



HAL
open science

Citizen Participation in Urban Forests: Analysis of a Consultation Process in the Metropolitan Area of Rouen Normandy

Charlotte Birks, Damien Féménias, Charly Machemehl

► **To cite this version:**

Charlotte Birks, Damien Féménias, Charly Machemehl. Citizen Participation in Urban Forests: Analysis of a Consultation Process in the Metropolitan Area of Rouen Normandy. *Urban Planning*, 2022, 7 (2), pp.174-185. 10.17645/up.v7i2.4997. hal-04410132

HAL Id: hal-04410132

<https://uco.hal.science/hal-04410132v1>

Submitted on 22 Jan 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Article

Citizen Participation in Urban Forests: Analysis of a Consultation Process in the Metropolitan Area of Rouen Normandy

Charlotte Birks *, Damien Féménias, and Charly Machemehl

Institute of Transformation of Physical and Sports Activities (CETAPS), University of Rouen Normandy, France

* Corresponding author (charlotte.birks@univ-rouen.fr)

Submitted: 26 October 2021 | Accepted: 7 April 2022 | Published: 31 May 2022

Abstract

The article examines the results of a “citizen consultation” organised by local public officials through a questionnaire-based consultation approach to the management of urban and peri-urban forests. The study shows how forests are at the same time strong, complex, and ambivalent policy levers in a public consultation process. The article, first of all, specifies the economic context of the case study, namely that of a metropolis in the north of France with a population of 500,000 people. It then presents the methods and the occasionally divergent results of the metropolitan “dialogue” survey (dated 2020, $n = 375$) on the one hand, and a university survey (dated 2020, $n = 774$) on the other. The results obtained reveal the challenges, difficulties, and limits of a participatory approach, given the high degree of ambivalence and contrast in the way population groups relate to woodland and the representative/participatory systems. The article highlights the complexity involved in the management of woodlands and their use as part of a political process that is both participatory and sustainable.

Keywords

citizen consultation; city; environment; Normandy; public participation; Rouen; urban forest; woodland

Issue

This article is part of the issue “From Smart Urban Forests to Edible Cities: New Approaches in Urban Planning and Design” edited by Alessio Russo (University of Gloucestershire) and Francisco J. Escobedo (USDA Forest Service).

© 2022 by the author(s); licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

Citizen participation in environmental decision-making in France began to develop in the 1990s. For social scientists, it revives three existing debates (Claeys-Mekdade, 2006). The first one re-examines the place of citizen participation in environmental policy-making, considering that the socially biased view of elected officials and experts requires the use of a broader system of representation. The second one questions the role of the sociologist in relation to the public authorities and the conditions of objectivity and involvement. The third debate questions the growing permeability between politics and science in decision-making (for example, the risk of technocratic treatment of social issues, questioning of scientific legitimacy within public environmental decisions by

the voluntary community). In line with these questions, this article shows how forests are ambivalent resources for “establishing territory” in a public dialogue process. On the one hand, elected officials and local agents cannot ignore the opinion of the residents on the management of a public “asset” in the form of a forest which is part of their living environment and, on the other hand, they must take into account the different levels of knowledge and involvement of the population.

Recently, the depoliticisation of climate issues has been pointed out in case study format (Comby, 2015). This phenomenon describes how the public authorities tend to take charge of an ecological challenge (politicisation) while removing the possibility of their being called into question so as not to jeopardize their existence and relegating the ecological problem to individual

responsibility, or technical or economic considerations (Comby, 2019). The local consultation process studied in this article effectively shows how the population groups consulted are invited to express their views on forestry problems that do not fall within the competence of the Metropolis (in the economic or security spheres, for example). It also shows how the institution wishes to strengthen its environmental actions in the name of good governance of a local political community.

