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In Pursuit of Water Policy Nirvana: Examining the Role of Catchment Groups in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT: Water quality decline has proven to be an intractable policy problem worldwide due to the complexity of multiple interests in land and water use. In Aotearoa New Zealand, a proliferation of local catchment groups, including collectives of farmers and other land users and stakeholders, raises important questions about the scope for government to direct collective management towards water policy implementation, and the opportunities and pitfalls of doing so. This paper draws on evidence from a collaborative research project in Aotearoa New Zealand to consider how an emerging catchment-group–led approach might address water policy goals. We examine the emergent policy narrative around catchment groups as a water management solution, and the investment in this approach by government agencies, industry bodies and non-governmental organisations. We then explore a diversity of experiences across four case study catchments. Our focus is on group membership, purpose, relationships, structure and resourcing, with the aim of illustrating how these characteristics of catchment groups influence their ability to carry out policy-relevant actions. We argue that efforts to enlist catchment groups in policy implementation have uneven consequences and that agencies and catchment groups alike should pay attention to the alignment between policy goals and group purpose, to the value of diversity and difference among groups, and to the fine line between supporting and instrumentalising groups towards implementing freshwater policy.

KEYWORDS: Watershed groups, collective management, action research, Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework, policy implementation, Aotearoa

INTRODUCTION

Halting declines in water quality and freshwater ecosystem health has proven to be an intractable policy and governance problem (Bunn, 2016; Gupta et al., 2013). Addressing this problem is difficult for at least three reasons, including the multiple competing interests in water resources, diffuse sources of pollution, and cumulative effects that defy clear definitions of problems and solutions across spatial and temporal scales.

Since the establishment of the Resource Management Act 1991, water policy and regulation in Aotearoa New Zealand (henceforth Aotearoa) have primarily targeted private landowners; this includes recent attempts to regulate farming practices to address non-point source pollution. However, due to variability in climate, soils, topography, farming practices and financial circumstances, solutions to these problems are difficult to achieve by regulating the farming sector. This suggests that policy should prioritise responses that are locally tailored (recognising that every ecosystem and catchment is different), locally led (acknowledging that landowners have detailed knowledge of local conditions), and collective (because cumulative effects span property boundaries and thus residents are able to monitor land use practices more effectively than non-local regulators) (Sinner et al., 2020). In many places in the world, including in the European Union, US, UK, Australia and Aotearoa, there is intensifying interest in bottom-up, community-based and collective approaches to freshwater management (Amblard, 2019; Boone and Fragaszy, 2018; Brady et al., 2022; Collins et al., 2020; Diaz-Kope and Morris, 2022; Sinner et al., 2022a).

In Aotearoa, catchment groups take the form of collectives of diverse community actors who live near a waterbody and have an interest in it; a catchment group approach is thus being framed as having potential as a locally tailored collective water management solution. The New Zealand Landcare Trust identifies more than 220 catchment groups across the country, while the regional initiative Thriving Southland claims 35 groups in the Southland region alone, covering 90% of the region. Concomitant with a recent proliferation of catchment groups, there has been a raft of incentives for groups to form and identify as catchment groups per se. Major government funding schemes[1] have targeted catchment

[1] See, for example, the One Billion Trees Programme (https://www.mpi.govt.nz/forestry/funding-tree-planting-research/one-billion-trees-programme/), the Jobs for Nature scheme (https://www.jobsfornature.govt.nz/), and the associated Essential

groups and invested in NGOs that support them. Primary sector industry bodies have also developed programmes to support catchment groups – and rural communities more generally – in pursuit of a range of social and environmental outcomes (see, for example, DairyNZ, 2023). In the Hawke's Bay region, pending regional plan provisions propose to offer catchment groups a collective pathway for compliance with freshwater rules. Policymakers and industry bodies therefore envisage catchment groups as part of a solution to hitherto intractable freshwater policy problems, and they are interested in research that can help to enable this.

In this paper, we ask: 1) how can place-based catchment groups help to achieve freshwater policy goals, and 2) what are the risks of trying to use them for this purpose. We draw on a three-year collaborative research programme during which researchers worked alongside catchment group members and supporters to examine how collective catchment-wide action is being pursued across four catchments in Aotearoa. We compare the emergent policy narrative around catchment groups with the lived experiences of these groups in order to consider how an idealised conceptualisation of catchment groups may misunderstand their ability and desire to achieve policy goals. Through our comparative analysis, we seek to answer several questions, including: 1) how do catchment groups differ empirically in ways that affect their ability to engage in on-the-ground actions; 2) how does conforming to the emergent idea of a catchment group enable or constrain groups; and 3) how can initiatives to support catchment groups navigate tensions between enabling groups to achieve their own goals and instrumentalising groups, i.e. treating them as a means to government or industry ends?

In addressing these questions, we show how the emergence of the 'catchment group' as a conceptual object and policy construct has material impacts on local groups and on what they can achieve; we further show how this, in turn, has implications for efforts to rally catchment communities to implement freshwater policy. Indeed, it remains an open question as to whether catchment groups can make a step-change contribution to improving water quality or whether their actions will remain largely symbolic; an essential precursor to supporting them to make improvements, however, is to recognise how groups differ in their capacity and intent to deliver on policy goals.

In the next section, we describe the emergence of catchment groups formed for the purpose of freshwater management in Aotearoa and we explore the ways in which this approach is expected to address water governance shortcomings. We go on to describe our research approach and methods and then draw on empirical evidence from our four case study catchments in order to explore how the emergence of the respective catchment groups has differed in ways that affect what they can each achieve with regard to policy implementation. Finally, we discuss prospects for an effective catchment-group – based approach to freshwater management and we consider the implications for catchment groups and supporting agencies.

SEEKING WATER POLICY NIRVANA THROUGH CATCHMENT GROUPS

In Aotearoa, freshwater management mirrors global experience with regard to both the water policy problem and the preferred solutions. For decades, the cumulative impacts of land use and development have increased pressure on the freshwater environment. Intensification of large-scale agriculture and expansion of irrigation have driven the depletion and degradation of water resources, with significant ecological and socio-economic impacts (see Ministry for the Environment, 2023). These effects have proven difficult to address for the local authorities who are responsible for environmental rule-making. In many cases, these authorities (called regional councils) have been unable, for both political and practical reasons, to issue or implement regulations that adequately address pressing freshwater problems (Kirk et al., 2020). A national economic focus on growing export-oriented primary production

Freshwater Fund (https://environment.govt.nz/what-you-can-do/funding/resources-for-seekers-of-environmental-funding/essential-freshwater-fund/), accessed 25 May 2025.

(especially agriculture and forestry) has proven difficult to reconcile with environmental protection (Fenemor et al., 2021), given the contribution of these sectors to freshwater decline. Furthermore, while central government agencies and regional councils are often branded as heavy-handed regulators by primary industry lobby groups, environmental advocates have argued that these agencies and councils are essentially captured by economic (and especially agricultural) interests (Joy, 2022). Over the past two decades, public concern over freshwater has thus intensified (see, for example, Cullen et al., 2006; Howard-Williams et al., 2010), and water has become a key object of environmental policy (Challies and Tadaki, 2022; Fenemor et al., 2021). In this intensely political arena, agricultural industry groups and farming businesses are intent on maintaining a social licence to operate (Edwards and Trafford, 2016), but their environmental performance and corporate citizenship are under increasing scrutiny.

