

French regional COPs on ecological planning: what lessons can be learned?

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The French national biodiversity strategies implemented since the early 2000s have struggled to halt biodiversity loss. This can be attributed to the challenges in implementing measures across all levels of action, beyond actors such as the ministry, environmental agencies, and conservation stakeholders. Furthermore, their national scope has hindered efforts to target actions at the most appropriate locations and scales.

Over the last two years, several European countries have introduced innovations in governance to better integrate biodiversity into regional development projects. Examples include ecological planning in France, the Dutch National Programme for Rural Areas (NPLG) and Denmark's Green Tripartite Agreement.

This Policy Brief focuses on the French case of regional ecological planning COPs initiated in autumn 2023, examining their contribution to implementing the National Biodiversity Strategy (*Stratégie nationale pour la biodiversité*, SNB). It also proposes recommendations to guide the continuation of work in French regions. In particular, it aims to inform how the COPs might mobilize in 2025 to address adaptation-related issues following the release of the third National Plan for Adaptation to Climate Change (*Plan national d'adaptation au changement climatique*, PNACC).

KEY MESSAGES

Biodiversity issues, just like climate issues, should be addressed in a cross-cutting manner at the COPs. For instance, ecosystem restoration is relevant to the housing, transport and food sectors. Adopting this cross-cutting approach is essential to ensure coherence across actions to advance the ecological transition, guided by the principle of "do no harm". It also highlights the solutions that biodiversity can provide to promote resilient territorial development.

The consultation process within the regional COPs could be improved by integrating expertise across the various thematic groups. This would encourage the development of a collective vision for the region's social, economic and environmental development.

The identification of specific projects to support the transition by local authorities should be guided by their expressed needs and the territorial development issues they prioritize, rather than imposed through a top-down approach using regionally identified levers. This approach would enhance appropriation of the levers by local authorities and improve the relevance of the proposed projects.

The integration of biodiversity into regional ecological planning roadmaps must be continuously improved to ensure the effective implementation of the SNB. The adoption of the PNACC and the drafting of the national plan for nature restoration offer an opportunity to revisit biodiversity within the regional COPs and to implement the governance arrangements described in this report.

1. REGIONAL COPS: WHAT ADDED VALUE DO THEY BRING TO GOVERNANCE?

Regions have long been engaged in the ecological transition, with their involvement strengthened by several laws since the 2014 law on the modernization of territorial public action.¹ The aim of the regional COPs was to give fresh impetus to the implementation of national policies in the regions.

1.1. Deployment of the COPs

In 2022, the government of former Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne established the General Secretariat for Ecological Planning (*Secrétariat général à la planification écologique*, SGPE). Its mandate aims to identify the levers available to France for achieving its ecological objectives² and to collaborate with the relevant sectoral ministries, such as Agriculture, Transport and Energy. In addition to its interministerial scope, the SGPE introduced another key innovation: the “territorial application” of environmental strategies.

In a circular issued in September 2023, senior regional officials (prefects) were tasked with organizing a COP in collaboration with regional councils to develop a roadmap for implementing ecological planning in each region. While the COPs explicitly targeted “the territories and all levels of local government,” the involvement of economic actors and civil society should also be considered.

Most regions³ have embraced the COPs as their own. Launched with the participation of ministers and local elected representatives, the COP sequence included the following events over a 12-month period:

- Diagnostic phase: to refine the understanding of ecological transition challenges in the regions, drawing on feedback from government departments, local authorities, and other stakeholders;
- Debate phase: to “identify the collective efforts required to achieve regional objectives and to define, without delay, the

actions and projects to be launched or continued for 2024.” This work was organized into thematic groups according to the ecological planning themes (**Figure 1**);

- Support phase: conducted at the departmental level, this phase encouraged local authorities to propose projects aligned with the roadmap. These projects could be financed through contracts between the State and local authorities, such as Contracts for the Success of the Ecological Transition (*Contrats pour la réussite de la transition écologique*, CRTE) or the Green Fund;
- Roadmap development phase: this phase outlined the region's contributions to the various ecological planning levers.

The process has been enriched over the months. For example, a questionnaire was used to take stock of the actions already

FIGURE 1. Ecological planning issues, themes and projects (in French)



Source: French Secrétariat général à la planification écologique (SGPE)

taken by local authorities, and to identify the main obstacles they face in seizing the levers of the ecological transition.

