

NATURAL  
ENGLAND



# A Public Engagement Laboratory for Nature and Society

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# The Public Engagement Laboratory

This briefing introduces the Public Engagement Laboratory for Nature and Society which has been developed through a partnership between researchers in the Science, Society and Sustainability (3S) Research Group at the University of East Anglia and staff at Natural England.

The Public Engagement Laboratory experiments with new ways of mapping, practicing, learning about, and responding to diverse public engagements with nature and biodiversity, within Natural England and its networks in the UK and internationally. Through doing this the Laboratory seeks to transform the organisation's approaches to public engagement and its responsiveness to society.



# The value of public engagement with nature and biodiversity

Societal engagement is seen as crucial to addressing the problems of nature and biodiversity. Science-centred and regulatory-based conservation practices on their own can lack effectiveness in mitigating ongoing declines in the natural environment. It has been suggested that this should be treated as a *socio-ecological* challenge which includes a focus on cultivating meaningful engagement between people and nature.<sup>1</sup>

Public engagement with nature can be beneficial in substantively improving knowledge and the quality of science and decision making.<sup>2</sup> It can bring benefits ranging from human health outcomes<sup>3,4</sup> through to enhanced legitimacy and trust in management practices. Involving citizens is also crucial to ensuring that measures to enhance nature and biodiversity are democratically accountable, just, and in the public interest.<sup>5</sup>

There are two main ways in which public engagement with nature and biodiversity has been conceived. Under a science-centred approach to nature conservation the

assumption is that the public have a deficit of knowledge to be overcome with better *one-way communication* or bypassed altogether. While information and awareness are important, a reliance on one-way communication to the public has proven limited on its own. Resultingly, there has been a drive to develop *two-way and interactive* forms of public participation and engagement – such as deliberative workshops, citizens' assemblies<sup>6</sup>, partnerships<sup>7</sup> or citizen science<sup>8</sup> initiatives. In this perspective, citizens are most often invited to participate by host organisations in discrete engagement processes around particular decision moments.



# Why a Public Engagement Laboratory?

While important in their own right, dominant perspectives on public engagement are increasingly seen to have limitations. Most existing approaches have developed in isolation, focus on discrete forms of participation, most often relate to one-off decision moments, and are mainly institution-led initiatives. As a result, they fail to attend to the many different ways that people engage with nature and biodiversity issues. Furthermore, nature decline and biodiversity are inherently systemic problems but existing approaches to engagement are not systemic.

A new perspective on participation has emerged in other areas of science, the environment, and across the social sciences in recent years.<sup>9,10</sup> Rather than being individual, specific, and discrete, this third perspective views participation and publics as being:

- **Diverse** – recognising the many different ways publics are already engaging, including those that are citizen-led like activism and community action;<sup>11</sup>
- **Constructed** – understanding that what publics say and do is shaped by the ways in which they engage or are engaged;<sup>12</sup>
- **Systemic** – in that public engagements do not occur in isolation but continually interrelate in wider systems and ecologies of participation.<sup>13</sup>

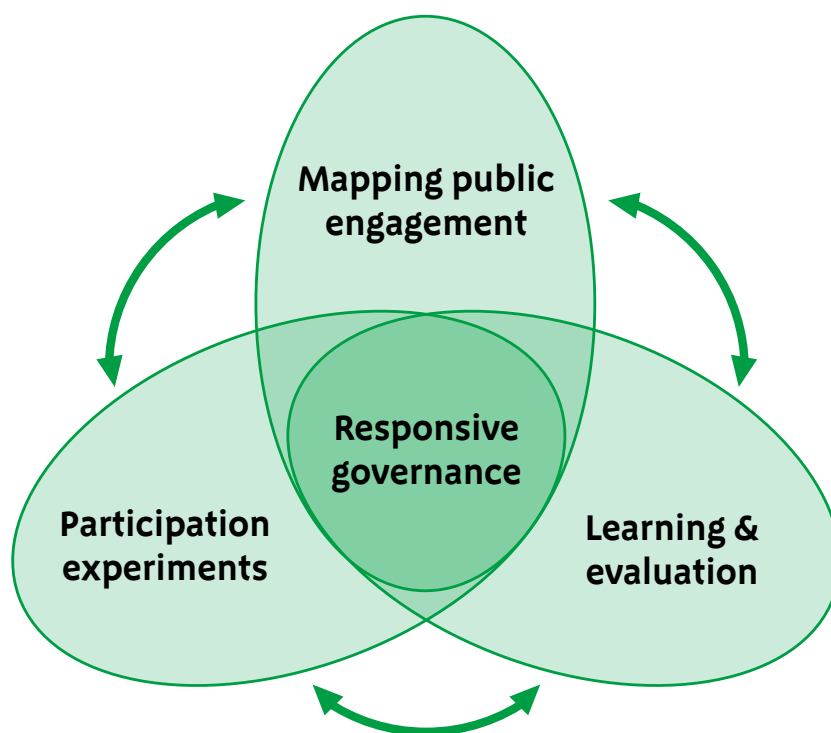
This new perspective on participation is being taken forward in other domains, for example in the context of energy and climate change by the Public Engagement Observatory<sup>14</sup> of the UK Energy Research Centre (UKERC). The Observatory is based in the 3S Research Group where new approaches have been developed to map diverse forms of public engagement<sup>15</sup> with energy and climate change across the UK on an ongoing basis. The Observatory uses these mappings to inform decisions, innovations, and new forms of participation as well as making connections across a disparate system of engagement.<sup>16</sup>