Recent reforms to address freshwater degradation have focused on creating new obligations at the property scale, targeting individual resource users. Although large-scale systemic land use change has been advocated from some quarters (see, for example, PCE, 2024), the approach so far has been to improve management practice within existing land use. The farming sector, for instance, has faced new rules that require the exclusion of livestock from waterways, limits on intensive winter grazing of forage crops, increased frequency and coverage of water metering, and mandated farm-scale environmental planning ('freshwater farm plans').[2] In addition to these specific regulations, the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management 2020 (NPSFM) requires that local authorities engage meaningfully with both *tangata whenua* (that is, Māori who have ancestral connections to local land and waterways), and communities in the process of defining local outcomes and objectives for freshwater (New Zealand Government, 2020: s.1.3.1). The NPSFM is grounded in the conviction that local communities should articulate a long-term collective vision for their local freshwater environment (see Ministry for the Environment, 2013; New Zealand Government, 2020).[3]

In Aotearoa and elsewhere, the limits of a regulatory approach that is focused on individual properties are increasingly apparent (Bodin, 2017; PCE, 2024) due to the cumulative nature of effects and the diversity of local catchment and land use contexts. This has led some (see OECD, 2017; Wiering et al., 2020) to turn to collective management theory (see Ostrom, 1990, 2009), which suggests that users faced with threats to a shared resource can organise to achieve common goals. A key question for freshwater policy is, how can groups of landowners be encouraged to assume collective responsibility for catchment-scale freshwater outcomes, especially when the benefits of changing land use practices accrue beyond the boundaries and membership of the group (that is, they are considered 'externalities'). Unlike an Ostrom-esque context whereby resource use threatens users' own livelihoods, in an externality situation the incentives for landholders to act must be driven more by social forces such as community pressure and regulation than by direct material self-interest.

In the US in particular, where watershed groups have proliferated since the 1990s, scholarship on collective action at the catchment (or watershed) scale has explored factors that enable collaboration among diverse stakeholders. A national study by Clark et al. (2005) highlighted how group composition, funding, issue focus, decision-making structures, and information needs shape the activities and capacities of watershed management organisations. Moore and Koontz (2003) proposed a typology based on stakeholder configuration which distinguished citizen-led, agency-led and mixed groups; they showed how these arrangements influence group roles and outcomes in planning and implementation. Expanding on this, Diaz-Kope and Miller-Stevens (2015) emphasised governance structure as a key

[2] See provisions in: the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management 2020; Resource Management (Stock Exclusion) Regulations 2020; Resource Management (National Environmental Standards for Freshwater) Regulations 2020; Resource Management (Measurement and Reporting of Water Takes) Amendment Regulations 2020; Resource Management (Freshwater Farm Plans) Regulations 2023.

[3] Since the research was conducted, a change of government in New Zealand has seen some of these rules repealed or put on hold while the new government reviews key policies and regulations and implements its own reform programme.

determinant of the effectiveness of watershed partnerships; they compared interagency, cross-sector and grassroots models, identifying how each had different implications for group purpose and capacity. Margerum (2008) applied an institutional lens, arguing that groups differ not only by structure, but also in terms of the scale and nature of the problems they address; he positioned groups along a spectrum from the 'action' level (that is, on-the-ground practical actions) to organisational and policy levels (deliberating on, or shaping, organisational policies or legislation).

In Aotearoa, 'catchment groups' increasingly feature in environmental and water policy discourse. While conceptually aligned with watershed- or catchment-scale approaches elsewhere, catchment groups in Aotearoa are emerging within a distinct regulatory and policy landscape that is being shaped by evolving national priorities around freshwater management. Substantial funding and support for catchment groups has been offered by key government ministries (for example, the Ministry for the Environment and the Ministry for Primary Industries) as well as farming industry bodies (such as DairyNZ and Beef + Lamb NZ).[4] In a New Zealand survey of 244 catchment groups and community environment groups, 31% reported having received central government funding (Sinner et al., 2022b), and over the period 2020-2024, government schemes such as Jobs for Nature and One Billion Trees channelled tens of millions of dollars towards catchment groups for riparian planting and other restoration work (O'Connor and Jones, 2020). In 2022, over NZ$20 million (about US$12 million) was allocated to projects to build capability among catchment groups and communities.[5] In the process of administering these schemes and distributing funding and other support, government and industry bodies are building a narrative of the catchment group as a solution to the freshwater problem.

This is reflected in statements by politicians from successive governments and by other public sector officials. Successive agriculture ministers have stated, for example, that,

> The future of our food and fibre export growth will depend on walking the talk when it comes to sustainability. The Government's strategy is to work with and invest in our farmers and growers to shift the dial (…). Our investment has helped support more than 35 catchment projects, which are supporting hundreds of catchment and sub-catchment groups (…). The funding supports a key sustainability component of the Government and sector's Fit for a Better World roadmap that aims to restore New Zealand's freshwater environments to a healthy state within a generation (New Zealand Government, 2023).

> The Government is backing farmers to improve land management practices with a [NZ]$36 million [US$21 million] commitment to support locally led catchment groups, [NZ]$7 million [US$4 million] of which will go directly to catchment groups across the country (…). Supporting locally led catchment projects is one way the Government backs farmers' efforts to improve land management practices and water quality (New Zealand Government, 2024).

In a recent high-profile report, the New Zealand Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment endorsed a catchment-scale approach to environmental decision-making and management and argued for a prominent role for catchment groups alongside regional authorities. As the Commissioner put it,

> With a bird's eye view of their catchments, regional councils should work with catchment groups to set the direction of travel in accordance with central government guidance (…). Catchment groups are best placed to determine the on-the-ground actions needed to implement that direction of travel (…). Where catchment

[4] From 2020 to 2024, the regional initiative called Thriving Southland received NZ$5.9 million (US$3.5 million) from the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) to support catchment groups in the Southland region. In 2022 alone, the New Zealand Landcare Trust, a charitable organisation that facilitates catchment groups across Aotearoa, received NZ$2.5 million (US$1.5 million) in core funding and project funding from MPI and the Ministry for the Environment.

[5] These projects were led by the New Zealand Landcare Trust and the Mountains to Sea Conservation Trust (see the Essential Freshwater Fund site, Ministry for the Environment; https://environment.govt.nz/what-you-can-do/funding/previous-funding/essential-freshwater-fund/), accessed 25 May 2025.

> groups are established, regional councils need to work with catchment groups and consider, where appropriate, devolving powers (and funding) to those groups (PCE, 2024: 66).

While the twin objectives of supporting catchment groups and implementing freshwater policy developed in parallel for some time, the above statements reflect a growing desire by state actors to see catchment groups as the implementing actors.

In Aotearoa, the 'catchment group' policy construct is at a turning point. It developed out of the discourse and actions of a variety of stakeholders (including government, industry and community-based entities) who were in pursuit of different, and possibly even competing, goals; now, however, regulators are asking whether and how catchment groups might serve as administrative entities for achieving government objectives.[6] The idea of community-based catchment groups busily working to deliver freshwater policy goals generates multiple positive connotations that suggest locally tailored, community-driven, whole-of-catchment restoration actions.

