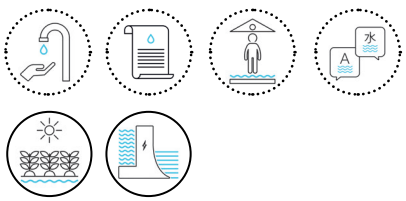
Blue Papers
2022 (Vol. 1 No. 2), 24-31
10.58981/bluepapers.2022.2.02

"Riverhood" and the Politics of (Mis)Recognizing Local Water Cultures and Water Rights Systems

Rutgerd Boelens
Wageningen University and the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

*An appreciation of the diversity of world water cultures – past and present – is essential to recognizing the conflicts and solutions that exist within water management. This article analyzes the intricacies of water governance and politics. It argues for new ways to recognize and negotiate the value of local water cultures, and proposes the term "Riverhood" as a way to understand the political, technological and cultural arenas in which water rights and governance frameworks are being shaped in grassroots movements' everyday practice, in interaction with rivers' adjacent social and ecological communities (*www.movingrivers.org*).*

KEY THEMES



< Fig. 1 Model of the Three Gorges Dam and the Xiling Bridge over the Yangtze River in China. The dam was finished in 2006 (Source: Sharon Nardo, *CC BY 2.0*, via Wikimedia Commons).

Introduction

It is a classic, age-old desire: to engineer utopias through the conquest of nature, especially by domesticating rivers and bringing order to "wild water." Sumerian, Egyptian, Roman and Incan societies all made utopian efforts to transform and control humans and nature at once, through water. In the Andean countries, not only Spanish colonizers, modernist engineers and water bureaucrats, but also indigenous empires and Inca rulers used similar tactics to subordinate local water cultures and collectives.

In present-day water management, customary uses tend to be brushed aside and water demands for mining, hydrocarbon, agro-export and hydropower often get priority. These demands entail territorial transformations, sometimes polluting or drying out downstream regions. This "mega-hydraulic regime" builds on a normative discourse but tends to involve a deep neglect of existing diverse water cultures, overlooking territorial meanings, values, identities and rights systems. Examples of these regimes are large dam schemes, such as Franco's "hydraulic policy" implementation in Spain and, more recently, China's Three Gorges Dam, Brazil's Belo Monte Dam and India's Sardar Sarovar Dam.

After decades of scientific approaches exalting the engineering of nature to maximize water control through river damming, the last two decades have witnessed various new water management paradigms. Approaches such as Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) advocate participation and multistakeholder platforms to curb the technocratic engineering tradition.

In fact, however, many of these recent approaches still restrict and deny complex water realities. Governments and political-economic elites, while claiming to respect and recognize local and indigenous water cultures and heritage, commonly deploy subtle cultural politics (the way in which dominant cultural norms, attitudes and beliefs inform political decisions and relationships; see Boelens 2015). They differentiate between two kinds of local water cultures. On the one hand, they identify "good governance water cultures" with "good practices" (meaning those that are compatible with dominant water knowledge and society), which should be "recognized." And on the other hand, they tend to critique the "wasteful, inefficient water cultures" (which they think should be "cured" and "educated," preferably not by force but by "participation"). Our universities' water engineering and governance disciplines have contributed to this problem. Simply said: "disciplines discipline."
Also common to find is that governments and elite bodies in many countries tend to glorify the ancient ("petrified") indigenous water traditions, religions and empires. These do not threaten their present-day hegemony and are unable to challenge their unsustainable water interventions and unfair allocation practices, but rather provide them with national pride and identity. At the same time, however, they oppress the existence of contemporary, actual "living" water cultures of peasant and indigenous societies: because these are "unruly," "stubborn" and do not fit "rational" water norms or follow "efficient" (inter)national legislation. Latin American author Cecilia Méndez (2000) critically framed such elite governors' cultural politics as "Incas yes, indigenous no."

Scientific approaches (market-environmentalism, rational choice paradigms, etc.) that prominently feed the new mainstream ("inclusive") water governance approaches (such as IWRM), equally tend to misunderstand the complexities, contingencies and power-laden interactions

^ Fig. 2 Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India inaugurated the Sardar Sarovar Dam in Gujarat on 17 September 2017. Behind him is India's Minister for Transport, Shri Nitin Gadkari. The construction of the dam began in 1987, but the project was stalled in 1995 over concerns of displacement (Source: Prime Minister's Office, GODL – India, via Wikimedia Commons).

among humans. Naturalization, technification and universalization make the experts' norms, definitions and values the equalizing metric. River basins come to be seen as "natural" water management units, and "rational" allocation, "functional" water rights, "efficient" water use, and "optimal participation" become universalized standards. In water debates, these technocratic arguments are presented as objective, neutral or even "natural." They have become so dominant that they are accepted as normal or inevitable, making it difficult to recognize them as biased representations of good water management.

Grassroots movements, activists and academics have criticized the multiple ways in which mega-hydraulic developments have generated environmental damage and human suffering. Locally existing "living" water cultures do not remain silent but respond. Far beyond any romanticization, now and in the past, they have combined their struggles against cultural discrimination, unequal water distribution and political exclusion, building on ecological integrity to sustain their waterscapes or "hydrosocial territories."

