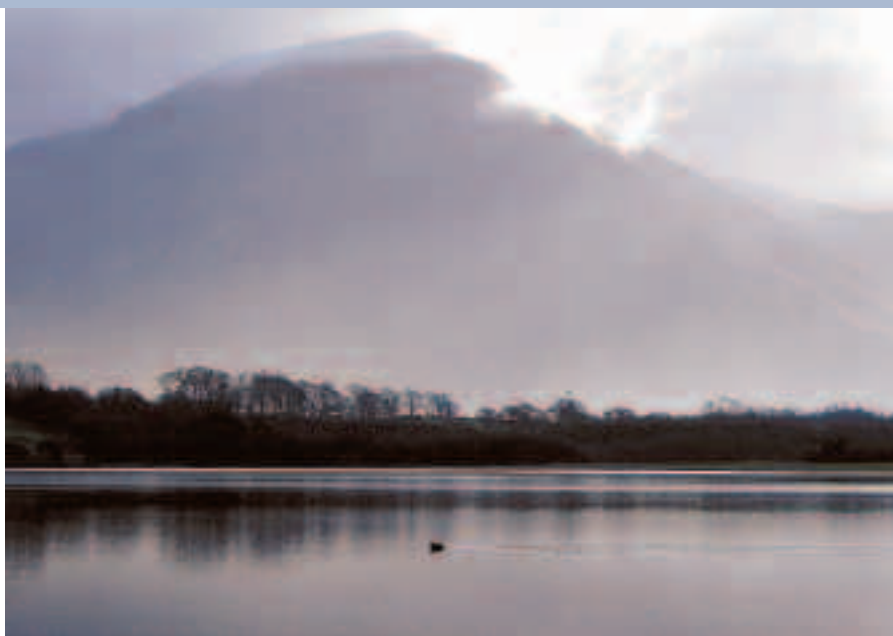


Understanding Loweswater

Lisa Norton introduces the Rural Economy and Land Use programme, and explains how it is using a polluted lake, and the community in the lake catchment, for a scoping study.



Imagine an idyllic valley, bracken-covered fells, green pastures and local stone farmhouses surrounding a still blue lake. However, the blue of the lake doesn't quite fit the picture: it's an unhealthy, toxic algal bloom blue and it's putting people off coming to the valley.

The place is Loweswater in the Lake District. The story is not a unique one. What is unique is that local farmers have grouped themselves into the Loweswater Project to address the pollution issue. Here in this valley the farmers recognise what the lake means to them and their community. The foot-and-mouth disease outbreak of 2001 may have been devastating in Cumbria, but it did highlight that the Lake District landscape's economic and social importance extends far beyond providing for those who farm it.

The situation is highly relevant to the Rural Economy and Land Use programme (RELU) and thus far RELU funding has been received for a small-scale scoping study in the catchment. It is clear that to understand lake pollution you must understand the people who use the land in the catchment. To ignore them is a bit like treating malaria by closely investigating mosquito bites.

Funding from the RELU programme has complemented funding from the Rural Development Service (RDS) and the National Trust for detailed lake sampling over the past year. This has given a chance for some of the more traditional scientific approaches to sit alongside a RELU scoping study.

For me, being part of RELU is a bit like waking up in a different country where they do things differently and speak a completely new language. Firstly, there's bridging the gap between the social and the physical sciences. I have to tackle terms like 'lay knowledges' and 'epistemological frameworks', alongside grasping the fact that having a chat with a farmer is good qualitative data collection. The challenges go beyond language and methodology right to heart of what we do, why we do it, and what value it has. Realising that our expertise or knowledge is just a factor in the equation and not the 'answer' can be difficult to swallow. A further challenge comes from working with physical scientists from different branches of science. For example, RELU aims to bring a knowledge of land use together with the algal modelling, in order to get closer to an understanding of the processes happening in the lake.

The other main strand of RELU is working alongside stakeholders. In Loweswater, we have the distinct advantage of the farmers having already grouped together to address lake issues. The scoping study identified further stakeholders, including the Environment Agency, the National Trust (which owns the lake and surrounding land), the Lake District National Park Authority and the Rural Development Service (which supports many of the farmers through Environmentally Sensitive Area payments). As a scientist used to focusing on discovering a clear (statistically significant) answer, the sheer complexity of working in real world situations is a challenge, but it's a very interesting and mind-expanding one and, I hope, one that scientists from all disciplines will take part in.

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