

## The riparian owners, unsung heroes for the management of rivers and aquatic environment

Au fil de l'eau : les propriétaires riverains héros méconnus de la gestion des cours d'eau et des milieux aquatiques

Jean-Paul Haghe <sup>1</sup>, @, Olivier Guerri <sup>2</sup>, \*, @, Mélanie Ozenne <sup>2</sup>, \*, @, Nathalie Jeanneau <sup>3</sup>, @

1 : Pôle de recherche pour l'organisation et la diffusion de l'information géographique (PRODIG) - [Site web](#)

PRODIG - 2 rue Valette - 75005 Paris - France

2 : Etablissement Public Territorial du Bassin de la Dordogne - EPIDOR (FRANCE) - [Site web](#)

EPIDOR Etablissement Public Territorial du Bassin de la Dordogne Place de la Laïcité 24250 Castelnau-la-Chapelle - France

3 : Créham, Etude, conseil, assistance à maîtrise d'ouvrage et maîtrise d'œuvre - [Site Web](#) - 202 Rue d'Ornano, 33000 Bordeaux - France

### RÉSUMÉ

Résultats de trois enquêtes portant sur 10 348 parcelles appartenant à 5 140 propriétaires, réalisées en 2013-14 dans le cadre du programme Epidor SudEau2 (1 050 questionnaires postaux auto-administrés, 213 questionnaires en vis à vis, 46 entretiens). Cette recherche quantitative et qualitative vise à mieux comprendre quelles sont les perceptions des milieux aquatiques, les pratiques de la rivière et l'implication des propriétaires des parcelles riveraines de l'Isle, de la Dronne et de la Belle dans la gestion de ces trois cours d'eau du bassin de la Dordogne en vue de l'atteinte du bon état écologique.

### ABSTRACT

Results of three surveys involving 1,302 riparians living in the basin of the Dordogne, conducted in 2013 - 2014 as part of the program Epidor SudEau2. This research aims to better understand what are perceptions of aquatic environments, river practices and involvement in the management for achieving good ecological status for the owners of riverside parcels of three rivers (Isle, Dronne and Belle) in the basin of the Dordogne.

### KEY WORDS

Riparian, river, river management, social practices, social values

## 1 QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS

Riparian owners are the main characters in the plot which is played around the governance of the river and his ecological status, and yet they are not well known by the French institutions responsible for water management and they often appear under a stereotypical form. Indeed in France, water institutions tend to overlook the riparians, by taking actions in their place, rather than giving them responsibilities by directly involving them. For their part, riparian owners seem very reluctant to recognize the political and scientific legitimacy of these institutions. One can also point out the limits of participatory approaches to reduce mutual misunderstandings. The Public Establishment Epidor, responsible for several animation approaches related to water governance, wanted to explore opportunities for greater involvement of riparian owners, which remain major players due to their grip on the waterfront parcels. For this, it seemed essential to seek to reduce mutual ignorance between actors and set up the dialogical form to construct a real communication.

We believe that several distinct social realities are in co presence along the rivers; there are "*separate rivers in the river*," according to the individual or the group which is taken as reference and actor. Our hypothesis is that each group in copresence in the river space has difficulty in recognizing the expertise, the technical knowledge and the ideational representations of others, which nevertheless allow them to live like them on a river that is now regarded by all as a common good. This poses a difficult problem for the collective and political management of the copresence and thus for the governance of hydrologic and aquatic environments associated with it. As a prerequisite to riparian empowerment for a sustainable management, it seemed useful to investigate the riparian owners to know them better and to analyze the relationships they establish with their river and with the managers of the river institutions. We therefore conducted a quantitative and qualitative research that seeks to understand what are the perceptions of aquatic environments, the practices of the river and the involvement of the owners of riparian land in the management of three rivers of the Dordogne basin: Isle, Dronne and Belle.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

Three areas were surveyed: the Isle River which is a state-owned watercourse (146 km along); two non-state rivers, the river Dronne (120km) and the Belle (16 km). The surveys were targeted on owners of riparian land parcels of these three rivers. The cadastral matrices were used, except those of the department of Charente-Maritime (representing 2.5% of the municipalities involved in the study area). The study focused on a set of 10,348 plots belonging to 5,140 owners. An initial survey was conducted on 70 samples randomly formed (spread all 4km along each river) and each consisting of 30 plots. This survey consisting in a closed interview allowed to interview 213 owners. In a second phase, the investigation continued in the form of semi-structured interviews with a panel of 46 persons from the first survey (volunteers and representative in terms of age, socio-professional category and housing place). These qualitative interviews enabled to construct a second closed questionnaire, more comprehensive and developed, which was mailed to 4,059 owners that had not been targeted by the preceding surveys. 1043 questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 25.7%. 917 questionnaires were exploited in this mail survey, which represents 17.8% of the total population of the riparian owners of the study area.

