

THE FRENCH APPROACH OF “LIBRE ÉVOLUTION”

What happens when conservation means letting things be?

Laure Germain-Thomas, French Committee of IUCN

Wildnis im Dialog 2026

The French Committee of IUCN

2nd IUCN national member network



81 MEMBERS

- 2 Ministries
- 7 Public agencies
- 8 local authorities
- 64 NGOs and Foundations

+ 300 EXPERTS

45 STAFF MEMBERS

5 COMMISSIONS

- Species
- Ecosystems
- **Protected Areas**
- Communication and education
- Biodiversity policy

11 WORKING GROUPS

<https://uicn.fr/>

“Wilderness and Feral nature” Working group



P6_TA(2009)0034

Wilderness in Europe

European Parliament resolution of 3 February 2009 on Wilderness in Europe (2008/2210(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to Council Directive 79/409/EEC of 2 April 1979 on the conservation of wild birds¹ (Birds Directive),
 - having regard to Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora² (Habitats Directive),
 - having regard to the European Union's ecological network of special areas of conservation established by the two above-mentioned Directives, called the “Natura 2000” network,
 - having regard to the outcome of the ninth meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 9) to the Convention on Biological Diversity,
 - having regard to the report No 3/2008 of the European Environment Agency (EEA) “European forests - ecosystem conditions and sustainable use”,
 - having regard to Rule 45 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (A6-0478/2008),
- A. Whereas the effective protection and, where necessary, restoration of Europe's last wilderness areas are vital to halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010,
- B. Whereas the target to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2010 will not be achieved and the negative social and economic impact of biodiversity loss and declining ecosystem services are already being felt,
- C. Whereas the European Union should build on current achievements such as Natura 2000 and develop a significantly strengthened and ambitious new policy framework for biodiversity after 2010,
- D. Whereas the Birds and Habitats Directives provide a strong and workable framework for the protection of nature, including wilderness areas, from harmful developments,
- E. Whereas the objectives of the European Union's biodiversity policy and of the Birds and Habitats Directives are still far from being properly integrated in sectoral policies, such as agriculture, regional development, energy or transport,

European
Parliament
resolution of
3 February 2009 on
“Wilderness in
Europe”



2012

French Committee of
IUCN Working group on

**« Wilderness and
Feral nature »**

<https://iucn.fr/aires-protégées/wilderness/>

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-6-2009-0034_EN.pdf

Semantic questions

Wilderness // Feral Nature

WILDERNESS

Never significantly altered by humans.

=> Original condition.

FERAL NATURE

Previously altered by humans, now regaining autonomy.

=> Becoming wild again.

=> Freely evolving areas: from a state -> to a process.

The process of Freely evolving areas

Human intervention



Managed ecosystem

Reduction of interventions



Ecological processes
unfold freely



“FREELY EVOLVING AREAS”

Not a target ecosystem, but a trajectory.

“Organised” Freely evolving areas vs Spontaneous sites

“ORGANISED”



