

Waterways Walk

Eliciting information from stakeholders by connecting people and places

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Background and rationale

This poster presentation showcases an experimental and innovative setting to elicit information and ideas from stakeholders by taking them to actual places that are linked to the research topic, in this case drought and water scarcity in the United Kingdom. The hypothesis is that people link memories to places and being at the very places conjures up useful information of drought or water scarce situations such as personal remembrances, family or friend memories. Usually information, ideas or opinions from stakeholders are gathered in institutional settings, either stakeholder's offices, meeting rooms, during workshops or focus groups among other established methods. However, being confined to a room can limit memory and creativity. In the example presented below, the results were useful for advancing the scope of a research project that deals with water efficiency campaigns in the public sector and tries to increase the awareness of water scarcity and drought in the UK and also tries to elicit useful information about what value people hold with regard to water.

The poster presents the example of a water-related themed walk through the city of Birmingham, United Kingdom. The walk was organised during a drought and water scarcity conference in 2018. This activity offered an informal and unusual way of discussing and contributing to the question how water efficiency campaigns can promote public social norms in relation to valuing water. Stakeholders and participants, mostly drought and water scarcity professionals from UK water regulators, research councils and non-governmental organisations, had the possibility to showcase how they perceive water efficiency campaigns to address their concerns in relation to the water environment. The 90-minute walk made stops at defined points along the route, and discussed ideas about water efficiency campaigns. The stops served as 'anchor' points to discuss aspects of drought and water scarcity.

Abstract

This poster presentation makes a contribution to the discussion on knowledge co-production, especially about how to gather ideas and elicit information from stakeholders in innovative and unusual settings. Hence the focus is less on the research topic as such but more on the method. I present a water-related walk through Birmingham, UK that stopped at various places and discussed drought and water scarcity issues with participants. The hypothesis is that people link memories to places and being at the very places conjures up useful information, for example personal memories, in this case about drought and water scarcity.

Questions

- What is the value of water?
- How do people experience water efficiency campaigns?
- What role should citizens play in the management of drought and water scarcity?
- What water efficiency campaigns would you be interested in contributing to?
- Have you participated in water efficiency campaigns at your workplace?

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Where does water come from?

The second and third stop were at Victoria Square in Birmingham's city centre. Against the backdrop of Birmingham's council house and town hall, participants were briefly introduced to Birmingham's water supply history. Birmingham is an interesting case because it was the first city to 'municipalise' water 1876. Then mayor Joseph Chamberlain decided to buy the water works and run it for public profit. The "Birmingham Corporation Water Department" was responsible for Birmingham's water supply from 1876 until 1974. In 1892, land was purchased in mid-Wales and work began at what was to become Elan Valley Reservoirs and the Elan aqueduct. Both still supply Birmingham with water. Built between 1896 and 1906, consisting of five lakes and a 73 mile long aqueduct, every day 365 million litres travel to Birmingham by gravity alone. It was built because the average rainfall in mid-Wales is almost three times higher than in Birmingham. Today the reservoirs are managed by Welsh Water. Cannon Hill Park in Birmingham hosts a model of the Elan Valley Reservoir and the model was constructed as a tribute to the pioneers of the scheme and opened in 1998.



Elan Valley Reservoir



Elan Valley Reservoir model; Source: Oosoom (Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0)