## 3 RESULTS

### 3.1 The river space is lived by individualistic owners

Four characteristics define the lived space of riparian owners along the rivers Isle, Dronne and Belle. For them it is first a familiar and intimate space that was constructed from their old experience of place and from their residential proximity. It is a place they invest through the multifaceted uses (development of the ground of the plots, practices along the banks and river bed), and through their activities for the management of the river and its surroundings (expertise, maintenance practices). It is also a river space that is potentially conflictual, because neighbourly relations are distant or nonexistent, because riparians have an approximate knowledge of their rights and duties and because they have are unaware of the institutional actors role although they expect a lot from them. In last, local residents have a representation of space which differs according to the river, each of the three constituting a unique imaginary universe.

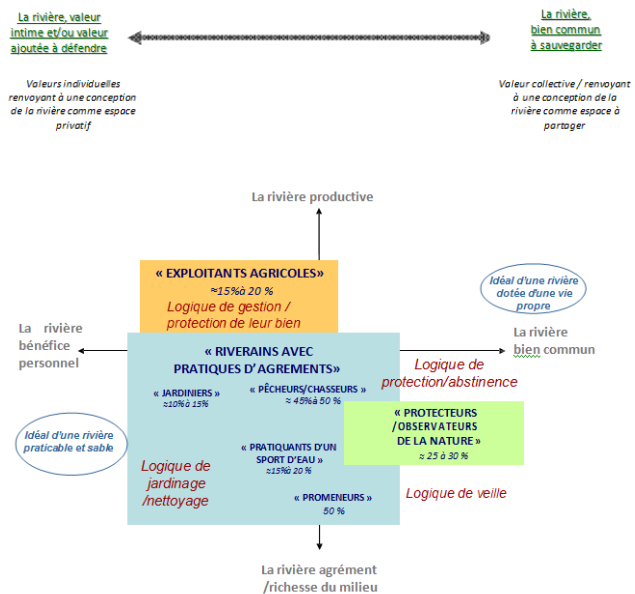
### 3.2 The appropriation or the sharing of river: the ambivalent position of the riparians

The values associated to the river by riparian's owners appear to be torn between two poles:

- the river intimate value and / or its added value to defend appears through the individual experience that each riparian associates to the river and through the personal interest related to the ownership of the parcel.

- the river as a common good to protect appears as a part of the territory (history, social life, local economy), and / or a natural environment with its own requirements. The river and its surroundings are then apprehended as a resource to share, save or even enhance.

This ambivalence allows to better understand the different profiles of residents and their positioning in relation to the logic of action on the river.



### 3.3 Riparian's owners are involved and sensitive to "good ecological status" of their river

We can note the presence of riparian's vernacular practical knowledge which is associated with a subjective assessment of the state of the river. The richness and naturalness of the environment (riparian vegetation, fish) is the first determinant environmental satisfaction driver, before the quality of the bed and banks. The diversity of criteria for assessing the state of the river that are used by the riparians seems to testify of the existence of a "culture of the river". This one seems aloof and out of touch with institutional knowledge. For example, the concept of "good ecological condition" as defined by the institutions is an abstract concept for them, which has no practical significance; and yet they use the term "good condition" with a personal conception for acting on the aquatic environment. Moreover, they are unevenly confident to do well when they work for maintain the shores. In addition, when the determinants of the state of the river are seen as complex and uncertain, they tend to incriminate the "others" and thus shirk their responsibility as residents. This is exacerbated by the fact that they are not familiar with the functioning and responsibilities of the water institutions.

## 4 FINDINGS AND PERSPECTIVE

The riparians relationship with their river produces a specific geographicity that is built largely around the legal status they have internalized (the right of property: *usus, fructus, abusus* on their possession). It includes practices and a conscience of the aquatic space of the river which is singular compared to those of other actors. But if this mode of existence and this consciousness contribute to the formation of personal identity to each owner, it is difficult to detect invariants for defining a collective local identity for these three rivers. Local residents tend to emphasize their differences rather than their similarities; they do not feel they belong to a particular social category. For the use and care of their land and river, riparians have set up their own environmental local expertise, which is enriched by their empirical knowledge. There is a profusion of complex attitudes that are difficult to regroup. Only a few riparians offer a built discourse on the development and improvement of the whole of the river. However, we note that their position as regards to a logic of action on the river is highly dependent on the social value they attribute to the river, in terms of personal benefit or common good. These elements seem to support our approach of the water governance based on the conceptual framework of the copresence "au fil de l'eau" : for the stakeholders there are several rivers in the river that management institutions are trying to govern. Establishing a dialogue between these parties would enable the connection between the river considered like a sum of properties and the river considered like a larger and more collective system. For that, it will require firstly that water institutions learn to recognize the riparians in their diversity and give them a real place instead of ignoring them. It will secondly require that managers build their legitimacy by offering to the riparians an

understandable aquatic biodiversity representation and a comprehensive and collective vision of river which they lack.

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