

La libre évolution: Negotiating ecological freedom at UNESCO, Paris

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The third meeting of *Les journées de la libre évolution* (11–13 February 2026) – an annual symposium organized by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) – convened NGOs, policymakers, ecologists and researchers over two days to examine the emerging concept of *la libre évolution*. Hosted by UNESCO in Paris, the symposium was opened by Franck Pupumat, Counsellor for the French National Commission, who affirmed that the peace mission of UNESCO applies not only to relations between humans, but also to relations between humans and the rest of the world.

The term *la libre évolution* (which literally translates as ‘free evolution’) means allowing ecological processes to unfold without continuous human control. It goes beyond conservation science to engage the cultural, legal and ethical dimensions of environmental practice. While there are overlaps with the English term ‘rewilding’, for now *la libre évolution* seems primarily a 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.

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 institutionalize recognition of non-human interests, and how cartographic practices shape the ways landscapes are understood, prioritized and governed. Taken together, questions of measurement, law and mapping illuminate where *la libre évolution*, with its focus on ecological autonomy, encounters the instruments of governance shaping the future of nature recovery.

The 2026 symposium was steered by the IUCN Working Group *Wilderness et nature férale* led by Pascal Cavallin, and 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 (UICN Comité français, 2026). Presented as an evolving 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 service frameworks and climate adaptation strategies. *La libre évolution* is not positioned outside these institutional contexts. It benefits from support by organizations 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 cannot be captured by instrumental metrics. The symposium revealed ongoing efforts to hold these different modes of valuation together.

Among speakers and attendees were NGOs, governmental organizations and ecologists, along with a handful of university researchers. Despite its invocation of ‘free evolution’, the program was carefully structured. Sprinkled among the conventional presentations and roundtables were elevator pitches or *pastilles* and workshops using the ‘World Café’ methodology. Participants from the UK and Germany joined 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 recognizing non-human interests; and the political dimensions of mapping and spatial planning for ecological restoration. Together, these strands indicate where the ideals of ecological autonomy in nature recovery encounter the instruments of governance, raising questions that resonate beyond national contexts.

Measuring the less tangible

During one of the first workshops, facilitated by Anthony Foussard and Hélène Lion from the Born to Rewild project (2025–26), each table in the room became a hub for debating public engagement challenges around messaging, communications media and tensions. These open-ended dialogues highlighted common difficulties and led to 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 évolution*. 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 and should 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 conceptualized – not only as a resource base and service provider, but as a relational field of 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 évolution*, however, also gestures toward forms of ecological flourishing that may not be fully captured by such instrumentalization. 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 évolution*. 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 (Sabin, 2026). In turn, these shifts in perception shape what is recognized as valuable in a landscape. Storytelling does not displace scientific assessment, but rather expands the repertoire through which ecological value can be articulated and, where necessary, measured.

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 have been formalized either through Indigenous cosmologies or by extending principles rooted in human rights law. In New Zealand, judges have recognized 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, Calmet explained, 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 recognize non-human interests and agencies within systems of governance.

The political cartography of wild nature

On the second day of the symposium, 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 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 conceptualization of *naturalité* and why particular methodological choices were made. Building on this transparency, I suggest that mapping nature – like defining it – is never politically neutral or a ‘merely technical’ matter. Decisions of scale, classification and representation each inevitably carry political weight, insofar as they influence how landscapes are made visible, valued or prioritized. This opens further questions about how cartographic practices might more explicitly attend to justice, local knowledge, multispecies worlds and future imaginaries – such as 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, future directions for *la libre évolution* remain necessarily unresolved and open-ended. 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, complexity and autonomous unfolding of ecological relations over space and time.

This view continues to sit uneasily within governance regimes that require demonstrable and quantifiable 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. In some cases, perhaps wonder illuminates the most ethical path.

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

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 during the breaks. Applying the philosophy of free evolution to the program itself, along with more interactive formats, would allow for more organic and reflexive exchanges to freely evolve.

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 recognize national boundaries.

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A view of the UNESCO headquarters (photo by Alice Eldridge).