The SGPE and the Ministry for the Ecological Transition (*Ministère de la Transition Écologique*, MTE) assess whether the compilation of regional roadmaps effectively puts France on track to meet its climate and biodiversity commitments. Scheduled to take place annually, future COPs will provide a regular forum for dialogue between the State and regional stakeholders, with a view to continually revising the roadmaps in line with the contributions expected from the regions, and monitoring progress in their implementation.

1.2. What role can biodiversity play in this process?

The SGPE invited the regions to consider several SNB indicators, including: the surface area of both terrestrial and marine protected areas, including those under strict protection; the sur-

¹ These include the NOTRe Act and the Energy Transition for Green Growth Act of 2015, and the Biodiversity Recovery Act of 2016.

² Outlined in the National Low Carbon Strategy (SNBC), the National Biodiversity Strategy (SNB), and the National Plan for Adaptation to Climate Change, among others (PNACC).

³ French Guiana and Mayotte have not yet been able to implement regional COPs.

face area of sustainably managed forests; the number of “black spots” eliminated;⁴ the surface area of restored habitats; the reduction in the pesticide risk indicator; and the useful agricultural area under organic farming. To ensure these indicators progress towards the targets outlined in the SNB, action must be taken across various sectors, including agriculture, forestry, transport, housing, and energy.

In the regional COPs, however, biodiversity was primarily addressed within a thematic group focused on preserving natural resources. Although biodiversity is a cross-cutting “issue” in ecological planning (Figure 1), it has been treated as a distinct “theme”, resulting in a lack of integration across all aspects of the work of the COPs. Nevertheless, beneficial measures related to land use can drive progress on multiple fronts, including mitigation, adaptation, and health. For example, managing forests, protecting or restoring grasslands and hedgerows all contribute to carbon storage and greenhouse gas emission reductions, while reducing soil sealing contributes to adaptation. Conversely, pursuing other ecological planning initiatives without adequately considering biodiversity risks perpetuating or exacerbating existing pressures (for example, increased water stress linked to reindustrialization or certain agricultural choices).

The thematic groups at COP 1 brought together the majority of public sector stakeholders, particularly on the topic of biodiversity. In contrast, private sector actors were more likely to participate in discussions on energy or industry, and farmers were engaged on issues related to food. Key public entities, including the regional offices of the French Office for Biodiversity, regional biodiversity agencies, and the *Conservatoire des Espaces Naturels*, were all involved. However, associations, private sector actors and local stakeholders—including local authorities (municipalities, public bodies for inter-municipal cooperation) and biodiversity practitioners (national parks, regional nature parks, Natura 2000 coordinators) were underrepresented. This was either because they were not invited to this stage of the process or because they were not encouraged to participate in a process that was perceived as an additional layer to existing consultation and planning exercises, such as the creation of a Regional Biodiversity Strategy (*Stratégie Régionale pour la Biodiversité*, SRB) or the identification of acceleration zones for renewable energies.

In parallel with this process, the regional implementation of the SNB continues through existing channels established at the national level (regional directorates for the environment, planning and housing) and the regional level (SRB, regional biodiversity committee). Since the organization of exchanges at the COP level did not extend beyond stakeholders already involved in these processes, the COPs offered limited added value for the effective implementation of the SNB. However, the multi-stakeholder composition of the COPs and their ability to highlight diverse issues to regional decision-makers make them a valuable forum for addressing the structural obstacles that have hindered the implementation of previous SNBs.

2. PRIORITIZE THE JOINT DEVELOPMENT OF A TERRITORIAL PLAN FOR SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL TRANSITION

2.1. Creating a genuine negotiation space: building on the success of the shared assessment

Depending on the region, the COPs have placed varying levels of emphasis on building consensus among regional stakeholders regarding priority actions for the ecological transition. Efforts have largely focused on initiating new projects for the transition. However, this project-based approach has left little room for consultation and the construction of a collective vision for the region's social, economic, and environmental development priorities. As a result, the regional COPs have struggled to identify potential land-use conflicts, whether between “business as usual” uses and those required for the ecological transition, or between the objectives of the ecological transition themselves (for example, restoring nature in urban areas versus the need for urban densification). Negotiation across various planning levels is essential to determine where trade-offs will be needed and where the objectives of the transition can be shared or combined. For instance, restoring wetlands in a specific area can simultaneously support habitat restoration, improve quantitative water management, and mitigate the impacts of extreme weather events. This approach to pooling objectives can also enhance funding opportunities by demonstrating how different funding streams can address multiple aspects of the ecological transition.

