OUR LAND AND WATER

HE MANAWA PIHARAU

SYMPOSIUM 2024

Panel on Catchment Groups Reveals a Key Tension

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The Our Land and Water National Science Challenge held its final Symposium in Wellington in May 2024. During the Symposium, there was a discussion panel about catchment groups: Catchment Group Potential and Ways of Working. The panel included participants from government, research, and a catchment group organisation. Attendees were encouraged to share their thoughts and questions via an online conference app. This document interprets and summarises that material.

Our panel discussion revealed a key tension about catchment groups

The panel and comments revealed a central tension that is developing with catchment groups:

> Policymakers are looking at catchment groups as part of a regulatory solution to water quality problems: in essence, to recruit them to achieve limits on water contaminants. Catchment groups, on the other hand, are largely voluntary organisations based on relationships, trust and community-driven aspirations. Often, they do not have the resources, skills, or data to implement water regulations, nor do they necessarily have the intention or accountability frameworks to do so.

This disconnect is still developing, and it isn't clear how the tension may be resolved.

We identified key themes about catchment groups

From the online and in-person discussion, we distilled the following key themes:

- **Wero**
  Farms, communities, and catchments face the challenge of improving water quality. This challenge sits in a larger context: wicked problems, climate change, intergenerational thinking, and support for mātauranga Māori. Catchment groups can help set local aspirations and enable transitions in farming and land use.

- **Participation**
  The first question is, what are catchment groups? Some participants defined catchment groups as place-based and community-based: everyone in a geographical area is a stakeholder and welcome to participate, and diversity and representation are important. Other participants defined catchment groups as primarily for landowners or people with 'skin in the game' – people who might need to change their land use. The composition of groups might also change over time with new community members and succession.

- **Activities**
  Catchment groups were described by the things that they do: sharing information, developing collective aspirations, figuring out how to achieve those aspirations, prioritising actions, bringing applied science to landowners, working with landowners to solve problems and innovate, and supporting and developing relationships.

- **Independence**
  Nearly universally, people emphasised that catchment groups are based on voluntary, local action, with high trust and high autonomy.

- **Government**
  Catchment groups have an undefined relationship with government, both regional councils and central government. A few people seem to incorporate catchment groups into the regulatory apparatus. Other people are looking for ways to use the tools of government to support catchment groups. Still other people see the government as setting regulatory signposts and then leaving catchment groups the freedom and flexibility to achieve them. Accountability – who has accountability for what and to whom – was raised as an issue.

- **Resourcing**
  There is a set of related issues: resourcing, skills and voluntary work. Catchment groups tend to rely on volunteers, which may not be sustainable and scalable. People also identified many skills necessary to achieve the goals of catchment groups: leadership, administrative support, technical expertise, local knowledge, mātauranga Māori. There was recognition that funding was a challenge. Many ideas were shared about how to find the necessary funding and resources and how to sustain support over the longer term.

- **Scale**
  Catchment groups sit at an intermediate scale. One concern is how to apply or translate catchment information to the farm scale. A second concern was connecting catchment groups facing similar challenges, even up to national-level advocacy.

- **Science**
  Science and knowledge are important for catchment groups and their members. Catchment groups need access to information and data, and in particular information-based tools that are easy to apply. There are still gaps to be filled with future, collaborative research.

The key themes above reflect the comments and discussion on the day, which included several different dimensions. A single comment might touch on three or four of these themes, making it difficult to summarise. One possible summary framework is:

- **Internal**
  Catchment groups engage in activities for the benefit of stakeholders involved, and must figure out how to resource those activities.
- **External**
  Catchment groups have a set of external relationships with wider communities, outside providers and experts, government agencies, and catchment group organisations.
- **Change**
  The context for catchment groups is in flux: climate and markets are changing, people come and go, regulations are being developed and modified, and expectations are changing.

Viewed this way, a catchment group is a set of people, tools, processes, and relationships, anchored to particular place, that is not fully defined ahead of time but is instead figuring out over time how to address local environmental challenges given local constraints on the rural economy and land use.

