

(Re)appropriating the valley after the dismantling of a dam: the importance of the transition phase (Sélune, France) (Selune River, France)

S'(ré)appropriier la vallée après le démantèlement d'un barrage : l'importance de la phase de transition (Sélune, France)

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RÉSUMÉ

Loin d'être une simple intervention technique ou écologique, la restauration écologique transforme les paysages et crée de nouveaux lieux. Les grandes opérations de restauration écologique engendrent des transformations importantes des paysages qui font appel à des moyens conséquents qui déstabilisent de manière durable le cadre de vie des gens. Dans le cadre du suivi de la suppression des barrages hydroélectriques de la Sélune, plusieurs méthodes d'investigation ont été mobilisées, combinant l'observation participante, les entretiens et questionnaires individuels et l'organisation de focus groups pour appréhender l'importance de la phase de transition particulièrement longue (plusieurs années) qui a marqué ce chantier. Il s'agit de rendre compte parallèlement (1) de la transformation matérielle des paysages qui affecte toute la vallée, (2) de l'évolution des représentations et attentes des habitants et des usagers quant au devenir de la vallée et (3) du rôle des maîtres d'ouvrages (Etat, EDF, collectivités) dans l'accompagnement de ce projet. Ces observations sont comparées au déroulement de plusieurs autres grandes opérations de démantèlement de barrages en France et aux Etats-Unis afin de mettre en perspective l'importance de cette phase de transition dans le processus d'appropriation et de construction d'un nouveau projet de territoire pour une vallée restaurée.

ABSTRACT

Far from being a simple technical or ecological intervention, ecological restoration transforms landscapes and creates new places. Large-scale ecological restoration operations generate major transformations of landscapes that require substantial resources and destabilize people's living environment in a lasting way. Within the framework of the monitoring of the removal of the hydroelectric dams on the Sélune, several investigative methods were mobilized, combining participant observation, individual interviews and questionnaires, and the organization of focus groups in order to apprehend the importance of the particularly long transitional phase (several years) that marked this project. It is a question of taking into account at the same time (1) the material transformation of the landscapes which affects all the valley, (2) the evolution of the representations and expectations of the inhabitants and the users as for the future of the valley and (3) the role of the owners (State, EDF, communities) in the accompaniment of this project. These observations are compared with the progress of several other major dam dismantling operations in France and the United States in order to put into perspective the importance of this transition phase in the process of appropriation and construction of a new territory project for a restored valley.

MOTS CLES

Dam removal, ecological restoration, landscape, inhabitants, transition

The removal of the Vezins and La Roche-qui-Boit dams located on the Sélune River is an unprecedented operation in Europe due to the size of the structures: 36 and 16 meters high. These two hydroelectric dams are built in the beginning of the 20th century less than 15 km from the mouth of the river in the bay of Mont Saint Michel. In 2009, the French government decided to remove them. In addition to the regulatory aspects connected with the Water Framework Directive, the operation aims to allow the colonization of the river by Atlantic salmon. This ecological restoration project, which is currently being finalized, has been spread over a long period since the sediment management was spread out for Vezins from the spring of 2017 to the summer of 2019 when the dam was demolished, and from July 2020 to the spring of 2022 for the Roche-qui-Boit whose removal is planned for the spring of 2022.

We propose to present part of the results obtained in the framework of the scientific program for monitoring the removal of the Sélune dams to discuss the delicate management of this long transition period. It is a question of observing on the one hand how this phase is (or is not) mobilized by the various protagonists, in particular the project managers (State and EDF) and local elected and on the other hand how the inhabitants and users adapt to this new configuration by questioning the evolution (in progress) of their relations to these new places. It is a question of contributing to the work on the social dimensions of the ecological restoration of rivers (Morandi, Cottet, and Piégay 2021).

1 AN UNPRECEDENTED OPERATION THAT CREATES NEW PLACES

The Sélune restoration operation is conflictual: both elected officials and inhabitants are opposed to this project, which some of them continue to contest (Germaine and Lespez 2017). This situation has largely blocked the preparation of a project for the reconversion of the valley, entrusted by the State to the local authorities, even though the latter have so far refused to recover the land.