We contend that this catchment group solution exemplifies what Molle (2008) has termed a 'Nirvana concept'. A Nirvana concept paints a picture of positive outcomes that appear as "desirable counterpoints" to negative or ineffective aspects of existing management and that promise to address what is wrong with the current situation. It thus has wide appeal, mobilising the catchment group as a kind of boundary object, that is, an object that is mutually intelligible to a range of parties but is also flexible enough to mean slightly different things to each party (Leigh Starr, 2010). This scope for multiple interpretations means that boundary objects can build credibility and cooperation among diverse or even divergent interests (Duncan, 2011). In this way, catchment groups come to be widely considered as worthy of investment and support. We suggest that the catchment group solution purports to remedy at least five key shortcomings of freshwater management:

- It entails a *collective response* to a problem involving cumulative effects; this collective response contrasts with attempts to regulate individual landowners, resource users and businesses, which has so far failed to secure freshwater health;
- It implies *cooperation* between local government and farmers/landowners; these are relationships that have in the past often been experienced as adversarial and prescriptive;
- It can provide a vehicle for meaningful *partnership* between farmers, tangata whenua and government; statutory processes, by contrast, have not resulted in strong engagement with tangata whenua in water governance;
- It works, in principle, at the *catchment scale* (that is, at the natural scale of waterbodies or catchment/watershed systems), thereby enabling solutions that are strategically framed at the 'problem scale'; although there is a history of catchment-scale management in Aotearoa,[7] recent policies and plans have tended to cover regional administrative jurisdictions (Memon et al., 2010), while regulations have been targeted at the individual property scale;
- It presents the potential for *integrated management* and improved policy coherence across a variety of policy arenas such as water, biodiversity, infrastructure, climate change mitigation and

[6] We note that this dynamic echoes earlier encounters with collaborative governance. In many cases, collaborative groups were asked to deliver freshwater improvements while maintaining or growing the economic potential of primary industries like farming. Because this entailed reconciling wildly different values, many collaborative groups found it difficult to deliver on either goal. We are indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this observation.

[7] See the Catchment Board experience of the 1970s and 1980s and the collaborative initiatives of the 2010s (see Fenemor et al., 2021).

adaptation,[8] whereas previous policy and governance of these domains have been fragmented and siloed.

Cast in this light, one can easily see how catchment groups promise an elegant solution to the regulatory problem of unsatisfactory water quality outcomes. By tapping into existing local community and catchment-scale activity to support catchment groups (Peters et al., 2015; Sinner et al., 2022b), local authorities can be seen as working *with* communities instead of (or in addition to) regulating and sanctioning them. For groups of landowners and stakeholders, projecting a catchment group identity can increase credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of authorities and the public and can improve access to funding streams and other forms of support such as technical advice. For politicians, supporting and promoting catchment groups also works well, as they can take credit for funding allocations and can be associated with 'good news' stories of grassroots action, especially those that present a positive view of the agricultural industry (Sinner et al., 2025). Working with catchment groups lets the state be seen as working both with *and* through community in pursuit of environmental policy outcomes (see also Agrawal and Gibson, 2001).

However, the idealised picture of catchment groups dutifully implementing freshwater policy sits untested against the lived realities of catchment-scale action and of the actual successes and failures of catchment groups on the ground. In practice, local groups form for diverse reasons, pursue different goals, adopt different ways of working, and have varied aspirations and means at their disposal (see, for example, Peters et al., 2015; Sinner et al., 2022b, 2025). Others have reached similar conclusions about community environmental groups more generally (Jones and Kirk, 2018). Although their work is often aligned with policy, groups may at times also work *around* policy, or 'against the grain' of it (see Whaley et al., 2021). How then, might catchment groups be conceptualised and hailed to help solve one of the great environmental challenges of our time?

In the following section we detail the research approach and methodology by which we engaged with catchment group members and other stakeholders to learn about the ideals and realities of catchment-group–based responses to water management.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Our inquiry into the emergent policy narrative around catchment groups was situated within a wider three-year (2020-2023) research programme that was aimed at understanding the potential of catchment groups to tackle degradation of freshwater ecosystems. We applied a collaborative co-research approach (Clark et al., 2022; Proefke and Barford, 2023) to work alongside catchment group members, local stakeholders and policy actors for shared learning and mutual capability-building. Over the course of the research programme, we carried out interviews and engaged in extended dialogue with research participants in order to generate empirical evidence, collaboratively construct meaning (Paulus et al., 2008), and co-produce insights. We introduced and debated theory on collective responsibility (for example, Ostrom) and used critical theories of power relations and social justice (such as found in Molle, 2008; Cleaver and de Koning, 2015), to prompt discussion and build wider conceptual understanding among the research team and co-researchers (Kilvington et al., in press; Sinner et al., 2023, 2025).

Our research focused on four catchments from across Aotearoa New Zealand. They were selected to represent a range of different physical characteristics, circumstances and experiences with water management issues (see Figure 1 and Table 1 below). We conducted semi-structured interviews with catchment group members and local government staff, and with others who were engaged in supporting catchment work in the four catchments. To engage our co-researchers in an extended dialogue, we convened two collaborative inquiry forums that met with the research team over the three years.

[8] Claims to this effect have been made by various commentators (see, for example, *Farmers Weekly*, 2024).

A Catchment Group Forum comprising a farmer representative and a tangata whenua representative from each catchment was formed, and met six times over the course of the project for two-day workshop discussions, including once in each of the four catchments. These meetings involved field visits, discussions with local tangata whenua and stakeholders, and extended semi-structured dialogue and collective inquiry among the research team and Forum members.

A Policy Advisory Group (PAG) was convened in parallel. It comprised staff from central government ministries and departments, regional councils, primary industry and sector groups, Māori land trusts, and NGOs engaged in supporting catchment-scale land and water management. This group also met six times over the life of the project, engaging in face-to-face and virtual meetings to discuss emerging ideas and questions about the role of catchment groups and how they might be supported, and to reflect on the evolving experiences of those currently working with catchment groups.

In collaboration with members of the Catchment Group Forum and the PAG, and by bringing the observations of each group into dialogue with those of the other, we as co-researchers collectively learned about the diversity of experiences (Proefke and Barford, 2023) across the four catchments and beyond. We progressively built an understanding of key challenges and opportunities for catchment-scale collective action – from the perspectives of local catchment actors, and government, industry and NGO actors supporting catchment groups. We worked particularly with Forum members to distil key findings and eventually co-author this article.

Our inquiry was guided by high-level research questions that were initially raised by the research team and then were progressively expanded on and refined through the dialogic process with the Forum and the PAG. To explore the conditions under which catchment groups might take collective responsibility for freshwater outcomes, we asked how catchment groups function, we examined their core features and dynamics, and we considered key factors affecting whether and how they take up water policy implementation actions. Transcripts and detailed notes of research interviews, Forum discussions, and PAG meetings were analysed for how they addressed the overarching research questions. The following analysis and discussion surfaced through this collaborative research approach, wherein we collectively (that is, with Forum and PAG members) explored and refined questions and ideas about catchment groups and collective responsibility for land and water.