The discussion phases in the French departments, intended to engage as many local authorities as possible, have sometimes been used to incubate projects incrementally (thereby multiplying initiatives across the regions). However, the project-based approach has not fostered the development of a systemic approach, which would take better account of the interdependencies within a territory. It would have been valuable to use these departmental consultations to bring forward the needs of local authorities, without limiting this expression to ecological planning issues. The COP process could then have identified which ecological transition levers might have addressed these needs (such as food or water security and transport infrastructure), framing greenhouse gas reductions and biodiversity protection as opportunities for regional development. This bottom-up approach could also shift the narrative surrounding the transition, which is still predominantly viewed as a constraint.

2.2. Enhancing the engagement of scientific and technical stakeholders

Sources of knowledge and data on biodiversity were utilized to prepare the regional assessments that served as the foundation for discussions at the regional COPs. However, the social sciences were not engaged, despite their potential to offer valuable

⁴ Black spots refer to locations where ecological continuity is disrupted.

insights into the relationship between biodiversity and the quality of life for local residents (IDDRI, 2024). For instance, heritage and landscape values were absent from the data used in the COPs.

Additionally, spatial data, some of which is available in planning documents such as SRADDETs, could have been used to identify, for example, key ecological corridors and areas with specific protection and restoration issues.

While stakeholders involved in resource conservation discussions, such as regional biodiversity agencies and natural area managers, possess data on the characteristics and challenges of local ecosystems, limited exchanges between thematic groups and the low participation of biodiversity experts in other thematic groups risk leading to the identification of counterproductive or suboptimal solutions.

3. PROPOSED ORGANIZATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR FUTURE COPs

The collegial and inclusive nature of international COPs (particularly those on climate and biodiversity) could serve as a model for improving regional COPs on ecological planning, addressing several of the challenges outlined above. Effective consultation helps stakeholders build mutual understanding, collaborate to reach consensus, and take collective responsibility for the COP's outcomes. The regional COPs were structured around a "plenary" session to launch the process, followed by ongoing work in thematic groups. While the plenary session was an opportunity to mobilize stakeholders, it was not reconvened during the development of the roadmap, which was instead directed by the technical departments. To enhance collective ownership of COP outcomes, regular plenary sessions for monitoring progress and validation at key stages would be beneficial.

Most of the groundwork and consensus-building, whether at the international or regional level, occurs within the working groups. These groups could benefit from an "exposure" session where scientists provide an in-depth presentation of the analysis of a specific issue, outline existing policy frameworks, and facilitate a discussion on the obstacles to implementation.

Unlike the current organization of thematic groups, which brings together stakeholders with converging interests and pre-existing connections, the working groups should be open to

all. They should ensure that each "party" or type of stakeholder is represented in every group, allowing them to express both their capacity and the limitations of their capacity to implement the proposed measures. The roadmap should also clearly outline the responsibilities of each type of stakeholder, both public and private, ensuring their commitment to the roadmap as a whole, rather than solely to the sectoral areas in which they are directly involved. Through this approach, the working group would identify measures that can be universally applied or adapted through different implementation methods. They would also clarify the responsibilities of each stakeholder and highlight where decisions or trade-offs are necessary.

It may be worth considering organizing regional COPs over several consecutive days. This longer, more concentrated timeframe could improve the conditions for consultation by enabling more exchanges between stakeholders—including informal interactions—to better understand each other's positions and work toward compromise solutions. It would also foster collective responsibility for developing a shared project, save time, and enhance expertise on the themes being addressed. However, given the time constraints, it does not seem feasible to address all the themes of the ecological transition (see **Figure 1**) within an annual cycle. Instead, two or three themes should be selected and systematically examined in relation to all key issues (biodiversity, climate, health).

The project identification and feedback phase would then take place, aiming to engage local and regional authorities beyond the "COP" format at the various sub-national levels.

4. CONCLUSION

Although future regional COPs will need to address new areas, such as adaptation through the implementation of the third National Plan for Adaptation to Climate Change (PNACC), the topics covered in the first year are yet to be resolved. Unsuccessful levers from the initial cycle can be revisited to advance progress on biodiversity indicators. The area of climate change adaptation, which has strong connections to biodiversity issues (sustainable forest management, hedgerow protection, restoration of degraded ecosystems) offers an opportunity to explore new methods of consultation within the COPs. It also provides a chance to develop regional roadmaps, because all stakeholders are both impacted by adaptation in their sectors and contribute to the effective implementation of the PNACC.

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