

## *Agriculture-Biodiversity related conflict in a Natural Regional Park (PNR): A case study in the Marais Poitevin<sup>1</sup>.*

### Introduction to Natural Regional Parks in France

France has many different rural landscapes unique in terms of their natural and cultural heritage. Over 430 “small agricultural areas” have been selected so far for biodiversity conservation although many are threatened by desertification, urban pressures, tourism and infrastructure. Very early on, it became clear that the protection of these areas was linked to the agricultural dynamics of the area. As legislation for the protection of these areas (from 1930 to the latest 1993 “landscape” law) is insufficient, this led local councils in regions, counties and communes to work with the central government in an attempt to link the protection of their heritage with local development through the creation of Natural Regional Parks in 1967.

The parks add to the wealth of the country through economic and social development as quality economic areas. The name “Parc Naturel Regional” is actually a label owned by the Ministry of the Environment. This label is therefore subject to specifications and has to adhere to certain development principles. Sustainable development is therefore central to the charter signed by all the municipalities involved in the project. The charter defines the development trends for the next 10 years and involves locally elected representatives as well as the state. An evaluation procedure every 10 years enables the charter to be revised if necessary. As well as being superb landscapes with important biodiversity resources, PNRs are above all rural environments where agricultural practices respectful of the environment and biodiversity are essential. Of the 40 French PNRs, 22 are natural reserves, 19 are voluntary natural reserves and 4 are Biosphere reserves (MAB UNESCO).

PNRs aim to make agricultural and forestry practices compatible with the conservation of natural environments by establishing contracts with various managers. In the same way that the Territorial Exploitation Contracts (CTE) aimed to link agricultural projects with benefits to the country, the PNRs favour agro- environmental measures. Natura 2000 is also ambitious in that 13% of all land covered by PNRs were recently selected under the Directive.

### The Marais Poitevin

The Marais Poitevin PNR was created in 1979 and is often referred to as the “second humid zone in France after the Camargue”. It is the second largest Atlantic facing wintering site for marine migrating birds, is a recognised national and international Ramsar site and is a pilot zone under the “National humid zone plan” issued by the French government in 1995.

The century old trend of repeatedly draining the area has not showed signs of slowing down since the area gained its new status. In the last 20 years for example, permanent grasslands have gone from 63,770 ha in 1979, to 46,500 ha in 1989, 28,540 ha in 1994 and 29,000 ha in 1997. Concomitantly, agricultural crops (mostly corn), have gone from 70,000 ha in 1979 to 93,000 ha in 1989 and 109,670 ha in 1997. In total, 50% of permanent grasslands have disappeared and the 1970 ratio of 1:1 between permanent grasslands and crops has now shifted to a ratio of 1:3. Also, irrigated areas have increased by 50% during the 1983 to 1993 period due to an irrigation policy supported by the local government and the state. The farmers gain directly from this policy and intensify drainage before sowing in the spring.

### Procedural dimension of the conflict

This gradual habitat degradation is obviously not in line with the objectives of a PNR and also led to a deterioration of relationships between local stakeholders (conservationists, farmers, elected local government members...). All these factors led to the most important consequence and height of the conflict, the loss of the “Parc Naturel Regional” label in 1996.

A report tried to make sense of why the situation had occurred and what the solutions might be (Simon, 1998). One of the main reasons for the conflict was the perception by non-specialists of the PNR simply as a landscape feature. This is due to the “Green Venice” part of the PNR, covering barely a few thousand hectares of permanent grassland but representative of the tourist heart of the area. Agro-

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<sup>1</sup> Case study by Didier Alard, University of Rouen.

environmental measures and intensive drainage in other areas of the PNR do not seem to impact on people's perceptions as much. The information conveyed by scientists was deemed vague to non-specialists and did not emphasize the interests and function of the humid zone, or possible scenarios if management continued in such an unsustainable way. Although the central government does lay down certain rules for such areas, a process of decentralisation leaves the local communities in charge of implementing the rules. Having said this, the drainage and irrigation policies were pushed by the state, with important financial support.

The conservation of the water resources and biodiversity clashes with two important questions in regards to agriculture (the farms) and water management (local union).

#### Substance dimension of the conflict

The most important factor in maintaining biodiversity in this area is the agricultural exploitation of permanent grasslands in a wide area as possible. Indicators like birds and plants all point to the importance of this factor. Buying of land with public funds and public management is not a feasible solution in an area covering thousands if not tens of thousands of hectares. One possible solution was contracts.

Local agro-environmental operations (OLAE) affected 1,680 farmers on 23,000 hectares and represented a sum of 26 million Francs. They did manage to slow down the landscape dynamics, but could not be a long-term solution due to the vast scale and the diversity of the agricultural systems involved (especially with the imbalance of "meat" systems with prices going down, disease outbreaks and technical constraints versus "milk" systems where the price is guaranteed despite a few constraints and finally "corn" systems with level prices, subsidies and few constraints). The problem of tenant farming also complicates matters as tenancy rates and taxes are higher in the swamp area for historical reasons (used to be where the wealthiest farms were). The agricultural conclusion for the Marais Poitevin is the most paradoxical: the best systems from a biodiversity point of view (milking cows) are also worst from an economic point of view. There is clearly a conflict with agricultural interest, which looks for profitable solutions that are incompatible with biodiversity conservation. A complete change of direction is needed and is only possible with the appropriate external financial incentives including a reinforcement of CTE initiatives and a change in the CAP. Water management is also a major stake and as such a source of conflict. The only ways to reduce the amount of water used per hectare is to have irrigation quotas and maintain or reduce the total area of irrigated land. The only solution in the given landscape is a strong response from public authorities if the situation is to be reversed.

#### The relationship dimension of the conflict

This conflict has involved a number of stakeholders and has become a national example. Relationship conflicts quickly took over from the actual conflict sources, namely water and agriculture. The loss of symbols such as the PNR label and the condemnation of the Court of Justice for breaches against the EU Directive 79/409/CEE regarding wild bird protection heightened tensions and exacerbated relationships. In an attempt to quieten things down a little and give back a symbol to the community, the mixed Union of the Marais Poitevin created the "Inter-regional Natural Park" to recall the old label, but without the guarantees of the latter. Conservationists, seeing that political will was all but absent, decided to create their own study of water, independent of official authority. The "Organization for the Protection of the Marais Poitevin" now have their own website (<http://www.marais-poittevin.org>) and is a source of alternative data and analyses.

After the paroxysm of 1995 and 1996, the "symbol"-seeking phase has died down and stakeholders seem ready to engage in talks again. Although the major conflicts (water and agriculture) are still just as present, communication and discussion can now start, even though the scale of conflicts will inevitably be an important issue.