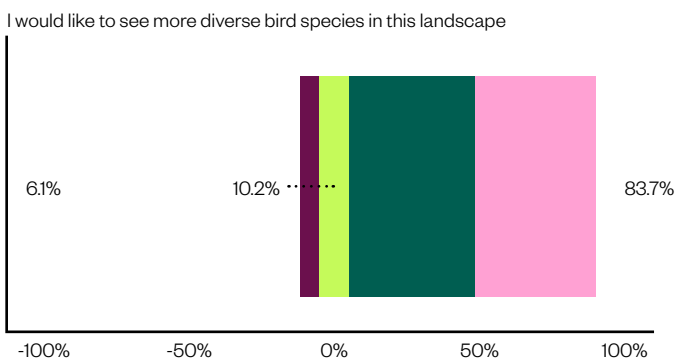
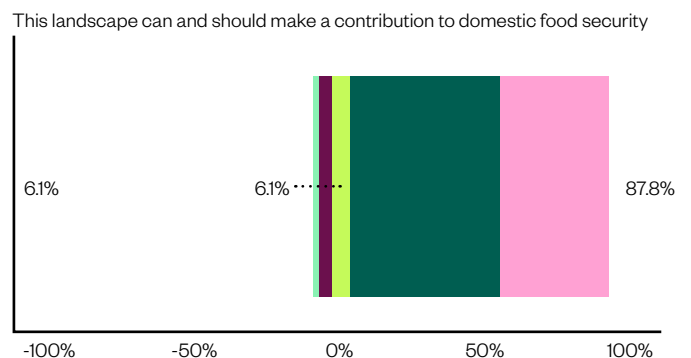


Figure 4: Example of survey result with a higher consensus index score (0.723)



Disagree strongly Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Agree strongly

Divisive issues emerging from survey results were related to managing change – actual or prospective – in this landscape. The survey suggested that the most divisive issue for the respondents was around identity and belonging in a changing landscape. The statement ‘I am concerned that there will no longer be a place for me in this landscape if it changes too much’ had the lowest consensus index score of all statements (see Figure 5 below). Other low-consensus statements pertained to the role of farming versus restoration-based livelihoods, the perceived importance of ‘traditional’ land uses, and the value of local versus ‘expert’ scientific knowledge for looking after nature (see Figure 6, Figure 7 and Figure 8).

Figure 5: Example of survey result with a lower consensus index score (0.368)

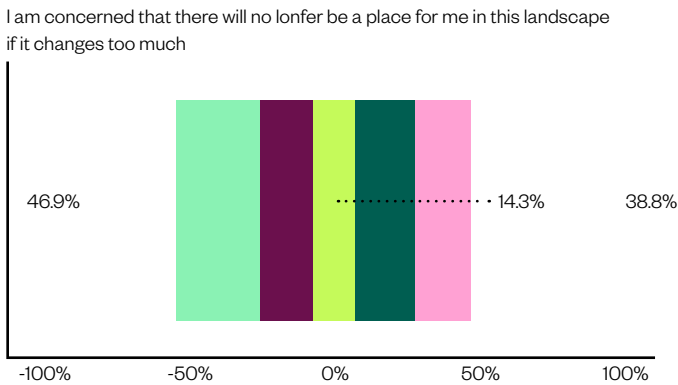


Figure 6: Example of survey result with a lower consensus index score (0.564)

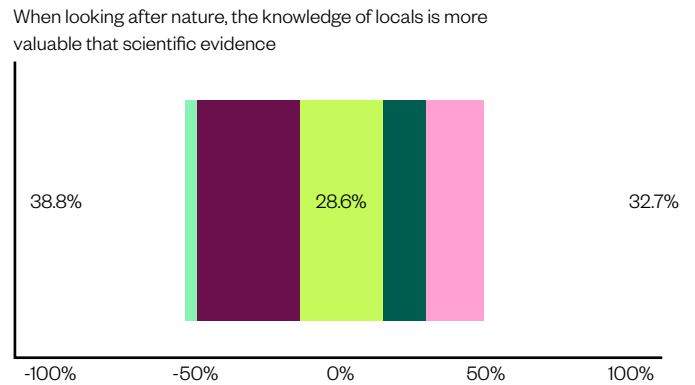


Figure 7: Example of survey result with a lower consensus index score (0.485)

