

## Reflections

# Towards more locally aware resource governance? – commentary to Albrecht and colleagues

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This text grew out as a commentary on the article “Hydropowering sustainability transformation: policy frames on river use and restoration in Finland” (Albrecht *et al.* 2023) during the manuscript review process. While the article itself is a timely contribution to expanding our understanding on how rivers are framed and related to in a national context where the history of coercive ‘modernization’ meets an urgent demand to decarbonize, the authors’ observations also invite discussion beyond the explicit scope of water governance. Considering the range of extractive and renewable resource projects that are expected to unfold across the country in response to the demands of the ‘green transition’, I make use of this text as an opportunity to discuss Albrecht and colleagues’ (2023, 58) conclusion that “more emphasis should be placed on [...] governance that recognises the local dynamics and interactions within the social-ecological systems”. I take a focus on the inseparably political, affective and situated nature of all resource-related developments and debates, which all pose their unique challenges for translating the idea(l)s of locally aware environmental and resource governance frameworks into practice.

Keywords: environmental governance, resource development, just transition, hydropower, energyscape

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## Powering ‘development’

Waterways have occupied an integral role in the modernization of post-World War II Finland. At the face of rapid industrialization and national identity building, established uses and traditional meanings and valuations of rivers were forced to give way to perceiving them as a source of power and prosperity, desperately desired to fuel the development of the small and peripheral nation (see Suopajärvi 2001; Rannikko 2022; for similar developments in Canada, see Desbiens 2013). It was of course not only rivers that became viewed as a valuable ‘resource’ (cf. Bridge 2009; Hast 2021); in the hectic pursuit of ‘development’, regional employment prospects and national economic gain also

other natural environments have shared their fate (e.g. Tanskanen 2001; Ruuskanen 2010; Hast 2021). The decades-long national hydropower development scheme left behind not only massive industrial infrastructure that continues to block the flows of water and all life dependent on engagements with it, but also a 'cultural trauma' (Albrecht *et al.* 2023) that was allowed to unfold in the name of 'national interest' (Suopajärvi 2001), 'major regional development project' (Vola 2020) and the 'good of the society' (Strauss 2011).

Despite its tragic local histories and the increasing political emphasis on nature conservation, restoration and other ecosystem services and values, hydropower has maintained its image as a source of reliable and environmentally benign form of power generation. Owing to its relative flexibility, hydropower is seen as a key resource that can compensate for the intermittency of other forms of renewable energy generation, thus instrumentally contributing to energy affordability and security of supply (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2022, 42). Hydropower also continues to enjoy popularity among Finnish citizens: in the annual survey of national energy attitudes commissioned by the Finnish energy industry, around two thirds of the respondents agree either somewhat or completely agree with statements of hydropower being 'environmentally friendly' (total 73%) and 'necessary for mitigating climate change' (70%). Nearly a third of the respondents express their support for additional hydropower construction in the country. Only around 10% of the respondents somewhat or completely disagree with these statements (see Finnish Energy 2022, 11–12, 14).

Despite its widespread acceptance, hydropower has also featured as a prominent source of local environmental conflicts since the 1950s (cf. Pettersson *et al.* 2017). What kind of space and voice should be given to the minority opposing hydropower in a situation where an overwhelming majority of is willing to grant the hydropower industry its societal license to operate or even expand? (cf. Lesser *et al.* 2023)

Albrecht and others' (2023) article paints an appropriate picture of the complexities of hydropower: while it is a flexible and low-carbon source of electricity, its construction has had – and continues to have – a detrimental impact on waterways as well as on the species and (multispecies) cultures that depend on their flows. While the authors' interest lies in the management of waterways, the discussions they engage in bear significance also in other contexts of resource (un)development. Similar 'ambivalence' (*ibid.*) characterizes the local implications of all resource development projects, extractive and renewable alike. The harms and losses that are being experienced locally as a result of policies aspiring towards maximizing "common normative goods" (Sovacool *et al.* 2019, 582) lie at the very heart of the contemporary energy sustainability dilemma. They also reflect more broadly the spatial and temporal complexities associated with implementing just transitions towards a low-carbon world.

## Sustainability depoliticized

In their article, Albrecht and colleagues (2023) identify a set of frames that rivers are being made sense of in the expert and media debates of contemporary Finnish society: as a source of flexible power; in terms of preserving and restoring their ecological values and functions; in terms of the value they have in providing sociocultural ecosystem services for riparian communities and other users; and in relation to the persistent cultural trauma that also contemporary water governance has to come to terms with. Through drawing attention to the oftentimes conflicting societal understandings of what rivers are 'for' and what should be done with them, the authors arrive at the core of what 'political' entails: the right to define the prevailing state of affairs and the ability to influence its desired future trajectories (cf. Stirling 2014).

