

## Corridor Talk: Conservation Humanities and the Future of Europe's National Parks

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### Abstract

Corridor Talk: Conservation Humanities and the Future of Europe's National Parks is a DFG-AHRC funded project at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society at LMU Munich (Germany), and the University of Leeds (UK). The project focuses on three European transboundary national park areas: the Pyrenees, the Bavarian Forest and Šumava, and the Wadden Sea Biosphere Reserve. It uses comparative literature, visual ethnography and environmental history methodologies to connect insights into human culture, values, history, and behaviour that are central to humanities and social sciences research to nature conservation science and practice. It aims to foster a conservation that is more culturally aware, more aware of human behaviour and values, and more aware of the ethical complexities of its work by applying the "corridor talk" metaphor in three ways: to address and support the material ecological corridors that link protected sites; to address and support the symbolic corridors that connect governance and cultural perspectives on protected sites; and to bring humanities research into discussions on nature conservation.

### Keywords

conservation humanities, ecocriticism, environmental history, environmental humanities, visual ethnography

### Introduction

Corridor Talk: Conservation Humanities and the Future of Europe's National Parks is a DFG-AHRC funded project running from February 1<sup>st</sup> 2020 until April 30<sup>th</sup> 2023 that brings together researchers based at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society at LMU Munich (Germany), and the University of Leeds (UK). Focusing on three European transboundary national park areas – the Pyrenees, the Bavarian Forest and Šumava, and the Wadden Sea Biosphere Reserve (see Fig. 1) – the project connects the insights into human culture, values, history, and behaviour that are central to humanities and social sciences research to nature conservation science and practice. It thereby aims to foster a conservation that is more culturally aware, more aware of human behaviour and values, and more aware of the ethical complexities of its work.

### Background

The national parks at the centre of Corridor Talk all exist along national borders. They thus require transboundary cooperation, but they also show that national differences apply in conservation, for example, in matters of land ownership and management, and in differing views of what constitutes sustainable development in protected sites. National parks are only ever wild to some extent; they are perhaps best understood as managed spaces that are partly designed to create a commercially viable impression of the wild. As managed spaces, they inevitably face conservation challenges of different kinds, including those associated with climate change, which facilitates the movements of some animals but not others, and which intensifies shifts already present in the landscape. These conservation challenges are potentially



**Figure 1.** Map showing the three European transboundary national park areas relevant to Corridor Talk.

exacerbated when the protected sites in question cross national borders or extend across large tracts of territory.

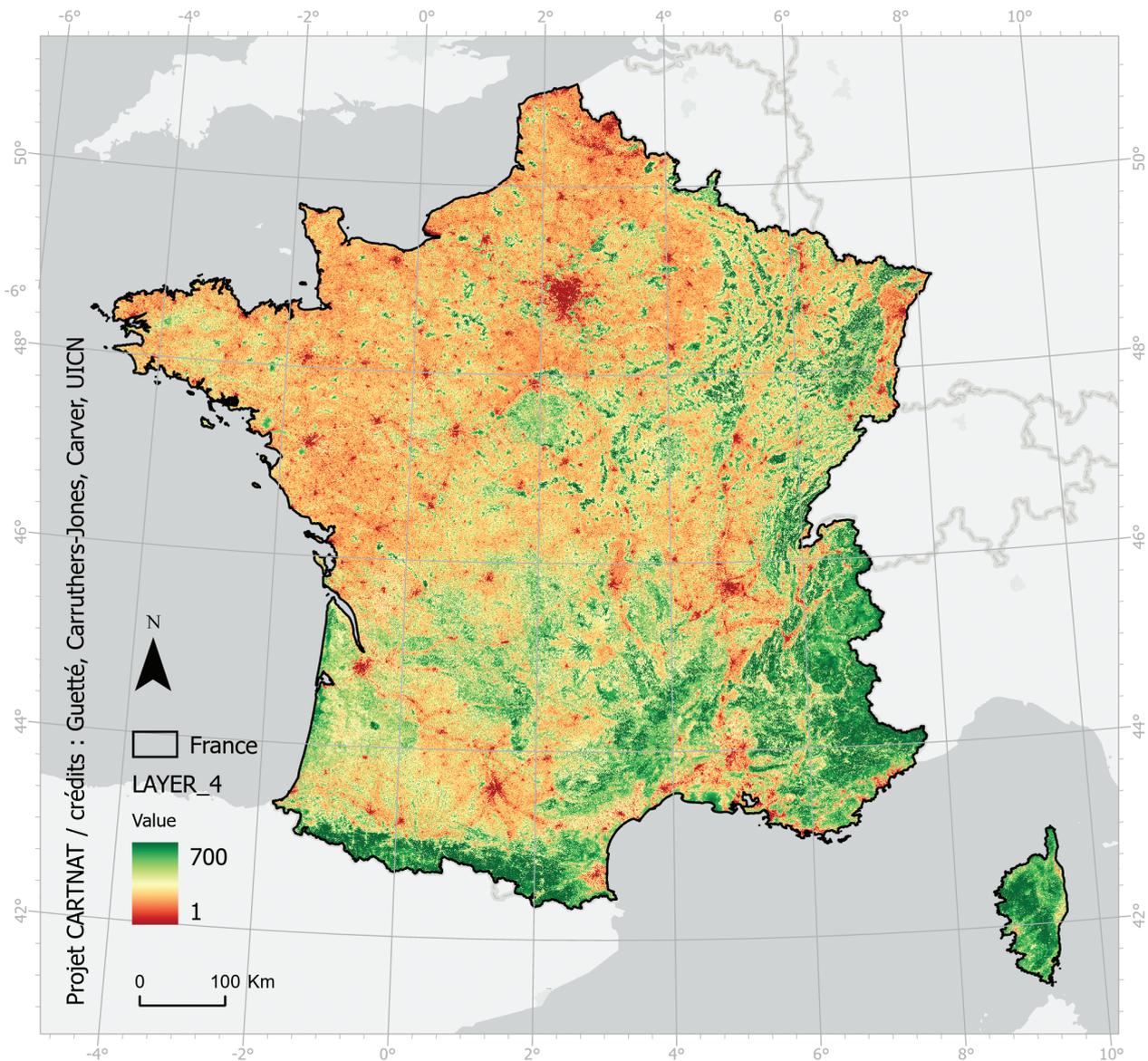
Corridor Talk, like the field of conservation humanities at large, draws on a range of disciplines to better understand the humanistic aspects of species loss and ongoing efforts to conserve biodiversity. Combining symbolic and material perspectives, the project contributes to both conservation discourse and conservation practice, advancing understandings of humankind and its relationship with the non-human, and provoking reflection on the need to change human society and its prevailing attitudes toward the natural world. Taking in the study of humans (including conservationists) and nonhuman animals (including protected species) as well as the multispecies communities and societies that enfold them, the project is based on the principle that much of conservation is about understanding and changing *human* behaviour: being aware of the complexities of human culture as well as its equally complex entanglements with the natural world.