The perspectives shared through the co-research process highlighted that catchment groups – and even the task of freshwater improvement – were subject to a multiplicity of views and problem framings by key actors. Through analysis, we identified differences across five key dimensions that affect groups' abilities to carry out on-the-ground actions to improve freshwater ecosystem health or advance other group objectives. Below, we introduce the four case study catchments represented in the Catchment Group Forum and we then present our research findings.

Four case study catchments

Looking across four catchments, differences in catchment group dynamics emerge in terms of catchment size, land use and physical geography. While our focus was on the social dynamics of catchment groups, the catchment context (see Figure 1 and Table 1) shaped how groups understood the key local freshwater and land management challenges, the possibilities of and limits to collective action, and therefore their goals and purpose as a catchment group.

In the Pourakino Catchment, Southland, a group of farmers established a catchment group in 2014. In forming a group, the members aimed to support one another in their efforts to understand and comply with new freshwater regulations. Over time, group membership grew to around 66 farmers and some forestry company representatives. Land use in the catchment is split almost evenly between pastoral farming (dairy, sheep and beef cattle) and forestry. The river's channel has been modified and, while water quality has been assessed as generally 'good', elevated levels of *E. coli* (faecal) bacteria and nitrates are evident in some places (Thriving Southland, 2021) and the downstream estuary is becoming

eutrophic. Initially, the catchment group focused on promoting adoption of farm environment plans and good management practices among its members to get ahead of the impending regulations. More recently, however, the group has focused on building a relationship with tangata whenua to inform improved on-farm drainage management practices that are conducive to the protection of native fish.

In the Mangaone Catchment, Hawke's Bay, a group of farmers established a catchment group in 2019, with its 33 levy-paying members comprising almost all the larger landowners in the catchment. One group member reflected that the group has shifted from being primarily reactive to regulation into a more proactive mode that is focused on monitoring and documenting changes in water quality resulting from the efforts of the group members to protect the catchment. The catchment comprises mostly sheep and beef farms, with significant areas of forestry and some dairy and deer farms. Farmers in the catchment have done much to fence waterways, but *E. coli* and phosphorus remain key pressures on water quality (HBRC, 2020). To obtain their own data so as to be able to address problems before they come to the attention of the regional council, the group has been trialling a water quality monitoring project. The Mangaone is subject to new regional water management rules (which are still subject to appeal) that give the option for catchment-level group plans and programmes as an alternative pathway to individual regulatory compliance (HBRC, 2022). Subsequent to our research, the Mangaone Catchment Group joined together with other groups to form a regional collective in order to qualify for funding and support that is specifically targeted at catchment collectives.

In the Waitangi Catchment, Northland, the regional council convened a multi-stakeholder group in 2013 to prepare a catchment action plan as part of a statutory planning process. Spanning a geographically diverse catchment, the group included local government staff, NGOs, tangata whenua and local community members, but it included only a few significant landowners. The catchment is home to numerous *hapū* (sub-tribes) with close ties to the river, its tributaries and the land, so the interests of tangata whenua in the catchment are complex and diverse. Little of the catchment land remains in Māori ownership, however, and the area hosts a wide range of horticultural and agricultural production. Sediment and nutrient runoff from intensive land use is a major issue in the catchment (NRC, 2023). Having agreed on a catchment action plan in 2017, the group continued to meet thereafter, although its purpose then became less clear. When the regional council stopped supporting the group in 2020, its activity quickly waned.

In the Te Hoiere Catchment, Marlborough, a large and high-profile government-funded catchment-enhancement project was being delivered by local government, NGOs and tangata whenua with community involvement.[9] The project aimed to showcase the catchment as a large-scale restoration initiative. Native forest covers much of the catchment, while the main remaining land uses include plantation forestry and dairy farming, with over 400 farms. Sediment, nitrogen and *E. coli* are the main pressures on the health of the river and the downstream coastal environment (MDC, 2021), and farmers and tangata whenua were considering collective approaches to addressing this problem. While at the commencement of the government project there was no existing catchment group in the Te Hoiere Catchment, the project has since convened farmers, tangata whenua and communities through consultation mechanisms and restoration activities. Farmer- and community-led catchment groups have begun to emerge under the umbrella of the project, but progress in assembling groups in this catchment has been slow.

[9] See the Te Hoiere Project website: https://www.tehoiere.org.nz/, accessed 25 May 2025.

Figure 1. Location and size of the four case study catchments.

