

[Did You Say Reference Conditions? Ecological and Socio-economic Perspectives on the European Water Framework Directive \(Bouleau & Pont 2014\) \[1\]](#)

Reference conditions are a key concept in the European Water Framework Directive (WFD). The WFD stipulates that the ecological status of a given water body shall be assessed by quantifying the deviation from a set of reference conditions that represent the stable state of an ecosystem in the absence of significant human disturbance. This concept is subject to criticism from several authors, particularly because underlying ecological concepts are weak and the distinction between natural variability and the effects of anthropogenic activities on ecosystem function will become increasingly artificial.

In this paper, a sociologist and an aquatic ecologist examine the origin, successes and limits of the reference conditions concept and raise important questions about applying this concept in practice. We argue that this concept fitted specific needs from different institutions and stakeholders which promoted the WFD. Monitoring practices using this concept require some adaptations. Setting goals for restoration based on reference conditions is more problematic. A more adaptive management approach would be wiser.

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