



Building connections with nature

A Reconnect policy brief on narratives
that support nature restoration





Summary

Restoring our ecosystems back to a healthy status is central to the transition towards a more sustainable future. This is a process of changing the biophysical landscapes and actively working with human perceptions and world-views. For nature restoration to bring benefits for both nature and people, it is important to ensure that it will be a broad societal commitment, supported and motivated by strong narratives of meaningful relations between people and nature. To this point, the RECONNECT project has identified five narratives for nature restoration and conservation grounded in people's experiences and different relationships with nature. These narratives showcase the diverse and complementary facets of revitalised and resilient human-nature relationships. This policy brief aims to contribute to the efforts of EU Member States and communities in implementing the EU Nature Restoration Regulation. It will help to identify common values and meaningful pathways for inclusive restoration activities, grounded in local realities. of the Global Biodiversity Framework.

Recommendations:

- Nature restoration involves more than ecological targets: for it to be successful, it needs to resonate with the richness of people's narratives.
- Consider the use of multiple nature narratives: there are diverse ways to make restoration meaningful and important to people.
- The implementation of the EU Nature Restoration Regulation needs to be embedded in a participatory approach that includes and gives voice to different narratives and people's diverse experiences at a local level. other sectors, as well as the historical and cultural features of landscapes – matters that are commonly overlooked in contemporary biodiversity conservation.





Introduction

Nature is essential to the functioning of our societies and economies. Healthy ecosystems not only provide us with the necessities of life – food, water, and air – they also play a vital role for our health, well-being, and prosperity. At the moment, there is much to be done to ensure the long-term health of our ecosystems; currently 81% of European habitats are in poor condition. While protecting key habitats and species will remain crucial, restoring our ecosystems back to health will become a vital part of nature conservation in the coming decades.

There has been a growing recognition of the importance of nature restoration in the international policy arena. The European Union (EU) recently took an important step forward through the adoption of the EU Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR), which took effect on 18 August 2024. This regulation aims to restore at least 20% of the EU's land and seas to good health by 2030, and all ecosystems in need of restoration by 2050. Restoring nature in the EU will offer many co-benefits for people in addition to nature's intrinsic value, including the enhancement of ecosystem services such as resilience and capacity to adapt to climate change, protection against natural disasters, food security, as well as benefits to our physical and mental health.

Our connections to nature are a key to nature restoration

Human-nature relationships are influenced by and evolve with our identity, sense of responsibility and our attachment to specific places and practices. People's connections to nature provide a foundation for nature-friendly behaviours and benefit nature conservation (Barragan-Jason et al., 2023). Connections to nature are related to our experiences in nature, to the consumption of natural products, for instance from gardening, agriculture, or forestry, but also to psychological dimensions including our emotional attachment, our attitudes towards natural environments, and our deeper worldviews (Ives et al., 2018).

We all make sense of our environment with the help of narratives. These are stories we tell among ourselves about how we relate to nature as individuals and groups, and how we interact with others and take decisions. Narratives are grounded in daily experiences. Looking at narratives of local communities brings to light their interactions with and in natural areas, and their connections to nature. It shows the contributions of nature conservation and restoration to people's day-to-day lives. Together, a set of narratives represents multiple, complementary perspectives and motivations with which people connect to the landscape as well as to other people through their activities.

Against this backdrop, it is timely to reflect on how we imagine and tell the stories of nature conservation and restoration. Engaging with restoration narratives helps us understand common values and identify pathways to implement inclusive and meaningful restoration actions for people and nature (Raymond et al., 2022).



How do people connect with nature?

Five narratives

There are many ways to connect with nature, as individuals or as groups of people. Here, we present five narratives of human-nature connections in protected areas, drawing from RECONNECT research activities. By analysing personal stories of people living and working in and around protected areas within the multifunctional landscapes of Göttingen, Germany (Jay et al., in review), we uncovered both the deeply local and the widely shared dimensions of these connections. These narratives capture the specific ways people experience and value nature in particular places. At the same time, they reflect broader discourses that resonate and shape how people connect with nature across different contexts. Bringing these narratives to the surface allows us to collectively reflect on how we attach value and give meaning to protected areas.