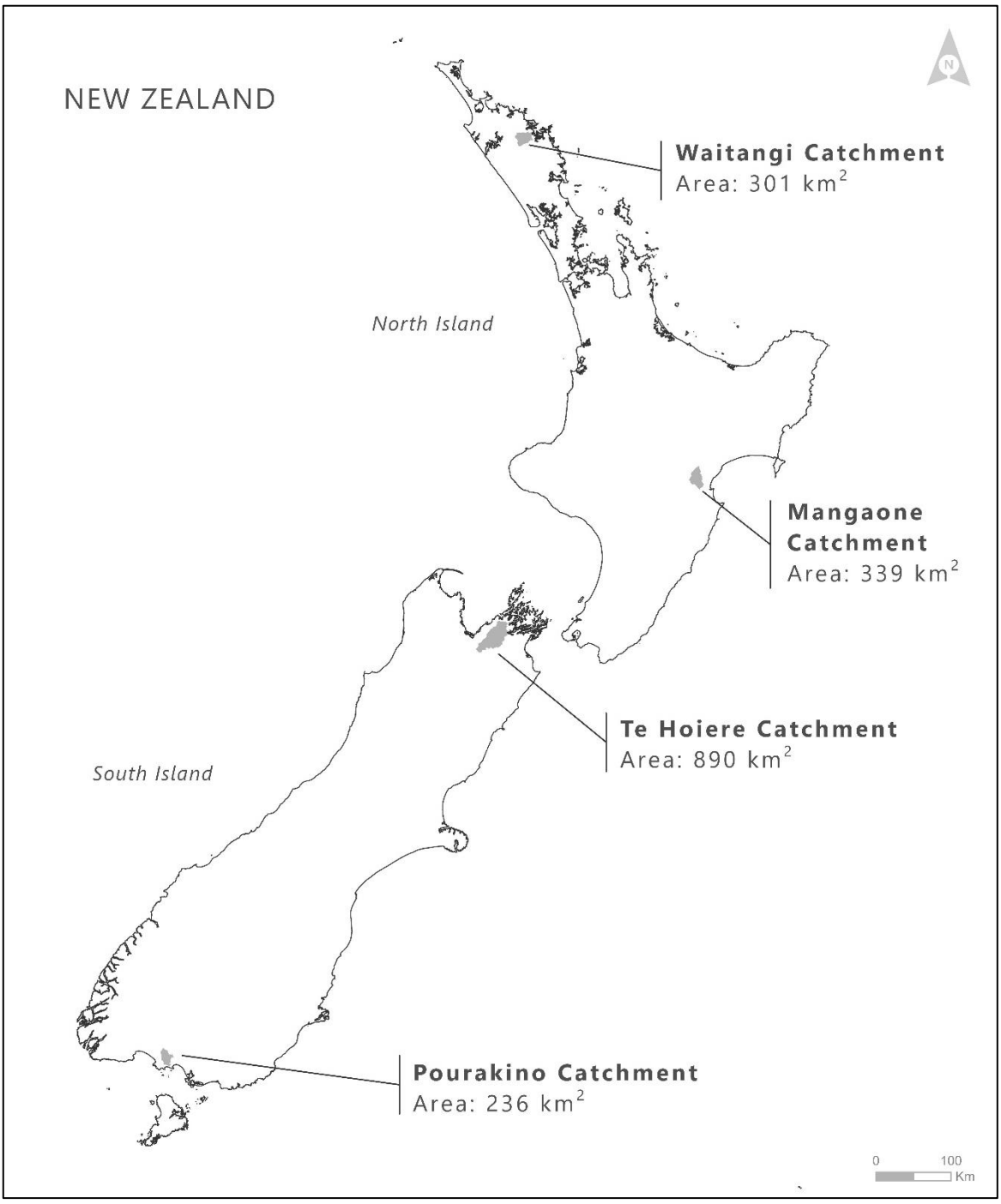


Table 1. Details of the four case study catchments and catchment groups.

	Pourakino	Mangaone	Waitangi	Te Hoiere
Year established	2014	2019	2014	n.a.
Catchment area (km^2)	236	339	301	890
Main catchment land uses	Dairy, sheep, forestry	Sheep and beef, forestry, dairy, deer	Dairy, sheep and beef, horticulture, forestry	Dairy, sheep, forestry
Origins of catchment group	Farmer initiated	Farmer/farm consultant	Regional council	Emergent groups and establishment discussions in progress
Membership	66 farmers, 1 forestry company	33 farmers, 3 forestry companies	Multi-stakeholder group of ~20: farmers, tangata whenua, NGOs, scientists	n.a.
Group activities	Encouraging good practice, presenting a collective voice	Pest control, water monitoring, soil and land use mapping	Advising council, supporting riparian planting	n.a.
Policy context	Proposed government regulations on winter grazing; regional council developing new policy with multi-stakeholder forum	Regional council plan identifies catchment collectives as option for meeting farming obligations	Group advised regional council on policy	Government designation as "exemplar" with promise of funding

FINDINGS: CATCHMENT GROUP CHARACTERISTICS ENABLE AND CONSTRAIN DELIVERY OF ON-THE-GROUND ACTIONS

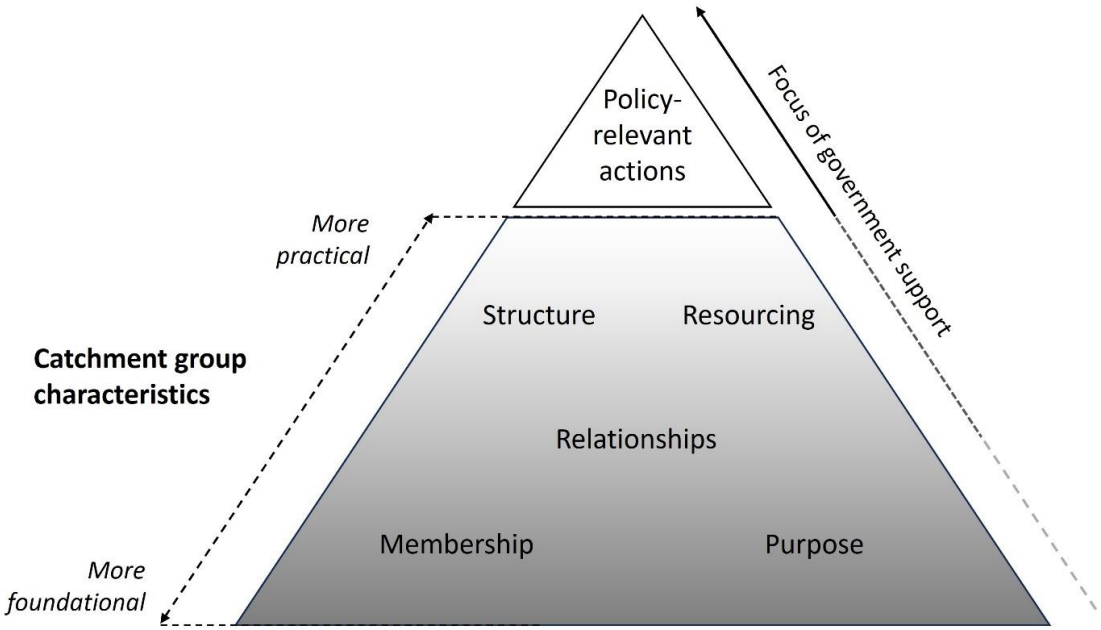
From our interviews and dialogue across the Catchment Group Forum and the PAG, we identify five key characteristics of catchment groups that together shape the actions that a group is likely and able to pursue. Figure 2 depicts how these characteristics underpin a group's capacity to deliver policy-relevant actions (located at the apex of the pyramid). These actions, comprising specific measures to address freshwater policy objectives, have been the primary interest of government in fostering catchment groups, yet they are not always the main focus of the group itself.

Figure 2 shows group *membership* and *purpose* as foundational elements of group identity, which are shaped by place and local context. Group *structure* and *resourcing*, on the other hand, are features of how groups work in practice, which a group can arrange and can use to achieve its purpose and goals. *Relationships* are both fundamental to who a group is (that is, group identity) and integral to a group's capacity to act, insofar as relationships shape what a group is seeking to achieve. Relationships also serve as a resource that the group can draw upon to these ends. As groups develop and respond to external pressures and opportunities, all of these elements are in flux.

Membership builds buy-in to objectives and delivery

The demographics of group membership are fundamental to what a group might do or want to do. Across our case study catchments, group membership was typically ad hoc; it was shaped by the group's response to a galvanising impulse but tended to change over time. The experiences of the Waitangi and Mangaone groups illustrate this.

Figure 2. Key characteristics of catchment groups that shape their capacity to deliver policy-relevant actions.



The Waitangi Catchment Group, being a regional council-led multi-stakeholder initiative, included strong representation of tangata whenua, interested community stakeholders, and local government staff; that is, it encompassed a spectrum of interests in freshwater. It involved very few farmers or landowners, however, whose land use practices affect freshwater the most. In a catchment of over 300 km^2, the group's membership represented a very small proportion of the total land area. While the Waitangi Catchment Group helped to write a catchment action plan, the group's membership was not capable of *implementing* it.

In contrast, membership of the farmer-initiated Mangaone Catchment Group represented the owners of almost 100% of the farmed land area in the catchment; furthermore, as these members pay a levy to fund group activities, the Mangaone group was able to claim strong buy-in and near-complete spatial representation for the catchment. This (near) 'complete' membership makes it easier for the group to advocate for council funding and engagement, as its ability to deliver on its promises can be more readily presumed. At the same time, however, the Mangaone Catchment Group included only landowners; it did not include tangata whenua or non-landowning community members who had an interest in freshwater. The group's goals and activities were thus defined from a landowner perspective.

