



Seminar: Rivers, Commons, Movements

Transdisciplinary and crosscultural
conceptualizations of river socationatures

The *Seminar: Rivers, Commons, Movements* is part of the Riverhood and River Commons projects. Riverhood and River Commons are both 5-year research projects that focus on enlivening rivers, river co-governance initiatives, and new water justice movements. Riverhood has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 101002921). River Commons is funded by the Wageningen Interdisciplinary Research and Education Fund (INREF).

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Seminar: Rivers, Commons, Movements

Transdisciplinary and crosscultural conceptualizations of river socionatures

Top-down, technocratic riverine interventions often affect watersheds, water flows, water quality and equal access negatively, e.g. by construction of dams, water transfers, urban expansion and discharging untreated wastewater. Active involvement of riverine communities in the co-governance of river systems can importantly contribute to ensure river systems' healthy development. Thereto, diverse new water justice movements (NWJMs) have emerged worldwide. These transdisciplinary coalitions creatively transform local ideas for 'enlivening rivers' into global action and vice versa, with important potential for shaping more equitable and nature-rooted water governance. In this interface, rooted, socionatural river commons and translocal/transnational social movements connect. Nevertheless, their ideas, concepts, strategies and proposals of socio-environmental interconnection and 'river commoning' are under-theorised, largely unnoticed by natural and social sciences, and excluded from policy-making.

The seminar took place in Valencia, Spain, and gathered scholars and PhD researchers who focus on theoretical and methodological concepts, strategies and experiences related to studying and supporting evolving 'river commons' and 'NWJMs', to revitalise rivers. The seminar's case presentations and research frames and proposals engaged with conceptualizing river systems in all senses, and understanding and supporting river knowledge co-creation and democratisation from the bottom up.

Thereby,

- Riverhood and River Commons PhD researchers presented, discussed and enriched their proposals to study river commons and movements in Europe and Latin America, elaborate on a transdisciplinary science-policy-societal action framework. The key dimensions are: (1) River-as-Ecosociety, focusing on biophysical, ecological and use aspects, (2) River-as-Territory, focusing on river governance rules and institutions, (3) River-as-Subjects, focusing on environmental justice issues and rights of the river, and (4) River-as-Movement, looking how riverine communities and allies organize and advocate for river co-management and translocal solidarity.
- Wageningen University and Spanish counterpart scholars specializing on water governance and political ecology presented related studies, concepts, and methodologies.

Overall general objectives:

- Discuss the four river ontologies and understand the key issues, concepts and debates of each ontology
- Relate the four river ontologies to each other as well as to broader society-nature, commoning and water governance debates
- Present and discuss the PhD projects to receive information, concepts and inspiration for finalizing the research proposals



Programme

The international seminar lasted three days (17 – 19 June 2022) and was based at the **Polytechnic University of Valencia** and **on the banks of the Serpis River, Spain**. The first two days were held on the university campus and the last day included a field trip to the basin of the Serpis River. A total of 26 researchers and activists from Spain, Colombia, the Netherlands, Mexico, Belgium and Ecuador participated.



DAY 1 - June 17

Activity	Panelists	Presentations
Welcome and introduction to the seminar	Carles Sanchis-Ibor, Juliana Forigua, Ana Ana María Arbeláez, Juan Pablo Hidalgo-Bastidas	Riverhood & River Commons: The four ontologies <i>river-as-ecosociety, river-as-subject, river-as-territory, river-as-movement</i>
Panel 1	Carlota Houart	Listening to the Voices of the River: A Path to Multispecies Justice in Water Governance Processes?
	Jerry van den Berge	The Human Right to Water as a tool in struggles for public water in Europe
	Lieselotte Viaene	Indigenous water ontologies and the human/more-than-human right to water: a call for critical engagement with plurilegal water realities
Panel 2	Ana María Arbeláez	What do you mean by 'river'? What do you mean by 'justice'? Understanding legal mobilisation and alliances to protect rivers in Colombia and Spain.
	Lotte de Jong	River imaginaries in climate change adaptation
	Francisco Martínez-Capel	REDAPTA project: governance spaces for adaptation to global change in Mediterranean rivers.
Panel 3	Sebastián Reyes	Peasant hydro-social territories: Rivers and new territorialities in Colombia's agrarian struggles
	Nuria Hernández-Mora	Redes sociales por una nueva cultura del agua en España: La defensa de los ríos como patrimonio común
	Gabriela Duque Orozco	Meñebay: monitoring and control of the Waorani hydroterritory
Documentary	Un Tajo Profundo: Recuerdos de Toledo	Documentary about the Tago River as it passes through Toledo, in which, through different testimonies, some of the causes of its degradation are revealed and why it is necessary to recover it as part of our natural and historical heritage.
Plenary discussion (ontologies)	Nuria Hernández-Mora and Rutgerd Boelens (moderation)	