1. Regional heritage landscapes

This narrative highlights the deep historical and cultural connections between local communities and protected areas, shaped by centuries of human-nature interactions (grazing, forest uses, e.g.). Places' names, local legends, and historical landmarks reflect past land-use practices that are part of the common heritage of a region. These areas are valued not only for their biodiversity and natural beauty but also for the cultural heritage embedded in the landscape. However, there are challenges in integrating non-material cultural values, such as local traditions and practices, into official management plans. This narrative **emphasizes the importance of preserving these intangible aspects, including the social structures that have developed around these places, such as celebrations and community gatherings. The role of local foresters, landowners, and residents in maintaining these connections and passing down knowledge can be essential for the sustainability of these heritage landscapes, ensuring that future generations continue to learn from and appreciate their historical and natural significance.**



2. Learning landscapes

Protected areas serve as key spaces for biodiversity conservation and learning experiences. Place-based learning initiatives, such as school projects or guided excursions, connect people to the nature in their region, deepening a sense of regional identity and responsibility. Learning experiences in natural landscapes foster emotional ties to the landscape and enhance understanding of natural processes and of biodiversity conservation measures. Healthy natural ecosystems present unique social-ecological features that showcase the natural wealth of a region, the land uses that shaped the landscapes, but also the threats and restoration or conservation needs. For this learning narrative to thrive in protected areas, two aspects are essential. First, maintaining and restoring ecological integrity is key for creating vibrant natural learning places. Second, active collaboration among researchers, land-use practitioners, and local communities beyond agriculture, forestry or nature conservation professionals allows to bridge education, land use, and conservation at local landscape scale. **By enforcing legal protection and the implementation of conservation schemes, emphasizing inclusive access, and supporting innovative actors and local engagement, policies can uphold the value of protected areas as hubs for learning, inspiration, and biodiversity preservation.**

3. Multifunctional production landscapes

This narrative emphasizes the idea that protected areas hold multiple purposes and that people connect to these areas including through productive uses. Farming, timber production, or forest management activities play a key role in shaping and maintaining these landscapes, and connecting people to the area. Connections are based on long-term relationships of individuals with the local ecosystems, knowledge, and know-how accumulated over decades through land use activities and personal engagement. **This narrative stresses that these areas are not only about protecting nature but also about integrating productive uses in a way that supports both biodiversity, local economies, and local identities.** Effective and inclusive management requires cooperation among local stakeholders, including farmers, foresters, and government representatives, and the voices of local practitioners to be heard to achieve a balance that respects both conservation goals and the economic needs of the community.

4. Care landscapes

In this narrative, protected areas represent vital spaces for individual well-being, offering opportunities for relaxation and personal connection with nature. These areas provide a counterpart to the pressures of modern life, allowing people to experience nature, quietness, and a sense of self. Walking, cycling, and other forms of recreation are ways to escape daily stress, with nature serving as a restorative force for the mind and body. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of these areas as refuge. While the peacefulness and beauty of these spaces are cherished, balancing human activities such as recreation, local wood production, and grazing with the conservation or restoration of nature requires context-sensitive management. **The narrative emphasizes the need for preserving the naturalness of these spaces while also ensuring they remain accessible for recreation, supporting both ecological health and personal well-being.**



5. Collaboration landscapes

This narrative focuses on the importance of people's connections to each other and collaboration for conservation. To maintain cultural landscapes and their biodiversity values, farmers, conservationists, land managers, and local authorities work together. Extensive grazing, in particular, is a farming practice essential for preserving species diversity. However, the success of these efforts depends on effective collaboration and financial support, such as agri-environmental subsidies, to ensure that farmers continue to engage in land management practices that benefit the environment. Building trust between all involved parties can be a central strategy to ensure that the needs and concerns of different groups are addressed. Effective collaboration involves ongoing communication and shared activities, such as field trips to monitor species or implement conservation measures. This narrative stresses that managing protected areas requires a broad network of actors who can balance conservation and agricultural needs, fostering a collaborative environment that strengthens both local economies and environmental sustainability.





How do narratives contribute to nature restoration?