A recent Defra Review of Public Engagement in 2022<sup>17</sup> has advocated this new perspective, recommending more “pluralistic approaches to participation... to address the diversity of publics” and the use of “mapping exercises” to acknowledge and work with “community-based and other pre-existing engagements”. The Public Engagement Laboratory is a direct response to these developments and attempts to bring forward the new third perspective on participation in Natural England.



# The Public Engagement Laboratory approach

The Public Engagement Laboratory is a distributed and networked entity that takes an experimental approach to public engagement which emphasises testing novel approaches, collaboration, learning, and being responsive to ongoing emergence in nature and society.



**Figure 1.** The Public Engagement Laboratory for Nature and Society.

The Laboratory is pioneering a new approach to the challenges of public engagement with nature and biodiversity through translating approaches of the 3S Research Group and the UKERC Public Engagement Observatory into the Natural England context. It breaks new ground in being one of the first examples of translating cutting-edge social science approaches to remaking participation into practice within an organisational and policy setting.

In translating these new approaches into the Natural England context, the Laboratory has four key aims:

1. To *map* diverse forms of public engagement with nature and biodiversity on an ongoing basis and make this evidence openly available;
2. To *experiment* with novel approaches to public engagement with nature and biodiversity and translate them into practice;
3. To transform *learning and evaluation* through new ways of seeing, connecting, and reflecting on public engagement.
4. To enhance the *responsiveness* of governance processes to diverse public engagements with nature and biodiversity.

These aims are addressed through four interrelating functions of the Laboratory, as shown in Figure 1.

## Mapping public engagement

A core function of the Laboratory is to map diverse forms of public engagement with nature and biodiversity in the UK on an ongoing basis and make this evidence openly available. To do this the Laboratory applies methods for mapping participation used in and developed by the UKERC Public Engagement Observatory.<sup>13,15,18,19,20</sup> A core method in this regard is *comparative case analysis* which involves documentary analysis of diverse cases of public engagement with nature and biodiversity to map how people are engaging, who is involved, what they are engaging in, and where. This is supported by *crowdsourcing* where stakeholders in the Laboratory's network in Natural England and beyond are involved in identifying cases of public engagement with nature and biodiversity from their own experience.

These approaches to mapping public engagement reach beyond and can complement existing engagement approaches in Natural England, centred on inviting publics to

participate in consultations, surveys, outdoor activities, local nature planning, citizen science projects, and so on. Through opening up to diverse forms of engagement beyond those initiated by the organisation itself, the mappings generate new knowledge and more comprehensive evidence about public engagements with nature. This has been demonstrated in a pilot project undertaken by the Laboratory to map diverse public engagements with nature in the UK<sup>21</sup> as shown in Figure 2.

The Laboratory builds capacity in approaches to mapping participation across Natural England. The new evidence base formed through mapping public engagements will be periodically updated and the dataset will be maintained and openly shared within the organisation. The new social intelligence generated plays a crucial role in the other Laboratory functions (as indicated in Figure 1), in supporting more responsive governance processes, informing the design of new participation experiments, and prompting new forms of learning and evaluation.