The Rouen Normandy Metropolis (RNM), Normandy, France, presents an interesting case of an inter-municipal grouping (71 municipalities for a population of 492,681; INSEE, 2018). It is a port and industrial area undergoing a transition in social and ecological terms and boasts a green belt comprising 25,600 hectares of woodland. The analysis concerns the consultation process carried out in the context of the drafting of the 4th Forest Management Charter and the associated action plan. It examines the meaning and results of two quantitative surveys designed to inform the drafting of these documents. The first survey was conducted in 2020 “for the purpose of initiating dialogue” with the residents of the region by the RNM ($n = 375$). The second survey, also carried out in 2020 ($n = 774$), was set up by a university team to produce knowledge about the tensions between private uses and perceptions of woodland as “public property.” The results obtained by the RNM’ participatory approach reveal strong involvement and desires for change, but also create many blind spots. The data from the university survey show more ambivalent and contrasting relationships with forest areas, which reflect highly differentiated concerns, knowledge, and levels of appropriation, depending on the practices and social characteristics of the respondents. These two surveys are also part of a social and political context that should be described to gain a better understanding of the issues at stake in the approaches being implemented. While the reception of the public and political participation change the reference points of foresters on the one hand, and of elected officials on the other, the results reveal population groups that do not fit into the same frames of reference, nor into the same “public problems,” nor into the same desire for participation or “delegation.”

The position adopted here is determined to remain outside the classic dichotomy, which consists of either facile criticism of opinion polls (Dobré & Caraire, 2000, p. 11) or defense of the ideas the lay population seeks to put forward in a public debate (Callon et al., 2001). This article is intended to help identify the limits inherent in a citizen participation mechanism, which is as necessary as it is difficult to implement, and to foster and support hybrid exchanges, combining lay and scholarly knowledge (Claeys-Mekdade, 2006, p. 8; Geddes, 1904), to encourage the emergence of relevant public problems (Dewey, 2010) and fine-tuned public actions (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2018).

2. Method and Context

2.1. Scale of Analysis: Rouen, a Norman Metropolis

In France, since the law on the reform of territorial authorities in 2010, the MAPTAM law in 2014, and the NOTRe law in 2015, some twenty metropolises have been created, constituting groupings of municipalities with more than 400,000 inhabitants. Among the areas of competence exercised as of right within their perimeter (economy, housing, water, sanitation, etc.), the metropolises also exercise their competence in the field of spatial and environmental planning in connection with the enhancement of the living environment, the fight against pollution, and energy management. Of the ten urban areas in France that have major woodlands, the RNM has the largest population. As Figure 1 shows, with three state forests and large areas of forest freely available to the public, woodland accounts for a third of the surface area of the region, producing oxygen and acting as a “green lung.”

The RNM has been announcing since 2020 that it has the ambition of turning this region into “the epicentre of the social-ecological transition” and the “capital of the World After” (RNM, 2020). The “after” emerges in unusual socio-historical conditions, against a background of elections, around which revolves a protest against the government’s social policy (the Yellow Vests of 2018–2019), a major industrial accident (Lubrizol in 2019), and a health emergency (Covid-19, as of 2020–2021). These three elements refer to multidimensional crises (ecological, social, and representation in a democracy) that have increased rapidly over the last three years, and which have taken on particular importance locally regarding the subject under study.

The Yellow Vests movement (GJ after the original *gilets jaunes*) was important in the Rouen region and left its mark on the people. This movement—named after the jackets worn by the protesters—emerged in October 2018 outside of the intermediate bodies, from the protest at the increase in fuel prices, and its framing in the protest register of independent liberals (Spire, 2018). Very quickly, as the protest grew (Sebbah et al., 2018), the collective subject that made itself evident defined itself, above all, as people from the working poor (Guerra et al., 2019), people in employment, “prevented” from earning a real living from their work, coming from the working class (Collectif d’enquête sur les Gilets jaunes, 2019) and the middle classes (Dormagen et al., 2021; Hoibian et al., 2019). Despite the violence and repeated violent clashes with the police, the movement enjoyed a majority and significant support among the French population for several months (six to seven months), according to the polling institutes. The movement is a statement of a crisis of political representation and calls for institutional reforms while making visible an unprecedented level of mistrust of the principles of representative democracy, the consequence of a feeling