DAY 2 - June 18

Activity	Panelists	Presentations
Panel 1	Catalina Rey	De-designing the river: representation and visualisation of New Water Justice Movements in spatial planning
	Nick Bourguignon	Forging interconnected hydro-social territories through modernisation: comparison of irrigation communities in the Tagus and Segura basins
	Sergio Segura Cale	Water governance and innovative multi-stakeholder spaces for the transition to sustainability
Panel 2	Laura Giraldo	Between life and death: everyday infrastructures for water governance in the Bogotá river
	Cristina Yacoub	Participatory river quality monitoring processes - can they be used as a strategic tool?
	Maarten Loopmans	Hydrosolidarity: from a moral to a socio-political concept
Panel 3	Carolina Cuevas	Ways of river entanglement: towards an ecology of care practices
	Alejandra Peña	Popular intellectuals and the new water justice movements: analysis of the cases of Rio Santiago (Mexico) and Rio Baba (Ecuador)
	Carles Sanchis-Ibor	The river-wetland connection in the Mediterranean. Problems and dilemmas
Panel 4	Juliana Forigua	Fishing micro-ecologies in the Magdalena river: the construction of the political subject of water
	Marta García-Mollá	Hydrological planning and the depletion of the Júcar river
	Sergio Villamayor	Collective management and social mobilisation in Spanish irrigation communities: first survey-based results
Documentary	Silent River: The deadly cost of industry in Mexico	Silent River follows a young woman and her family as they defy death threats to try and save the one of the most polluted rivers in Mexico.
Plenary discussion (ontologies)	Jaime Hoogesteger (moderación)	

DAY 3 - June 19

Visit to the lower-middle basin of the Serpis River



Narrative abstract of the presentations and general discussion

DAY 1

Panel 1

Listening to the Voices of the River: A Path to Multispecies Justice in Water Governance Processes?

Panelist: Carlota Houart

At the Valencia seminar I presented some preliminary ideas about my research proposal: "Listening to the Voices of the River: Towards Multispecies Justice in Water Governance Processes". The central framework of my research is the concept of multispecies justice, and how one can think about water justice beyond an anthropocentric approach in the context of river protection and restoration. I presented my research questions, the theoretical framework of political ecology and non-anthropocentric political philosophy, and also my case studies: the Piatua River in Ecuador and the Maas River in the Netherlands

The Human Right to Water as a tool in struggles for public water in Europe

Panelist: Jerry van den Berge

The struggle for water justice is sometimes featured by alliances and campaigns for recognition of the human right to water and sanitation. In April 2012 the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) "Right2Water" proposed to implement the human right to water and sanitation in European legislation, as a strategic-political tool to fight privatization. Implementing such water justice notion is part of an ongoing socio-political struggle. The Right2Water movement united different groups and organisations and linked local struggles to national and European policies. It successfully challenged EU neoliberal politics and changed EU discourse towards water while increasing awareness of citizens about water services by sparking the debate over privatisation and remunicipalisation of water services. Three cases of interwovenness of water policies and social justice are highlighted (Greece, Netherlands and Spain) and a preview is made to the UN 2023 water conference to see whether and how water justice struggles are continuing and whether and how discourse and approach towards water are moving.

Panel 2

What do you mean by 'river'? What do you mean by 'justice'? Understanding legal mobilisation and alliances to protect rivers in Colombia and Spain.

Panelist: Ana María Arbeláez

New Water Justice Movements have played a key role in defending rivers against increasing pressures such as climate change, pollution, and urbanization. Through collective action and committed movement, they have achieved, among others, that laws and court decisions in several countries recognize the socio-ecologic value of rivers and adopt measures to protect them.

Within the legal mobilization strategy for the protection of rivers, one of the main arguments is promoting environmental justice. This concept emerged in the 1980s within the struggle of the African American communities in the US, and has traveled to many other geographies. However, one risk of such travel of ideas is the adoption of universal definitions that may exclude the diverse experiences of people in different contexts.

In that sense, adopting a universal definition of environmental justice runs the risk of ignoring various forms of injustices that may arise in contexts characterized by the coexistence of a plurality of perspectives about nature, legal systems, and types of knowledge. By applying a legal-anthropology and feminist political-ecology approach, this research aims to understand how the concept of environmental justice is mobilized by grassroots actors in the rivers Serpis (Spain) and La Miel, (Colombia) where a plurality of ontological understandings of rivers, justice, and legal systems coexist.

REDAPTA project: governance spaces for adaptation to global change in Mediterranean rivers

Panelist: Francisco Martínez-Capel

This presentation explained the objectives, the essential process and the results of the REDAPTA project, which can also be consulted extensively in the article entitled "Governance spaces for adaptation to global change in Mediterranean rivers: the REDAPTA project in the Tordera and Serpis river basins". The project worked in collaboration with two "governance spaces": the "Taula del Delta i de la Baixa Tordera" and the "Plataforma Ciudadana per a la Defensa del Riu Serpis". A methodology for the co-design process was applied, to exchange knowledge and encourage deliberation, and the result was a strategic adaptation document, for each basin, which includes ten concrete adaptation measures co-produced with the stakeholders. The second output of REDAPTA was a manual describing the concepts and approach applied, the main methodological steps of the co-design process and the lessons learned during its implementation. To raise public awareness of the importance of participatory monitoring of river improvement actions, a field activity was carried out in both rivers, where participants were able to get to know a section of the river and record different observations and indicators for its characterization. Finally, a day of exchange of experiences between different organizations was held, exploring their interest in creating an "Iberian Network of Governance Spaces for Water Management".

We can state that the REDAPTA actions served to consolidate the governance spaces involved in the co-design of adaptation measures, and gave more visibility to the proposed solutions, as well as to the Taula and the Platform as interlocutors with the administrations. The work done lays a good foundation for the proposed measures to have a roadmap for their implementation.

