Living with water - plural knowledges for water adaptation

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What was the initial situation?

The project set out to explore how transdisciplinary collaborations that bring together critical water research, artistic practice, and community engagement can broaden understandings of the multiple relations between water and society. Engaging with the manyfold ways in which water and society relate is crucial for developing more inclusive and situated understandings of contemporary water-related challenges and possible ways forward.

The project was developed as close collaboration between the researcher coordinating the project and the Kunstkollektiv FLUNST active in the tidal coastal region of Altes Land in Lower Saxony. As one of the largest fruit farming areas in Europe, the region's economy heavily depends on water for irrigation and agriculture. Water also holds cultural significance, as the area's history and identity are closely linked to its waterways, shaping a local sense of belonging. However, this close relationship with water presents challenges as sea level rise and extreme events such as floods and droughts pose significant threats to the region's future.

To explore the multiple relations between water and society, the project drew inspiration from Donna Haraway and other feminist scholars, who invite to pay attention to how stories and storytelling shape how we understand and act in the world. By collecting and bringing into dialogue a range of water stories from the Altes Land region, the project aimed not only to offer a space to think about plural water and society relation but also to raise questions about which stories and perspectives are amplified, which are silenced.

What has happened in the project?

The project centered on two interconnected formats—water stories and water dialogue—that served as creative means to explore and connect diverse forms of knowledge and experience related to living with water.

Ten distinct water stories were developed by the FLUNST collective, each representing a unique artistic approach to life in the tidal landscapes of the Altes Land region. These stories illustrate how human and more-than-human inhabitants—fish, birds, plants, and the land itself—adapt to the dynamic conditions shaped by tides and rivers. In an initial workshop, the team identified ten perspectives on



living with and along the region's water bodies. Each participant adopted one viewpoint and expressed it through an individual artistic medium such as photography, painting, film, sculpture, or performance. Each story draws on interviews and conversations with local residents as well as encounters with morethan-human environment. Through a range of visual and sound-based practices, the project transformed lived experiences into accessible artistic narratives. Unlike conventional policy documents, these artistic interpretations invited emotional engagement and dialogue, offering a more inclusive and public way to discuss water-related challenges and aspirations.

The water dialogue took the form of a daylong event-exhibition rather than a traditional discussion forum. It combined music, lecture performances, films, an exhibition, a street parade, and a closing celebration. Visitors were encouraged to move freely between installations, immersing themselves in the multiple perspectives and reflecting on the interconnections between water and society.

The development of both formats required extensive individual and collective work. Regular meetings allowed the team to exchange insights, align artistic processes, and coordinate the organization of the event and accompanying catalogue. The collaboration demanded flexibility to accommodate different creative rhythms and practical requirements, yet the project maintained its original concept throughout.

To ensure a lasting impact, a catalogue was produced, documenting the ten water stories and the process behind them. Together, the water stories and dialogue created a multidimensional exploration of the relations between water and society in a constantly changing coastal landscape.

What has been achieved?

The project demonstrated that art-research-community collaborations do offer opportunities to explore the plural water and society relations. Taken together, the ten stories developed within the project articulate diverse relations between people, birds, quasi-fish, vegetation, water, and technology. They serve as narrative entry points into the intertwined ecologies of the region, revealing how human and more-than-human lives are entangled through shared water flows and material infrastructures. The stories also proved valuable in connecting past, present, and future perspectives, offering multiple temporal and experiential viewpoints on the evolving relations between water and society. While the project did not aim to directly transform local governance structures, it nevertheless succeeded in stimulating public interest in art-research collaborations. A key achievement was the well-attended final public event. The water dialogue provided a novel space for discussing questions of water governance in the region. Moreover, the event demonstrated the potential of art-research initiatives to attract interest of local communities and to provide spaces for dialogue across diverse forms of knowledge and experiences.

The project represented the first transdisciplinary collaboration undertaken by the researcher in the region and the first substantial research-oriented initiative for the FLUNST collective. Despite its small scale, the collaboration provided both partners with valuable experience in navigating transdisciplinary processes, establishing shared methods of communication, and combining artistic and research-based approaches. As such, the project functioned as an important learning platform and a foundation for future collaborative initiatives. Moreover, the project identified key themes for further research, particularly how relations with water are interlinked with experiences and feelings of belonging, memory, identity, and care. An open question for future research is how these relational dimensions influence collective visions for the region's future and its water governance.

What could happen next?

The project attracted considerable attention from both residents and municipal institutions. Building on this positive response, the team has been invited to present the project in a dedicated exhibition



with accompanying events at the Altes Land Museum, planned for Spring 2026. This exhibition will provide an opportunity to further engage with local communities, expand on the themes of living with water, and deepen the dialogue between art, science, and policy. In addition, the project will be featured at the upcoming Fluid Interdisciplinary Festival in Berlin. The project has also been presented at the New Cultural Geography Conference, where it contributed to academic discussions on pluralizing water governance. The project team intends to continue exploring the intersection between research and artistic practice in future collaborations and possibly in a follow-up transdisciplinary project.

Further information

- Catalogue of the event / exhibition "Flunstwerke Wassergeschichten im Dialog"
- Website FLUNST: <u>www.flunst.art</u>
- Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/ig_flunst/
- Article in the newspaper Buxtehude Tageblatt 'Sie verwandeln Wasser in Kunst' by B. Vasel, 17
 June 2025
- Fluid interdisciplinarity festival https://www.anthroposcenes.de/festival