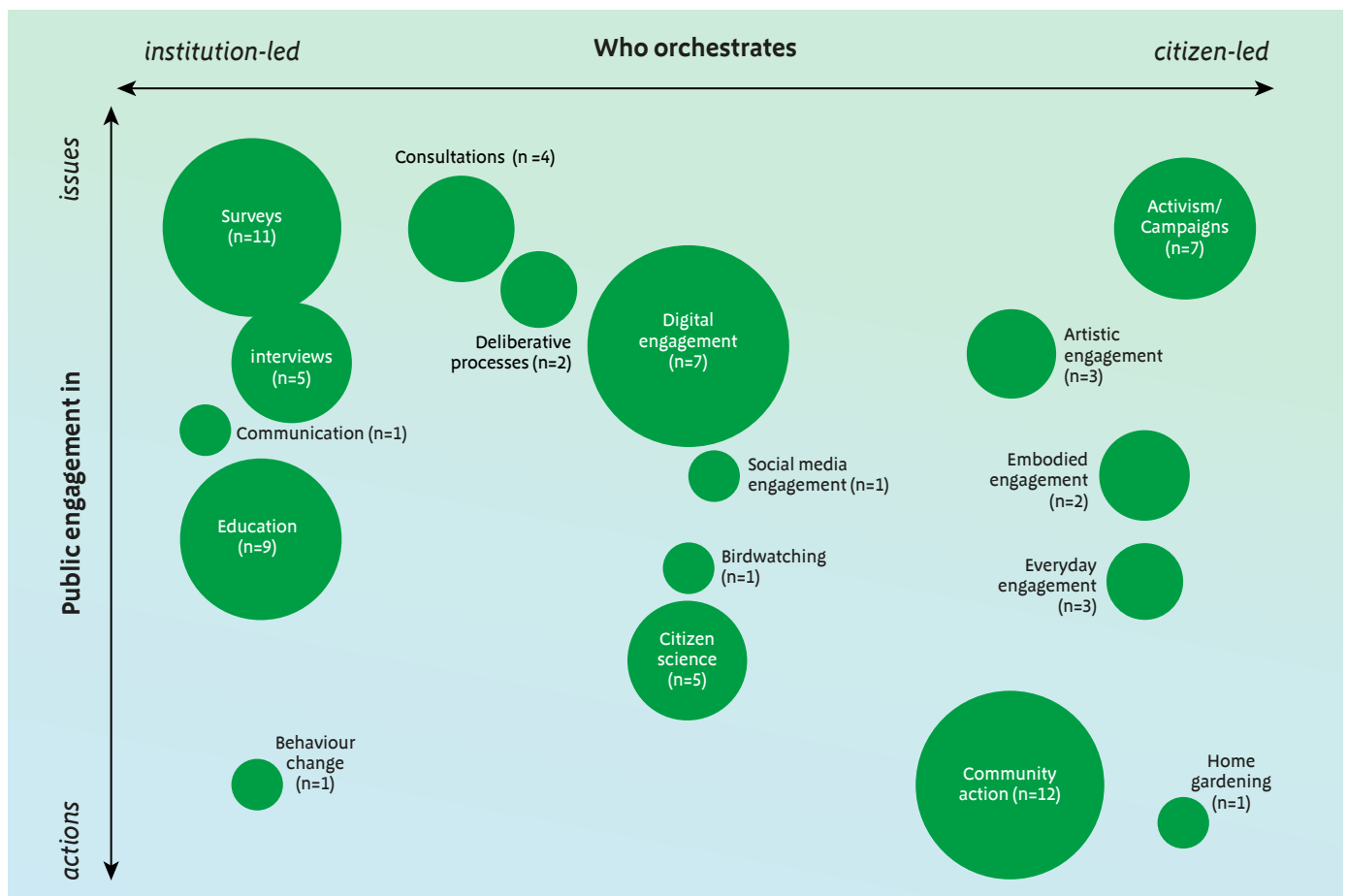


Figure 2. A mapping of diverse public engagements with nature and biodiversity in the UK.<sup>21</sup>



## Participation experiments

The second function of the Laboratory is to experiment with novel approaches to public engagement with nature and biodiversity and translate them into practice. The Laboratory's participation experiments introduce novel aspects into existing forms of public engagement, and create new participation formats that are tested, monitored, and learned from.<sup>22</sup> This seeks to build more effective and equitable forms of public engagement through better attending to diversity, emergence and exclusions of publics, nature and society.<sup>9</sup> Participation experiments prompt this in two main ways.

- First, the Laboratory's *mappings* are used to inform and shape the design of public engagement processes by situating them in a wider landscape of participation and acknowledging already existing public engagements. Previous work has

demonstrated how such mappings can play an important formative role in enhancing the framing, inclusion, and design of public engagement processes, as well as improving how they attend to exclusions during the process and in reporting outcomes.<sup>15</sup>

- Second, *public engagement processes* are designed in a more experimental way to introduce novel elements while being more open and responsive to emergence and exclusions.