To build a water facility is to establish rights and mutual relationships among families, the collective, the infrastructure and nature. These relationships become the fundamental basis for collective action in water management tasks (Vos et al. 2020). In many places, these rights that are created by building hydraulic artifacts drive the formation of local water culture and identity, water rights defense, and the relationships among local user collectives, river ecologies, and previous or ancestral interactions with

^ Fig. 3 KATRIBU National holds an anti-dam protest in the Philippines (Source: International Rivers, CC BY-NC 2.0, via Flickr).

water and nature – since human-river "investments" can also be inherited and in many places are ritualized. User-developed water works such as community-led irrigation systems, shared wetlands control and inter-community stream diversions, therefore follow a process of coproduction among humans, technology and nature (Hommes et al. 2022), creating and consolidating mutually established "water rights."

The Water Resources Management group at Wageningen University, together with CEDLA-University of Amsterdam, the Water Justice alliance, and many partners in the global North and South, build on these notions. We have started a cross-continental program (www.movingrivers.org) to study and support the large variety of what we call "New Water Justice Movements" (NWJMs). These are rooted, transdisciplinary, practice-based, multi-actor and multi-scalar coalitions. They deploy a variety of institutional and political strategies, new languages of valuation, vernacular water rights frameworks and pro-active "commoning practices," to claim environmental justice, restore or defend "living rivers," and enhance nature-entwined water governance and "pluriversal water cultures" (Boelens et al. 2022). Alternative practices include dam removal, allocating flows to nature, the interlacing of small weirs, river-livelihoods, nature-inclusive hydraulics and recognition of nature's rights.

To conceptualize the program, I revived a mid-nineteenth century forgotten word: "riverhood" – "the state of being a river" (Oxford Dictionary 2019). The program focuses on how humans and nonhumans co-produce riverhoods, and on the role of NWJMs. First, the program considers how NWJMs challenge the prevailing

water governance paradigms. Second, it addresses how they provide grounded solutions to contemporary water crises and innovative perspectives to "reviving the river": as a socio-natural being and as an entwined ecological, cultural and political subject.

Fundamental to understanding these movements is to understand how communities form networks with nature and mutually produce their environment (Shah et al. 2019). Social actors inscribe their life worlds in particular environments following ideologies, epistemologies and power structures, generating environmental knowledge systems, so developing territory and riverhood. With grassroots networks, engaged academics, activists, and policymakers can critically support this in so-called "river co-learning arenas" (Souza et al. 2023). The objective is not to "glorify the local" or "the indigenous," because these may include their own class, ethnic and gender inequalities and injustices. Rather, it contests modernist water legislations and policies that tend to transform local water rights frameworks and water cultures even before local arrangements are known.

Water flows through landscapes and cities, connecting places and spaces to each other, enabling environments for living and production. Water animates cultures and entwines ecology and society in particular ways. The movement of water co-creates social, material and symbolic linkages, lived spaces and boundaries. Water itself produces hydrosocial territories and riverhood.

Acknowledgment

This contribution was peer-reviewed. It was edited by members of the editorial team of the UNESCO Chair Water, Ports and Historic Cities: Carola Hein and Hilde Sennema. It is an extended and improved version of a blog post by Rutgerd Boelens on the PortCityFutures website. "Riverhood" has received ERC-funding under the EU's Horizon 2020 program (grant No. 101002921).

References

Boelens, Rutgerd, Arturo Escobar, Karen Bakker, Lena Hommes, Erik Swyngedouw et al. 2022. "Riverhood: Political Ecologies of Socionature Commoning and Translocal Struggles for Water Justice." *Journal of Peasant Studies*, https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2022.2120810.

Hommes, Lena, Jaime Hoogesteger, and Rutgerd Boelens. 2022. "(Re)Making Hydrosocial Territories: Materializing and Contesting Imaginaries and Subjectivities Through Hydraulic Infrastructure." *Political Geography* 97: 102698. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102698.

Méndez, Cecilia. 2000. *Incas Yes, Indians No. Notes for the Study of Creole Nationalism in Peru.* Lima: IEP. (in Spanish)

Shah, Esha, Jeroen Vos, Gert Jan Veldwisch, Rutgerd Boelens, and Bibiana Duarte-Abadía. 2021. "Environmental Justice Movements in Globalising Networks: A Critical Discussion on Social Resistance Against Large Dams." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 48, no. 5: 1008–32.

Souza, Daniele Tubino de, Lena Hommes, Rutgerd Boelens, Arjen Wals, Jaime Hoogesteger, Bibiana Duarte-Abadía et al. 2023. "River Co-Learning Arenas: Principles and Practices for Transdisciplinary Knowledge Co-Creation and Multi-Scalar (Inter)Action." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* (forthcoming).

Vos, Jeroen, Rutgerd Boelens, Jean-Philippe Venot, and Marcel Kuper. 2020. "Rooted Water Collectives: Towards an Analytical Framework." *Ecological Economics* 173 (July): 106651. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2020.106651

Rutgerd Boelens is Professor "Water Governance and Social Justice" at Wageningen University, the Netherlands, and Professor "Political Ecology of Water" with CEDLA, University of Amsterdam. He also is Visiting Professor at the Catholic University of Peru and the Central University of Ecuador. He coordinates the Justicia Hídrica/ Water Justice alliance (www.justiciahidrica.org) and the international research and action programs Riverhood and River Commons (www.movingrivers.org). His research focuses on political ecology, water rights, legal pluralism, water cultures and cultural politics, governmentality, hydrosocial territories, environmental justice and social mobilization, mainly in Latin America and Europe. See his profiles on the Wageningen University website, Researchgate, and Academia.

Contact: rutgerd.boelens@wur.nl