Supporting champions in river management

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Abstract

River champions are people working for better water and river management in a range of capacities, and who are particularly influential and effective in driving progress. The championship concept is not new, but tends to emphasize the bold and highly visible leader. This archetypal champion is at odds with the more humble and quieter forms of leadership that we frequently encounter in our work and communities. These less-visible champions are in danger of being overlooked. A more inclusive characterization of championship can enrich existing conceptualizations. We argue that many river champions lead quietly and are effective because they build and use social capital to influence others. They are well-connected and can help to bridge scales of management. We advocate that championship must be recognized and supported within and beyond institutions. This can be enacted by rewarding people for their time in ways that are meaningful and appropriate (i.e., not only financially) and by prioritizing connection between people. We offer specific examples of how this can be done in a river management setting. By recognizing and supporting river champions in all their forms, we can maximize their value as a critical component of participatory water and river management systems.

This article is categorized under:

- Water and Life > Conservation, Management, and Awareness.
- Engineering Water > Planning Water.
- Human Water > Water Governance.

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leadership, participation, river rehabilitation, social capital, social networks

1 | INTRODUCTION

In an era of multi-million-dollar programs for environmental management, it is often forgotten that achieving positive, sustainable environmental and social outcomes, in-place and on-the-ground, is an innately social and participatory process. Many people care intensely about their rivers, and, as most practitioners will attest, river management is as much about managing human relationships as it is about managing environments (Natcher, Davis, & Hickey, 2005). The capacity to develop, manage and nurture stakeholder relationships, and enact and inspire participation, often goes unrecognized, and yet these are critical attributes of those who are the most effective in river management.

As researchers, teachers, and practitioners in the river management industry, we frequently encounter individuals who are particularly influential and effective in driving river management initiatives. These individuals best fit the description of "champions." A river champion can be anyone—a local community member, Indigenous Traditional

Owner, a rural landholder, a practitioner employed in government, or a scientist working in either a professional or voluntary capacity.

The championship concept emerged in organizational management and innovation literatures in the early 1990s (e.g., Howell & Higgins, 1990), and has been adopted more recently in fields related to sustainable water management. Previous research profiled champions in sustainable urban water management, identifying personal characteristics, behaviors, types of power, outcomes, and supportive contextual factors associated with effective champions (Taylor, 2009). Champions are characterized as leaders who are unusually influential in driving change. Champions may be project champions or executive champions (Taylor, 2009), and are often emergent leaders (Taylor, Cocklin, & Brown, 2012). They tend to use personal power more than positional power (Taylor, 2009) and influence others in formal or informal networks (Straith, Adamowski, & Reilly, 2014).

The "champion" concept usefully highlights the importance of critical leaders in environmental management initiatives. However, our experience tells us that the label of "champion" would sit uncomfortably on the shoulders of many who play critical roles in advancing river management agendas in their communities and workplaces. The term "champion" conjures the image of a hero or the elite winner. This is at odds with the humility and modesty of many of the champions we have met. In some cases, this results in these individuals being taken for granted or being overlooked. In response, we invite readers to consider an expanded concept of championship—not only the frontrunners (Brown, Farrelly, & Loorbach, 2013) and visible leaders, but also those individuals who champion rivers in ways that do not conform to more traditional styles of leadership.

While in this article, we use the term "champion" to label people, we conceptualize champion as a verb as well as a noun. We argue that championship is less an innate quality possessed by some, and more of a behavior that may be practiced by many. We begin by outlining some common features of championship that we have observed. This is in no way exhaustive, but offers a prompt to help others with identifying championship in their own contexts. We then present principles that can be enacted to support championship of all kinds in a more inclusive way.

2 | WHAT DO RIVER CHAMPIONS DO?

2.1 | River champions are leaders, but may lead quietly

While champions are undoubtedly leaders, their leadership can take different forms. Some may stand out as obvious thought leaders and visionaries, but many others are quiet and humble leaders who influence their peers more subtly (Box 1). Many river champions we have met present as introverts with strong social skills and high emotional intelligence—not necessarily the loudest person at a meeting. For example, a rural landholder may gain recognition and respect from more traditional farmers by *demonstrating* the benefits of streamside rehabilitation on their property,

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BOX 1   Quiet, humble leadership

Greg* is a fourth-generation farmer of seed potatoes, prime lamb, and fodder. In 2011, he bought 196 acres of adjoining land, which had been heavily grazed, was overrun with weeds and was a source of sediment pollution into the river. While many people in his position might fence only the immediate riparian zone for rehabilitation, Greg opted to fence the entire floodplain. He developed a whole-of-farm plan and built new water management systems, created smaller paddocks, and planted feed. Greg is qualified in conservation earthworks, and used these skills to slow down flow across the landscape. He also experimented with scalping to encourage seed germination from mature trees. Greg says, "Water quality improved within 12 months, the total ecology changed within 5 years and there has been so much regrowth that we can expect full shade and shelter [for stock] within 10 years." Greg considers the improvements in water quality the greatest achievement. A quieter achiever, Greg is well respected in his community and a passionate advocate for rural people's mental health. He is generous with his time and is regarded as someone who runs a profitable farm business while caring for the people and environment around him.

