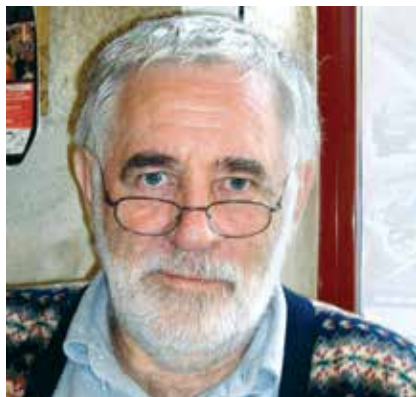


INTERVIEW: DR. CHRISTIAN LÉVÊQUE

Is Ecology Sick from ‘Fixism’?

*The ecologist and hydrobiologist Christian Lévêque, Director of Research emeritus at France’s Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD), was interviewed in March 2021 by Karel Vereycken for the French monthly Nouvelle Solidarité, which first published the interview excerpted here. Dr. Lévêque is a specialist in aquatic ecosystems. He is also Honorary President of the French Academy of Agriculture and a member of the French Academy of Overseas Sciences. His most recent writing is *Reconquering Biodiversity, But Which One?* (Fondapol, 2021).¹*



Courtesy of Christian Lévêque

Christian Lévêque

Karel Vereycken: In your writings, you point out



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The Lac du Der-Chantecoq reservoir, built to protect Paris from flooding of the Seine.

that the discourse we hear in the media on ecology is more ideological than scientific. What do you mean and why is this worrying?

Christian Lévêque: The first thing that worries me

1. Among Mr. Lévêque’s latest writings, we recommend these: *La biodiversité avec ou sans l’homme?* (Quae, 2017); *La mémoire des fleuves et des rivières* (Ulmer, 2019); and *La gestion écologique des rivières françaises—Regards de scientifiques sur une controverse* (L’Harmattan, 2020, with J.P. Bravard).

about the ecological discourse is that it is a one-way discourse: “Man is destroying nature.” It is a discourse of indictment of man in his relationship to nature. However, what I see around me is not quite that. Let us take the case of the natural park of the Camargue (southern France), which is sometimes presented as a pure product of nature. In reality, it is a system developed by man for the production of salt and rice. It is an artificially managed system that is nevertheless labeled a “natural park.” This example clearly

shows that human action is not necessarily negative.

Let us now take the case of the Norman “bocage.” Once again, this is not a natural system, but one developed by man and agriculture. It is amusing to note that the bocage appears in all the books dealing with biodiversity as a beautiful example of nature that must be preserved. We could multiply the examples. I often take the case of the Lac du Der (Lac du Der-Chantecoq, in the Champagne region) which is a dam-reservoir (of 48 km²) on the Marne River, built some thirty years ago to protect Paris from the floods of the Seine. Like the Camargue, this site has been designated a “Ramsar site”^{2,3} in terms of nature conservation, in particular for the habitat it provides for birds.

So, we can see that the “people’s experience” (the reality) does not correspond at all to that talked about by a certain number of militant movements that only accuse man of ravaging nature. For me, there is something totally incoherent in this approach. This does not mean that everything is fine, and there are of course counter-examples. But we must return to a more realistic and less dogmatic view of our relationship with nature.

What concerns me most in their approach is this

2. A bocage is a pasture bordered by thick forest or hedges.

3. In 1971, at a conference in Ramsar, Iran, 18 countries signed a convention on the protection of wetlands, “important, because of the ecological and hydrological functions they perform, for the conservation of the world’s biological diversity and for the sustainability of human life.”

“fixist vision” of nature, which underlies most of the discourse on nature conservation. There is the impression that by creating protected areas, we will protect nature. We forget that nature never stops changing and that a protected area does not protect anything in the long term. The flora and fauna will evolve under the influence of the climate for example. Or under the influence of species that will become naturalized on the site. And the species that we are trying to protect may disappear because the ecological conditions will no longer be favorable to them. These are emergency measures that can be useful in their own right, but they are not long-term assurances.