However, it would be advisable to invest efforts to promote citizen science programs and specific collaborations to strengthen the monitoring of the climate change adaptation strategy.

Panel 3

Peasant hydro-social territories: Rivers and new territorialities in Colombia's agrarian struggles

Panelist: Sebastián Reyes

In the context of the global environmental crisis caused by climate change, a series of adjustments to the relationship between capitalist production and nature have been proposed. These adjustments seek to deal with the limits that the environment has placed on production, ensuring economic growth and capital accumulation. This series of adjustments in the governance of natural resources and technological innovation have an effect on rivers and the communities that inhabit them, which generates conflicts, especially in peripheral or frontier areas. These conflicts have a material dimension, related to access and use of river goods, and an ontological dimension that confronts different values, knowledge and ways of perceiving rivers and nature. In regions inhabited by peasant communities organized around agrarian claims, such as the Sumapaz riverine region that is presented in this case study, the tension generates ecological conflicts in which different actors intervene to define the course of rivers in the context of the environmental crisis.

Redes sociales por una nueva cultura del agua en España: La defensa de los ríos como patrimonio común

Panelist: Nuria Hernández-Mora

With the advent of democracy and the socio-political transformation of Spain in the 1970s and 80s, new voices and actors emerged – regional governments, environmental groups, local social movements affected by proposed waterworks, critical and environmentally engaged academics, and some political parties – to oppose specific projects and plans. The opposition coalesced around the ideas of the “new water culture movement”, an epistemic community made up of activists, academics and local groups that created alliances to offer an alternative water management paradigm for Spain. This community, developed around a new understanding of the relationship between rivers and society, advocated for a new water management paradigm aimed at ecological conservation, participated and transparent decision-making processes, and the incorporation of a new economic rationality in policy-making. Starting in the early 2000s, and coinciding with process of implementation of the Water Framework Directive in Spain, these actors organized into networks at the river basin or regional scale. These river basin networks engage with and contest dominant positions on the first three echelons mentioned above – material assets and distribution; rules and rights; authority and legitimacy – but are grounded in the desire to challenge dominant discourses, understanding of water as common patrimony (patrimony), with implications on basic notions of rights, equity and environmental justice. They engage both horizontally with other networks, sharing arguments, strategies, knowledge and goals; and vertically with other organizations and actors that contribute to build their alternative worldview and discourses.

Meñebay: monitoring and control of the Waorani hydroterritory

Panelist: Gabriela Duque Orozco

With the advent of democracy and the socio-political transformation of Spain in the 1970s and 80s, new voices and actors emerged – regional governments, environmental groups, local social movements affected by proposed waterworks, critical and environmentally engaged academics, and some political parties – to oppose specific projects and plans. The opposition coalesced around the ideas of the “new water culture movement”, an epistemic community made up of activists, academics and local groups that created alliances to offer an alternative water management paradigm for Spain. This community, developed around a new understanding of the relationship between rivers and society, advocated for a new water management paradigm aimed at ecological conservation, participated and transparent decision-making processes, and the incorporation of a new economic rationality in policy-making. Starting in the early 2000s, and coinciding with process of implementation of the Water Framework Directive in Spain, these actors organized into networks at the river basin or regional scale. These river basin networks engage with and contest dominant positions on the first three echelons mentioned above – material assets and distribution; rules and rights; authority and legitimacy – but are grounded in the desire to challenge dominant discourses, understanding of water as common patrimony (patrimony), with implications on basic notions of rights, equity and environmental justice. They engage both horizontally with other networks, sharing arguments, strategies, knowledge and goals; and vertically with other organizations and actors that contribute to build their alternative worldview and discourses.

DAY 2

Panel 1

De-designing the river: representation and visualisation of New Water Justice Movements in spatial planning

Panelist: Catalina Rey

Globally, the management of rivers and river landscapes has been based on technocratic knowledge, involving top-down (hierarchical) processes of landscape design, territorial planning and socio-material transformations that these designs imply. These processes directly affect river communities and their livelihoods, provoking local confrontations with the imposed designs and related socio-material management forms. In this context, the aim of this research is to better understand: (a) how policies, institutional-normative practices and stakeholders shape and recreate river landscape designs and land management plans; (b) how these designs transform socio-material relations and practices in local river communities; c) how communities resist, negotiate and transform the imposition of these designs and land management plans; and d) how 'counter-designs' and 'counter-geographies' can support resistance groups and networks to express their own interpretations, aspirations and interests around their river landscapes. The research will focus on the cases of the redesign of the Berkel River (NL) and conflicts around large-scale mining projects in the Quimsacocha wetlands (EC). Using methodologies based on spatial ethnography, the research will draw on the conceptualization of hydro-social landscapes and notions of the social construction of technology to better understand and theorize the role of "designs" in the contestation and transformation of river spaces in which a multiplicity of actors attempt to create a specific social, technological and environmental order.