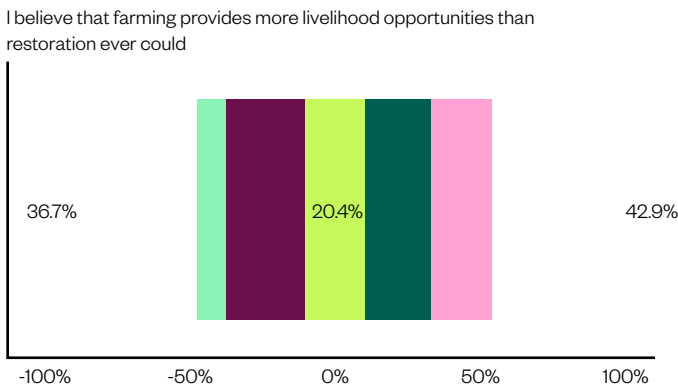
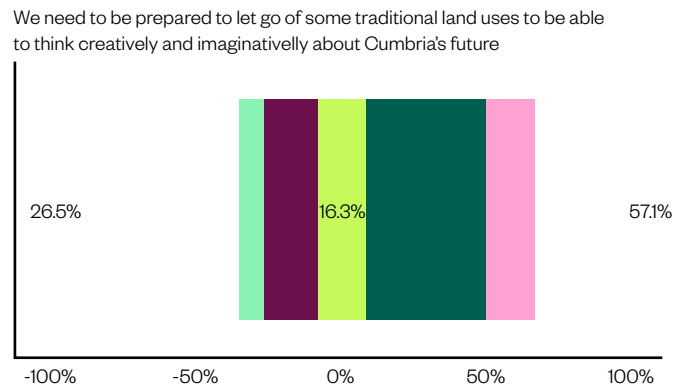


Figure 8: Example of survey result with a lower consensus index score (0.537)



Disagree strongly Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Agree strongly

This preliminary quantitative analysis of survey results begins to paint a general picture of where stakeholders in the project case study landscape align in their thinking, and where they diverge. This provides instrumentally useful data for the project case study, suggesting areas where it may be easier for stakeholders to find common ground or make plans together, and highlighting issues that require further efforts and resource to explore in more depth. However, the survey results should not be viewed as a standalone data set; rather, their primary function is to structure discussions in deliberative workshops.

Subverting expectations: survey data as discussion prompts

The high-level findings emerging from quantitative analysis provided useful insight for the researchers when planning the deliberative workshops, highlighting potential unifying issues as well as points of likely contention. From this initial analysis, researchers selected a handful of statements

for more in-depth discussion in small groups, ensuring that participants would be supported to discuss both less and more controversial issues.

Participants of varying backgrounds and positionalities expressed satisfaction that there was, in principle, agreement around a range of environmental issues; several farmers took heart from a survey result suggesting that farm-based nature was valued highly (or at least more highly than anticipated); and plenary sessions provoked a range of practical suggestions for future collaboration. Highlighting these broad areas of consensus provided a discursive foundation upon which more contentious issues could be discussed.

On several occasions, workshop discussions of survey statements revealed novel or unexpected dynamics beneath ostensible disagreement on a particular topic. For example, a statement about local versus scientific knowledge for looking after nature prompted conversations around what can be considered 'evidence' in the design and delivery of nature-based projects. Several workshop attendees from governmental and non-governmental environment organisations expressed personal appreciation for the importance of farmer knowledge in managing land for nature in the project area but reported that, generally speaking, only 'hard' scientific evidence could be used in planning on-the-ground interventions – particularly when justifying spending public money. This provided new insights for workshop participants into how local, place-based knowledge may be highly valued by individuals working in conservation or restoration, but that those individuals faced structural barriers to incorporating that knowledge into their professional practice.

Discussions around 'tradition' and hill farming also catalysed reflective and introspective conversations – between farmers and non-farmers, and among farmers themselves – about the meaning and value of tradition(s). This segued into discussions about what constitutes farming in a rapidly changing policy landscape – when is a farm no longer a farm? – and drew in reflections on the practical and psychological implications for farmers who see the landscape around them changing. In a practical sense, these conversations highlighted issues where further research and understanding would contribute to strategy and operations of a restoration project, such as the place-based dimensions of farming identity and how restoration projects can (wittingly or unwittingly) impact on this. In an experiential sense, these discussions opened up explorations of 'inner worlds',¹ giving participants insight into the experiences of their fellow discussants, and meeting their psychological and emotional needs to feel heard and understood by their peers.^{3,4} Such conversations help discussants to reach meta-consensus, where there is "reciprocal understanding and recognition of the legitimacy of the values held by other participants in political interaction"⁶: though workshop participants may disagree on whether on-farm and wider landscape changes are positive or negative, they still gain insight into their peers' perspective, and accept the legitimacy of their viewpoint.