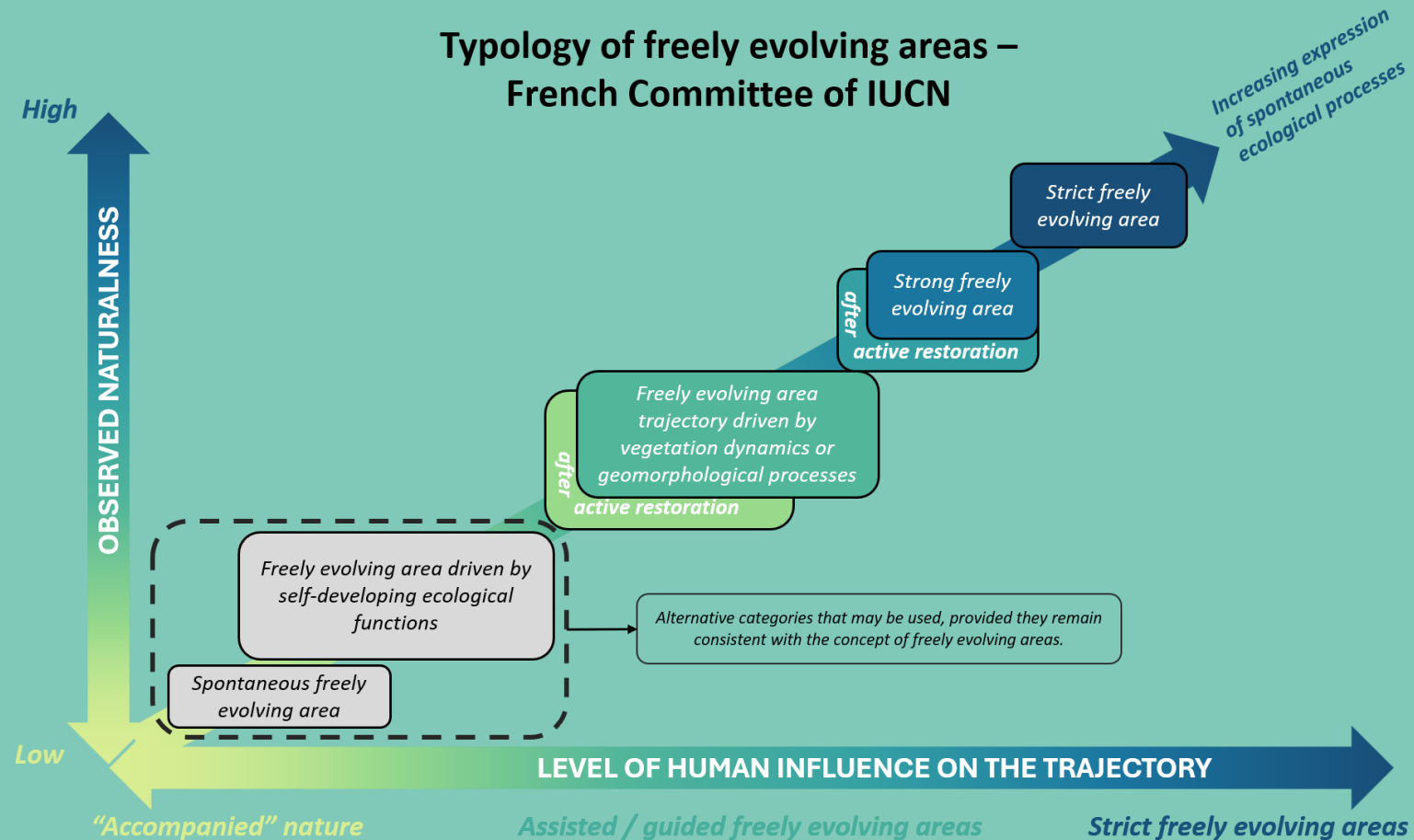
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SPONTANEOUS – FORMER AGRICULTURE



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Freely evolving areas: One concept, multiple realities



https://uicn.fr/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/Typologie-de-la-libre-evolution_juin-2026.pdf

The Massane Forest: a long-standing example of a freely evolving area



© Diane Sorel

<http://www.rnnmassane.fr/>

- ❖ Located in the **eastern French Pyrenees**, close to the Spanish border
- ❖ National Nature reserve since **1973**
- ❖ **336ha**, ranging from 600 to 1,250m above sea level
- ❖ Largely inaccessible mountain forest with very limited human disturbance, **freely evolving for 150 years**
- ❖ Part of the **UNESCO World Heritage**

The *Vercors Vie Sauvage* Reserve: a contemporary freely evolving area



© ASPAS

<https://aspas-reserves-vie-sauvage.org/les-reserves-de-vie-sauvage/vercors-vie-sauvage/>