Forging interconnected hydro-social territories through modernisation: comparison of irrigation communities in the Tagus and Segura basins

Panelist: Nick Bourguignon

My presentation focused on presenting the results of my fieldwork interviewing individuals in irrigation communities in the basins of the Tajo and Segura rivers, and how they inform and problematize the concept of hydro-social territories. It begins with the presentation of the results of my critical review of inter-basin transfers. Next, I present the research framework and the methodology of choosing and interviewing irrigators (25 interviewees) in the 7 irrigation communities chosen in both basins. The second half of the presentation was devoted to present the results focused on the 4 axes of the seminar. Rivers as ecosociety explores how water influences the uses and ontologies of intertwined materials and concepts, such as property, or the concept of living and dead waters. Likewise, in Levante the mixing of waters is seen almost as a kind of alchemy, and the concept of (green) landscape is based on the possibility of irrigation. Rio as subject explored how the subjects who use and live from water live the intergenerational crisis, and the history of property. Rio as territory explores the hydro-social territory as (anti)hegemonic and connected to various local and global processes. It concludes with several intertwined points from all axes.

Water governance and innovative multi-stakeholder spaces for the transition to sustainability

Panelist: Sergio Segura Cale

The United Nations emphasizes the need to make water-related problems visible. It is precisely in the field of water where pioneering regulatory advances in water governance have been presented both in Europe and in Spain. In addition, the

international academic community has contributed numerous approaches and frameworks for incorporating participatory processes in water governance, applying transdisciplinary methodologies with a focus on citizen science and stakeholder analysis, as well as using participatory action research (PAR) methodologies. However, there is still a call for more innovative efforts in the field of transitions to sustainability for the socio-technical water system. It is indeed enriching to introduce innovation approaches in water governance research, both from a theoretical and methodological point of view. Thus, it seems essential to generate and experiment with multi-stakeholder water governance spaces in order to seek new solutions that directly consider complexity, uncertainty, power relations and the different narratives underlying the different systems. All of this, moreover, with an integral perspective and with a multi-scale and multi-actor territorial approach.

Panel 2

Between life and death: everyday infrastructures for water governance in the Bogotá river

Panelist: Laura Giraldo

The Bogotá system of rivers and wetlands forms the ecological core of the history and memories of Bogotá city and the Cundinamarca department (Colombia). The Bogotá River is also considered today one of the most contaminated rivers in the world. During the last decade, restoring the river and protecting its sources, located in a páramo ecosystem, has been crucial.

Currently, collective conservation practices and public-private governance schemes coexist in the headwaters. The actor interactions are based on and foster both collaboration efforts as well as conflicts, in particular as reaction to expert-based, top-down and ahistorical river interventions. In this context, the planning, re-patterning, and monitoring process in Bogotá River's headwater and the politics of promoting dominant knowledge and expertise may reduce the understanding of the river to its narrow technical and biophysical dimensions. This research will investigate the socioecological memory of the headwaters to address how people have jointly cohabited and transformed the upstream river network in the last decades. Therefore, the main objective is to analyze the materialization of different socioecological memories in river infrastructures in the

Bogotá River headwaters, considering grassroots self-organized initiatives and public-private alliances which trigger new social relations and spatial configuration to support new imaginaries and future-making.

Hydrosolidarity: from a moral to a socio-political concept

Panelist: Maarten Loopmans

In the late 1990s, water solidarity is introduced in the literature by the Swedish hydrologist Malin Falkenmark. She coins hydrosolidarity as the 'reconciliation of conflicts of interest with a solidarity-based balancing of human livelihood interests' in water management, deliberately presenting it as an ethical addition to techno-managerial approaches to (international) water resource management. Yet the real-life sociological and political underpinnings of water solidarities at a wider range of scales have remained underexplored in the water solidarity literature.

Such sociopolitical perspective would benefit from classic social science literature on solidarity, which define it as the willingness or moral obligation to share and redistribute material and immaterial resources drawing on feelings of a shared fate and group loyalty. Such combines a normative, ethical dimension with social structure. Simultaneously, micro- and meso level social sciences, in particular human geography have emphasized solidarity as praxis in place, complementary to, but simultaneously constitutive of the macro-level sources of solidarity rooted in societal structures. Social scientists situate solidarity in the socio-political dialectic between universal principles and their particularistic verification in practice. This implies not only an active

politics of solidarity, but also the possibility of a varied geography of solidarity at different scales and places in space and time. This, in turn, opens up perspectives to strengthen a political ecology of water solidarity, as present (though implicitly so in the hydrosocial territory framework).

Panel 3

Ways of river entanglement: towards an ecology of care practices

Panelist: Carolina Cuevas

This research seeks to address the multiple attempts to regenerate, repair and protect vulnerable rivers and river ecosystems in contexts of multiple socio-environmental injustices. Taking as a starting point feminist political ecology, studies on hydro-social territories and feminist conceptualizations of care, the main objective of this research is to understand how river hydro-social territories have been (re)configured through the body-territory-river care practices of multiple actors. Thus, recognizing hydrosocial territories as contested territories, and traveling between multiple human and more-than-human actors and diverse temporal-spatial scales, this research will address care practices in their affective, ethico-political and epistemic dimensions, while trying to understand how they have (re)configured river territories. To this end, through ethnographic, audio-visual and counter-cartographic methods from feminist, decolonial and participatory action research methodologies, this research will study the upper basin of the Lebrija River in Colombia and the lower basin of the Guadalquivir River in Spain. The intersection of these two case studies will allow us to reflect on how practices of care challenge the hegemonic modern-colonial relations between nature and society through which rivers are currently managed and governed, offering theoretical and methodological tools to support threatened river socio-ecologies and struggles towards intersectional socio-environmental justice.