Many restoration or development projects that seek to reconstitute a historical ecological state (thinking that it was better before ...) forget that the future cannot be the past. Ecological systems are constantly evolving and changing on the arrow of time....

Vereycken: If I understand you correctly, these environmentalists are somehow taking a snapshot of evolution, which they want to artificially freeze forever?

Lévêque: When we look into the past, as paleo-ecologists do, we can see that nature was different from today. Europe has experienced various periods of glaciation that have profoundly changed the flora and fauna.

I often say: think about it; 10,000-20,000 years ago, northern Europe was covered with ice, as well as the Alps, and there was a permafrost zone where we are today. This has changed a lot since then, hasn't it? We have gone from the tundra of Siberia to lush forests, and biodiversity has also changed a lot. And that, in a relatively short time. The flora and fauna have been reconstituted by migrations or introductions of species for about 10,000 years, which is recent. On the geological scale or on the evolutionary scale, it is a drop of water.

It is important to understand that nature is dynamic. It is illusory to think that we can freeze this dynamic by

establishing norms and laws to protect it. I am aware that this is difficult to assimilate because we don't like change very much, which brings uncertainties and therefore dangers.... For scientists, biodiversity is the product of change and therefore of the permanent adaptation of species to fluctuations in their conditions of existence.

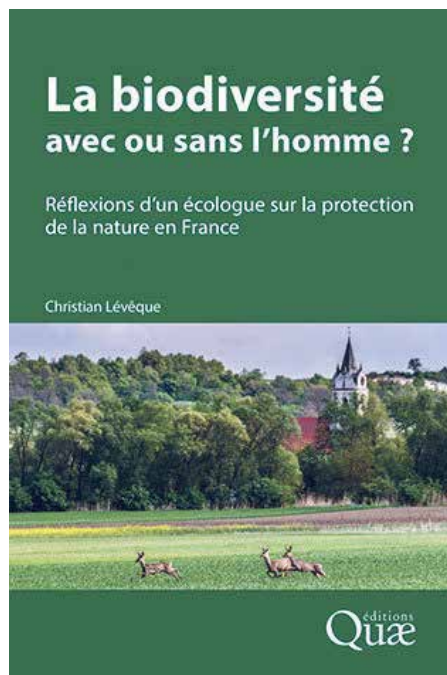
Vereycken: Environmental movements are warning us of a strong erosion of biodiversity and some even evoke the threat of a “sixth mass extinction,” this one caused by human action. What is the situation? The case of insects is often mentioned.

Lévêque: It's true that there are fewer insects, I don't dispute that. Man necessarily has an impact on his environment. Or we must exclude man, as some people propose and for whom a “beautiful nature” is a nature *without* man. Do we want to follow this logic? It is not mine. All animals have an impact on nature. When you watch wildlife movies on TV, there is always that poor lioness or wolf desperately looking for food for her cubs.... We see with pleasure and even with relief the poor lioness killing an antelope or the wolf killing a chamois. Nature is cruel. It is not a paradisiacal world. It is a world of power relations.

To come back to insects, we must, once again, try to understand why, on a case-by-case basis, certain populations (not all) are in decline. And if pesticides are to blame, they are not the only culprits. There are agricultural practices and the modification of landscapes, but also all the consequences of artificialization and pollution resulting from urbanization....

Vereycken: A romantic vision claims that if man disappeared for good, nature would “take over,” but we can also fear that this is not necessarily the case. One can even fear that more primitive forms of life, such as “malicious” viruses or others, would come and ravage what would remain.

Lévêque: One can imagine anything. I am not



against thinking about these questions, far from it. I would say that globally, man needs nature, that's obvious. Without the resources of nature, he cannot live, as indeed is the case for many other species. The principle of nature is that there are eaters and eaten, let's not forget it. Nevertheless, nature has existed for a very long time without man. Man is a very small episode in the history of the Earth and of nature, at least the present man. And there is a good chance that if man disappears, nature will continue its way....