The State, owner of the Vezins dam, and EDF, owner of the Roche-qui-Boit dam, are in charge of the operation. In concrete terms, it is the State services that are responsible for accompanying the project. This is envisaged as a strictly technical operation (sediment emptying, destruction of infrastructures) with an ecological aim (improvement of water quality, return of biodiversity) whereas EDF seems to take more attention to social aspects. The valley struggles to be considered as a hydro-social territory (Boelens et al. 2016). Yet the removal of the dam transforms landscapes and participates in the creation of new places. We are interested in the conditions for their appropriation. While the changes in the valley were not anticipated in the construction of the project, we are interested in observing how the inhabitants and users manage (or not) to overcome the fear of change and the nostalgia of the golden age of the lakes in order to (re)appropriate this new valley and even participate in a new process of territorialization.

2 A COMBINATION OF METHODS TO DOCUMENT THE TRANSITION PHASE

For this, several methods were mobilized to follow in parallel:

- the material transformation of the landscape in the field: photographic observatory of the landscape, field visits, mapping of landscape forms and emerging uses;
- the political construction of a new territory project for the valley: participant observation which consisted in following the various thematic workshops implemented in a very erratic way by the communities and the State to work out a program of landscape and economic reconversion of the valley, realization of regular interviews with the elected officials and technicians of the services of the State, and the communities as well as agents EDF intervening at various scales;
- the evolution of the relationship of the inhabitants and users to the valley, both from the point of view of their representations of nature and landscapes and their concrete appropriation of the area: individual interviews in the field in most cases, realization of an online questionnaire on the future of the valley and organization of a workshop gathering about twenty inhabitants and users focused on the expectations in terms of landscapes and uses for the future

These different dimensions are confronted in order to identify possible discrepancies between these views and processes and thus better understand the process of appropriation of this new territory under construction.

3 RESULTS

3.1 A profound transformation of the landscape

The first step is to document the transformation of the valley's landscape throughout the construction period. The perimeter affected goes far beyond the dams. The operation concerns the whole of the dewatered zone where the sediments are stored and redistributed over the months. Although this area has been off-limits since the beginning of the work, local residents observe the implementation of this new configuration of the channel and the valley on a daily basis via the bridges and other viewpoints. Their appreciation of the new valley is also affected by the nuisances inherent in the construction site (machine traffic, noise, etc.).

3.2 Multiple expectations poorly understood by the project owners

The next step is to observe how this transitional period is mobilized by the project managers - the State, EDF and the local elected - to facilitate the appropriation of this new valley. To do this, we are interested in the mediation strategies put in place as well as the information disseminated to the inhabitants and users. These observations are compared with the expectations expressed by the inhabitants and users regarding the future of the valley. The actors who do not live directly near the old lakes are more likely to project themselves into the future. They identify a real potential in this valley that they wish to see developed. Their proposals in terms of development show the difficulty of projecting themselves in a project whose beneficiaries would be only the inhabitants since they rather envisage the development of a tourist place. Nature, however, occupies an important place in the discourses. More specifically, the confrontation of views shows the search for a difficult balance between preserving nature and developing to guarantee access to the river, allowing vegetation to settle and maintaining open landscapes.

3.3 Contrasting temporalities

The discrepancies observed between the expectations of some and others during this transition period are evidence of contrasting temporalities. In the field, users are confronted with the material reality of places that are being transformed. This situation brings to the fore staggered temporalities. The political time linked to the long negotiation between the communities and the State is not that of the local residents whose daily spectacle is this landscape of transition. The time of the farmers who were offered to mow the flattest areas of the valley floor is not that of the administration which grants authorizations to penetrate and intervene in the still forbidden dewatered area, nor that of the willows which colonize the valley floor.

Finally, this transition period appears to be crucial in the process of appropriating a new territory. It can be identified as the moment of concretization of the fears of the inhabitants with regard to the future of the valley, which has become inaccessible and abandoned, or conversely as the revelation of an original potential to be developed for others. Finally, we will mobilize other examples of large dam dismantling operations in France and the United States to put into perspective the importance of this transitional period in the construction of a shared project.

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