Popular intellectuals and the new water justice movements: analysis of the cases of Rio Santiago (Mexico) and Rio Baba (Ecuador)

Panelist: Alejandra Peña

The paper proposes an analysis of the link between intellectuals and environmental justice movements in Latin America, based on the concept of intellectuals (Gramsci, 1999; Bose, 2004) and academic activism, to address the relationship woven between some intellectuals and grassroots organizations and local leaders in political struggles calling for social and environmental justice. The illustrative cases addressed are the Santiago River (Mexico) and the Baba River (Ecuador). We start from the premise that the different forms of collaboration that are woven together have different impacts on the development of the conflict and its scope, and that these depend on different aspects such as the type of conflict and demands, the composition of the local organizations, their strength, trust and coincidence of interests.

The river-wetland connection in the Mediterranean. Problems and dilemmas

Panelist: Carles Sanchis-Ibor

The consideration of the river as a socio-ecological system and its derivations in other holistic approaches usually focuses on the flow of water as the defining element of the river. These approaches tend to forget that a river is as much a flow of sediment as of water, a fact particularly evident in ephemeral and semi-ephemeral rivers, where water only appears intermittently and sometimes after prolonged hiatuses.

The artificialization and domestication of fluvial spaces and regimes, and the impacts that the processes of global change cause in their feeding basins and channels, are greatly altering the sedimentary behavior of most of the planet's rivers, both perennial and ephemeral. The most evident impact is the reduction of sediment availability, due to artificial retention or detraction, which has generated in many rivers the phenomenon known as "hungry waters", whereby rivers, in the absence of sediment, initiate erosive dynamics that accelerate the incision and narrowing of their channels. This lack of sediment also leads to the interruption of the feeding of the coastal fronts, transferring this erosion to the sea shores and affecting goods and people far from the river itself. Consideration of the sediment issue is therefore essential to address the functions of the river as an ecosystem, its management and a fair distribution of the social burdens and benefits that the river provides.

Panel 4

Fishing micro-ecologies in the Magdalena river: the construction of the political subject of water

Panelist: Juliana Forigua

We can study the artisanal fishers' struggles and their vindications as political and social subjects through the concept of water justice, which evidence how communities and environmental movements demand for equitable distribution of water, an effective participation in the design and implementation of the rules, norms and laws that determine the distribution and allocation of water, a redefinition of water authority, and a vindication of cultural discourses that articulate several claims for water (Zwarteveen & Boelens, 2014). This conceptualization calls for a comprehension of artisanal fishers' organizations in Middle Magdalena as social movements with their own customary norms. It implies to understand how the recognition of artisanal fishing as a cultural heritage has addressed the fishers' struggles to be considered as social and political subjects in institutional and legal contexts, which will strength their capacities to manage the distribution and allocation of water resources in Middle Magdalena. Therefore, I propose to answer the next research question: How artisanal fishers in Middle Magdalena River have vindicated as social and political subjects through the process of recognition of artisanal fishing as a cultural heritage of Colombia?

Hydrological planning and the depletion of the Júcar river

Panelist: Marta García-Mollá

The Júcar exploitation system is the largest of all the systems that make up the DHJ. In this system, which is enormously complex, very different types of agriculture and areas with different regional governments coexist.

Since the last decades of the 20th century, the Júcar River has undergone an unprecedented process of domestication and depletion of its resources. Initially through the construction of a large number of hydraulic infrastructures to regulate flows and later through the system of allocations established by the Spanish hydrological planning. As a result of these actions, the system is in the process of closure, because the resources of the system do not satisfy the consumptive demands during most of the year. This process has been accompanied by an "over-allocation" or "creation of paper water", which occurs when the rights exceed the available resources and which has occurred on the supply side, due to the overestimation of the available resources and, on the demand side, due to the overestimation of the savings produced in the modernization processes and due to the groundwater demands that grew without assigned rights, but which have ended up being incorporated into the planning documents.

The existence of paper water results in increased conflict between different users of the system and the presence of unsatisfied demands that especially affect environmental uses. Adjusting the rights assigned to the available resources is a challenge for the

river basin confederations in a context of decreasing resources, taking into account the complexity of the demands and the pressures that the basin authorities receive from different spheres to obtain resources from the system.

Collective management and social mobilisation in Spanish irrigation communities: first survey-based results

Panelist: Sergio Villamayor

The international research on the benefits of community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) regimes for sustainable development has raised concerns about the vulnerability of said regimes to globalization, shortsighted government regulations, marginalization, and other global political economy threats, particularly in the Global South. Research has shown that movements can generate positive effects beyond the reaction to specific threats. Those effects include the democratization of communities' collective choice processes, the reinvigoration of identity ties and local ecological knowledge, the promotion of economic development and autonomy, and the creation of nested user organizations. Negative effects also exist, including the reinforcement of divisions within the communities, governmental repression, and the "slogonization" of communities' interests. Recent survey research in the context of Spanish irrigation associations also shows the importance of these dynamics also in the Global North; Spanish irrigators also recognize the benefits of social mobilization vis a vis internal cooperation, as well as the importance of barriers such as low sense of efficacy in the promotion of said mobilization.