However, at the same time the authors make several references to the possibility or goal of 'striking a balance' (Albrecht *et al.* 2023) between the often conflicting interests and values of different stakeholders. Such a statement is problematic in the sense that depoliticizes a situation that is political at its very core through suggesting that such a balance between often irreconcilable wants, needs and worldviews of manifold different actors *could* somehow be achieved. Instead, in many instances the possibility of such a 'balance' does not exist: diverse losses and gains are bound to occur in a manner that treats those involved in an uneven manner, and involved actors are bound to have an unequal say in defining and deciding on what this 'balance' entails.

Policies nor policy transitions are never amoral, neutral or value free, but instead built on and carved out of an existing social order and prevailing, asymmetrical power relations (Stirling 2014; Sovacool *et al.* 2019). Fully acknowledging this inseparably political nature of hydropower (and other) resource development projects – and the perspectival nature of the notion of sustainability itself – places a tremendous challenge on the frameworks of resource governance. While a wealth of legislation that should in principle guarantee those most impacted a say in what will happen does exist, in practice the existing governance frameworks have ‘a proven degree of maladaptivity’ (Albrecht *et al.* 2023); the possibilities for local communities and those residing by the impacted waterways can at best be described as ‘limited’ (*ibid.*).

Similar challenges have been observed in other national resource governance contexts. The channels of participation that existing legislation provides have left (parts of the) local communities underrepresented and, as a result, with a profound experience of being excluded and devalued (Strauss 2011; Suopajarvi 2013; Pettersson *et al.* 2017; Möttönen *et al.* 2022). I would argue that much of the incapability of our environmental governance frameworks to identify and value citizens’ everyday lives and experiences does not stem only from inadequacy of the frameworks themselves but more profoundly from our manners of relating to resources as a society. As Sejersen and Thisted (2021, 369) conclusively summarize:

in the field of resource extraction there is consensus that emotions [and everything labelled as such] should be avoided. We are constantly reminded that [...] discussions should be based on facts and rational arguments rather than let the emotions prevail.

This ‘dominant techno-scientific governmentality’ (Dale 2016) of resource management and related cultures of argumentation constitute a ‘truth’ about resources, what should be done with them and why that leaves very little room for non-expert voices to participate in the processes of its definition – equally within the formal frameworks of public participation and in broader societal debates (also Strauss 2011; Desbiens 2013). Paradoxically, this remains the case even when those societal resource-debates deemed as ‘objective’ or ‘rational’ have been established as thoroughly penetrated by affective states and statements (see Weszkalnys 2016; Lempinen & Lindroth 2021; Sejersen & Thisted 2021; Kangasluoma & Lempinen 2022). The way in which Finnish water governance has been geared towards allocating the maximum amount of water for hydropower production (Albrecht *et al.* 2023) is not any less dependent from hopes, fears and wants of different actors involved than resistance of hydropower is.

The same also holds true in the context of implementing the ongoing ‘just green transition’ towards low-carbon and no-carbon societies more broadly. Only through comprehensively understanding the local impacts of a given development project the true distribution of benefit and harm, the diverse range of losses that are being experienced (beyond monetary terms) and those who suffer them and those who need to be included and heard can be identified (for excellent discussions on the notion of energy justice e.g. Jenkins *et al.* 2016; MacCauley & Heffron 2018; Williams & Doyon 2019; Cha 2020). While financial harm and monetary losses are (relatively) effortless to quantify, agree upon and compensate for, the losses that do not translate to monetary terms are difficult to grasp. My own work with Finland’s ‘just’ peat transition and experiences of those most affected by the transition – those deriving their livelihood from peat extraction – has highlighted some of these challenges. For Finland’s peat entrepreneurs, what is being lost in the transition is not a source of employment and income, but an integral part of everyday life and identity and a deep attachment to peatland as a profoundly meaningful space. As within the frameworks of resource governance more broadly, these personal and sociocultural losses remain unidentified and unaccounted for (cf. McGrath & McGonagle 2016; Della Bosca & Gillespie 2018; Lempinen & Vainio 2022).

### **On the ‘local’**

In their article, Albrecht and colleagues (2023) make a well-justified demand for better awareness and inclusion of the local circumstances to which the planned (un)development is intended to become a part of. For them, the conceptual answer lies to a great extent in the interplay of a hydro-social cycle and an aquatic regime: the changing meaning and functions of waterways that have an impact on how

the communities among whom they flow interact with them and collectively shared understandings of how these bodies of water should be managed. Similar conceptual attempts have been made also by other authors: Rannikko (2022) builds on the notion of hydro-social networks, others have relied on the concept of an energyscape (Kaisti & Käkönen 2012; Strauss *et al.* 2013; Lempinen 2019).