Comments provided rich material on these themes

Many participants shared their thoughts on catchment groups, and we collected a rich dataset of their comments and questions. Each of the themes is discussed in more detail below, with example comments from participants. This is not an exhaustive presentation of all the material, but an attempt to add a bit of colour to the summary of key themes.

Theme: Wero

A key theme of the symposium was the wero or challenge of addressing water quality issues and the changes in practices and land uses that requires. This theme continued through the catchment group panel. Some comments focused on the role of catchment groups in capturing community aspirations:

> 'The point of a catchment group seems to be to develop some collective aspirations based on values, then identify how to achieve these.'

Other comments were focused more on the changes implied, especially the risks of those changes:

> 'Demonstrate "de-risking change". Show landowners how it's done.'

Other comments put the wero of water quality in the context of the multiple challenges facing agriculture and rural areas:

> 'Stop treating this in silos: carbon, land and water, climate change are all important.'

Catchment groups were seen as a way to connect community aspirations to actions, and to connect people to the information and examples they need to make on-the-ground changes.

Theme: Participation

Combining two emerging themes around the 'definition' of catchment groups and 'diversity and representation', we identified the theme of participation. Catchment groups are in part defined by who participates in them. For some, it's about connecting landowners to each other and to useful sources of information:

> 'I would suggest they are adequately funded to have transdisciplinary technical connectors working alongside the landowners to solve the problems.'

For others, the idea of 'ownership' is broader:

> 'It's a part of community ownership of where they are and where they live.'

In fact, some would like catchment groups to be inclusive, to have significant diversity and representation of people in a geographical catchment:

> 'Being open (not invite only). Invitation to all. Rural and town folk. Power of the many.'

Who should be included in catchment groups appears to be an open issue.

Theme: Activities

Catchment groups are also defined by what they do. There were many ideas about what those activities might be:

> 'Important to support exposure and development of rangatahi.'

> 'Catchment groups can have hero projects, self-funded or privately funded.'

Some comments were focused on technical issues around improving practices, while others suggested that catchment groups might focus on more than environmental management:

> 'I also think that while catchment groups were set up in the need for environmental management, these groups provide and represent so much more than just siloing into the environmental management space.'

Many of the comments about activities also connected to other themes, such as participation or resourcing.

Theme: Independence

Several comments focused on the importance of the independence of catchment groups:

> 'CGs must maintain their independence as this is our trust proposition.'

Comments frequently singled out regional councils as needing to remain separate from catchment groups. Other comments also noted the importance of funding or resourcing in maintaining independence.

Theme: Government

Comments about the relationship between catchment groups and government considered several issues. One was the relationship between catchment groups and policy, in particular questioning how specific policies should be applied through catchment groups:

> 'Yesterday, we heard that NZ can't achieve NPS-FM [National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management] bottom lines in many places with mitigations of types available to catchment groups. In that case, how should we use/support catchment groups?'

Other comments considered the relationship between regional councils and catchment groups. Again, the independence of catchment groups was important, but regional councils were seen as a possible enabler of change:

> 'There are options to make targeted rates for catchment-scale interventions through special rating districts.'

We also grouped questions around Te Tiriti o Waitangi and mana whenua in this theme, as they relate to the relationship between the Crown and tangata whenua:

> 'What to do about funding/resourcing mana whenua? This is unresolved.'

The relationships between catchment groups and different levels and functions of government are complex, and the comments reflected a diversity of thinking.

Theme: Resourcing

In analysing the comments, we saw three themes emerging: resourcing and funding, the role of volunteers, and access to skills and specialists. When we looked at how themes linked together, these three separate issues seemed to connect. Catchment groups largely depend on voluntary labour and participation to do their work. They would benefit from having access to more funding or other resourcing, and would certainly need more funding if they were to take on greater responsibilities.

A key use of resourcing would be getting access to more skills and specialist knowledge, in order to help catchment group members access accurate and useful information.

Resourcing would help catchment groups with baseline operations:

> ‘Fund co-ordinators to get started and consider ongoing support.’