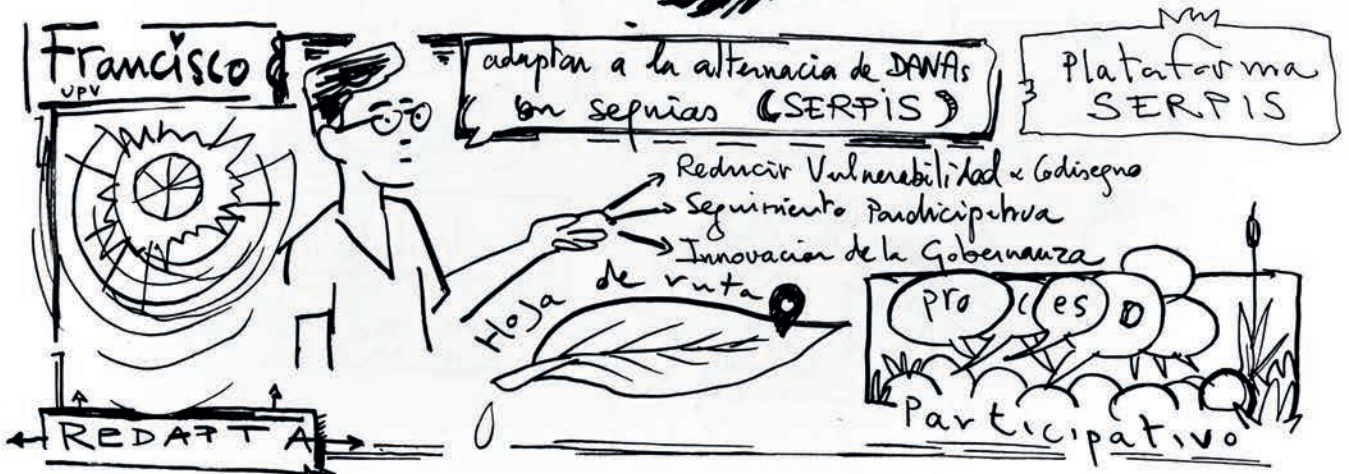


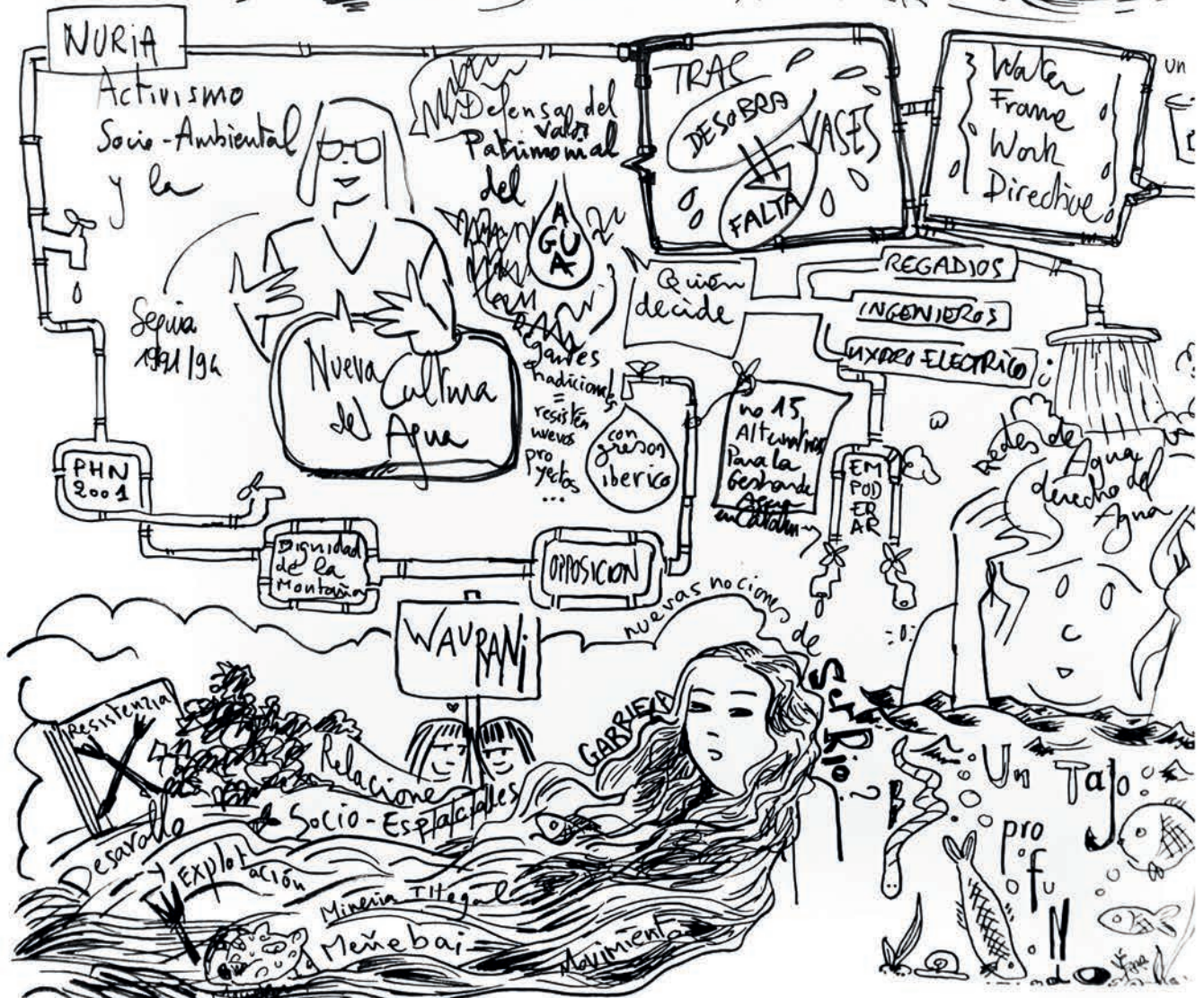
Meeting with environmental activist along the Serpis river