As indicated in Figure 1, the Laboratory's learning and evaluation function supports how participation experiments are monitored, learned about, and reflected on. Experiments in participation in turn generate new cases that extend the datasets in the mapping function of the Laboratory. Participation experiments also generate new insights and evidence about publics and society to support the Laboratory's responsive governance function.

## Learning and evaluation

The third function of the Laboratory is to transform learning and evaluation through new ways of seeing, connecting, and reflecting on public engagement. The intention is to help transform how Natural England learns from and learns about public engagement with nature to become a learning organisation in this area.<sup>23,24</sup> The Laboratory does this through serving as a platform for knowledge exchange and learning across disparate practices of engagement within the organisation and beyond. It creates processes for reflecting on public engagement and introduces new ways of judging success.<sup>10</sup> Experiments in learning and evaluation include:

- Using the Laboratory's *mappings as a source of reflective learning* at an individual and organisational level about publics, participation, and nature and biodiversity issues – or in other words the 'who', 'how', and 'what' of public engagement. The transformations that this can bring forward has been demonstrated in a workshop where Natural England staff reflected on the results of the mapping<sup>21</sup> shown in Figure 2.
- Using *mappings in monitoring and evaluation* of Natural England approaches to public engagement, including how they change over time and relate to wider systems of engagement with nature beyond the organisation.
- *Introducing new evaluative questions and criteria* brought forward under the third remaking participation perspective introduced above, which go beyond pre-given evaluation frameworks centred on inclusion, representativeness, decision impact, and other positive aspects to also consider the downsides, exclusions, and effects of participation as well.<sup>10</sup> The value of this has been demonstrated in a UKERC Public Engagement Observatory collaboration experiment in evaluating a citizens' panel.<sup>25</sup>

The Laboratory's learning and evaluation function plays a role in supporting participation experiments (as indicated in Figure 1). It actively draws on the mappings of public engagement and in turn feeds back into reshaping how mappings are framed. More broadly the learning and evaluation function tracks what difference the Laboratory is making to public engagement within Natural England and beyond, including in relation to governance responses.

## Responsive governance

More comprehensive forms of evidence about how people are engaging, who is engaging, what they are engaging in and where, from mapping public engagement and participation experiments can help make governance processes more responsive to society. The Laboratory explores this through a series of collaborative experiments to put this evidence into practice in governance and decision-making processes across Natural England. A key question that guides these experiments is *what difference can these new forms of evidence make both in decisions over nature conservation and in the governance of public engagement more broadly?*

The Laboratory's mappings and participation experiments feed into governance processes, which in turn place demands on the evidence needs from these functions. Learning and evaluation tracks what difference these new methods and forms of evidence make to governance processes over time.



# The Public Engagement Laboratory in practice

The Laboratory is a networked entity that is run by a core team involving staff from Natural England and the 3S Research Group at UEA.<sup>26</sup> Its activities and experiments involve a network of staff and functions from across Natural England. The Laboratory also connects with a wider network of actors interested in public engagement with nature across different sectors in the UK.

The Laboratory and its functions are taken forward through a series of experiments. A first experiment undertook an initial mapping of public engagement with nature and biodiversity in the UK<sup>21</sup> and explored the implications of this for taking forward the Laboratory within Natural England. Based on recommendations from a workshop reflecting on this initial mapping and from the Laboratory's steering group, a number of experiments are being undertaken in the different Laboratory functions and across different parts of Natural England as an organisation.

In addition to these elements, the Laboratory is maintained through a series of core activities including:

- an *online platform* within Natural England for knowledge exchange, communication, and access to Laboratory resources;
- a *core public engagement mapping dataset* that is maintained, updated, and made available through the online platform;
- *networking, knowledge exchange and learning activities*, including events, workshops, and capacity building.

The Public Engagement Laboratory is an experiment in itself and will adapt and evolve over time around its core design in response to learning, evaluation and feedback. It is outward looking and encourages the involvement of diverse actors within Natural England and beyond. If you would like to know more or get involved with this new approach to public engagement with nature, please get in touch through the contacts at the end of this briefing.



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26 The Laboratory has been developed in collaborative work since September 2021, initially on an informal basis between Prof. Jason Chilvers in the 3S Research Group at UEA and Paul Hinds and colleagues at Natural England. Since 2022 the work of the Laboratory has been taken forward through a series of collaborative research projects involving 3S Group researchers and Natural England staff, alongside initiatives within the organisation to build the Laboratory's network and functions. As of October 2023, a steering group comprising representatives from across Natural England was set up to oversee and advise the work of the Laboratory.

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# About the Public Engagement Laboratory

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