

## French Lessons

By Judith M. LaBelle  
President, Glynwood Center

*"The creation of the French Regional Nature Parks in 1967 was a visionary act. In their brief history, the Regional Parks have become vital players on the land use chessboard even though they have no formal regulatory power. Their freedom to innovate, wisely guided by community charters, remains a stroke of genius."*

**Jean-Luc Sadorge**

Former Director, Federation of French Regional Nature Parks

France has provided us with many wonderful things, ranging from the underpinnings of our democratic traditions to its cuisine and sense of style. But **one of the best things France has to offer is almost unknown in North America - its system of Regional Nature Parks, which explore "sustainability" in complex and varied landscapes where millions of people live, work and play.**

French "Regional Nature Parks" differ profoundly from the "parks" typically found in the United States. They encompass entire landscapes, including towns, businesses, farms and cultural and natural resources.

**Judith M. LaBelle** began studying the French Regional Nature Park system in 1989. Since then, she has visited more than a dozen parks throughout France. In 1995 she led a study tour of Regional Parks and ecomusees organized in conjunction with the Federation of French Regional Nature Parks.

Before becoming President of Glynwood Center, Ms. LaBelle practiced law with an emphasis on the environment and land use and served as Counsel to the NYS Commission on the Adirondacks in the 21st Century and the

These landscapes are not captured in amber to be put on display. The 40 Regional Nature Parks are home to almost three million people and serve as laboratories for exploring new methods of rural revitalization and sustainable development.

For the French, the concept of the landscape is not limited to spectacular panoramas. Instead, it includes the everyday environment; it is thought to be shaped as much by human imagination and behavior as by the forces of nature. The Regional Nature Parks encourage economic development that respects the local culture and environment, providing an alternative to thoughtless development that would undermine them.

With more than 30 years of experience, the French Regional Nature Park system has much to offer Americans and others who desire to develop regional frameworks based on local participation.

Of course, French and American culture and legal and political systems differ. But at the same time, both countries are characterized by relatively strong property rights and an emphasis on local decision-making relating to land use. The experience of the French Regional Nature Park system provides inspiration, ideas that can be adapted - "translated" if you will - for use in the United States and elsewhere.

During the 1960s the French government began to use planning and land use policies to integrate the social, economic, and environmental goals of each area and to attempt to spread development more equitably throughout the country. The concept of the *parc naturel régional* was created as part of this new approach.

National Audubon Society. Long active in the nonprofit field, she also serves as Chairperson of the Preservation League of New York State.

A Regional Nature Park is created at the request - and through the work of a locally based coalition. Therein lays its strength. This coalition - a broad cross-section of government officials - working with landowners, associations and business people from throughout the region, undertakes a planning process that extends over several years. While they vary widely, the average Regional Nature Park encompasses 80 to 100 local authorities.

A detailed landscape "diagnosis" serves as the basis for the Charter that defines the park boundary, objectives, management strategy and budget. As a result, **the approach taken in each park is unique and the system affords great latitude for innovation.** If accepted by the Ministry of the Environment, the Regional Nature Park is designated and the Charter becomes effective.

The Charter is a binding ten year commitment. The local, departmental and regional officials that sign it commit to exercise their authority - including their land use authority - in ways consistent with the Charter. Thus while the park itself does not have regulatory authority, the zoning scheme in its management plan has legal force.

Each park is administratively and financially independent, yet part of a larger system that provides various types of support. For example, the logo for each park incorporates an element unique to that park into a design including a stylized star which is the same for all parks. Regional Nature Parks are shown on national tourist maps and may participate in the branding program noted below.

At the end of ten years, the designation is reviewed and may be withdrawn if the parties have not acted in compliance with its objectives. Or the Charter may be updated to reflect current concerns and the designation extended.

From its national office in Paris, the *Fédération des Parcs Naturels Régionaux de France* assists in the designation process, provides opportunities for professional development for staff from all parks and ensures that the parks benefit from each other's experience. It maintains a web site, produces publications, supports pilot projects and represents the system nationally and internationally.

The "diagnosis" focuses on the forces that shaped - and continue to influence - the evolution of the landscape. The diagnosis combines scientific data, such as botany and geology, with more subjective elements, such as the emotional attachment to certain places resulting from their traditional use. It includes analysis of each area's cultural, social and economic situation.