*Name has been changed to maintain anonymity.

rather than *telling* others how to manage theirs. These river champions may not intend to lead, but their commitment to a cause places them in a leadership position and their authentic demonstration of logic builds trust with others in their networks (Frei, 2018).

2.2 | River champions build and use social capital effectively

Social capital is the trust, knowledge, reciprocity, relationships, and shared norms that contribute to a sense of group identity, and which support collaboration and action (Coleman, 1988; Onyx & Bullen, 2000; Putnam, 1995). River champions use social capital effectively by connecting people, networks, ideas, and resources. These individuals draw in relevant experience from their network to incubate new, emerging relationships, and, in so doing, expand and diversify the connectivity of any network they are a part of. River champions are effective because they develop relationships of trust with their peers and with others in their networks who share a common goal or passion for rivers and their health. They are powerful *because of* their relationships with others (Mould, Fryirs, & Howitt, 2018). When outsiders work with river champions, they may be "lent" the trust that the champions have established in their communities. The social capital lent by river champions to other trusted individuals enables others to access people and social resources that may otherwise be unavailable (Box 2).

2.3 | River champions work and think across a range of scales

Many challenges associated with river management involve thinking about issues, problems, and processes across different spatial and temporal scales (e.g., Maynard, 2013). River champions often work and think *across* and *between* a range of spatial scales (e.g., local community, regional organization, catchment or river reach, state, or nation) and temporal scales (e.g., since the last flood, over years, decades, or centuries), and are grounded in their place-context (e.g., social and environmental history). The champion's skill in using relationships with and between river places, river people, and river institutions, epitomizes relational ideas about scale (Howitt, 1998). River champions in professional positions often spend time and effort working with landholders to support river rehabilitation on their properties, while using catchment-framed knowledge to connect projects between properties, with this work situated within broader spatial and temporal contexts. This is often referred to as "middle-ground" governance (i.e., between top-down and bottom-up Hassenforder, Clavreul, Akhmouch, & Ferrand, 2018). Community-based river champions may connect people and knowledge between property and community scales to establish collaborative networks from the bottom-up (Box 3).

BOX 2   Building and using social capital

Violet* is a rural landholder who has independently received grants and collaboratively developed techniques for removal of persistent riparian weeds on her property. To help others learn from her experiences, she has hosted "field days" on her property. However, she recognized that even moderate use of a particularly effective herbicide was contentious in her community and that strongly held, opposing views were causing friction. In response, she organized a community round table to workshop alternatives to herbicide use. Violet invited landholders with different opinions and experiences in weed removal techniques, local and state government representatives, scientific researchers (including the authors), and experienced contractors. The result was a constructive discussion on possible alternatives, agreement to trial some of those alternatives on different properties and establishment of relationships between people from various places and groups. Violet recognized the value of building social capital in this situation, bringing people together in order to build rapport and trust across differences of opinion.

    *Name has been changed to maintain anonymity.

> **BOX 3 Working and thinking across multiple scales**
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> Lauren* is an environmental management practitioner employed by a state government to help landholders in her region with property and natural resource management. When working with individual landholders on riparian zone management at the property scale, she prioritizes new projects that will link up existing projects and tries to connect participating landholders so that they can learn from each other's experiences. In doing so, Lauren is helping landholders to address property- and reach-scale issues but considering their position in a catchment context to strategically prioritize projects. Lauren acts as a first point of contact for landholders within her region, because she has established a rapport with them over many years. She can then connect them with colleagues in her professional network who have expertise in other property management issues, bridging government-directed (top-down) and community-directed (bottom-up) processes.
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> *Name has been changed to maintain anonymity.

3 | WHY WE NEED RIVER CHAMPIONS

We need river champions because they expand the relationships between river management institutions and riparian communities and the environments they care about. The clearest benefits are in relation to their ability to support and improve understanding of formal management institutions and to nurture opportunities to challenge, influence, trust, and participate in river management decision making and implementation. This relies on the skills used by champions as outlined in Section 1 (as well as those reported by Taylor, 2009). In some cases, river champions (and what they do) become contested within an organization, particularly in organizations with strong institutional boundaries. This is because these champions often do not conform to traditional leadership styles or to traditional ways of knowing or doing. As such, they can be viewed as champions and contested at the same time and by the same people. However, we need river champions to unsettle and disrupt the status quo.

Champions, whether working in professional and voluntary capacities, also help to better target engagement between groups. Participatory processes need to embody the principles of empowerment, equity, trust, and learning (Reed, 2008), with the co-production of knowledge and decisions a key outcome (e.g., Renner et al., 2013; Rogers, 2006). This level of participation is a significant undertaking, and one in which champions play important roles. Rather than offering a shortcut for avoiding meaningful and inclusive participation, champions are able to guide and support processes of collaboration, increasing group coherence (Bateman, 2013), and developing well-established relationships of trust through ongoing collaboration (Castleden, Morgan, & Lamb, 2012). By drawing on their social networks, lending their social capital and working at the boundaries of institutions and communities (Bateman, 2013; Haas, 2015), champions can help to embed the collaborative effort required for trust to flourish. Trusted champions increase levels of buy-in, trust, and ownership from people (and particularly communities) who are provided with opportunities for meaningful participation in decision-making (Eden & Tunstall, 2006; Fujutani, McFall, Randler, & Arlinghaus, 2017; Reed, 2008).

