

La libre évolution

Negotiating ecological freedom at UNESCO, Paris

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Abstract

Les journées de la libre évolution organised by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), convened NGOs, policymakers, ecologists, and researchers to examine the emerging concept of *la libre évolution*. Often rendered in English as a form of rewilding, the term refers to allowing ecological processes to unfold without continuous human control. Beyond conservation science, *la libre évolution* engages cultural, legal, and ethical dimensions of environmental practice. Discussions at the symposium explored how ecological change might be measured beyond conventional indicators while accounting for socio-cultural dynamics. They also addressed how rights of nature institutionalise recognition of non-human interests, and how cartographic practices shape the ways landscapes are understood, prioritised, and governed. Taken together, questions of measurement, law, and mapping illuminate where *la libre évolution*, with its focus on ecological autonomy, encounters these “instruments of governance” shaping the future of nature recovery.

Introduction

The peace mission of UNESCO applies not only to relations between humans, but between humans and the rest of the world, affirmed Franck Pupunat, Counsellor for the French National Commission in his opening words. *Les journées de la libre évolution* was the third edition of a seminar organised by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) held over two days and steered by the Working Group for Wilderness and Feral Nature led by Pascal Cavallin.

In essence, *la libre évolution* is about allowing ecological processes to unfold without continuous management as an instrument of human control. To be sure, there are overlaps with rewilding, but for now *la libre évolution* seems an eminently francophone concept. Linguistic nuances matter here, as speakers grappled throughout the event with what counts as *la libre évolution* and how it should be deployed in practice.

Indeed, the 2026 gathering was an opportunity for Cavallin and colleagues to announce their typology of *la libre évolution*, which opens the concept to a range of applications—from rural to urban spaces—and degrees of human intervention—from spontaneous nature recovery to more active approaches (IUCN 2026). Presented as a contestable resource, the typology set the tone for exploratory discussions throughout the symposium.

These discussions unfolded within a broader policy landscape shaped by biodiversity targets, ecosystem services frameworks, and climate adaptation strategies. *La libre évolution* is not positioned outside these institutional contexts. It benefits from support by organisations such as IUCN and UNESCO, and many of its ecological benefits can be quantified. Yet the concept also gestures toward ethical and aesthetic registers that are not exhausted by instrumental metrics. The symposium revealed ongoing efforts to hold these different modes of valuation together.

Among speakers and attendees were NGOs, governmental organisations, and ecologists, along with a handful of university researchers. Despite its invocation of “free evolution”, we participants found the program to be carefully structured. Sprinkled among the conventional presentations and roundtables were elevator pitches or *pastilles* and workshops using the “world café” methodology. This was a somewhat international affair, with participants from the UK and Germany joining their French colleagues in person, while others from Switzerland, Poland, and Canada attended online.

Three interconnected and urgent themes emerged across the symposium’s discussions: how ecological change is measured and valued; the ethical and legal implications of recognising non-human interests; and the political dimensions of mapping and spatial planning for ecological restoration. Together, these strands highlight where ideals of ecological autonomy in nature recovery encounter the instruments of governance, raising questions that resonate beyond national contexts.

1 Measuring, aesthetics and the less tangible

During the first workshop, facilitated by Anthony Foussard and H  l  ne Lion from the Born to Rewild project (2025-6), each table in the room became a hub for debating public engagement challenges around messaging, communications media, and tensions. These open-ended dialogues, potentiated by the world caf   methodology, were a breath of fresh air, highlighting common difficulties and meaningful exchanges.

One challenge cut across all tables: how to measure and assign value to both ecological and social phenomena in the context of *la libre   volution*. Shifting baseline syndrome was referenced, but more fundamentally the philosophy of “letting go” prompted questions about whether conventional limit values in Euro-Western environmental science and policy are sufficient. The issue was not a rejection of metrics; many participants acknowledged that biodiversity gains, carbon sequestration, and pollution mitigation can be quantified. Rather, the discussion turned toward expanding evaluative frameworks to include experiential, relational, and aesthetic dimensions. What emerged was not simply a debate about conservation technique, but about how nature is conceptualised — not only as a resource base and service provider, but as a relational field of ongoing ecological co-becoming.

This tension is particularly acute within policy environments structured around ecosystem services accounting, carbon metrics, and climate adaptation targets, where ecological value must be rendered legible in quantifiable terms. *La libre   volution*, however, also gestures toward forms of ecological flourishing that may not be fully captured by such instrumentalisation. In this sense, the question is not whether to measure, but how — and according to which epistemological commitments. What kinds of ecological worlds become visible, and which remain marginal, when value is tied to ecosystem services provision or climate mitigation potential?

