

Controversial dam removals founded on value conflicts

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Removal of the Kuba dam on the Nätra river in March 2007. Credit: Håkon Söderberg

Researchers at Umeå University conclude that public opposition to dam removal is not based on knowledge deficiency, as is sometimes argued in dam removal science. It is instead a case of different understandings and valuation of the environment and the functions it provides. The findings

are now published in the journal *Ecology and Society*.

Dam removal is an increasingly common practice as old splash dams and small hydropower dams have become obsolete. Although the removal of these dams has [ecological benefits](#) by restoring rivers to their former courses, local residents sometimes contest dam removals.

"We wanted to understand how the proponents and opponents of dam removal think about the function of two contrasting ecosystems – an existing dam with a pond and a potential running stream without the pond. The local people who fight to have a dam remain in place have often been dismissed as unknowledgeable," says Dolly Jørgensen, environmental historian at the Department of Ecology and [Environmental Science](#).

Together with ecologist Birgitta Malm-Renöfält, she investigated the types of arguments made for and against dam removal in newspaper articles about dams in the Swedish towns Alby, Hallstahammar, Orsa, and Tallåsen.

They found that those who want to remove the dam place a high value on the return of game fish to the ecosystem, [recreational fishing](#), and restoration in general. Opponents want the dam to remain because of recreational opportunities for bathing and beaches, the aesthetics of the pond's still water, and the [cultural heritage](#) of the pond and the historic dam.

"The [public opposition](#) is not based on knowledge deficiency, where more information would lead to better ecological decision-making. The locals simply value different aspects of the environment than scientists or [environmentalists](#) that want the dam removed," says Dolly Jørgensen.

As the number of dam removal projects continues to grow in Sweden

and other places in the world, controversies are likely to become more common. Because a decision to remove or keep the dam will result in one side losing the ecosystem services they value, compromise solutions may be difficult to reach.

More information: Jørgensen, D. and Renöfält, B. 2013. Damned If You Do, Dammed If You Don't: Debates on Dam Removal in the Swedish Media. *Ecology and Society* 18 (1): 18.

www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol18/iss1/art18/

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