

## Reforming society via biodiversity Biodiversity as a public policy

**The French Ecology ministry looks back over several years of public policies for biodiversity conservation. The glass is only half full with limited results in the field, but significant progress in public debates and some encouraging developments. On the whole, there are still many challenges to be met.**



When the notion of biodiversity emerged in the 1980s, it put an end to the idea that nature could be considered an environment or setting separate from human activities. The Convention on biological diversity (CBD, 1992), which firmly established the term itself, clearly stated the close ties between our societies and all life forms. By declaring the «intrinsic value of biological diversity and of the ecological, genetic, social, economic, scientific, educational, cultural, recreational and aesthetic values of biological diversity and its components», the convention recognised biodiversity as the common heritage of humanity. It calls on sovereign states to intervene politically. Their intervention is all the more important that it rapidly became clear that biodiversity management requires decisions between strong and potentially conflicting interests, as is made clear by the convention articles on access to genetic resources or the links between the cultural claims of indigenous populations and biological diversity.

Taking the place of nature, the notion of biodiversity would seem to have been designed to be more permeable to designing political responses to the problems affecting our natural heritage. So what is the current situation?

### The nature issue analysed politically, using the first National biodiversity strategy 2004-2010

In 2004, France honoured its CBD commitments and included in its National strategy for sustainable development (SNDD) a complete section on biodiversity. Adoption of the National biodiversity strategy (SNB) was an important step and clearly signalled the entry of biodiversity in the vast domain of French public policy. That was a novel situation because, for the first time, the goal was to set up a consistent framework for a wide array of inte-

racting environmental-protection policies. The ambition was to go even farther and make biodiversity a transversal issue built into every sector of governmental action. It was decided to structure the SNB in four transversal targets, namely mobilise all stakeholders, acknowledge the true value of life, improve its standing in public policies and develop scientific knowledge and observation capabilities, and in ten sectoral action plans, each managed by the ministry in charge of the policy sector, i.e. agriculture, land transportation infrastructure, international, oceans, natural heritage, urbanism, forests, overseas territories, research and tourism.

The SNB was assigned an ambitious goal, i.e. to halt losses in biodiversity by 2010 in France. What is the situation today? Unfortunately, the task is far from finished. French ecosystems remain significantly damaged and many species are still threatened (see photo ①). The causes of this partial failure are the many malfunctions of the current SNB, themselves due in part to the very short deadline granted to formulate the strategy in 2004, and include a lack of funds, of coordination, of involvement on the part of key participants and insufficient political management. But above all, the goal was simply too ambitious. An assessment report on the SNB, recently published by the CGAAER (Council on food, agriculture and rural areas) and CGEDD (Council on the environment and sustainable development), provides an in-depth and accurate analysis of the difficulties.

But the absence of quantifiable results must not obscure the main achievement. The SNB served above all to determine what biodiversity policy should look like. Impetus of this type is vitally important because when the State sets up a public policy dedicated to a specific topic, it contributes to its social recognition. The dynamics required to mobilise society, boosted by a situation that encourages acceptance of the issues and policies of sustainable development such as the Grenelle meetings, can thus gain traction.



Storks couple in Alsace (France), species who nearly threatened.

What better indication of the changes resulting from recognition of biodiversity as a political issue than the emergence of regional biodiversity strategies? Taking the policy of the central State as their example and occasionally claiming direct affiliation, the strategies developed by the regions impart new clarity to the integration of biodiversity in territories, which is an essential step given that biodiversity issues are very specific from one territory to another. In a voluntary and responsible manner, the regions are increasingly coming forward with their policies and it is certain that the success of the new SNB will depend on flexible and intelligent coordination between the national and regional strategies.

Fundamental change is also underway outside the public sphere. A growing percentage of professionals is now responding to the call to assume their environmental responsibilities. Farmers, developers, industrial companies are participants in laying the foundations for the sustainable development of our society. Most of the job remains to be done, but signs of change indicate that professionals are now ready to modify their processes and practices. The change underway in the agricultural sector is eloquent. The development of environmental contracts, participation of farmers in action plans, e.g. Biological agriculture horizon 2012 and Écophyto 2018, demonstrate acceptance of the biodiversity issue by a key economic sector.

And finally the associations. Representing the positions of civil society, they constitute an essential mobilising force in favour of biodiversity. In the past, they have been involved in environmental public policy in France via their contributions to implementing efforts in the field to protect and gain knowledge on the natural heritage, today they are called upon to become full-fledged participants. Their involvement in the Grenelle environmental meetings, where they succeeded in becoming central participants

in strategy discussions, is a clear sign of the changes in French political life. Citizens are also increasingly receptive to new forms of collective action.