Now, what is true is that if a certain number of activities—notably agricultural—of co-construction of nature are abandoned, the landscapes will change. Agricultural abandonment (long-term abandonment and underutilization of land) leads to what is known as the “closure” of landscapes. This means that forest systems will take the place of open grassland systems, which will cause a fairly significant change in the stands associated with them. And one of the probable reasons for the erosion of farmland bird populations in France and Europe, which is being discussed quite a bit, is



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How far should man go in protecting himself against nuisances such as insects? Shown: Dead bug splatter on an automobile windshield at sunset.

partly related to this agricultural abandonment. This means that many places that were “open” environments are now abandoned to a forest that is gaining ground in France.

And we must never forget that the artificialization of soils (extension of habitable areas) is progressing greatly. When we address the problem of the disappearance of insects (without excluding the role of insecticides), we must consider the role of lighting, that of street lamps which kill quantities of insects.

Urbanization obviously destroys a certain number of environments favorable to insects. Agricultural practices, especially with extensive cultivation, eliminate copses, etc. I do not deny the role of insecticides at all, but I refuse to make them the only factor or the scapegoat for the disappearance of species.

Behind all this, I ask the question of whether it is legitimate or not for man to protect himself from the

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nuisances of nature. Don’t we have the right to protect ourselves against all these nuisances such as insects that ravage crops, mosquitoes, all these disease vectors, etc.? There is a real question that is asked ... and how far should we go? Can we imagine compromises and on what basis? Moreover, this question is not asked in the same way in developing countries as in advanced countries. When we look at the role of insects in the transmission of major parasitic, bacterial, and viral diseases, we have a different view.



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no resolution to the issue of biodiversity erosion.

I have worked in developing countries. I spent ten years in Africa, and I was in the field, not behind the computer screens of a French laboratory. The current discourse on biodiversity is completely aberrant compared to the needs and situation of developing countries. Their problem is not the conservation of nature in reserves. Their problem is also to protect themselves from nature and its nuisances. I say also ... because obviously they also need to protect their resources.

This question of the two faces of nature is particularly dear to me because in the lived world of citizens, nature is an inexhaustible source of nuisances (diseases, crop

pests, weather hazards, etc.). But conservationists refuse to talk about it so as not to dent the image of a bucolic nature besieged by man, which is their business!

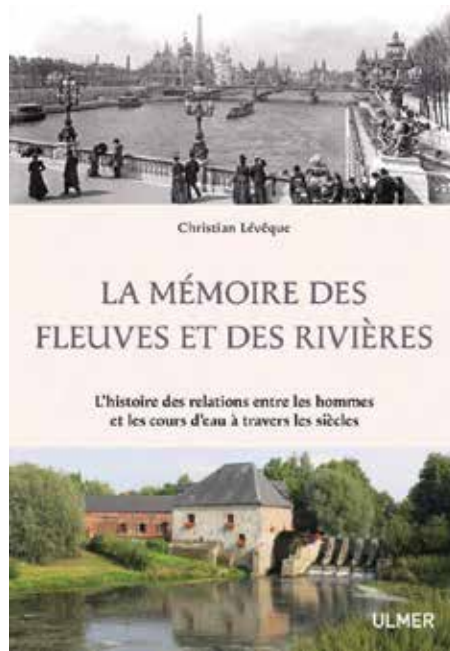
It is not a trench war, but all the same, it is not at all the bucolic and idyllic vision that the “bobos” currently have of nature. This is really a view from a rich country.

Vereycken: What you are saying seems to me very important. However, your discourse, without being marginal, is not covered by the media and remains very far from the dominant discourse. Why are there so many scientists who indulge in this catastrophism?