Resourcing would also help access to specialist skills and information:

> ‘Investment from central government to bring together information in an accessible fashion for groups.’

However, resourcing needs to be managed in a way that is appropriate for catchments groups:

> ‘Targeting funds to what catchment groups need. Be flexible and tailored.’

Some comments drew links between resourcing and the role that catchment groups are expected to play:

> ‘If we want to use catchment groups as vehicle to reach freshwater goals should local ratepayers be funding some core funding, e.g., regional economic development agencies?’

Other comments connected resourcing to the reliance on volunteers:

> ‘If the model is to rely on volunteer labour both to generate funding and to do the work on the ground, how can this scale and persist nationwide and long term?’

Resourcing was a major issue in the comments and was connected to several other issues being discussed.

Theme: Scale

Many of the comments linked catchment groups – which act at the scale of a catchment or sub-catchment – to other geographic scales. Some linked to smaller scales, particularly the farm scale:

> ‘I think in terms of technical support, we are lacking technical tools, such as geospatial models, which can integrate farm scale data in the context of catchments.’

Others linked to higher scales. Sometimes, it was about links between the catchment and national scales. Other comments explored how catchment groups could learn from each other or form communities of practice:

> ‘Support your comments about connections across catchments to tackle similar issues.’

Several comments also considered cross-scalar issues, particularly in the context of data and information:

> ‘We need more high-quality biophysical data/information collected at catchment and sub-catchment scales to better support the work of CGs. We can’t keep relying on the application of national to regional scale datasets at the catchment scale.’

Overall, the comments suggested a clear vision of catchment groups as operating at an intermediate scale, between farms and higher scales such as regions or the national level. This perspective may reflect the scale of the environmental issue: the challenge is to manage water catchments, and catchment groups are operating at a scale that corresponds to the challenge better than other entities.

Theme: Science

The comments on science appeared to raise three issues. One was access to information that already exists:

> ‘Groups also need access to nationally consistent biophysical and management information so they can assess problems and solutions within and across catchments and regions.’

However, other comments pointed to the need for information and data to be available as usable tools:

> ‘Can’t just dump information on websites. Need to do extension work through tools with groups.’

Other comments considered what future science was needed to support catchment groups:

> ‘Investment into technological and biological innovation to achieve large scale change for low cost.’

Scientific information and expertise are clearly part of catchment group activities, and the comments suggested that groups need more information and data better targeted to their needs.

