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## LIFE Dordogne River: Restoring Alluvial Habitats and Building a Shared Culture of River Conservation

### Author

Baptiste Potet

EPIDOR

Led by EPIDOR, the public territorial establishment for the Dordogne basin, the LIFE Dordogne River project is restoring aquatic and alluvial habitats along one of France's major river corridors. Supported by the European LIFE-Nature programme, it combines field restoration, land acquisition, professional guidance, education and European knowledge exchange to address a common challenge: how to give regulated rivers more space, sediment and ecological resilience.

Like many large French and European rivers, the Dordogne has been profoundly altered by past and present development. Large hydroelectric dams have reduced the frequency of river-shaping floods and interrupted sediment transfer from the upper basin. Historical aggregate extraction has deepened the riverbed by more than four metres in some places, while bank protection works have restricted the river's natural mobility. Over the last fifty years, the bed has incised by an average of 60 cm and the active channel has narrowed by about 30 metres, increasing the tendency towards a single, fixed channel.

These changes have degraded natural habitats and weakened biodiversity. Gravel spawning grounds, which are essential for migratory fish such as salmon, shad and sea lamprey, have become scarcer, while emblematic species such as otter, kingfisher and Aquitaine pike depend on increasingly fragile riverine habitats. In response, LIFE Dordogne River is delivering around thirty restoration operations, including gravel injection to restore spawning grounds, sediment transfer near the Mauzac dam, and the ecological rehabilitation of backwaters, banks and former gravel pits through topographic reconfiguration and sediment reinjection.

The project also recognises that river restoration can only succeed if local stakeholders understand, support and help maintain the changes being made. It therefore brings together 15 technical and financial partners and involves managers of other major European rivers. Ten associated beneficiaries contribute to implementation and dissemination: five local authorities acquiring riparian land, a river syndicate carrying out restoration works, the French Office for Biodiversity (OFB), the National Association of Basin Elected Officials (ANEB), the European Centre for River Restoration (ECRR), and the National Union of Quarry and Materials Industries (UNICEM), which supports the sharing of good practice with the quarrying and construction materials sector.



FIGURE 1 The land strategy at the scale of the 280 km river corridor. Credits: EPIDOR.

## Mobilising local authorities to secure long-term habitat protection

The long-term success of conservation and restoration on the Dordogne depends on sustained commitments from local authorities, supported by land acquisition targets and a shared strategy along 280 km of river corridor.

Land control is a decisive condition for restoring habitats and ensuring their long-term conservation. Many target habitats, especially alluvial woodlands, extend across both the Public Fluvial Domain managed by EPIDOR and privately owned land. The project therefore includes the acquisition of 181 hectares to guide land use and secure practices that are compatible with natural habitat protection.

The Pays de Fénelon community of communes and the municipalities of Prudhomat, Carennac,

Floirac and Carsac-Aillac receive LIFE funding to acquire 121 hectares of riparian land. These acquisitions make restoration work possible and help preserve areas of high ecological value. Public management of riverfront land is therefore not only an administrative tool, but also a strategic lever for improving ecological continuity.

At the scale of the 280 km river corridor, the land strategy draws on the land study and the feedback from the beneficiary communities and brings together 13 intermunicipal authorities. Its purpose is to translate conservation objectives into urban planning documents and pre-emption tools. A working group led by EPIDOR, with the participation of other land stakeholders, helps embed this approach beyond the lifetime of the LIFE project.

Local authorities also play a central role in explaining the project to residents and river users. Elected representatives help anchor restoration projects locally, bring the issues into municipal discussions and relay clear messages to communities along the valley.

## Improving practice in the quarrying and public works sectors

Through UNICEM Nouvelle-Aquitaine, companies in the quarrying and construction materials sectors are being encouraged to better integrate the morpho-ecological functioning of the alluvial plain into their activities.

UNICEM represents more than 2,700 companies in the quarrying and construction materials industries and provides a documentary resource centre for its members. Within the LIFE project, UNICEM Nouvelle-Aquitaine is developing a practical guide to help operators better understand the ecological and geomorphological dynamics of alluvial systems and adapt their practices accordingly.