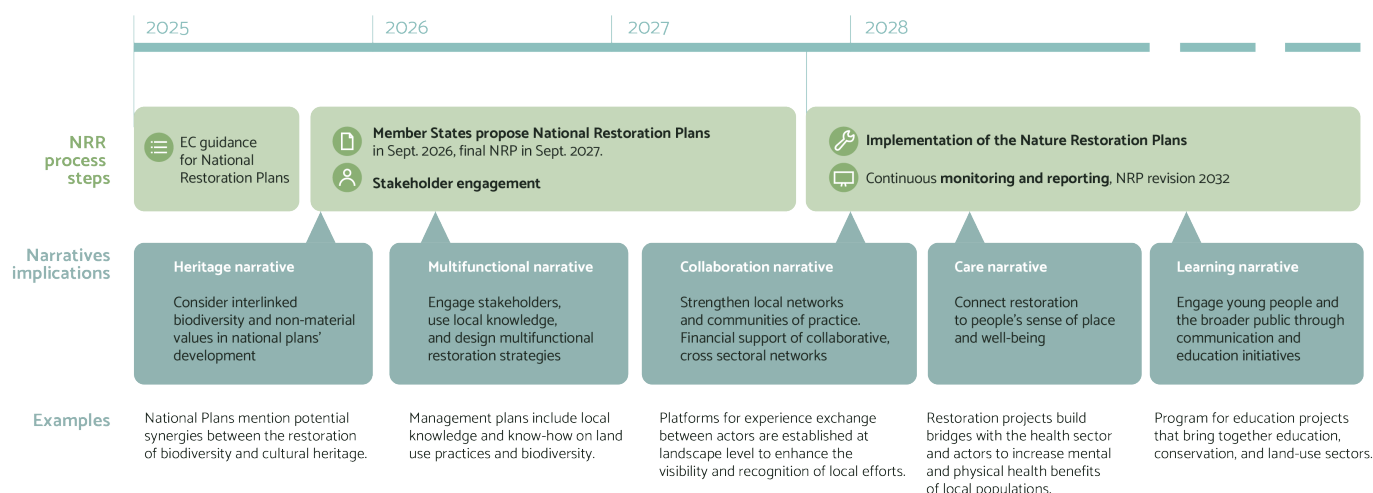
For nature restoration policy and its implementation, which needs to consider both effective measures to reach ecological targets, and social equity in the form of stakeholder engagement, narratives are a powerful tool to find a common language and support inclusive decision-making and the planning and management of restoration actions. The following four key characteristics of narratives make them essential to nature restoration policy:

- **Narratives provide opportunities for people to make sense of their connections to nature.** They allow us to collectively reflect on and understand our complex interactions with natural areas and the environment in general. People have complex stakes in restoration, and richer narratives help avoid oversimplification.
- Narratives are grounded in experiences. They tell the stories of people coming together to engage with a given landscape. Narratives voice local, nuanced perceptions of protected areas. Through their many roots and nuances they surface local knowledge and support **community building**.
- Narratives re-tell us the different values underlying our actions. In this sense, they provide crucial **information for planning conservation and restoration actions**. Rich and diverse narratives reveal the multiple facets of restoration beyond ecological targets. They offer guidance for decision-making on restoration visions.
- **Narratives act as connectors.** They can be shared by different groups and are not essentialized as a fixed vision or interest of one specific stakeholder group.

Recommendations for the NRR implementation

Narratives have direct implications for the implementation of the EU Nature Restoration Regulation, and can impact how we will restore nature in the EU throughout the next years. The implementation of the NRR foresees the elaboration of National Restoration Plans until 2027, including engagement of stakeholder groups, followed by concrete measures and programs, monitoring, and revisions of the restoration plans. Narratives of how people connect to nature can nurture this process at its different stages, as exemplified with the five narratives presented above (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Impact of the learning, heritage, care, multifunctional, and collaboration narratives throughout the NRR implementation process



Finally, we conclude with core recommendations on how to use narratives to support nature restoration and foster connections with nature:

1. Nature restoration involves more than ecological targets: for it to be successful, it needs to resonate with the richness of people's narratives. Inclusive planning and management of restoration actions require that different narratives be heard.
2. Consider the use of multiple nature narratives: there are diverse ways to make restoration meaningful and important to people. Make the various narratives apparent will voice communities' knowledge and experiences, and ensure they are audible and articulated within the decision-making processes of restoration measures.
3. The implementation of the EU Nature Restoration Regulation needs to be embedded in a participatory approach that includes and gives voice to different narratives and people's diverse experiences at a local level. Approaching the NRR implementation with a "People and Nature" mindset from the outset will help navigate differences and tensions.

RECONNECT investigates the social-ecological relationships between protected areas and the larger landscapes that they are embedded in. The project explores ecological, social, and institutional connections to understand how protected areas relate to the 'outside' world. With this systemic take, the project goes beyond the conventional approach to biodiversity conservation and contributes to better coherence in discussions and decisions about the management of landscapes.

RECONNECT is 3-year long research project (2023-2026) sponsored by Biodiversa+ and the EU, with a budget of approximately 1,4 million Euro's. It spans across four different case studies, namely Stockholm (Sweden), Göttingen (Germany), Grenoble (France), and Cape Town (South Africa). The partners are: Stockholm University, IUCN European Regional Office, French National Centre for Scientific Research, University of Helsinki, University of Göttingen, University of Western Cape and University of Cape Town.



5. References

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