Third objects and third places: survey data as discursive structure

The survey results acted as a conversational prompt and provided much-needed structure to potentially challenging topics of conversation. In this way, the survey results acted as a 'third object'. Originally employed to describe the use of prompts to support young people to talk about sensitive issues in interview settings,¹⁴ in this project, the survey results functioned as a third object by allowing participants to talk hypothetically and imaginatively about the perspectives of others. This had several implications. First, by inviting participants to hypothesise about survey results (e.g. what would motivate someone to (dis)agree with this statement?), participants could enter into a dialogue with one another about a range of issues, including divisive ones, without falling into personally attacking or defensive roles. Second, by allowing participants to talk hypothetically, they had the opportunity to contribute to discussions without being compelled to vocalise and own their position in front of other participants. This is a serious barrier to participation for some people, particularly in settings where fellow workshop participants might be colleagues, friends, neighbours or landlords, or people who have historically been positioned as 'experts'. Third, by asking people to reflect on what might motivate someone to respond to a statement in a specific way, they are encouraged to think from someone else's point of view, and reflect on their own.

Roux et al discuss the importance of creating a 'third place' – "a social environment, other than home or the workplace, that provides a neutral ground for engagement, conversation and community building, and for establishing feelings of a sense of place"¹⁵ – in situations of dialogue and knowledge exchange. As well as selecting a 'neutral' site for the workshops to help create a third space in a literal sense, as a 'third object' the survey data created a discursive 'third place'. Participants could communicate through the survey results, be confronted with opposing points of view, and express disagreement without conflict.

In post-workshop feedback forms, participants referred to the "opportunity to unpack controversial issues" and "get my views out there"; they said the processes help to "get under the skin...about what [others'] concerns, issues, worries are" and "understand the way we obviously see things completely differently at times"; the setting was described as "non-confrontational". We see this feedback as proof of concept that our social science toolkit could support a range of people, who have extremely different life experiences, professional priorities and relationships to nature and land, to disagree without conflict. As participants pored over survey results or picked over statements, their expectations of others were subverted, or refined, or complicated, supporting potentially transformative moments in the pursuit of achieving not consensus, but a level of mutual understanding that is 'good enough' to make future collaboration seem more feasible. In the context of place-sensitive nature recovery, where disagreement between individuals and organisations is extremely likely, cultivating empathy and mutual understanding beyond specific points of (dis) agreement will help us move towards meta-consensus that will be needed before restoration projects or policy-makers can begin processes of negotiating specific place-based plans or interventions.

Scaling and adapting the Restoration Partnership Development approach

The toolkit itself is available as a series of [free-to-use web-based apps](#), with a supporting [self-guided manual](#) on how to design and deliver perspective-elicitation surveys and deliberative workshops.

Figure 9: Screenshot of web-based app showing statement selection from a module on livelihoods and local economies. Users can choose statements from modules, or create their own bespoke statements, to build a survey.

← → ↻ rpd.shinyapps.io/survey_generator/

Survey Generator App

Module 6: Livelihoods and Local Economies

Please tick the statements you wish to include in your survey:

- Restoration in this landscape must not compromise the ability of local people to live and work here
- Restoration-based livelihoods cannot replace the rural livelihoods already established in this area
- I believe that farming provides more livelihood opportunities than restoration ever could
- Traditional land uses already offer better livelihoods for local communities than restoration could offer
- There is potential to develop tourism opportunities in this landscape
- Restoration in this area could give ecotourism a boost
- The scope for nature-based businesses in this landscape will be increased by restoration
- It is important that some timber extraction for revenue can continue in this landscape
- Work done to look after nature should make money rather than cost money

50%

Bespoke surveys can be built either by selecting from pre-prepared statement banks created by the researchers (as shown in Figure 9 above), or by creating brand new statements. This means that the data generated, and conversations supported, in the RPD process will generate context-sensitive, place-specific data on respondents' perspectives. The proposed workshop structure is based on simple, widely-applicable conversational prompts, which are designed to a) generate useful qualitative insight and practical information on opportunities or barriers to making changes in the landscape under consideration, and b) support participants to gain insight into others' perspectives and reflect critically on their own. This, in turn, enhances mutual understanding and builds trust between participants, creating a culture of open-mindedness and curiosity in restoration projects going forward, making them more likely to set appropriate objectives, and to achieve them.