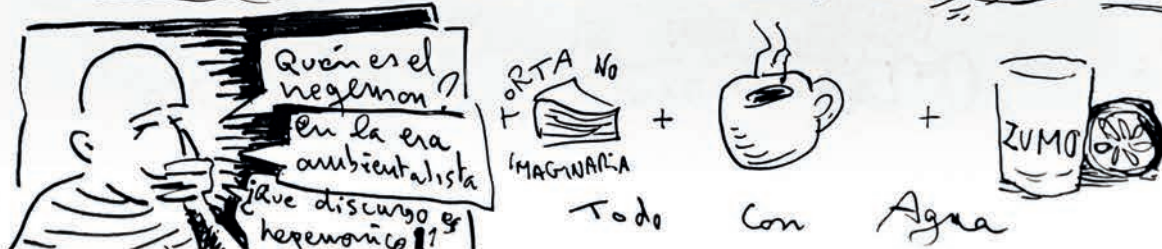
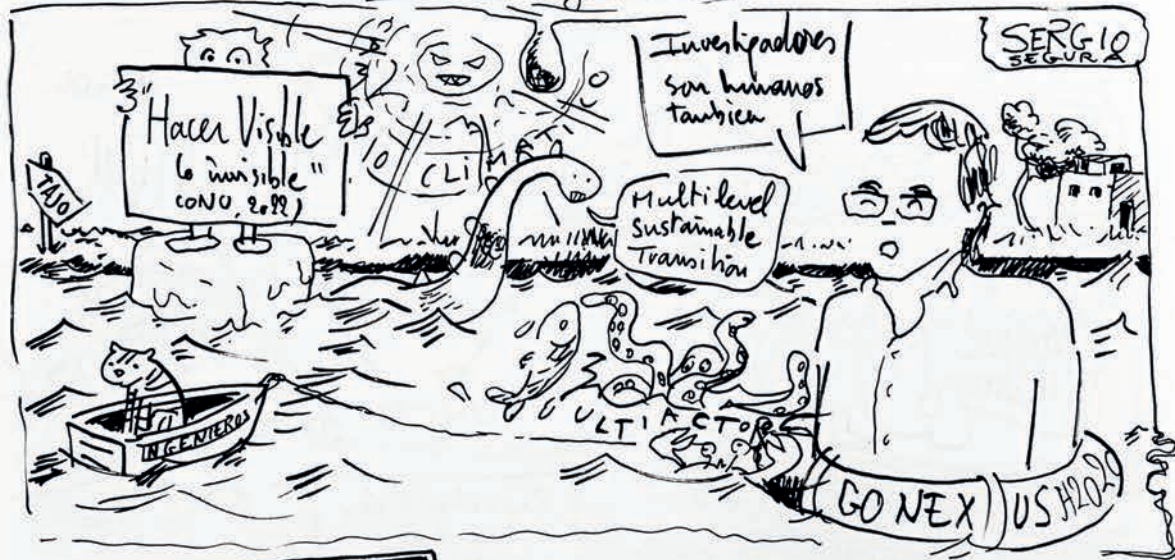
Graphic abstract of the presentations

