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Actors and issues in the standardisation of naturalist field data in France

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The French paradox

- The proliferation since Rio 92 of policies on the preservation of biodiversity, in France and in Europe, has created a significant need for naturalist field data
- The French paradox : inadequate public funding for the production of field data in the light of the ambitious declared aims of these policies (the EU imposes on member states the obligation to produce results)
- The French government is a major actor in the preservation of biodiversity, even though it frequently turns to voluntary bodies and the private sector for the production of data.

Who produces naturalist field data in France ?

The French situation is characterised by :

- 1) Considerable dispersal around the country of production of data
- 2) Great heterogeneity among organisations producing data : public or quasi-public bodies, such as the ONF (forestry authority) or the Conservatoire botanique ; universities, research centres, voluntary associations, consultancies, etc.
 - Producer networks are often not in touch with one another
 - Overlap between public and private

✚ The problem of visibility. The difficulty of identifying who produces what.

Calling naturalist field data into question

- What is a piece of naturalist field data ?

An observation made in the field that gives : the name of the species in question, place and date of observation, observer's name or a bibliographic citation.

E.g. : 1 buzzard at Rhinau, 21/06/00, by M. Martin

- What are the limits of naturalist field data ?

⇒ Disparities among species (e.g., greater interest in birds than lichens) → abundance/scarcity of data

⇒ Inconsistency (data produced under different protocols)
→ problem of quality of data and difficulty in mobilising them

- Decisive role of non-official bodies, based largely on the involvement of volunteers and amateurs. A tendency towards professionalisation
- Given the increased need for specialist knowledge and the problems of mobilisation noted, intervention by government in organising and structuring data.

A new system for rationalisation

- Creation of a system by the Environment Ministry: 'Information system on nature and landscapes' (SINP). Unprecedentedly broad in scope.
- SINP = a portal, not a database, making it possible to identify who is producing which type of data, where, and using what methods
- Aims: to standardise data (standardisation of methods, systems of reference, etc.), encouraging access to them through a concern for transparency and for making them accessible to EU authorities and to citizen
- How far is the SINP compatible with the culture of voluntary organisations?

The specific ways in which voluntary organisations work

- Diversity of motivation and forms of commitment
 - Production of data associated with a particular geographical area, and based on personal relationships characterised by reciprocity and trust
 - The compromise proposed by the leading federation of associations involved in the study of nature, between maintaining the above principles and the process of rationalisation inherent in the SINP
- establishment of a code of ethics designed to recognise the work of volunteers, and determining the way the data is circulated and used

Conclusion

1) The production of data

- ▮ Represents an increasingly important issue in the preservation of biodiversity
- ▮ The work of voluntary organisations remains essential; it foregrounds a personalised and localised understanding of data, in contrast with the standardised and functional approach of public authorities
- ▮ The process of rationalisation reveals important debates: on different kinds of knowledge, professionalisation, etc.

2) The role of voluntary associations

- ▮ The role of voluntary associations in public action is changing
- ▮ For the past 30 years, they have acted as local agents of the Environment Ministry, but also as independent local actors
- ▮ The government is now favouring the associations' function of expertise, to the detriment of their political role, and is encouraging the growth of large NGOs