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Understanding Loweswater: A Study to Generate New Understandings of Ecological, Economic and Social Interactions in a Lake District Environment

This scoping study looked critically at the nature of different kinds of knowledge (social, ecological, economic, cultural) that may be brought to bear on the ecological problems in Loweswater. Through the study, it was possible to begin to understand the importance of linkages between the ecological, social and economic condition of the Loweswater catchment, to realise the value of integrated working between scientists and the fundamental nature of interacting with stakeholders.

A clear issue in trying to understand Loweswater was the need to take on board how both the researchers and the stakeholders in the catchment have very different ways of understanding the catchment. Thus, a large part of the research was about thinking through one another's ways of interpreting the catchment. Good progress was made in developing understanding of each other's frames of reference particularly between the ecologists and the social scientists and between the social/natural scientists and the farmers in the valley.

Whilst the lake pollution did not change during the course of the research, the social conditions in the catchment did. With large shifts in countryside policy imminent, issues of lake pollution became secondary. It was clear that changes in the prevailing socio-economic conditions in the catchment would inevitably impact on the lake. Understanding the catchment in an holistic way included taking into account the differences between reaction time in social and natural systems as well as the recognition that the need for economic survival is likely to come at a cost to the environment.

The research between different actors involved in the project suggested that 'communication' was very important and was not occurring as fluidly as might be needed to achieve integrated sustainable management of the catchment. Communication between scientists and farmers was historically poor but improving. It was apparent that scientists too often stand outside of rural issues and were not seen as integral to the process of helping to resolve them. Scientists need to be seen as part of the stakeholder body and as far as possible locally involved. They also need to be able to communicate their science openly and honestly, be able to translate it into practicable solutions where relevant and be willing to invest time in developing trust with other stakeholders.

Communication between policy bodies and farmers was patchy – some relationships were well established, others not. Government targets for the rural environment and a lack of trust on the part of land-owners both impacted on these relationships. Institutional flexibility played a role in facilitating more effective communication and in Loweswater this has been used to try to encourage more constructive working towards common aims. Communication amongst farmers was found to be very sensitive and intricate, particularly under conditions of uncertainty. The apparent importance of identifying local champions and building on their potential emerged as an important issue through the scoping study.