by Maarten Loopmans



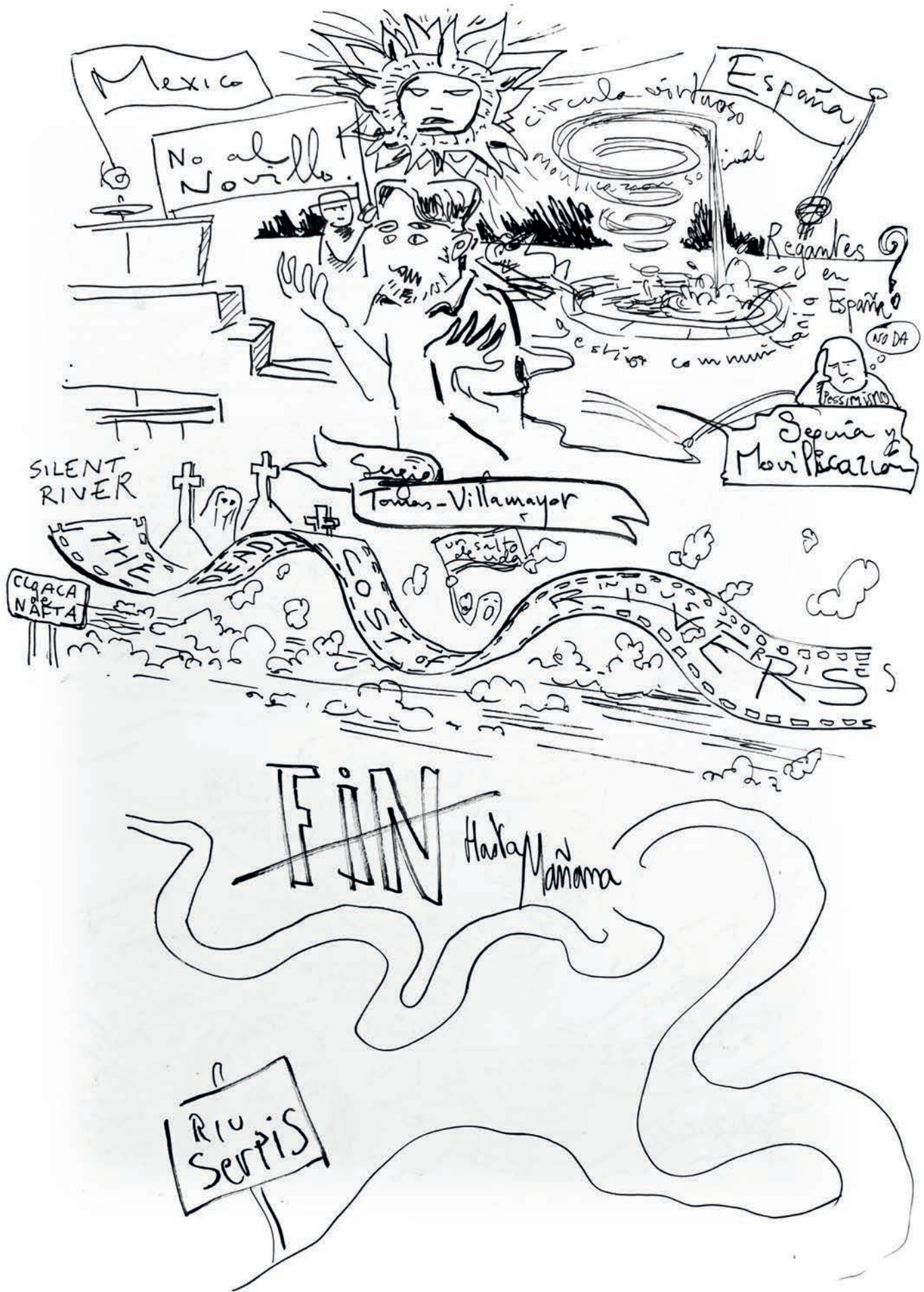












Final reflections

The Seminar “Ríos, bienes comunes, movimientos. Conceptualizaciones trans-disciplinarias y culturales de ríos socionaturales” closed with a plenary. The plenary started with fundamental and critical questions raised by the participants: What do we understand by nature? How can social movements effectively help to regenerate rivers? What is the role of academics and research in this endeavor?

The debate sparked by these questions intertwined with discussions on political ecology, environmental dilemmas, and the four ontologies proposed by the River Commons and Riverhood projects— river-as-ecosociety, river-as-territory, river-as-subject, river-as-movement, —, which comprised the red thread of the Seminar. The background for the reflection on these questions was a common understanding that there are countless viewpoints on these issues, and that most answers may only be found in the field, in the space of coexistence with environmental issues and with those who experience them directly. Plausible answers cannot be anticipated if researchers do not rely on practical experience and observation. Another common ground, which underpinned the debate, was the idea that academics must go beyond the simple production of theoretical knowledge when dealing with these issues. In this sense, knowledge must lead to action and tangible ways to recover or restore socionatures that are under threat.

Such reflections led the participants to question about the construction of discourses on what kind of nature and society we want, and, more importantly, on who creates such discourses and how ontological battles are engendered and played out so that some views prevail and others not. In this sense, understanding how discourses were constituted throughout history is fundamental. The very definition of what is established as “the past” and which “history” is told, by itself, already entail a dispute of views and a power struggle that will necessarily enact views of the future.

Thinking about that in terms of the four ontologies, involves analyzing the discourses that are tied to the discussions on hydro-social conflicts. It implies asking ourselves about who the actors that are present in the conflicts are, what level of power each actor holds, which movement they belong to, and, above all, who is controlling the rules of negotiation. From a conversation that weaves between polyphonies, other participants pointed out that conflicts over water resources occur at different scales and from different ontological perspectives, which results in the ongoing destruction and creation of territories.

Such a discussion of how discourses engender our relationship with rivers and the strategies we devise on how to utilize, preserve, and/or regenerate them brought about a connection with the temporal scale of nature and of our human actions. In this regard, Carles and others observed that rivers and nature have found ways to adjust and readjust to new ecological dynamics. This raised questions on to what extent institutions are willing to support such long-term natural processes and what role technology plays in this context. Several participants noted that there is currently a great deal of faith in technology, and that a contaminated river is often times seen as an opportunity to do business.

At the end of the plenary session, we returned to the question: What is nature? In the direction of a possible answer it was emphasized that we must not forget that a river is also a biophysical entity that needs to be studied in its own language. Power and asymmetries of power can make new rivers, but we must remember that a river is also a living materiality. It was concluded that thinking on justice and river socio-ecological regeneration in general, and, specifically, in the context of the river cases that comprise the Riverhood and River Commons projects, is a challenge that requires listening to the life stories of the people and the particularities of each river to build a collective intergenerational history based on solidarity. The exchange of knowledge, in this sense, is fundamental to open our eyes to a variety of issues, to recognize sufferings, and share hopes.