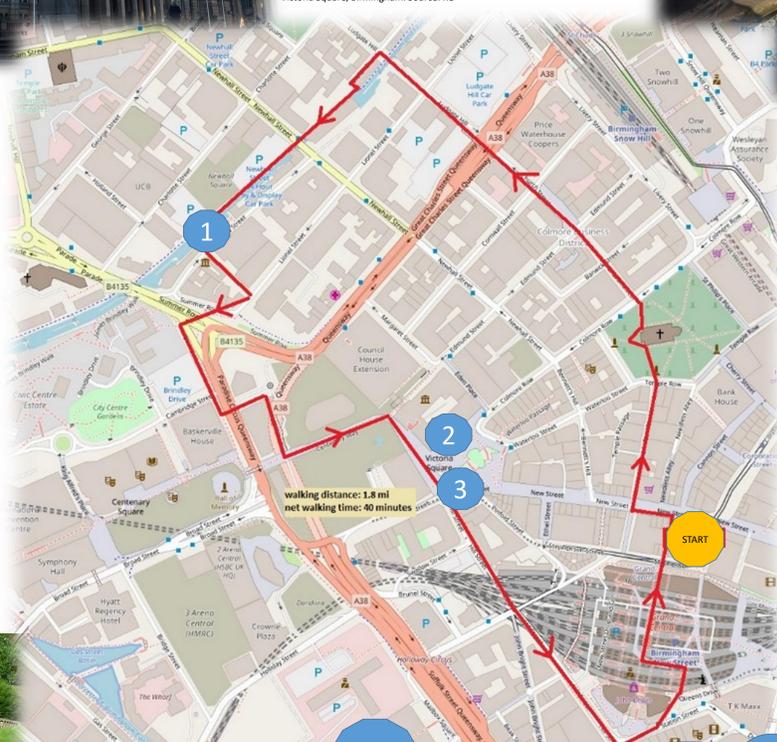
Victoria Square, Birmingham. Source: KG

Canal locks near fleet street. Source: KG

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Frozen – a different perspective on water scarcity

The walk's first stop was at a series of canal locks at the Birmingham and Fazeley Canal, one of the many canals that run through Birmingham. This location was chosen to present the narrative of a Yorkshire based woman and keen boater who recollects her memory of an incident in the winter 1984/1985 when she was frozen in the canal in Tipton and Wolverhampton for a month each when she was moving her boat from Birmingham because the canal was due to be drained. She remembers how they coped with the situation and how it affected working boats as well. This oral history presented an unusual and unexpected aspect of water scarcity – being frozen in and not being able to navigate the canals. It is important to stress the variety at which water scarcity can affect us and the cold spell in the UK at the beginning of March 2018 saw pipes burst and water companies distributing water bottles among its customers.



walking distance: 1.8 mi
net walking time: 40 minutes

START

Participants

The Waterways Walk was part of the ENDOWS (ENGaging diverse stakeholders and publics with outputs from the UK Drought and Water Scarcity programme) Showcase event on 18 March 2018 in Birmingham, UK. The nine participants were from:

- UK water regulators
- UK Research Councils
- UK National Farmers' Union
- other water researchers

The role of regulators

The fourth stop was planned outside Ofwat's offices close to Birmingham's New Street railway station. Instead, the lively discussion at Victory Square was further continued and Ofwat's role was briefly introduced. Ofwat is a key actor and responsible for the economic regulation of water industry in England and Wales. We therefore briefly discussed the role of Ofwat as a catalyst for innovation and whether Ofwat could play a role in animating water companies to take more care of the public sector and water efficiency.

What is the value of water?

We also used this stop to introduce the Consumer Council for Water (CCW) whose offices are located at Victoria Square. The CCW is a public body that represents water and sewage consumers in England and Wales. It provides impartial advice and advocacy and it takes up unresolved complaints. The CCW stresses the fact that customers also have an important part to play when it comes to saving water and making the water resources more resilient. However, they also attest customers a lack of awareness of the pressures of the water system. Both, the brief introduction into where Birmingham's water comes from and the CCW's role were used to discuss about whether we value water, whether it matters where water comes from and also if water efficiency campaigns, which usually address domestic customers should also address the places where most people spend their daytime – at our workplaces. In other words, do we need to widen the focus of water efficiency campaigns?

Summary and conclusion

"I really enjoyed the canal walk that we did" (participant from Defra (UK Environment Ministry))

The walk was useful for advancing the scope of a research project that deals with water efficiency campaigns in the public sector and tries to increase the awareness of water scarcity and drought in the UK. The discussion among the participants during the walk contributed to this discussion about water efficiency campaigns by for example highlighting that water scarcity should be put in a wider context: water scarcity is about human behaviour, technological infrastructure and weather events. Also, to emphasise and talk about water scarcity as it occurs more often than drought. An important aspect was where does water come from and whether that is important? Is there such a thing such as 'local' water as compared to the discussion about local food. These useful questions and implications followed from the lively discussions during the walk and the overall positive feedback from participants encouraged us to repeat this type of information, idea and data gathering in the future but also to critically reflect on it.

Next steps after the Waterways Walk:

- international academic and grey literature review 'water efficiency in the public sector'
- draft Primer document "Water efficiency on the public sector: the role of social norms"
- workshop with stakeholders to receive critical feedback on draft Primer
- publication of Primer (May 2019)
- 'Water Efficiency Walk' at ENDOWS Finale Event in London (November 2019)

Watch the video featuring the Waterways Walk



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