The researchers strongly recommend the use of independent facilitators to oversee deliberative workshops wherever possible. This frees up the toolkit user – who will likely already have an idea of the kind of change they want to see and why – to enter into reflexive rather than reasoning modes, and to focus on participation rather than planning. Additionally, full participation from those who are leading restoration projects, or who work for partner organisations, has symbolic significance for the other participants by demonstrating commitment to the process. Other resources are those associated with running workshops – venue hire, catering, stationary etc – and are outlined in the RPD toolkit manual.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

Rethink consensus

The RPD toolkit's use with the case study in Cumbria acts as proof of concept that it is possible to disagree well. By this we mean that confrontation with ideas different from, or perhaps in opposition to, one's own, does not preclude fostering mutual understanding or empathy. In other words, these approaches can support "engagement across difference" and help us see those we disagree with as adversaries rather than enemies.⁸ Indeed, there is an increasing sense that we should move away from consensus as a default aim in environmental planning and policy-making altogether, and that in doing so, we are collectively more able to meaningfully engage with stakeholders, and facilitate co-design and co-development in environmental knowledge creation and practice.^{6,7} Creating discursive third spaces will be critical in going 'beyond' inclusive conservation and working to practically embrace diversity of perspectives in contexts of environmental change.⁶

Get used to working slowly

Delivering place-sensitive nature recovery necessitates engaging with place and reckoning with people's inner worlds, and this takes time. Part of the reason the RPD approach was effective in the Cumbrian case study was its grounding in place-specific issues, meaning the survey results were engaging and interesting to participants. This generated instrumentally useful data on areas of consensus and dissensus between stakeholders in the project area: identifying broad-based consensus around the importance of on-farm nature and the positive contribution farms can make were heartening for both farming and non-farming discussants alike. Crucially, however, the survey and workshop data also supported participants to openly acknowledge points of disagreement, signposting more challenging issues the project might face in the future. Identifying and discussing areas of potential conflict allowed participants to confront their own and others' emotional and psychological responses to prospective change in the wider landscape, and gain richer understanding of the motivations and priorities of peers. Because the RPD toolkit was used in the earlier stages of the project, this set a tone of mutual understanding and curiosity between participants, creating a foundation for future collaboration. The RPD toolkit could also be used at later points in the lifespan of a project, including, for example, setting out and discussing stakeholder perspectives on a specific intervention, or even exploring the perceived successes and failures of a project as part of monitoring and evaluation processes.

The environmental problems we face are significant – even existential – and there is understandable concern that the introduction of deliberative elements to engagement processes will slow down decision-making at a critical juncture. At the same time, however, it is clear that failure to engage with social dimensions of conservation, land use change and restoration – using both 'soft' skills and sophisticated methods – risks undermining efforts to make positive changes for nature altogether.^{3,16–20} We must think carefully about whether we are prepared to make short-term gains for nature at the expense of potentially longer-lasting, even transformative change.

Don't rely (solely) on tools and tech

To the person with the proverbial hammer, every problem becomes the proverbial nail. But the utility of any tool depends on who uses it and how. Perhaps the single most important interpersonal competency for using the RPD toolkit well is a genuine commitment to the process, and a corresponding curiosity about the perspectives and motivations of peers. Open-mindedness and curiosity are not only key attributes for any individuals working to plan or implement change in places people care about; they are also essential for professional reflexive practice in conservation and restoration.^{21–23} The approaches set out above are therefore most powerful when deployed

as part of a deliberative-reflexive exercises, when those who are leading restoration processes or developing policy also participate, in good faith, and with a commitment to meaningful engagement with a wide range of stakeholders over the lifetime of a project. This requires interpersonal competencies and commitments as much as it does specific tools and technologies.^{17,20,24,25} Using the RPD toolkit is just one way to try to inculcate a 'culture of engagement'¹⁷ within restoration projects. We encourage potential users to reflect carefully on their motivations for using the toolkit, what they want to achieve from it, and – crucially – what they can realistically promise to those people whose time and efforts they request.

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