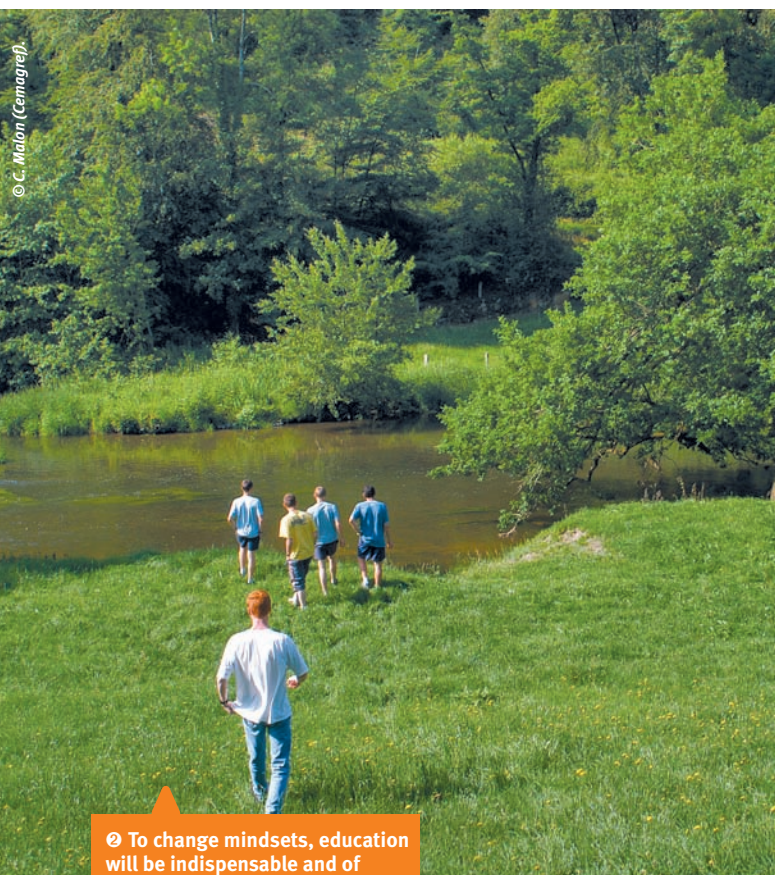
The cards are being reshuffled and in the newly created situation, old issues have taken on new importance and others, never imagined before, are emerging. What are the goals that must be set for biodiversity? Who should decide? What should we expect from the State? Who should implement the decisions, using which resources? How should policy monitoring be done? How representative must a participant be before being admitted to decision-making circles? How should the various territorial scales be coordinated? And the many time scales? What should be the role of citizens, elected officials, associations active in the field?

With each new question, the current political framework becomes increasingly outdated. The SNB in particular has been criticised because it causes frustration in participants due to the disconnect between the importance of the challenges at hand and the means that it provides. But it has also shown its strengths. The strategy, though criticised, is not obsolete and must be reformulated taking into account the questions raised.

### What governance for democratic management of biodiversity?

In this evolving context where the shifts in how we formulate and carry out policies are becoming visible, governance is a notion still being explored. This recent concept has for the past few years been a central topic in that it implies a new approach to devising and implementing decisions in a manner more open to dialogue and negotiation between participants.





📍 To change mindsets, education will be indispensable and of critical importance in making biodiversity one of the foremost concerns for future generations.

► Discussed in 2005 during the UN conference Biodiversity: Science and governance, the topic also formed the background for the French conference on biodiversity titled *What governance to succeed together?*, organised by the Ecology ministry on 10-12 May 2010 in Chamonix Mont-Blanc. Compared to previous conferences, the added-value of Chamonix was a new approach to the topic. Going beyond interpretations that reduce it to a procedure, the goal was to turn governance into a political issue. As noted in the European commission white book on governance, «the challenge is to renew the European political process» by addressing processes rather than procedures. The commission is showing the way by stipulating that governance is above all an approach. A way to go about politics that includes dialogue, collaboration and participation of the entire population.

The discussions between the 400 participants in Chamonix brought to the fore a number of challenges in the areas listed below.

- **Coordination of different scales.** Borders do not exist for biodiversity and its management must remain as free as possible from the red tape of administrative boundaries in France. A number of solutions should be investigated, from better operation of the existing complex structure to the creation of new perimeters taking better into account biogeographical realities. The water policy could be an example to follow.

- **Continued efforts to gain new knowledge.** It is imperative to learn more about biodiversity and the dynamics involved. The system to produce, organise and use knowledge must be restructured. A more open, collaborative system with access to more human and financial resources would be more effective and of greater assistance in decision-making. Data centralisation must take place, while maintaining the independence of the existing structures.

- **Biodiversity values and training.** Preservation of biodiversity will require changes in the hierarchy of values held by society. To change mindsets, education will be indispensable and of critical importance in making biodiversity one of the foremost concerns for future generations (see photo 📍).

A number of other topics emerged during the conference as priority political issues, i.e. the use of economic, notably fiscal, instruments, effective application of laws, development of science advice, communication efforts and awareness raising, etc. In this forest of hopes and expectations, a common denominator appeared, namely complexity. Putting together biodiversity policies means, quite simply, developing the political engineering required to master complexity. Again and again, we will have to compose, combine and coordinate contradictory opinions, the interests of the various stakeholders, different spatial scales, different reference documents (national, international), etc. That will be the only way to achieve the democratic management of biodiversity espoused by the participants in the conference.

In conclusion, the concept of biodiversity served initially to raise environmental issues in political terms and is now an opportunity to reassess the link between human beings and all other life forms. Reforming society via biodiversity is our challenge and we are capable of rising to meet that challenge. That is the goal of the SNB revision committee. ■

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Watching of aquatic plants (Les Saisies, Haute-Savoie).