The people involved can thus vary widely and can change over time, as can the particular interests or values that they bring to the group. Who is in the group and who is not is central to the group's very nature and is an important determinant of its aims and purpose; it also determines the group's collective knowledge, resources and capabilities and therefore what it can achieve. In this sense, membership reflects the social capital that a group has assembled and can draw upon. While group composition may initially be ad hoc, groups can take a more deliberate approach to building membership over time, whether by seeking to broaden it or by reinforcing a specific kind of membership. While membership may have other facets to it beyond what we observed in our cases (see Clark et al., 2005), we find that what a group is able to achieve is shaped by a number of factors; these include: the size of the group (its absolute size or 'critical mass'); its coverage in terms of the proportion of the catchment's landowners who are involved; and the particular perspectives, capabilities and resources of group members.

Purpose underpins resilience

A catchment group's core purpose is similarly fundamental to shaping its activities, and catchment groups pursue a wide variety of goals. The significance of an explicit shared purpose was reflected in our case studies, where it had an obvious bearing on the momentum and resilience of the group. In the Pourakino Catchment, prompted by impending freshwater regulation, farmers came together to support each other in farm environment planning and adoption of good management practices. In the Mangaone Catchment, farmers were motivated by a similar desire to be recognised as caring for the catchment, which they sought to achieve through upskilling and investing in their own monitoring infrastructure. In both cases, working to a clear purpose has enabled the groups to further their own goals while providing a solid basis from which to forge relationships with others and even reassess their goals over time. One Catchment Forum member reflected on the importance of having a clear statement of purpose and values, reflecting that,

> We kept referring to those [values]. So it was easy for the group to know why they were there, what they were doing. So the conversations were often around that. It's not like we had to keep looking for our identity or trying to find it or redefine it or try and work out why we exist (…). We kind of knew we're here for this part of the world, the Pourakino. We have a responsibility to this part of the country.

In contrast, the Waitangi Catchment Group was assigned a purpose by the regional council, which convened the group to advise on a planning process. Once the initial task was complete, the regional council continued to fund the group for a time, but its purpose had become less clear. It supported small restoration projects and maintained dialogue between some members, but reported a limited ability to influence farming and forestry practices. The group's activity waned when the regional council stopped resourcing it. Its initial composition was shaped by its purpose, but when that purpose was fulfilled the group struggled to define a new purpose around which to build momentum.

Sinner et al. (2022b) found that in New Zealand most groups are focused on environmental goals beyond freshwater quality (especially broader biodiversity goals), and that many also seek social and community outcomes. While a group initially forms around a core purpose, we see from our case studies that this purpose generally evolves over time. Participation in a catchment group can have a number of different motivations; these can include: economic reasons such as cost savings and access to funding; social reasons, for example to be seen to be acting in a pro-social and pro-environmental way; or for solidarity, that is, to help each other and to collectively confront challenges (including regulatory pressures) (McIntyre et al., 2022; Peters et al., 2015).

Although catchment groups pursue a range of goals, these are only sometimes well-defined. At times, goals are expressed as broad strategic objectives or principles such as to enhance the health of the river, and at other times they take a relatively practical or operational form such as planting a certain area or mitigating a particular contaminant. Some groups formalise their purpose and objectives in the form of written terms of reference or well-developed catchment plans, while other groups have a more informal and less-explicit sense of shared purpose.

Relationships are built through (and shape) group activities

Relationships formed with external actors contribute to shaping group identity and enabling group actions. Our case study catchments included considerable variability in terms of connections to external partners such as local and central government agencies, industry and sector groups, community groups, tangata whenua, and funding bodies. In the Mangaone Catchment, for example, farmers deliberately sought a particular relationship with the regional council that allowed them to be proactive rather than reactive to council rules and where they could be recognised as taking initiative in identifying and addressing problems in the catchment. By investing in monitoring and maintaining dialogue with senior council staff, the group built credibility with the regional council. This helped them to access

administrative support via a council-funded charitable trust and at the time of our study they were discussing possibilities for data sharing with the council. In promoting its work publicly, the group also sought to build relationships with local businesses and with the wider community.

In the Pourakino case, through a series of fortuitous encounters the group became invested in their relationship with tangata whenua. After being invited onto the local *marae* (tribal meeting house and grounds), the Pourakino group began to regularly share information with the local tribal group. This ongoing exchange about the catchment and the river has brought new values and objectives into view for the catchment group. The evolving relationship with tangata whenua was ultimately a key driver in shaping the group's direction and its actions to improve water quality in the catchment. The group learned, for instance, that the catchment used to provide a habitat for large numbers of kanakana (pouched lamprey), a native species that is highly valued by tangata whenua. As the farmers learned more about the kanakana from tangata whenua, they wanted to support its return, so they began discussing how they might coordinate and adjust on-farm drainage practices to improve kanakana habitat. Tangata whenua have expressed an interest in monitoring for ecological improvements, which catchment group members have supported by providing access and information.

The relationships a group chooses to develop will often be linked to how well the group's stated purpose and goals align with those of other entities as expressed in, for example, policies and regulations, funding criteria, or industry codes of good practice. Within groups, however, individual personalities are often influential and key group relationships thus also hinge on interpersonal relationships. External relationships are often mutually supportive, but they may also entail tension and require constant maintenance; for example, catchment group relationships with councils have often been tense because the council is a regulator and has a monitoring and compliance function. Relationships therefore both enable and constrain groups in their activities, while different activities and ways of working may enable certain kinds of relationships.

Structure enables but also constrains groups

Catchment groups can be organised in different ways. Some groups have facilitators and hold regular meetings, while others meet only sporadically and without a formal agenda. Some groups have a legal structure that allows them to receive and disburse funds, while others deliberately remain informal and find workarounds. Group structure also encompasses the organisational characteristics of a group. These can include: how roles or functions are assigned to members; the practices and protocols that are adopted within the group; and the legal, financial and tax status of the group. Such structural factors indelibly shape how a group operates, what it can take on, and what it can achieve.

Of our four cases, the Pourakino and Mangaone Catchment Groups were established, respectively, as a charitable trust and as an incorporated society with a committee and fee-paying members. Having administrative support and the ability to receive and disburse funds, these groups were able to demonstrate robust process and organisational structure to key partners including local government, funders and the community. These elements of formal structure helped the groups to obtain both financial and non-financial resources. The Mangaone Catchment Group, for example, was able to secure support from the Hawke's Bay Future Farming Trust (a regional council-funded charitable trust) and to apply for government grants.

The Te Hoiere Catchment, by contrast, illustrates implications of a lack of organisational framework or structure at the catchment scale. At the start of the government catchment project there were no active catchment groups in Te Hoiere. Farmers had no collective voice and no vehicle through which to engage with each other; rather, they engaged with an appointed project representative who was acting for the government agencies that were driving the Te Hoiere Project. This meant that in the different sub-catchments, farmers had no way to coordinate their own activities to make the most of the support that was being offered. In its early stages, in fact, the Te Hoiere Project left some farmers unsure as to

how catchment groups might take shape in the catchment, with one farmer even referring to the project itself as 'the catchment group'.