For example, each park undertakes a painstaking inventory of animal and plant life as the basis for plans to protect biological diversity. By involving local residents in the process of discovering and documenting the park's biological resources, the park fosters a sense of responsibility and encourages "eco-citizenship".

Developing a landscape policy is deemed to require the participation of those who "make" the landscape: the local elected officials who are responsible for many land use decisions and help support the park financially, the residents and landowners who hold the collective memory of the landscape and impact it through their daily behavior, and the institutional partners - primarily government agencies - who make infrastructure decisions and may be able to provide technical assistance, funding or other support. By virtue of the commitment of all signatories to the Charter, and the park's authorization by national government, **the structure encourages consistency and synergy in public policy.**

A team of professionals is created to support the planning process. If the park is designated, they become the nucleus of the park staff. Each park's staff, drawn from disciplines related to the region's particular resources and concerns, supports local projects and undertakes pilot projects on the regional level.



Education is embraced as one of the most important missions of the Regional Nature Parks and it is a significant aspect of virtually all park initiatives. While visitors are welcome participants, the primary audience is park residents.

Nature, culture and landscape are not studied as separate, academic subjects but as elements of everyday life. The "curriculum" is derived largely from the park's landscape diagnosis so it reflects local issues and opportunities. The "students" include children, business people, public administrators, farmers, and tourists.

The Regional Nature Parks are also dedicated to supporting local economic development. The accepted compatibility of economic development and environmental protection marks the Regional Nature Park approach to rural revitalization.

The Regional Nature Parks actively intervene in the local economy, using their influence, access to financing and technical know-how to support businesses in ways that are in balance with and build upon the unique qualities of the landscape and culture. They help generate respect for rural industries and rekindle their association with local cultural heritage and productive values. They build networks that link isolated businesses in efficient ways.

A few examples will serve to illustrate how **the Regional Nature Park approach integrates the environment, economy and community, thus embodying the elements of sustainable development.**

The Brière Regional Nature Park in Brittany sponsored a project that helped restore the "sense of place", revived a traditional craft, encouraged several new businesses, improved the environment and even enhanced the local cuisine. The Brière consists primarily of a large marsh that has been held in common for hundreds of years as pasture land and a source of peat. During part of the year, small villages dotted across the marsh become islands surrounded by water. By the late 1960s, the thatched roofs that characterized the Brière had begun to disappear.

To counter this trend, the Park sponsored projects to help local craftsmen relearn the process of thatched roof construction and encouraged the use of thatched roofs through a subsidy program. It restored a cluster of traditional buildings for use as a museum, restaurant and education center. The Brière joined with two other parks to study ways to enhance the value of reeds and to set standards for their use in traditional buildings.

To supply the thatch, reeds were cut from the marsh and channels originally created by the removal of peat were reopened, improving the habitat for eels and birds. Several restaurants' menus now feature eels, a traditional regional food, and the Park has tapped into the growing number of tourists who want to watch birds.

The Brière illustrates the importance of the Regional Nature Park brand. The Federation has developed a registered logo and brand name that allows products and services from within a park to be marketed as culturally authentic and environmentally friendly.

For example, several traditional boatmen determined that they could expand their operations by offering "discovery boat rides" to tourists and applied for the right to use the "Welcome of the Brière Regional Nature Park" logo. In return, they agreed to operate according to standards set by the local government and the Park. For example, boats must be guided using traditional boat poles along a route chosen to protect the environment and the boatmen must provide commentary on the marshes. The boatmen regularly attend Park programs on landscape and ecology to enhance their



The Brière logo features the region's traditional boatmen with the star used in the logo of every Regional Nature Park.

commentary.

The Park also granted use of its brand to several restaurants, each of which signed a quality charter with the Park and agreed to comply with strict requirements regarding authenticity of design, construction, decoration and, of course, cuisine.

The use of the Regional Nature Park brand on traditional products not only makes them more attractive to many customers, but restores respect and meaning to rural production once thought old-fashioned and destined to fade away. **Rather than emphasizing the "stick" of enforcement for failing to adhere to environmental standards, Regional Nature Parks help local entrepreneurs achieve them and offer use of the logo as the "carrot".**

The French have also developed ecomusees museums dedicated to the traditional landscape and the cultural activities that shaped it. Some regions have a central ecomusee that introduces the region's diverse culture and refers visitors to a network of specialized museums located through the region. This encourages local museums to focus on the distinctive aspects of their history and fosters tourism in out of the way places. Ecomusees are often located within Regional Nature Parks and collaborate with them. When outside, ecomusees often take the lead in advocating protection of the landscape.