Seminars and technical days provide opportunities to share know-how and practices that respond to sustainable development challenges. Feedback from LIFE Dordogne River is already helping operators integrate ecological issues into extraction and rehabilitation projects and reduce environmental impacts. For example, the management of invasive alien species is now anticipated from the drafting of technical specifications, with close to 10% of some project budgets allocated to this issue.



**FIGURE 2** The former gravel pit of Reingues after restoration works. Credits: EPIDOR.

The forthcoming guide will consolidate this feedback and support skills development among socio-professional actors. Technical recommendations can then be incorporated into site specifications, while public-private partnerships may open the way to more ambitious morpho-ecological restoration projects across the alluvial plain.

The UNICEM website has [a summary article](#) of the workshop “Water-Filled Alluvial Quarries: Creation Rehabilitation and Diversification of Environments”, jointly organised with EPIDOR in Carsac-Ailac.



**FIGURE 3** A session of the Carsac-Ailac workshop. Credits: EPIDOR.



**FIGURE 4** Visit to the former gravel pit of Gaule as part of the Carsac-Ailac workshop. Credits: EPIDOR.

## Sharing river restoration knowledge with managers in France and Europe

By combining demonstration sites, pilot actions and structured feedback, LIFE Dordogne River contributes to the knowledge base available to managers of large rivers.

French and European partners see the project as an opportunity to broaden technical and strategic reflection on river management. Coordinated by the OFB and its watercourse resource centre, and supported by exchange sessions led by ANEB, this work will result in a practical guide in French and English for managers facing similar challenges in river restoration. At European level, ECRR will help promote exchanges through a study tour in the Dordogne basin in September 2026 and the final project conference in May 2027.

In partnership with SMDMCA, which manages part of the LIFE project area in the Lot and Corrèze departments, seven restoration operations are planned. SMDMCA works alongside EPIDOR on integrated water and aquatic environment management. This collaboration enables the syndicate to lead innovative and ambitious works while strengthening its expertise in morpho-sedimentary management and ecological river restoration.



**FIGURE 5** *The ECRR international restoration and management workshop in the Dordogne basin. Credits: EPIDOR.*

The ANEB website has [a summary article](#) of the workshop “Monitoring and Evaluation” jointly organised with OFB, EPTB Dordogne and EP Loire at the Nausac Dam.



**FIGURE 6** *An extracurricular workshop activity. Credits: EPIDOR.*

## Using LIFE sites as places for environmental education

Opening LIFE sites as learning spaces helps users, riparian owners and young people understand why river habitats matter and how daily practices can support their protection.

Many LIFE sites are public spaces used for activities such as fishing, swimming, hiking and boating. Their preservation depends on users and riparian owners understanding the ecological issues at stake. This understanding encourages good practices, supports behaviour change and helps residents engage more confidently with conservation and restoration policies.

For young people, Educational Terrestrial Areas have been created and others are being planned on LIFE sites. This OFB initiative enables pupils from primary schools, middle schools and high schools to take part in the participatory management of a natural area. Supported by environ-

mental education organisations, they observe the effects of their decisions and actions through a management plan. This places them in the role of manager-observers and helps them understand from an early age that ecosystems depend on interconnected biological, physical and chemical processes.

For valley stakeholders, information and awareness-raising activities help make the project visible, understandable and relevant to everyday river use. Café-debates, public meetings, walks, water sports and nature activities all provide opportunities to explain the actions undertaken to protect the Dordogne's natural environments and to invite local people into the conversation.

The presentation of the ATE tool is available [on the OFB website](#).



FIGURES 7 & 8 *The Maison-Neuve ATE during a field activity. Credits: EPIDOR.*

## Conclusion

The Dordogne's natural environments are valued by residents, visitors and socio-professional actors, but their long-term preservation requires more than technical restoration works. It depends on shared understanding, good practice and a network of partners able to connect ecological objectives with land management, professional activity, education and local decision-making.

LIFE Dordogne River shows that restoring a large alluvial river is both a physical and a social process. Its effects extend beyond the project sites themselves, with potential benefits for ecosystem services linked to agriculture, drinking water production, tourism and biodiversity. By combining habitat restoration, land strategy, professional guidance and public engagement, the project offers transferable lessons for other European rivers seeking to recover space, sediment dynamics and ecological resilience.