

Conversation starters

Ethics of environmental engagement

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National
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Introduction

This resource was developed by the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) with and for environmental researchers and project staff, funded by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC).

This resource is based on the [guidelines for ethical practice](#) for community-based participatory research created by the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, Durham University and National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement. As part of the NERC Researcher Engage Academy: Environmental Engagement in Practice programme, we explored these principles in the broader context of environmental engagement. We offer this resource as a conversation starter to develop your own ethical environmental engagement practices by exploring some of the ideas that resonated with the programme attendees.

Ethics helps us navigate the complexities associated with our behaviours, activities, and ways of working, ensuring that we minimise risk and harm to ourselves and others and consider our responsibilities to each other, the environment, and the wider world. Clearly there are ethical considerations when planning research, and these are often governed by research ethics committees. However there are also ethical considerations when you engage people with research. These can stem from the research topic, research methodology, the purpose of the engagement, and the approach you want to take, who you are working with, and whether you will be gathering any data from your participants.

Whilst the ethical considerations will differ—the relationships of people involved in a lecture are not the same as those developing a cross-organisational partnership or community collaboration—there are common ethical issues across public engagement with environmental research. How you plan for and respond to these ethical considerations depends on the context.

At the heart of any ethical work are seven principles which you can read about in detail in the [ethical practice guidelines](#):

1. Mutual respect
2. Equality and inclusion
3. Democratic participation
4. Active learning
5. Making a difference
6. Collective action
7. Personal integrity

In our programme workshop, we focussed on three areas where these principles could usefully be applied. While these focus on common challenges raised by workshop participants, it is important to remember that ethics covers a much broader set of considerations. Our three areas are:

1. Reach: who is engaged in the programme
2. Relationships: how you work alongside others
3. Reporting: what you collect and share with whom about the programme

We explore each in turn.

Reach

We often look at how many people a project engages with, and this is typically called reach. However, it is important to consider who is intentionally or unintentionally included or excluded from your engagement work.

'I think it is important to consider the barriers that people might have in engaging in your research, even the time it takes (would it mean they would have to leave work early? Do they have dependents etc. socioeconomic/ cultural etc.), along with considering what they may get from the process so that it is not extractive but mutually beneficial. It takes time to build trust.'

Alice White, University of the Arts London

When discussing this, we came to a familiar but challenging phrase, 'hard to reach':

'I worked with a group who rejected the term "hard to reach", they much preferred "seldom heard". I thought that was a really interesting and powerful change.'

Thea Wingfield, Environment Agency

We must consider the language we use, strive to uplift each other and refrain from using language that others or diminishes. One of our workshop speakers, Kate Pahl, shared her approach:

'Many of my community partners find it difficult when people describe their areas where they live as "deprived" or "marginalised". Instead, I now use positive words like "multilingual" and "knowledgeable" in relation to the communities I work with.'

Kate Pahl, Manchester Metropolitan University

Equity and inclusion should be at the forefront of these conversations. The NCCPE has developed an **Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Hub** which recommends provocations and principles to ask when developing projects. In this conversation starter resource, we offer a few questions to get you started thinking about reach, relationships and reporting.

Questions on reach

Representation: Who is represented in this project and who is not? Why? How are they represented? How can and should we address issues of representation? Can we ever represent anyone but ourselves or our organisations?

Accessibility: Is the content and the format of your communications/activities accessible? Have you considered people with different visual, cognitive or learning needs? Does the location work for people with hearing or mobility issues? Does the online platform enable live transcripts or sign language? Access requirements will differ according to the topic, project and people involved, so have you ensured that you have taken into consideration the needs of potential people you hope to involve?

Language: Is the language accessible, avoiding jargon and acronyms? Is communication available in people's primary language, or are translations available? Does it unintentionally exclude people by using colonial or gendered language?

Relationships

In our session, we discussed the relationships of partners, collaborators, and participants. It was recognised that how we decide who to partner with, and how the partnership is set up and managed is critical to ensuring ethical practices. Our [partnership guide](#) walks you through the various steps to ensure you engage in partnerships effectively, including recognising when partnership isn't the right path. The guide considers how to ensure the partnership is mutually beneficial and managed well.

One of the key aspects that arose from discussions was relationships with members of the public, and how to manage engagement around controversial topics, which can include the emotions associated with specific topics, differing opinions in areas of research, and misinformation and disinformation.