A group's structural characteristics can vary in the degree to which they are institutionalised and professionalised (Dupuits et al., 2021; Fisher et al., 2012). A group can consciously choose – and redesign – its structure without changing its membership and core purpose; for example, the development of protocols around meetings, communications, staffing or contracting, and coordination may become important as groups become more enmeshed in relationships with funders and regulators and thus need to demonstrate transparency and accountability. Sinner et al. (2022b) surveyed 61 catchment groups in Aotearoa and found that about 40% had no legal structure or status while the remainder were organised as charitable trusts or incorporated societies.[10] We can thus see that structure, like other group characteristics, is likely to evolve over time.

Formal structure can enable catchment groups to carry out certain actions; however, groups that do not have a strong purpose and membership base may instead be constrained by formal structures and processes. This is evident in the case of Te Hoiere, where a top-heavy government project encountered an absence of catchment groups on the ground; farmers and tangata whenua who wanted to access funding thus found themselves hampered by project processes and red tape. While professionalisation may be a valid prerequisite for receiving public funding or for assuming responsibility for regulatory compliance, it does not come without costs for groups. The significant proportion of groups that remain informally organised suggests that their members perceive important trade-offs with adopting formal legal structures – a dilemma that we discuss in the next section.

Resourcing often comes with strings attached

The resources available to catchment groups influence what actions they undertake, and most groups seek financial and/or non-financial support from government or non-governmental organisations. Accessing support, however, is often fraught. As one Forum member related,

> Probably the one I struggle the most with is when [support] doesn't align with what the group wants to do. The support is offered but it's often in a package (…). Sometimes the group has to change because that's part of the relationship, but other times, they just walk away from that support.

Our Catchment Forum and PAG discussions confirmed that some form of support is essential for most groups, especially in the early stages of becoming established; the discussions also revealed, however, that there are inherent tensions in accessing support where groups must meet specific requirements or deliver particular outcomes. Access to the right kind of support – given a group's goals, needs and capabilities – is therefore a key determinant of its capacity to achieve its goals. Forum participants stressed that not all offers of funding are helpful. Government funding, in particular, can come with significant requirements for reporting and accountability, which further stretches the resources of some groups. Groups may also be pulled in different directions to meet funding criteria and may thereby end up compromising on their core purpose in order to qualify for support.

In the case of the Te Hoiere Catchment, government funding of more than NZ$7.5 million (US$4.2 million) was allocated to a large catchment-scale restoration project. Governance of the project was complex and multilayered and local landowners had limited say in where these resources were focused. The Waitangi Group, on the other hand, was funded and coordinated by the regional council and support for the group was largely tied to its role in the regional planning process. Following completion of the catchment action plan, the group was asked each year to select a project that would receive a NZ$10,000

[10] Under New Zealand law, a charitable trust is a legal structure designed to hold assets for charitable purposes (as defined in the Charitable Trusts Act 1957); an incorporated society is a not-for-profit legal entity that provides legal separation between the society and its members (as defined under the Incorporated Societies Act 2022).

(about US$6000) grant. However, the group itself is no longer the main recipient of government funding in the catchment, and in 2020 a different entity named the Ko Waitangi te Awa Trust secured NZ$2.5 million (about US$1.5 million) in government funding to deliver on tangata whenua water quality aspirations. Both the Pourakino and Mangaone groups, in contrast, were structured to generate funds from members via subscriptions and levies. While self-funding may have generated less overall resourcing for these groups, they had full control over the use of the funds and could be more focused in their activities. The Mangaone Group, for example, is gradually building up its monitoring infrastructure in order to better document its actions and environmental outcomes, with a view to generating longer-term support and potentially even sponsorship from local businesses, the community, and public agencies. The Pourakino group was established and active prior to the emergence of a regional body whose mandate was to support catchment groups, and some in the group were wary of welcoming support from this body for fear of losing control over the group's direction.

The varied experiences of our case study catchments reflect a broader observation that has been made in previous research, which highlights the critical role of funding for core group functions such as administration and facilitation. Sinner et al. (2022b), for instance, found that 36% of surveyed catchment groups charged a membership subscription, although for most this was less than NZ$160 (US$94) per year. They also found that groups tended to rely on grant funding from government and charitable foundations and trusts and that they draw upon – and express a need for – non-financial support, particularly technical support, monitoring, and help with preparing funding applications.

The landscape of support for catchment groups is complex, both in terms of what is needed and the sources of support; this leads groups to access resources in diverse ways. Although a wide range of financial and non-financial support exists, its distribution is generally not equitable. Well-established groups or those in high-profile catchments are typically better positioned to secure additional resources, while many others operate with minimal external funding.

DISCUSSION

In Aotearoa, the Nirvana of compliant catchment groups implementing government policy seems close, yet remains elusive. While the 'catchment groups' solution promises to address many of the shortcomings of individualised freshwater regulation, it may be unrealistic to expect catchment groups to deliver water policy outcomes as long as we do not understand how they function. In reality, groups become established for different reasons and their needs vary. This means that efforts to enlist catchment groups to undertake specific actions such as improving regulated water quality attributes can have uneven and unintended consequences. In particular, focusing investment narrowly on specific measures to deliver water quality outcomes can miss the opportunity to invest in the deeper foundational elements that catchment groups need if they are to find purpose, build social capital, sustain themselves, and achieve long-term outcomes. When supporting agencies prioritise catchment groups that are already 'water quality action ready', they miss the opportunity to nurture groups that could become ready in future.

As our research shows, grasping the foundational elements of catchment groups can help with thinking about how they function and how they can change. The five dimensions of difference we explored above illuminate the complex trade-offs that groups face in deciding how to align themselves with the emergent catchment group discourse; they can also provide a tool for thinking about what types of activities and strategies might make sense within a given place-based ensemble of elements. Here we distil three themes to put our findings in a wider context.

Foundational elements of groups

As depicted in Figure 2, purpose and membership are fundamentally important in shaping a group's potential. These two elements strongly influence and underpin which relationships a group develops, the

structure it adopts, the support it receives and, ultimately, what actions it undertakes. In Aotearoa, government initiatives for catchment groups have focused primarily on structure and resources and have largely overlooked the importance of purpose and membership. Yet if these latter two foundational elements are not oriented towards policy goals and related actions, it is unlikely that funding targeted at group structure and resourcing will deliver the desired policy outcomes. The government has also not recognised the important role that relationships have in shaping both purpose (by creating a moral imperative for landowners to address concerns of their local community) and resources (by enabling groups to enlist other parties to help achieve outcomes). Understanding catchment groups through the lens of these five foundational elements enables us to map out differences among groups and can help groups to recognise their commitments, their priorities, and the trade-offs they face in consolidating as a group.

For a group to be effective – that is, to be able to implement actions that advance its purpose – it must be clear on what its purpose is, but this is not necessarily straightforward. Group purpose is not always explicit; it can be loosely defined and may even be understood differently by different group members. Nor is purpose static; it evolves and generally needs to be re-examined and reaffirmed over time. Furthermore, purpose and membership are co-constitutive. Who will, and will not, join a group is strongly influenced by its purpose (among other things) and the membership composition of a group will, in turn, influence how the group's purpose evolves over time.