## Methodologies

The conservation humanities field exists alongside and adds to research in the natural sciences on the

ecological aspects of conservation, and social sciences research on the social and political issues related to conservation. The main strength of the field is in contributing to the cultural aspects of conservation, bringing together ideas and approaches that are common to the humanities and practical efforts to protect and restore nature.

Three methodologies are central to the work of Corridor Talk: comparative literature, visual ethnography, and environmental history. Each of these disciplines offers particular insights into the biodiversity crisis. Comparative literature provides insights into the affective dimension of conservation, enabling analysis and understanding of the cultural values that are relevant to natural landscapes, the loss of species, and conservation initiatives. Visual ethnography illuminates the movement of human and nonhuman beings through particular landscapes, revealing patterns of interaction between them as well as different understandings of place. Finally, environmental history contextualizes current conservation practices in the light of historical trends and shows how past contingencies shape current understandings. The insights these disciplines collectively generate are valuable to conservation stakeholders and policymakers in Europe and beyond.



**Figure 2.** CARTNAT (Cartographie de la naturalité) is currently used to support decision making under the French National Strategy for Protected Areas. Green areas have high potential wilderness as based on expert analysis of remotely sensed satellite data. Made with support from the IUCN French Committee, WWF France and Wild Europe. See <https://uicn.fr/aires-protégées/wilderness/> for more details.

## Aims and outcomes

Corridor Talk aims to engender a more nuanced understanding of the role of national parks in European conservation strategies. It argues that national parks may be seen, from an ecological and a governance point of view, as ossified products of outdated ideas on nature conservation, isolated islands of protection that have not succeeded in halting declining biodiversity in Europe. Seen more positively, however, national parks are important cultural frameworks within which people can capture, express, and examine ideas about nature. In this last sense, the project looks to support, not just the material (ecological) corridors that link protected sites, but also the symbolic corridors that connect

governance and cultural perspectives on them. The project thereby allows university-based humanities researchers to work with park-based practitioners to provide integrated insights into the changing meanings and functions, as well as the practical management, of national parks.

In keeping with these goals, members of the Corridor Talk team have met regularly with professionals in conservation science and practice, they have communicated their results in academic conferences and journal articles, and they have produced outputs aimed at park-going publics. The multiple partnerships that have been built during the project will outlast its funding course. For example, a mixed group of university lecturers, national park officials, and conservation

scientists has recently developed units for teaching the Wadden Sea as part of school and university courses on Dutch, German, and Danish literature, which can be found at [www.waddensealiterature.com](http://www.waddensealiterature.com). Videos of walking interviews with participants in ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in the French Pyrenees will be used in exhibitions at Pyrenees National Park visitor centres in order to bring attention to the different ways in which local stakeholders relate to national park space. This fieldwork is structured around CARTNAT (Cartographie de la naturalité) and the project output will in turn support the way CARTNAT is used in decision making

under the French National Strategy for Protected Areas (see Fig. 2). Finally, a projected environmental history of the Bavarian Forest and Šumava national parks will contribute to an integrated understanding of an area long bisected by cultural misunderstandings and Cold War political strife. The various connections that have been developed over the course of the project are both a stimulus and a model for future efforts to bring humanities research into important discussions on nature conservation: a third form of connective “corridor talk” that should continue to make a positive impact long after the project ends.

## Selection of published outputs from Corridor Talk

Corridor Talk website: <https://conservationhumanities.com/>

Literature and the Wadden Sea website: [www.waddensealiterature.com](http://www.waddensealiterature.com)

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