4 | NURTURING CHAMPIONSHIP IN RIVER MANAGEMENT

Champions of all kinds require support in order for their efforts to be effective and sustained over time. The strategies and practices that can support champions are strongly context dependent, and useful processes have been proposed to encourage and facilitate championship (e.g., Taylor et al., 2012). However, in recognizing the diversity of nontraditional river champions, we contribute some broader principles which should underpin more specific strategies, and suggest approaches to nurture those quiet champions who might often be overlooked.

4.1 | Reward time

Perhaps the most valuable resource committed to a cause by any champion is their time. For practitioners and scientists, time is a scarce resource (Castleden et al., 2012) but this is particularly true for volunteers in river management,

for whom time volunteered must be traded away from other areas of life (e.g., paid work or family). Time taken to build relationships, participate in social networks and collaborate is almost always overlooked in the "Key Performance Indicators" against which professionals or community grant recipients must justify their work, leaving much of this work to voluntary efforts. Rewarding time spent need not always be in terms of financial benefit; understanding river champions' motivations for donating their time, and the trade-offs they make, can help people to find creative—and often more meaningful—ways of appropriately supporting and rewarding championship. One example is the formal recognition of river champions by the UK River Restoration Centre (https://www.therrc.co.uk/river-champions). We need to recognize that social networks are not only critical mediums through which champions are effective, but that well-functioning social networks support and reward, through social connection, those who donate their time in service of a common cause (Box 4).

4.2 | Prioritize connection

While many environmental management funding agencies and organizations espouse that knowledge is important and to be shared, they often fail to adequately fund its production and sharing. The transaction costs of building relationships and connections, through which knowledge can be shared, is often seen as too high and distracting from the "real work" of on-ground river management. The suppression of river champions in some professional settings by actively discouraging, de-funding or over-bureaucratizing activities such as fieldwork and community engagement, isolates river champions from the people and the environment that directly benefit from their expertise. Where river champions are supported and encouraged to invest time and resources in developing social capital, the flow-on effects from investment are substantial—not only for the champion, but for the community and environment, too. River management institutions must, therefore, prioritize social connection when allocating time and funding so that champions feel supported in doing their vital work of building and maintaining social capital (Box 5).

5 | CONCLUSION: TO *CHAMPION* A RIVER

With concerted effort, change can be made to re-tune our professional communities and cultures to the value of social capital, and to those people who contribute significantly to its creation, maintenance and application. In the context of water and river management, we invite readers to consider how people in their networks are practicing championship and how they can be better supported to do their work, in ways that are meaningful to them. Supporting championship

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BOX 4   Rewarding time with social connection

Melissa* facilitates and coordinates community-based "Landcare" projects on rural land. She is not the one to stand up and make speeches, but prefers to work hard behind the scenes, connecting people around on-ground environmental rehabilitation projects. Her community-based work is on a freelance basis, but she also works part-time for a government-sector employer. Melissa finds that her government work is not nearly as rewarding as her freelance work because the social incentives are missing. While freelance work is less financially stable, she is strongly motivated to persist and advance because the social networks in which she in embedded reward her. The rewards are connection to people with the same values and recognition of how her particular skills and experience bring value to the network and its shared projects. An environmental non-government organization (NGO) that she is associated with has supported her attendance at river management conferences, which would otherwise need to be paid from her personal budget. This NGO is unable to support Melissa with a salary, but sponsoring her attendance at this conference is in recognition for her commitment, an investment in her social connectivity (professional networking) and recognizes her particular motivations for championing river management. It is a creative and personally meaningful reward.

    *Name has been changed to maintain anonymity.

> **BOX 5   Prioritizing long-term connection**
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> Peter* is a regional manager in a state government environmental management agency, responsible for supporting landholders with advice on property and natural resource management. Sometimes the extension officers in his team develop a particularly strong rapport with one or more of the communities in their region. Peter recognizes the value of maintaining a strong link between communities and the government agency, with a human face that landholders trust. Thus, he encourages those officers to be a consistent point of contact for those communities and allows flexibility in their work schedules so that they can maintain strong connections; for example, by having face-to-face property visits and attending community events on weekends. In this way, the team is prioritizing connection as a basis for providing a good service to the community.
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> *Name has been changed to maintain anonymity.

needs to be a priority for institutions, networks, and communities of all kinds as we pursue sustainable environments and societies into the future.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Simon Mould: Conceptualization; visualization; writing-original draft; writing-review and editing. **Kirstie Fryirs:** Conceptualization; supervision; writing-review and editing. **Siwan Lovett:** Writing-review and editing. **Richard Howitt:** Writing-review and editing.

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