

# Negotiating river restoration: The role of divergent reframing in environmental decision-making

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we employ rhetoric culture theory, and a case study of upland channel truncation in the UK, to explore the nuanced processes of negotiation associated with environmental decision-making. In contrast to much of the literature on rhetoric in environmental management, which focuses on the means by which decisions are communicated and justified to an external audience, we focus on the dynamics of interaction and persuasion in and amongst a small group of decision-makers, and how, despite initial misgivings and conflict, they arrived at a decision consensus. We reflect on the importance of the rhetorical situation as a determinant of action and demonstrate how antagonisms were caused by competing moral notions of environmental restoration. We show that consensus was finally achieved through a process of divergent reframing, as individuals reframed the problem according to their own prior values. The outcome, therefore, was a *consensus of action* but a *divergence of opinion*, which sheds new light on the role of reframing in environmental management. Finally, we argue for a better understanding of how nuanced interactional processes influence not only small-scale interventions, but all environmental decision processes.

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## 1. Introduction

In much of the literature that has examined large-scale natural environment interventions or high profile environmental controversies in terms of contested perspectives, persuasion and rhetoric (e.g. Myerson and Rydin, 1996; Waddell, 1998; Myers and Macnaghten, 1998), the emphasis is often on the means through which decision-makers and institutions or government agencies justify policies or interventions to a wider audience through public engagement, the media, and formal Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). Fewer studies, however, have looked at the minutia of decision-making group dynamics for relatively small-scale interventions which, nevertheless, regularly take place without the need to justify a decision to a broader polity. This paper provides such a study using the lens of rhetoric culture theory (Strecker and Tyler, 2009; Carrithers, 2008), which, rather than viewing rhetoric as well-measured political spin, takes it to be an omnipresent feature of social life and interaction that manifests itself as individuals work on one another to negotiate their interests, moral positions and personhoods.

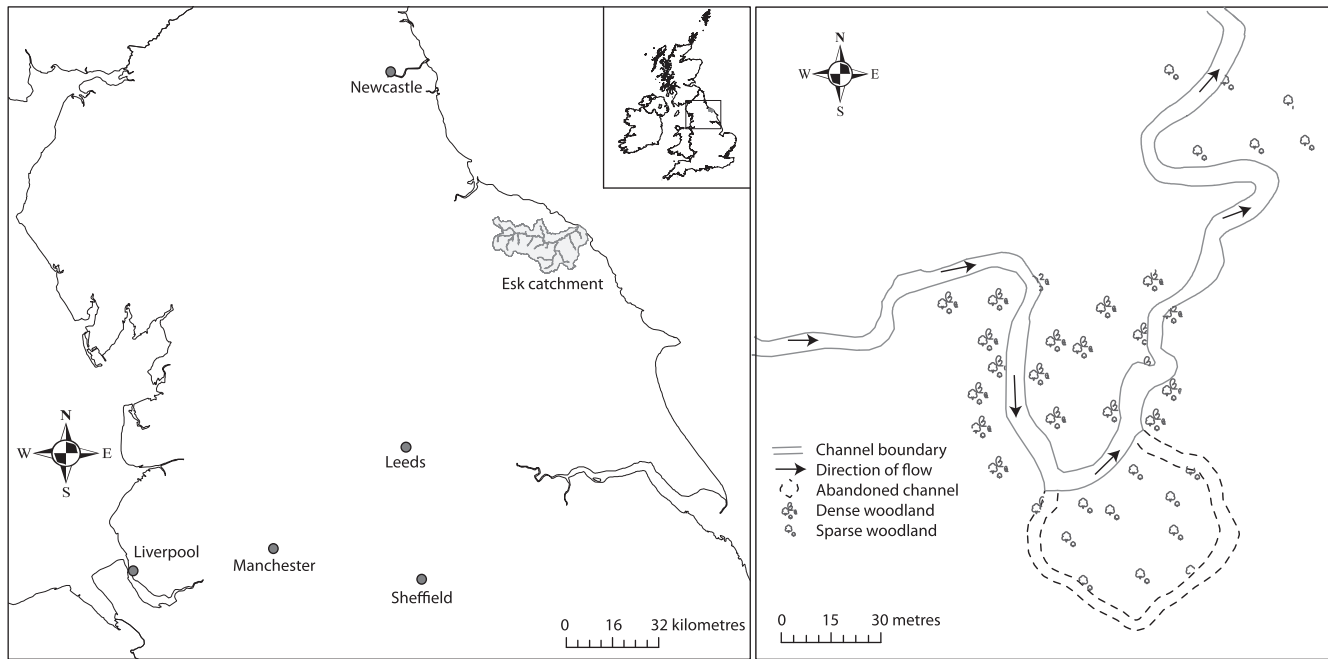
This view of rhetoric is illustrated through the analysis of a small-scale project to modify an upland river channel by reducing,