Storytelling and multisensory methods were discussed as promising ways to communicate the ethos of *la libre   volution*. How, for example, might one convey that weeds, fallen trees, or animal carcasses are not signs of neglect, but integral to ecosystem processes? Such approaches foreground experience and shifting aesthetic sensibilities, broadening how ecological change is perceived and interpreted. In turn, these shifts in perception shape what is recognised as valuable in a landscape. Storytelling therefore does

not displace scientific assessment. Rather, it expands the repertoire through which ecological value can be articulated and, where necessary, measured.

2 Rights of nature and ethical relations

Marine Calmet, President of Wild Legal, delivered a rallying presentation on rights of nature, drawing explicit connections with *la libre évolution*. She highlighted legal cases in Ecuador, Colombia, New Zealand, and Spain where rights of nature were formalised either through Indigenous cosmologies or by extending principles rooted in human rights law. In New Zealand, judges recognised Mount Taranaki as a legal person and ancestral relation; in Spain, the concept of human dignity was deemed inseparable from the ecological health of the Mar Menor Lagoon.

Across these cases, recognition emerged from situated relations between specific communities and the places they inhabit. Legal innovation did not arise in abstraction, but from lived attachments and sustained advocacy. Wild Legal works alongside local communities to support such initiatives, as comparable examples continue to accumulate internationally. Together, these developments suggest that rights of nature are gaining traction across diverse legal contexts.

While these ideas were largely met with openness, some participants questioned the practical implications of eco-jurisprudence for conservation practice, suggesting that legal personhood might remain largely symbolic. Calmet responded by drawing parallels with women's suffrage and other civil rights movements, arguing that legal recognition often precedes and enables shifts in institutional norms. Whether or not such transformations are immediate, the discussion underscored the role of law in shaping how ecological relations are acknowledged and acted upon. In this respect, rights of nature can be understood as a legal articulation of the broader move, shared with *la libre évolution*, to recognise non-human interests and agencies within systems of governance.

3 The political cartography of wild nature

On day two of the symposium, colleagues Adrien Guetté and Jonathan Carruthers-Jones presented CartNat, a project on mapping degrees of *naturalité* across France by aggregating existing geospatial data. Here *naturalité* is defined by proxy as the extent to which ecological processes are

original, spontaneous, and continuous (Guetté et al., 2018). CartNat has already demonstrated a correlation between concentrated *naturalité* and protected areas. It could also be used to highlight sites where other conservation efforts might be protected or expanded. Such mapping initiatives also resonate with national and EU-level priorities around biodiversity accounting, climate mitigation, and spatial planning for ecological resilience.

Guetté and Carruthers-Jones were notably transparent about how they arrived at their conceptualisation of *naturalité* and why particular methodological choices were made. Building on this transparency, I suggest that mapping, like defining nature, is never entirely neutral. Decisions of scale, classification, and representation inevitably carry political weight, insofar as they influence how landscapes are made visible, valued, or prioritised. This opens further questions about how cartographic practices might more explicitly attend to justice, local knowledge, multispecies worlds, and future imaginaries—potentially through dynamic, multi-layered forms of representation. Counter-mapping, for example, emerged from Indigenous land rights struggles and has since become a critical tool in conservation politics (Peluso 1995).

Final reflections

In sum, while each session evoked a compelling vision of healthier relations with non-human nature, no one could fully say what that looks like in practice. Several speakers called for humility in the face of uncertainty. Without forgoing measurement, *la libre évolution* is a reminder to value that which we cannot fully understand: the totality and complexity of ecological relations across scales. Perhaps wonder illuminates the most ethical path.

Such arguments continue to sit uneasily within governance regimes that require demonstrable returns in biodiversity indices, carbon sequestration figures, or pollution thresholds. The challenge is not to abandon measurement, but to rethink its limits: to ask whether ecological relations must always be justified through the language of services, resilience, or productivity.

La libre évolution is not a catch-all solution. If, as speaker Alexandra Locquet insisted, *la libre évolution* is one vector or *point d'entrée* among many others for reconfiguring relations between human communities and non-human nature—and among humans themselves—how might we practice and embody such a philosophy in everyday life?

One might apply this question to symposia *à venir*. As is often the case, many of the most interesting exchanges transpired during an interactive workshop or spontaneous conversation at lunch. Applying the philosophy of free evolution to the program itself, along with more interactive formats, would allow for more organic and reflexive exchanges.

It is early days for *la libre évolution* and for this community of practice. I am grateful for the warm welcome we received in Paris, the opportunity to learn from others, to meet new contacts or even potential collaborators, and to think across linguistic, national and cultural contexts—beyond the Anglocentric view of rewilding. As my collaborator Alice Eldridge succinctly put it: forests do not recognise state boundaries.

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