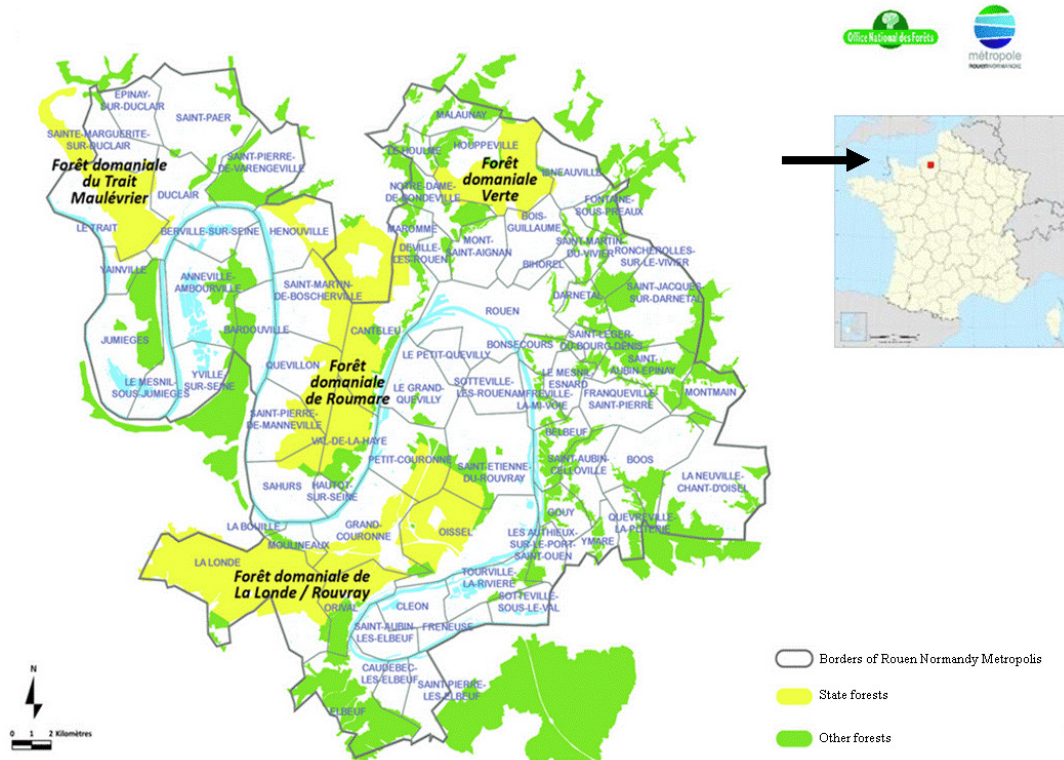


Figure 1. Forests of the RNM and its 71 municipalities. Source: Map by the Deputy Environment Directorate, taken from the RNM (n.d.) website and adapted by the authors.

that demands are not being heard or of contempt for the material living conditions of citizens (Rosanvallon, 2021). The GJ movement gives visibility to the advent of a “democracy of the public” (Manin, 1996; Noiriell, 2018), which is competing with party democracy, given that the visibility and voice of citizens, relayed by social media and the mass media, does not need intermediate bodies.

The city of Rouen was also marked by an industrial accident: the fire of the lubricant additive stocks of the Lubrizol company, which occurred in Rouen starting on 26 September 2019. A cloud several tens of kilometers wide formed and spread soot over residential areas and agricultural land. Management of the accident triggered various measures to protect the population (confinement, closure of schools, suspension of certain agricultural activities, etc.). Communication from the state authorities was reassuring but had difficulty publicising measurements of air and water quality that were precise and complete. The opinions given contradicted local perceptions, insofar as testimonies of nausea, headaches, vomiting (etc.) were abundant. The publication of the list of products involved in the fire was not made known immediately, which raised suspicion. Once the list had been published, questions remained about what might not have been measured. The consequences of the accident for public health, the environment, and the economy, led, on a symbolic level, to legal proceedings and the launch of a parliamentary fact-finding commission. Groups formed rapidly, expressing various dissatisfactions, addressing elected officials, and calling on candi-

dates in the campaign for the upcoming municipal elections, forcing them to take a stand. At the same time, the candidates and parties expressed their opinions about the place of industry in the city, the risks involved, how it contributes to employment, and promoted the question of the living environment and the place of nature in the city. The local context accentuates the “local” agenda of the ecological transition, what is at stake industrially, and the region’s economic path.