Putting the tension in a theoretical context

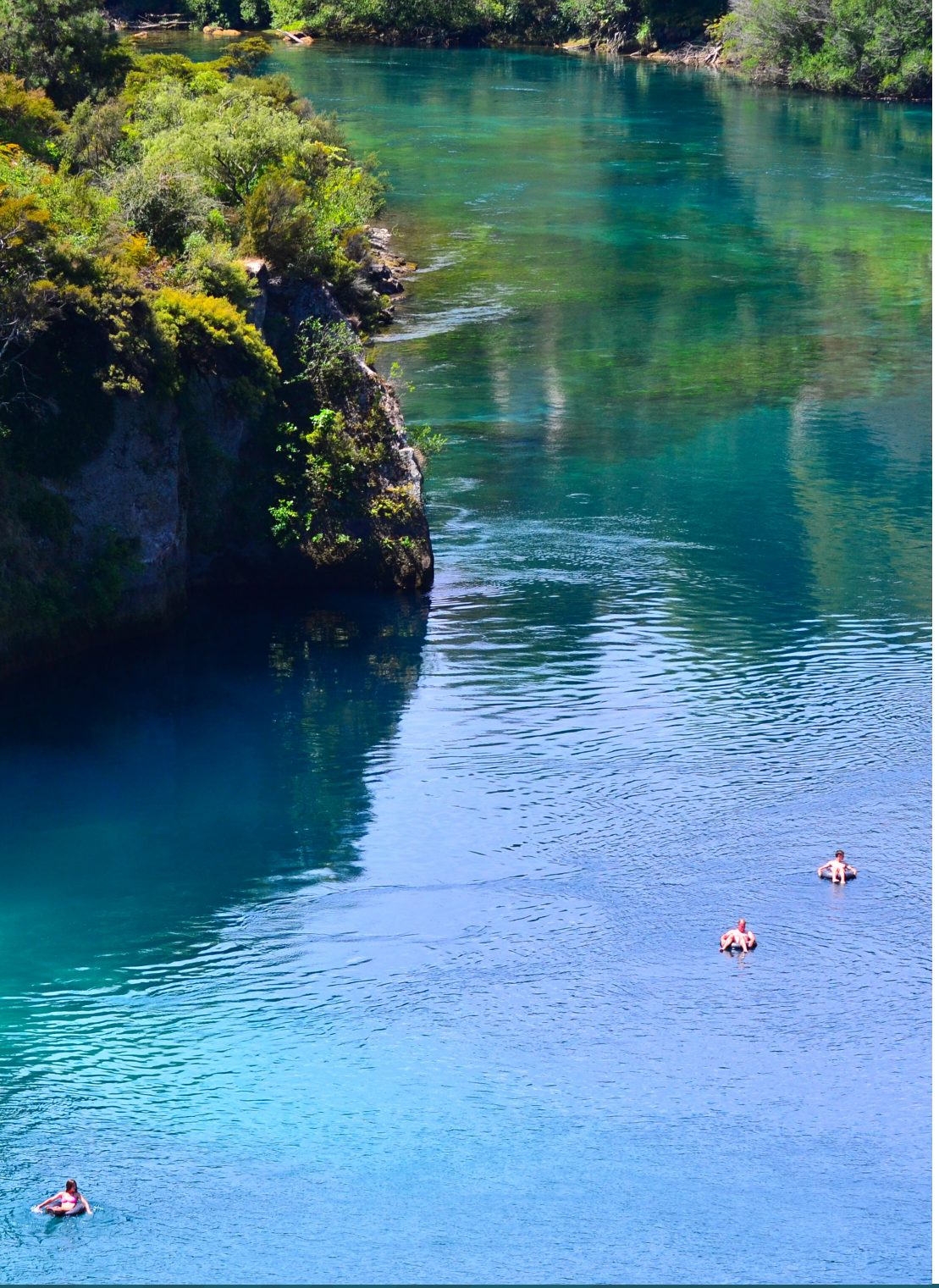
Our Land and Water research into catchment groups noted that creating new regulations – such as finding ways to regulate water quality – raises questions of power dynamics and involves bringing into alignment many people, organisations, and interests (Sinner et al., 2022). How policy-makers and the population at large think about regulating behaviours has been called 'governmentality' (Foucault, 2010; Sinner et al., 2022). The governmentality evident in the approach proposed in Aotearoa New Zealand to manage water quality through catchment groups (Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, 2024) can be termed 'biopolitics' (Foucault, 2010; Lemke, 2001).

There are two key elements to biopolitics for this case. First, it seeks to place all relationships and decision-making into a framework of individual optimisation: each person rationally seeks the best outcome based on an explicit or implicit cost-benefit assessment (Becker et al., 2012; Foucault, 2010; Lemke, 2001). Second, the modern role of government is to create the conditions in which the individual optimisation decision produces the outcome that the regulator seeks (Foucault, 2010). Biopolitics provides a lens for understanding how the choices of landowners and catchment groups may be brought into alignment with national policies. While this approach is explained critically and analytically by Foucault, it is recommended approvingly as 'nudge theory' by later theorists, who called it 'libertarian paternalism' (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). However, place-based research in Aotearoa New Zealand suggests that communities may be trying to supersede this approach, moving from a neoliberal state that fuses power, capitalism, and technocracy toward community co-governance with multiple power centres, plural values, and wide participation (Lewis et al., 2024).

The tension observed with catchment groups is a symptom of the work required to implement biopolitics and the shift toward community co-governance. As Foucault makes clear, the aim of biopolitics is to make the result of governmental action seem natural when it is actually constructed. Thus, people need to be convinced and contexts need to be managed.

