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Restoring biodiversity in France: options and opportunities

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The recently adopted European regulation on nature restoration is a key instrument for achieving biodiversity protection objectives, but also for improving the resilience of territories. In preparing their dedicated national action plans, Member States can use nature restoration to pursue a number of targets to improve environmental health and adapt to climate change. In France, the regional COPs for ecological planning are a relevant scale for designing these measures and deploying them by mobilizing multiple stakeholders.

By adopting the Global Biodiversity Framework in December 2022, France has committed to restoring 30% of its degraded ecosystems. Biodiversity can be restored actively (by replanting, bringing back species where they

disappeared) or passively (by reducing or halting pressures, leading to species returning spontaneously).

It is one of the pillars of the [French National Biodiversity Strategy](#) (SNB in French) published at the end of 2023. As such, the restoration of ecosystems is part of the deployment of ecological planning, initiated by Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne in November 2023 in the territories. This territorial approach, led by the prefects and presidents of the regions, is based on participatory processes known as regional COPs (Conferences of the Parties)¹. Each region is expected to submit its roadmap by the autumn, as work has fallen behind the initial timetable of summer 2024. The impact of the legislative elections in July on the process is uncertain at this stage. This work is an opportunity to reflect on the structuring action of restoration policies in the region. On this scale, [the benefits of restoration can be felt directly](#), for example by improving water quality or limiting the damage caused by extreme climate events in agricultural and urban environments.

Most French regions have a regional biodiversity strategy that identifies actions to restore ecosystems. The regional COPs can provide impetus and resources for the deployment of these actions, by linking them to the more general challenges of the region's ecological transition. However, the regional COPs, which aim to identify measures for the ecological transition with local elected representatives, struggle to address the issue of biodiversity, including that of restoration. We have identified two obstacles that need to be overcome if the regional COPs are to propose restoration measures that are resilient and adapted to the regions.

Beyond nature conservation, restoring biodiversity as a cross-cutting lever for territorial resilience

The COPs should not limit themselves to addressing the restoration of degraded habitats when dealing with the preservation of biodiversity. When the COPs consider the levers for action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in agriculture and forestry or for water management, restoration can be approached from three angles:

1. **Rethinking the resilience of territories through ecosystems:** at the level of catchment areas, improving air, water and soil quality and adapting to climate change can be based on a range of actions that include restoring ecosystems (diversity of species in forestry and farming, for example). In addition to the economic benefits, this resilience also protects people and property from chemical pollution (pesticides), forest fires ([UICN Comité français, 2022](#)) and flooding ([UICN Comité français, 2019](#)).
2. **Sustainable management of productive ecosystems:** the sustainable management of public and private forests or the management of grasslands and their reduced overturning help to meet targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, by avoiding the release of CO₂ stored in these ecosystems. This is passive restoration (less frequent selective cutting or less turning over of grasslands, so less disturbance to species between two cycles).
3. **Restoration through active work:** planting hedges or rewetting wetlands are examples of active restoration. They improve the services provided by ecosystems, such as water management: maintaining humidity in the event of low rainfall, or absorption in the event of heavy rainfall.

So when the regional COPs consider restoration actions, those cannot be confined to protected areas alone. Restoration must be considered in conjunction with agricultural production, forest management, water management and housing construction. Placing restoration at the heart of discussions on all ecological planning issues would give all stakeholders a better understanding of the different dimensions of ecosystem restoration and the convergence of levers for decarbonization, adaptation and restoration. Annex VII of the [European regulation](#) provides a list of measures that contribute to the restoration of ecosystems and that can feed into the COPs' discussions in this area,

enabling stakeholders in thematic groups to develop a shared diagnosis.

Specify which players can work to restore nature, and with what resources

The role of local authorities (regions, municipalities, EPCIs², etc.) is of course at this scale. In urban areas, the solutions are well known: management of green spaces, soil unsealing and green and blue networks (TVB) are deployed by town councils. In rural areas, where nature is more visible and the notion of restoration more difficult to embody, the levers for action are not so well identified and require a wider range of stakeholders to seize them, in particular the private sector and individual land owners in the agricultural and forestry sectors. Examples exist still. Some local authorities have undertaken to restore wet grasslands by establishing grazing areas in partnership with water agencies, regional nature parks, chambers of agriculture and professional regional organizations of organic farmers. Local authorities also have the power to create protected agricultural zones (ZAP) if approved by the town council, the chamber of agriculture and the departmental agricultural guidance committee (CDOA) to preserve the agronomic, biological or ecological potential of cultivated land. Other instruments such as rural leases with environmental clauses or real environmental obligations may also be considered.

This means that local authorities can trigger restoration initiatives, and coordinate with other local authorities in peri-urban areas as part of existing consultation forums, when drawing up territorial coherence plans (SCoT) or regional COP roadmaps.

In addition to this coordination issue, the implementation of ambitious restoration projects by local authorities requires technical and financial support. Although local authorities should be able to finance restoration through the natural restoration and renaturation sites mechanism, it will not be enough to cover the surface areas involved, which go beyond local authority property. The [Green Fund](#) provides local authorities with financial support for various actions relating to the ecological transition, including restoration. However, it excludes agricultural areas from its scope, leaving the Ministry of Agriculture with full prerogatives in these areas, with the notable exception of the Water Agencies, which have launched a number of restoration initiatives with local authorities and farmers in recent years.

The Green Fund could therefore better integrate restoration into its various portfolios, linked to natural risk management for example. Agro-ecosystems are both exposed to risks (e.g. droughts) and sources of solutions (e.g. natural flood expansion zones). Given their importance in rural areas, greater attention and resources should be devoted to their restoration in ecological transition budgets such as those of the Green Fund. The aim here would be to [increase direct support for farmers](#) committed to the agroecological transition through loans, subsidies or payments for environmental services, in order to bring together territorial projects focusing on resilience and environmental health and the aspirations or needs of farmers committed or ready to commit to practices that promote the restoration of nature.

The actions identified by the regional COPs can be incorporated into the [Contracts for a Successful Ecological Transition](#) (CRTE in French) signed between the State and local authorities. These contracts include the projects that a local authority wishes to carry out for the ecological transition and identify the sources of public funding available. The European regulation will also make new funds available.

Finally, with regard to technical support, many actors have been implementing and experimenting with actions to restore and sustainably manage ecosystems for several decades. By inviting them to take part in the regional COPs, these actors could bring their expertise on ecosystems to be restored, the actions to be taken and the resources required.

We have highlighted just a few of the many regulatory and financial instruments available. Many of them have not yet realized their potential. The regional COPs provide an opportunity for the State and the regions to take stock of the tools available, for local authorities to clarify their restoration needs and ideas, and for the regional roadmaps to pave the way for better coordination of existing ecosystem restoration initiatives between the State, the regions and local authorities, as well as with private actors. Combining the development of the national restoration plan in response to the European regulation with the work of the regional COPs would enable all the actors involved, not only in the environment sector but also in regional planning, to re-evaluate the role of ecosystems and their restoration where necessary in the economies and well-being of local residents. In this context, restoration policies should be extended beyond nature conservation actors, to involve all land and sea users in their implementation.

1 The term "regional COP" here refers to the entire process of territorializing the objectives of ecological planning. This includes all the work carried out since autumn 2023: work by thematic groups at regional level and discussions and consultations with elected representatives with a view to drafting a regional roadmap.

2 Public institutions for inter-municipal cooperation.

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