Lévêque: This is also a question I ask myself. I have been surprised several times that my colleagues can endorse a statement such as “1 million species threatened with extinction,” without having the data to back it up or knowing how it was calculated. In principle, there is a scientific code of ethics. Scientists should talk about things that are verified, or put information on the table for discussion. But nowhere is it stated how these figures were obtained. Statements like these that are circulating on the internet and social networks are not sourced.

I was questioned by the weekly magazine *Le Point* (February 20, 2021) on the question of the WWF [Worldwide Fund for Nature, formerly the World Wildlife Fund] which announces, in its *Living Planet Report* (2020 edition) that 68% of vertebrates have disappeared between 1970 and 2016.

Unluckily, there are two scientific articles that, using the same databases as the WWF, come up with totally different figures. Basically, yes, there are species whose populations are in sharp decline, that is undeniable; we talk about lions, we talk about giraffes, etc. But there are also populations that are expanding, and we never talk about that, just as we never talk about the evolution that is underway. We always talk about the disappearance of species, but when we do genetic analyses of populations, we see that evolution is always going on. You have genetic differences in the same river basin, between fish populations of the same



species a few dozen kilometers apart. Evolution is adaptation, species are constantly adapting. When you introduce an American species into a European lake, after a few decades, it differs from the original species and can become a new biological species.

Vereycken: At conferences aimed at popularizing the idea of the “Great Reset”—i.e., the greening of global finance to “save the climate”—we could see, at the end of the big session bringing together the cream of the financial world in London on Nov. 11, 2020, that Greenpeace presented the trailer of its film *Our Planet, Too Big To Fail*. So, we can believe that there is a green finance lobby that needs this kind of propaganda.

Lévêque: There is a “cash machine,” to put it simply. If you present a research program in which you say, “I want to show the interest of the preservation of the bocage and its historical transformation, underlining the positive role of man,” then you will find absolutely no funding. On the other hand, if you play the pyromaniac researcher and cry fire: “Ah, invasive species, ah, climate change! it will transform everything, it will destroy everything!” It works very well with the media, it works very well, unfortunately, with a good number of our fellow citizens, and there you will get credit, because you will say, “Give me money, I will bring you the solution.” This is very similar to what was known in the Middle Ages as “indulgences,”⁴ when the Church said, “Give us money, and your soul will be saved!”

That’s what the WWF says: “Give us money and we’ll save the planet!” It’s been going on for decades with no resolution to the issue of biodiversity erosion.

4. In the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church allowed its faithful to buy indulgences in hard cash, which were supposed to reduce, according to the amount accumulated, the time one had to spend in purgatory after death to atone for one’s sins. This was very convenient for those villains who could afford a few more sins than the average person. Long before Luther, the humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam was the first to speak out against this practice.

All this creates a kind of *doxa*.⁵ The ball is passed back and forth, and we are all outbidding each other. There is an “unprecedented erosion,” but it is not documented. In a way, we’re all getting on each other’s nerves, but it pays off—notoriety, because we’re in the media, and money, because you’re going to save the world. Who’s going to say the contrary? We’re in a big role-playing game.

Vereycken: This leads me to the last question, which you have already answered in part. To politicians, you say, “Look at the numbers and don’t respond to images and emotions.” Are there promising areas of research that can clarify this debate?

Lévêque: To clarify this debate, politicians will first have to listen, which is not necessarily the case. This is a question for which I do not have a definitive answer. I am not a guru. I don’t say, “We just have to...” or “We have to...” When I talk about preserving biological diversity, I emphasize that it must be done in a context that goes beyond a purely naturalistic view. There is the “object” nature and the lived nature ... and we cannot talk about preserving it without taking into account the social parameters of uses and health.