As the catchment group research shows, people, organisations, and interests need to be brought into alignment (Sinner et al., 2022): there is active management of the situation. At the same time, communities are resisting being managed (Sinner et al., 2015, 2022; Turner et al., 2020).

A new approach to managing local resources, which includes participation, experimentation, and co-development, is emerging from actual practices on the ground in Aotearoa New Zealand (Lewis et al., 2024). Catchment groups have become a 'boundary object' (Leigh Star, 2010): they mean different things to different people, and that ambiguity allows discussion to continue despite a lack of agreement. For example, Our Land and Water could stage a panel discussion about catchment groups without first completely defining what they are. In addition, boundary objects are available for standardisation by regulatory processes (Leigh Star, 2010). Catchment groups themselves seem comfortable with their own diversity, but policy-makers are working to create more definition around what they are and what they do.



What does this theory mean in practice?

What does this theory mean for catchment groups, given the material collected at the Our Land and Water symposium?

1. It recognises there is tension and puts it into context. That context is much larger than catchment groups or rural communities; it comes from how we organise our countries and governments today.
2. It recognises the ambiguity or ‘interpretive flexibility’ (Leigh Star, 2010) that surrounds catchment groups. They mean one thing to participants and something else to policymakers.
3. It suggests this interpretive flexibility has been useful. It has allowed catchment groups to recruit community-minded members while also finding support with policymakers.
4. It suggests the future for catchment groups depends on how much that ambiguity can be maintained. If catchment groups insist too much on their diversity and autonomy, they will likely lose support among policymakers, who will turn attention and resources to other mechanisms for achieving policy aims. If policymakers insist too much on delivering regulations through catchment groups, then groups will lose their voluntarism and trust that attract members, and communities will abandon them (Hirschman, 1970).

The panel discussion at the Our Land and Water symposium provided much material to consider regarding catchment groups. They are particularly interesting perhaps because they are not fully defined. As we have shown with evidence and theory, they are in the process of becoming. It will be up to catchment groups, communities, policymakers, and other stakeholders to determine what they become.

Method

Propositions and questions

To set up the panel discussion and online participation, we presented attendees with three propositions and asked for their reactions. They were:

- Proposition 1 – Catchment groups need sufficient resources. They should foster self-reliance and independence through capability-building, think creatively about generating funds, and avoid dependence on external support.
- Proposition 2 – Catchment groups need to build strong, positive relationships involving tangata whenua, other groups and the wider community, and then to work to the pact of their community.
- Proposition 3 – Catchment groups can fill a gap in New Zealand's institutional framework and integrate environmental management at the catchment level by working with both regulatory requirements and community aspirations.

During the session, the panel was asked several questions:

1. What is a catchment group?
2. Dependence on funding versus independence of catchment groups
3. Why are we using catchment groups if they cannot achieve the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management bottom lines?
4. How to get better information to catchment groups?
5. What are the implications of increasing the role of catchment groups?
6. What would you do with $10m for catchment groups?

Analysis of data

We collected two types of data. The first type of data was digital texts. The conference organiser provided an app that allowed attendees (in-person and online) to write comments or pose questions. We collected 52 comment and question texts, which we disaggregated into 126 items (for example, one comment listed six ideas). The second type of data was notes taken by an Our Land and Water science leader on the panel discussion, including the comments by panel members. These were turned into 39 pieces of text. The total number of texts analysed was 165.

These texts were assessed for themes and subthemes using an inductive process – allowing the themes to emerge from the data rather than assigning texts to predetermined topics. We used a manual process in Microsoft Excel to assign each text to at least one theme and subtheme, and then assessed themes and subthemes for overlap and discrimination. The result was six themes: big picture, catchment group operations/actions, government, scale, science, and wero. The largest group was 'catchment group operations/actions', which was further disaggregated into the following subthemes: activities, definition, development, diversity and representation, framework, independence, resourcing, skills, and voluntarism. The analysis was then used to develop this report.

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