Controversy is familiar to environmental researchers working on areas such as climate change and agricultural practices, but researchers experience controversy in many other fields, spanning environmental impact of media production to sustainable plantation agriculture, genetic engineering in evolutionary biology to the effects of pesticides on invertebrates.

Whilst some topics are already known to be controversial, controversy can arise in any topic, and it is good to be prepared, ensuring you have a strategy for how you will engage with those who hold very different views to your own. In some contexts, debate and discussion add to the value of research engagement, improve practices, and foster innovation. Where misinformation and disinformation hold influence, understanding where others come from can help us engage across polarising topics:

'I think discussing things - you start to understand people's motivations, formative experiences to have those opinions, and you can start to engage and unpick those at their level/point of reference/perspective.'

Lucy Brown, Institute of Zoology, Zoological Society London

However, this must be done with care.

'It's easy to surround yourself with people who agree with your views, and so healthy and respectful debate encourages you to understand other sides of a story, but it needs to be facilitated meaningfully I think so it doesn't alienate people further.'

Workshop attendee

The Imperial College London Societal Engagement team has created this [short resource](#) on how to engage with controversial issues. The NCCPE also has resources to help you deal with controversy or polarising topics in your work. Check out our [What Works: Engaging the public through social media guide](#) which offers insights to handling trolls, and visit our [training page](#) to see our current courses.

Questions on relationships

Participation: Is one voice dominating the space? How can you equalise and democratise participation?

Informed consent: Has clear consent been given by all people involved?

Understanding: Is there a working agreement in place for any partners involved, such as a memorandum of understanding? Have you developed clear expectations, roles, responsibilities, and processes? Are boundaries clear?

Process: Are there any ethical implications of the engagement project itself, such as a risk of causing negative reactions and emotional responses? What plans are in place to protect partners and participants if something does arise?

Respect and challenge: Are diverse views respected in this work? Are people supported and able to challenge problematic or oppressive comments and views? Is there a plan in place for how to respond to such issues? What about misinformation and disinformation? Or areas of potential controversy?

Reporting

Reporting considers the outputs of engagement, the evaluation processes and dissemination. It is imperative to consider these from the start of an engagement initiative, ensuring they are embedded into the approach you take. In order to be ethical, all those involved in the project need to know what you are collecting data about, how you want to use it, and whether contributions are credited to the contributor.

A good example of this came from one of our programme workshop case studies, which focuses on indigenous data sovereignty which relates to data that is about or affects Indigenous peoples. The **Maiam nayri Wingara Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Data Sovereignty Collective** offer the following definition:

‘Indigenous Data Sovereignty is a global movement concerned with the right of Indigenous peoples to govern the creation, collection, ownership and application of their data.’

Maiam nayri Wingara Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Data Sovereignty Collective

In our workshop example, academic and community researchers developed an environmental management programme together through the **SMART project**. While academic researchers were involved, the data storage, analysis, and ownership are held by the community members.

When thinking about reporting, check out the **evaluation resources** on the NCCPE website or visit **BetterEvaluation** for tools, resources and guides.

Questions on reporting

Data: What data is collected and why? Do you need to collect this data? Is personal data protected? Are vulnerable people protected? Does anything require confidentiality and is a written agreement required? Contributors and collaborators may have different data sharing policies that require careful consideration before a project can begin.

Contributions: Who will contribute to reporting? Who owns the work? How are contributions acknowledged?

Channels: What outputs will be produced, for whom and where will they be shared? This could be reports, podcasts, articles, policy briefings, photos or art, performance, exhibitions, webpages, and more. Are these outputs accessible to the people involved?

Anonymity: Who is acknowledged and who is anonymised? Why?

Next steps

There are great resources out there to help you build an ethical environmental engagement practice. We offer this conversation starter as a starting point, but there will be many more considerations, complexities, and nuances to factor into your own ethical environmental engagement practice.

Clear Lab produced a [living lab manual](#) of values, guidelines and protocols for their anticolonial environmental action lab. The [Dilemma Café Guide](#) introduces how to workshop ethical dilemmas with peers. And you can always return to the [guidelines for ethical practice](#), its related [toolkits and cases](#), and the [NCCPE EDI Hub](#).

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