Catchment groups may benefit from considering the five dimensions that we have identified (refer to Figure 2). They may find it helpful to consider how well these five dimensions align with the group's stated purpose and with the actions that would advance that purpose. These five identified dimensions may also help clarify where the group is willing to compromise and where it is able to adapt. To access certain resources, for example, some groups will need to shift or widen the focus of their work, or they may decide to adopt a different legal structure or seek new relationships. This underscores the foundational nature of purpose and membership in group identity and makes clear how other elements are built on this foundation.

Valuing difference instead of conformity

Catchment groups in Aotearoa New Zealand are faced with a complex landscape of regulatory agencies, indigenous interests, and diverse communities, all of whom are seeking to address externalities of land use on the freshwater environment. Some groups may be well-equipped to deliver outcomes for water quality while others may not be. This warrants attention because there are many valuable and policy-relevant activities that catchment groups are undertaking (and could be supported to undertake), as long as difference is recognised and accepted.

Understanding *how* catchment groups differ can help tailor support to the place-based needs and individual characteristics of the respective groups. As research in other settings has found (see, for example, Clark et al., 2005; Margerum, 2008), the foundational aspects of groups such as purpose and membership are highly place-specific and reflect particular local issues and community values that are often different from national policy goals. Targeting catchment group funding and support primarily to water quality improvement is likely to boost some groups that are already doing (or poised to do) this work; however, many other groups that are not yet delivering water quality improvements may still be worth funding for their long-term environmental and social benefits.

Acknowledging key axes of difference problematises the Nirvana of a catchment-group-led approach to freshwater policy implementation; however, it does not mean that diverse catchment groups cannot be usefully enrolled in the implementation of freshwater policy. Rather, the ways that different groups are enabled and constrained have important implications for both the groups themselves and the entities that would support them, and for the group's prospects for achieving freshwater policy goals.

Support and the risks of instrumentalisation

Taking a bottom-up view of catchment groups enables a rethinking of how scarce resources might best support public good outcomes. Traditionally, a government agency might offer subsidies or grants that are focused on actions or outcomes of most immediate interest, such as actions that lead to improvement of regulatory water quality attributes (see the top of Figure 2). Groups may also provide other important public benefits, however, such as building social cohesion and fostering cross-cultural relationships and collaboration. For instance, although the potential for catchment groups to engage more meaningfully with tangata whenua remains largely unrealised across Aotearoa New Zealand, there are promising signs that it could be realised with investment of time, resources and good will (Sinner et al., 2023).

Across our four case studies, as with the great majority of New Zealand groups surveyed by Sinner et al. (2022b), catchment groups received support from government and non-government agencies. The provision of support, however, affects their direction, scope, identity and cohesiveness.

Narrowly targeted support puts pressure on some parts of the wider system by driving groups to change what they do and how they do it; it can even reshape more fundamental elements of group purpose and membership. As one of our Forum members remarked in 2022, "We have to be really wary as catchment groups that we don't lose (…) the clarity of who we are and what it is we're doing. If we want some help then we'll (…) invite you, but we still own it".

Support that is too closely tied to water quality goals will be misaligned with the purpose and goals of many catchment groups, and to access this kind of support groups may be forced to stretch, or compromise on, aspects of their purpose, relationships and activities in ways that divert them from their original goals and sap the energy and capacity of members (Curtis et al., 2014; Sobels et al., 2001). Our Forum members related concerns about funding arrangements weakening their control over group direction and observed that in some cases groups needed to 'walk away' from offers of support.

To leverage community energy and activity towards valued catchment group outcomes, supporting agencies need to identify types of assistance that do not demand undue compromise on the part of groups. Such an approach will likely need to be flexible to cater to the unique priorities, strengths and weaknesses of groups; support systems will thus need to be equitable and transparent and will need to avoid taking a cookie-cutter approach to catchment groups. A potential strength of local, catchment-scale action lies precisely in its locally grounded and community-embedded nature, and a key challenge for supporting institutions is how to nurture this effectively. Supporting catchment groups to nurture connections with their communities and build social capital locally is likely to lay foundations for wider public support for catchment group work where it is seen to contribute to the common good.

Catchment groups should also recognise that government agencies have different objectives for, and perspectives on, catchment groups. To some extent, support offered to catchment groups is performative and politicised (see Sinner et al., 2025), with agencies and politicians pursuing multiple ends in their efforts to be seen to support catchment group work. Furthermore, as the political climate shifts, the expectations placed on catchment groups also change; for instance, the election in October 2023 of a conservative government that was more sympathetic to farmers and intent on reducing regulation has changed the incentives facing catchment groups in Aotearoa. With regulation less of a threat, it is an open question whether groups will increase (or even maintain) their efforts to improve freshwater outcomes.

Catchment groups face the challenge of developing ways of working within a dynamic political context. Where groups do not recognise the varied and changing objectives of supporting agencies, there is a danger that they will be pulled in several different and conflicting directions; this is particularly a risk where policy coherence and consistency are assumed or expected.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has drawn on insights and empirical evidence from collaborative research in Aotearoa New Zealand to consider to what degree an emerging catchment-group-led approach might support action to improve water quality. The 'catchment group solution' that is being put forth envisages a landscape of catchment-scale activity where catchment groups implement actions in service of freshwater policy goals. This is an example of what Molle (2008) termed a 'Nirvana concept', which carries the promise of addressing several of the shortcomings and deficiencies in water policy and management. The promise of catchment groups resonates differently with different actors. Government agencies and other entities that want to support catchment groups must walk a line between enabling and instrumentalising local groups. As our research highlighted, catchment groups differ considerably from place to place according to local context and issues. At the same time, they act as a kind of boundary object in that a wide variety of actors – from farmers to regulators – recognise their potential as a vehicle for achieving diverse ends. Catchment groups are thus differently positioned to carry out policy-relevant actions that implement a catchment-scale solution to freshwater policy problems. Understanding how catchment groups differ – rather than assuming, or aspiring to, their compliant uniformity – will help foster their capacity to deliver both water quality outcomes and much wider positive community outcomes.

Our findings can inform both catchment groups and those organisations seeking to support them. Beyond the Aotearoa New Zealand context, the findings can also have wider relevance for efforts to enrol collectives and community groups in environmental policy delivery (Schmid and Taylor Aiken, 2023). For the groups themselves, there is potentially much to gain by aligning and engaging with expanding initiatives to support them. Groups that do aspire to delivering freshwater policy outcomes may benefit from thinking through the five dimensions that we have identified in this paper and using them to determine where they are willing to adapt and stretch. To access certain resources, some groups will need to compromise on aspects of their core purpose, which can affect, for example, the group's identity. Overall, groups should be clear on their purpose so as to understand the potential trade-offs involved in accepting different kinds of support.

For supporting agencies, it is clearly a complex and ambitious task to rally and resource catchment groups at a national scale for delivery of freshwater outcomes. If the goal is to support groups to implement policy, we suggest that supporting agencies should broaden their support and resourcing beyond the realm of specific on-the-ground actions for freshwater quality; in this way, they can foster the foundational aspects of group identity and capacity that underpin a group's ability to fulfil longer-term freshwater goals.

As local catchment groups need to figure out for themselves what works in their place and time, the most important kind of government support may be that which improves their ability to do this. Such an approach may facilitate catchment groups contributing to policy outcomes and may help them be seen as more than simply a delivery vehicle for policy.

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