or truncating, the sinuosity of a bend in a tributary of the River Esk, North Yorkshire, England. This was achieved by physically cutting a new course across the inside of the bend with the effect of shortening and straightening the channel (Fig. 1). For simplicity, we hereafter refer to the project as ‘the truncation’. The case represents an interesting example in that the decision to approve the work was in the hands of a relatively small number of decision-makers, who also had a particular interest in the project because it related to a broader freshwater pearl mussel conservation project that they were involved in. As we will show, the reasons for undertaking the truncation were both diverse and disputed and it is the purpose of the paper to explore and interpret the means by which this small group of decision-makers, despite initial misgivings, persuaded themselves and each other to go ahead with the work. Our focus, however, is not on the processes at play in the arena of small-scale environmental decision-making *per se*. Instead, it is to use this example to illuminate the processes at play in *all* social arenas of interaction, which are often obscured in larger-scale decision-making processes by the official rhetoric of ‘political language’ (Parkin, 1984) and the ‘shield of falsification’ (Bailey, 1983, p. 24) afforded such processes through ‘rational’, ‘impartial’, ‘evidence-based’ and ‘scientific’ decision-making.

The analysis is based on participant observation and active interviewing (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995) with members of the River Esk Pearl Mussel and Salmon Recovery Project (EPMSRP), a local angler and a geomorphologist who were all in someway

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**Fig. 1.** Location of the Esk catchment in England and detail showing the truncation on Glaisdale Beck.

involved in the truncation. This was undertaken as part of a wider ethnographic research project amongst farmers in the River Esk catchment between 2007 and 2010 (Emery, 2010). All interviews were transcribed in full and coded to allow analysis of the changing perceptions of the interviewees towards the truncation and the narrative and persuasive forms they employed. Coding in this sense does not draw out themes that become relevant on account of their prevalence. Instead it applies local ethnographic insight to interpret the significance of words according to the contexts in which they are spoken, and the events of which they speak (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009). The approach we have adopted allows us to offer novel understandings of the antagonisms caused by an ambiguous use and interpretation of the concept of environmental restoration, of the role of problem framing and reframing in environmental conflict and management, and of the role and importance of the rhetorical situation as a determinant of action. We argue that environmental decisions need to be viewed as interactions between groups and individuals that negotiate and incessantly (re)create their moral positions. Such decisions thus need to be seen not only as *drawing* on different values and interests but, through the negotiated interactions they entail, as *shaping* the values and interests that are subsequently taken forward into future environmental decision processes.

## 2. Restoration and rhetoric

### 2.1. River restoration

Many recent river management interventions have been presented under the rubric, strategy, or philosophy of 'restoration'. As such, the concept of river restoration has received significant academic attention from both the natural and social sciences. What is apparent from this literature is that it is hard to generalise about restoration because its consequences and value are highly contingent in practice (Eden et al., 1999). This is underlined by the diversity of restoration projects being undertaken at a range of scales and complexity in different environments throughout the world. According to Wheaton et al. (2008) the underlying motives for restoration are equally diverse and principally include: ecosystem

restoration; habitat restoration; flood control/defence; floodplain reconnection; property and infrastructure protection; sediment management; water quality, and; aesthetic and recreational (Wheaton et al., 2008, p. 28). Given this diversity it is understandable that throughout the literature much attention has been given to the semantics of and differences between definitions of restoration. The most favoured definition seems to be the narrow definition proposed by Cairns of 'complete structural and functional return to a pre-disturbance state' (1991, p. 187; Wheaton et al., 2006). This supports the purist (traditional) view that restoration is about re-establishing an ecosystem's 'natural' appearance and functions and returning it to some past, historical state, often prior to disturbance or damage (possibly pre-human) (Aronson et al., 1993). In practice restoration practitioners acknowledge that restoration to a 'natural' state is rarely possible and that there are many other related interventions that seek to repair the environment but not necessarily return ecosystems/ivers to a historical or pristine state (Eden, 2002; Hobbs and Cramer, 2008). Wheaton et al. (2006) found that river restorers seem to have little concern for differences in definition and that the most commonly held view amongst practitioners was that restoration was used as a 'catch all' term for river management activities. In the case study presented in this paper alternative interpretations of restoration are shown to cause a disjuncture between competing imperatives for conservation and the maintenance of a 'natural' system. The "fuzziness" and interpretability of the concept of restoration, we argue, ensures that different people can apply it in different ways to justify or oppose what is ultimately the same physical environmental intervention.

### 2.2. Environmental discourse, rhetoric and framing

The environment, and environmental discourse in particular, are particularly appropriate for analysis because, as Mühlhäusler and Peace (2006, p. 471) point out, the uncertainty and complexity of natural environmental systems gives rise to a greater use of narrative and rhetorical forms than in many other discourse genres. "The environment" has gained global rhetorical appeal, and emerged as a meta-narrative, by virtue of its ability to transcend

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