Let’s go back to the Lac du Der, which has become a protection zone for birds. A wetland, a bit marshy, is not complicated to make. You dig a hole, you put water in it, and after a year or two, you will have a beautiful wetland. Nature does things very well and there is naturally a lot of exchange of species from one place to another through birds, mammals, wind, etc. If you are lucky enough to have a garden, make a hole and put water in it. After a few weeks you will see that life has settled in.

There have been some interesting experiments in the creation of marshes north of Paris, in the Parks Department of Sausset, by a colleague who is an urban planner. At the beginning, landscapers put plants there. A few years later, all that had disappeared, and the place was invaded by spontaneous wetland vegetation. So much so that this area became a center of attraction for



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Lac du Der-Chantecoq’s mix of deep water, islands, and freshwater marshes have made it an ideal habitat for waterfowl.

many species of birds. The public enjoyed this wilderness area ... in an urban setting.

This is something that was decisive in my reflection, to say that indeed the action of man is not systematically negative. But what was initially made to entertain the public has become a bird sanctuary closed to the public!

As I have developed in some articles, one is not obliged to have a monolithic vision of things. I often approach these questions from the point of view of the nature–society relationship. If people want, somewhere, protected areas of nature, because they like it, and because they find it interesting, why not? However, we are not obliged to make the whole of France a nature reserve! We must think on the basis of a compromise between the different expectations of citizens and the uses of biodiversity.

We are currently talking about 30% of protected areas (land and sea), and some conservationists say that this is not enough, that we should go to 50%. But where are we going to put the people in there? Are we going to put them in Indian reserves? That’s the problem, and it’s irresponsible.

If we go back to developing countries, when we talk about 30% or 50% of protected areas while their population is increasing rapidly, are we going to make hyper-populated areas and others hypo-populated areas? All this, so that we can admire beautiful nature in the protected areas while people are starving next door?

Have you read the book *L’invention du colonialisme vert* (*The Invention of Green Colonialism*, 2020) edited

5. *Doxa* is popular opinion, as opposed to *episteme*, which is knowledge.

by Guillaume Blanc? Read it....

At the end of the interview, there was this exchange with the scientist.

Vereycken: There is a fight of ideas to be led, and we are very happy that you are part of the fight. We, on our side, are trying to contribute to it.

Lévêque: It's a fight that nobody can win without the others. Discussing the dominant *doxa* is complicated, it is difficult to make one's voice heard, one has the impression of not being listened to. But we also realize that the lines are beginning to move.

Thus, I participated by videoconference in a meeting of the Senate on the "ecological continuity" of rivers in France. I remind you that a few years ago, the National Office for Water and Aquatic Environments (ONEMA) and the French Office for Biodiversity (OFB) decided that to restore the ecological status of French rivers, it was necessary to destroy all the "thresholds," that is to say, to destroy all the mills, in the way. In



Watercolor by Christian Lévêque

Is it possible to restore a river's ecology for species other than man, without eliminating the works of man in the process? Here, the Old Mill of Vernon, what remains of a 16th Century flour mill straddling two piers of a former bridge over the Seine River.

plain English, eliminate all constructions that could impede the flow of water in rivers, in order to allow certain species (actually a handful) to move upstream to breed.

There have been quite a few highly contested actions and there has been a lot of protest from mill owners. Here we are typically confronted with the false good idea, because the depletion of migratory fish in our rivers is the result of multiple causes, as we have seen above, including water quality, but also the damming of the rivers.

With a fellow geographer and other authors, we wrote a book on ecological river restoration, which was published last year. Apparently, this has moved the lines a bit and we are moving towards abandoning these technocratic measures consisting of systematically removing all the weirs,⁶ measures which, moreover, do not seem to give the expected results, but destroy a heritage. It is necessary to see things on a case-by-case basis and discuss alternative measures with the owners. There are policies that are starting to evolve.

So, I am not pessimistic, which encourages me to continue this fight of ideas.

6. The word "weir" refers to any fixed or partially movable structure built in the bed of a watercourse and which impedes it in part or fully. There are more than 60,000 of them in France.

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