What all of the notions above share is the idea that the planned development project is not constructed to a sociocultural void but instead becomes a part of an existing 'actor-network' (Latour 2005) or, in Clarke's (2005) terms, 'situation': a unique, constantly changing and perspectival spatio-temporal mosaic co-constituted by human, nonhuman and ideational entities alike. When becoming a part of this socio-environmental fabric, local (un)development projects inevitably "alter the ways in which [some] people live, work, play, relate to one another, organize to meet their needs, and generally cope as members of society" (Vanclay 2002, 190). This is even more the case in a situation where multiple resource developments are underway in the same local setting, but their permitting takes place in isolation from other projects. The environmental and social impacts of each project are assessed individually – and often insufficiently (Suopajarvi 2013, 2015; Hildebrandt & Sandham 2014) – without a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of their simultaneous introduction to the same socioenvironmental setting that constitutes the local resourcescape.

The situated nature of what the 'local' or a 'place' entails resists generalization. Furthermore, the human communities and places affected by development projects are not uniform but internally heterogeneous (Vanclay 2002; del Río & Burguillo 2008; Lempinen 2019). It might be that while some residents or right-holders are harmed, not all of them necessarily experience the same kinds of harm and, as a result, have the losses that occur to them compensated for; for others, the planned developments might reap financial or other gains. The internal diversity of communities and stake- or rights-holders within a given project implementation or development plan yet again underlines the political nature of how resources are related to. The tension between different viewpoints and the unbalanced power relations between the actors who present them is not limited to a juxtaposition between the local and the national or the periphery and the centre, but also applies to the conflicting viewpoints that by default exist within the communities that are touched by planned and ongoing resource development projects. If 'striking a balance' between the resource developers or project owners and local communities is a problematic in its own right – both as a practice as well as an idea(l) –, so is the assumption of being able to 'balance' the contradicting interests and worldviews *within* local communities.

## Concluding thoughts on rivers and beyond

The contemporary 'reality' in Finland is roughly that additional hydropower capacity can be constructed only to already dammed rivers. This state of affairs does not, however, mean that construction of hydropower would have been left in history or that planned hydropower projects at the remaining (technologically and economically) suitable sites in rivers that have already been dammed would not be contested. In the densely dammed Kemijoki river, the conflict around constructing a dam in the village of Sierilä continues to escalate both on ecological and sociocultural grounds. The decades-long debate for enabling the return of the mighty migratory salmon also continues. Construction of a bypass would (at least theoretically) enable the return of the fish whose loss had such a detrimental impact on local cultures and communities. At the same time, the return of the fish would not be synonymous with reversing the cultural trauma that damming the Kemijoki river caused. The associated experiences of deep injustice also still echo in the background also in societal debates revolving around other resource development projects in the contemporary North.

At the other end of the spectrum lies the removal of dams at sites where the role of electricity generation is insignificant or where the natural values are considered more important than the revenue that can be gained from hydropower construction. While welcome from the ecological perspective, removing a dam that has been woven to the fabric of the everyday experience of those whose lives intersect with it can also bring about loss to some. One such example is the planned dam removal at the mouth of the Vantaanjoki river in Helsinki, where the surroundings of the Vanhankaupunginkoski dam have become an integral part of the recreational and cultural landscape – a part of shared history

for the capital residents and a protected site of site of local cultural heritage – whose preservation in its existing state is also fiercely advocated.

It is easy to agree with the authors' demand to make 'better recognition of biodiversity, societal and cultural values and adaptation needs' an integral part of water governance frameworks. Calling for similar improvements in other sectors of resource governance is equally effortless to justify. Identifying the blind spots and calling for improvement in existing environmental legislation is a political act and act of justice in its own right. Just like the frames and interpretations of other actors can become integrated to other actors' frames and political agendas, research-based knowledge can feed into how different policy and societal actors make sense of their specific fields and the ways in which these sectors relate to the world around them.

The difficulty lies in pointing out the *how* this should be done in practice. What would a place-sensitive governance framework that would be both genuinely inclusive and nondiscriminatory towards alternative ways of valuing the multispecies world that we are a part of look like? How to ensure that the resources and expertise needed for implementation for such policies in practice is a completely different debate. Overall, the challenge is not solely about not re-designing our environmental and resource legislation, administration and governance but instead an endeavour of going deep into acknowledging and re-assessing the values embedded in and cherished by our societies. Embracing the irrevocably political and affective nature of all resource-related societal developments and being sensitive to truly acknowledging the localized injustices that are inevitably generated as externalities of our existing nature-related governance frameworks is a humble start.

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