The Morvan Regional Nature Park in central France undertook quite a different project that sought to reweave its area's cultural, natural and economic fabric. The Morvan has a long tradition of cultivating rare plants for the "naturalist" and "medicinal" markets. During the 19th century, its villagers were known for their knowledge of natural remedies. But during the 20th century, the old knowledge disappeared and the plants themselves began to vanish from the landscape.

In 1982, the Morvan Park decided to revive this legacy in a way that would contribute to the region's economic vitality. Park naturalists began researching and cultivating the local plant species that formed the basis of the Morvan's tradition of natural remedies. Park staff then worked with pharmaceutical experts to experiment with new plants and slowly increased the variety of plants grown.

The Park also created a producers' association, a cooperative to facilitate the sharing of plant material and a marketing cooperative. As a result, several farmers began to produce medicinal plants to supplement their other crops.

As one of the Park's medicinal plant specialists explains: "In order to live in the country and be a farmer, you have to become a rural entrepreneur and have a market strategy. You have to manage your cultivation like a business with specific products. In the Morvan, we are cultivating our unique heritage." (Parcs, No. 23)

The research was shared with academics and the public as well as farmers. More than 1700 species of plants have been identified and local traditions have been linked to hundreds of them. A book on the tradition of local plant use was published, exhibitions held regarding plants, nature and society, a herbarium created, and a professional agricultural diploma with an emphasis in medicinal plants developed.

The Morvan case study is a good example of the integrated approach taken by the Regional Nature Parks: the research provided the basis for economic development that also enhances biological diversity, encourages management of the landscape, and contributes to cultural understanding and academic advancement.

The Regional Nature Parks in the north of France are also exploring the economic benefits of restoring the traditional landscape. They are partnering with a Belgian producer of apple juice and cider to study the opportunities for organic production afforded by the region's traditional genetic fruit stock. In 2000, two experimental orchards were planted with varieties known to resist infection without chemical applications.

The list of intriguing projects goes on and on, yet provides only a glimpse of the comprehensive approach taken within each Regional Nature Park. Guidebooks on vernacular building types of the Livradois-Forez that illustrate how they can be adapted to meet modern expectations. "View boxes"

with plastic overlays which can be flipped over a drawing of existing or historical conditions to help residents in the Vosges du Nord understand change. Reviving the tradition of walking on stilts, once used by shepherds in the Landes de Gascogne, to create a new recreational activity and small businesses. Creating a system of locally owned hotels whose proprietors introduce visitors to the landscape and culture.

One clear indication that the Regional Nature Parks are achieving their goals is the continuing expansion of the system, which is driven by requests from local officials. The system, which began with one park in 1968, now has 40. In many cases local governments that initially declined to participate when a park was created in their region have since joined, either filling in "holes" or expanding the boundary. The number of requests for the creation of parks has raised the question of how large the system can become and remain effective.

## **FRENCH LESSONS**

**Our country has many regions rich in cultural and natural heritage that could benefit from ideas drawn from the French experience.** Some are already recognized as "heritage areas", most are not. One can easily think of several examples from New York State alone: the Catskills and Adirondacks, the Hudson River Valley, the Mohawk and Champlain Valleys, the Leatherstocking region, the Finger Lakes and the Tug Hill.

Among them they share many of the challenges that have led to the creation of Regional Nature Parks: agricultural activity that is losing ground, small towns that have lost their economic base, an exodus of young people, and inappropriate development that is threatening the landscape.

Regional structures of various types exist in some of these areas, but none of them combines the key elements of the Regional Nature Parks: the philosophy of actively basing rural revitalization on protection of the region's cultural and natural resources, a structure based on the commitment of local governments, a plan based on a nuanced regional "diagnosis", an emphasis on fostering "eco-citizenship", and a multidisciplinary staff to support the localities as well as undertake regional pilot projects.

All would benefit from a structure-such as the Federation-that would facilitate the sharing of best practices and provide a marketing system to encourage and support quality local products. And, perhaps most importantly, all would benefit from a structure through which the actions of local residents, nonprofits, municipalities, counties, state and federal agencies could be coordinated in support of the region's vision for itself.

*C'est une bonne idée. N'est pas?*