- ❖ Acquired in 2019 for over €2 million by **ASPAS** (Association for the protection of wildlife)
- ❖ Located in the **Vercors Mountains**, south-eastern France
- ❖ Managed under a **strict non-intervention principle** (no extractive or intrusive activities)
- ❖ Access limited to **hiking on marked trails**
- ❖ Raised **social acceptance issues**

The Francis Hallé project: a transboundary vision for a European primeval forest



<https://www.foretprimaire-francishalle.org/>

- ❖ A long-term (**700 years**) proposal for a **70 000 ha** transboundary forest
- ❖ Located in the Ardennes (France-Belgium) or the **Vosges du Nord** (Fr-Germany)
 - Vosges du Nord - Pfälzerwald
Transboundary Biosphere Reserve
- ❖ Designed to support the conservation of **temperate broadleaf forest** ecosystems
- ❖ At this point, more **a narrative and a vision** than an operational project

Key unsolved challenges of freely evolving areas

**1. Economic, institutional
and legal constraints**

**2. Social acceptance and
legitimacy**

**3. Ecological management
dilemmas**

**4. Regulation of large
herbivores**

IUCN Resolution 091 (2025, Abu Dhabi): supporting freely evolving areas



8.091 Promoting free evolution and the tools to sustain it

RECALLING, in accordance with the World Charter for Nature, the Earth Charter and the Biosphere Ethics Initiative, the values of existence, memory and future of living things;

COMMITTED to the 15th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity and the European Union Nature Restoration Law, which aim to conserve and restore 30% of land areas;

RECALLING that human activities are responsible for climate change and the erosion of biodiversity;

UNDERLINING the fundamental role of spontaneous ecological processes in carbon storage functions and in combating climate change;

RECALLING humanity's dependence on ecosystem services (food, water, security of property and people);

CONSIDERING that a free-evolving area is a place where ecological processes are spontaneous and unhindered by human activities;

TAKING INTO ACCOUNT that human societies have diverse representations of nature, free evolution can be understood differently from one culture to another;

UNDERLINING that free evolution constitutes an opportunity for a reaffirmation of the relationship between humans and their environment based on respect for living things;

CONSIDERING that large, freely evolving areas contain greater heterogeneity and greater genetic, species, and ecosystem diversity;

RECALLING that small, freely evolving areas in contexts of high human pressure have an important role as reservoirs of biodiversity;

NOTING that the promotion of free evolution is a tool for raising awareness of nature, through wonder as much as through science, and can contribute to improving the relationship between humans and non-humans;

RECALLING that freely evolving areas are opportunities for the development of a local economy, respectful of nature and populations; and

CONSIDERING that human societies have different worldviews and ways of understanding nature and its multiple values, and that Indigenous Peoples and traditional communities have inhabited and governed their territories with full respect for nature, free evolution must be interpreted as including and respecting these worldviews in which nature and humans are not separate but mutually interdependent;

The IUCN World Conservation Congress 2025, at its session in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates:

1. CALLS ON the Director General and the Commissions to develop guidelines for the international recognition of free evolution areas that respect the rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, taking into account the diversity of local circumstances;

2. INVITES IUCN Members to:

a. propose free evolution as a management principle in all types of areas;

a.bis. ensure that areas of free evolution are identified, managed and/or protected only in accordance with Indigenous and traditional territories and governance systems that have allowed nature to thrive;

b. grant protected status and/or recognition to freely evolving areas, subject to adequate safeguards;

- ❖ Submitted by France, main sponsor: French Federation of *Conservatoires d'espaces naturels*
- ❖ Calls for the recognition and promotion of freely evolving areas as a **conservation approach** and as an opportunity to rethink **relationships between humans and non-human living beings**
- ❖ Encourages the development of **policy, legal and financial tools** to support their long-term implementation
- ❖ Requests the IUCN Director General to **develop guidelines** for the recognition of freely evolving areas

https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/resrecfiles/WCC_2025_RES_091_EN.pdf



FREELY EVOLVING AREAS

From a state of nature...

to a conservation process

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THANK YOU!

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