From mid-March 2020, the Covid-19 epidemic led to a “state of health emergency” being declared and lockdown measures being imposed. For the people living in the urbanised RNM, the areas of nature, especially the public state forests, are seen as prime recreational resources. At the same time, the health crisis is increasing the attention paid to the living environment and shakes up the agendas of candidates and the calendar for the municipal elections, the second round of which was postponed from March to June 2020.

It is against this background of a global crisis that the municipal elections took place in France. After the two rounds of voting, the candidate elected as mayor of Rouen, the leader of a plural majority (socialist-ecologist), also became president of the RNM. As soon as he took office in September 2020, the RNM undertook to “design the city of tomorrow” through a series of lectures, debates, and citizen dialogue mechanisms. In the spirit of their electoral campaign, based on a project for social and ecological transition, the elected representative proposes to make Rouen the “capital of the World

After,” and to rely on a concerted approach to action, across subjects (Nicodème, 2020).

The idea, for the elected representatives, is to lead the ecological transition in a port and industrial city, which is reflecting on what its appealing features are, what its strategic positioning is (and its relative decline among other French and European metropolises), on its industry and its economy, its image, and its living environment. Poorly identified by the population since it was created, and despite the boost it was given in 2015, the metropolitan political-administrative layers make use of the forests to produce an attractive brand image.

In Rouen, this mobilising strategy relies on a forestry resource that is unusual in terms of extensive area (25,000 ha) and composition. Seventy percent of Rouen’s metropolitan forest is public, whereas the proportion of forest that is public in France as a whole is only 28.4% (Lepillé, 2017, p. 98). Three of the woodlands in the Rouen area have been awarded the Forêt d’Exception® label, which was created by the French National Forests Office in 2007 and now recognises 14 forests throughout France. There have been numerous actions in favour of the protection of biodiversity that have rallied stakeholders to endeavour to preserve the future of these three forest areas: the creation of a biological reserve, sites in the Natura 2000 network of nature protection areas, a sensitive natural area, a territorial forest charter, and urban planning documents. In an effort to reduce land pressure, part of the state forest of La Londe-Rouvray and the forest of Roumare have been classified as “forests to be protected.” For the community, the forest, and by extension the environment, become a means, that is, at first sight, rather consensual, to “create a regional identity.” The Forêt d’Exception® label, obtained on the basis of an application file, is an integral part of a marketing strategy that aims to strengthen the attraction of the town and allow political actors to show everyone that the forest environment has been successfully protected and run (if the criteria of the label are to be believed) by the Office National des Forêts, the RNM, and their partners.

2.2. Two Separate Surveys

In order to show the limits of the citizen participation process, we can compare two surveys conducted in 2020. The first was produced by the RNM in a process described as a “public dialogue,” with a view to drawing up the next forestry charter. Emanating from the 2001 Forestry Orientation Law, the charters are initiated by local players such as local authorities. They aim to carry out a multi-annual programme of forestry actions on a number of themes—economic, social, environmental, tourism, etc. Consultation and dialogue with elected representatives and local players are the preliminary stages to the final drafting of the charter which, in this case for the RNM, has been established for the period 2021 to 2026. As part of the procedure, the metropolis issued

invitations to answer an online questionnaire, which was made freely available on their website. The second survey was carried out by the authors of this article in a university setting and examines the uses and forms of management Normandy combines in its forestry policies.

The overall university survey (n = 1526) was carried out among people visiting all the forests in the Boucles de la Seine Normande nature reserve. The sampling strategy implemented in the university survey seeks above all to collect data on the different sports activities practised in the woodlands of Normandy. Face-to-face interviews allowed us to go into the woodland to meet those present, i.e., essentially individuals with non-institutionalised practices (not affiliated to clubs). This was combined with the same questionnaire distributed online by email or face-to-face via 32 sports clubs and groups (including hunters) institutionally-structured (university clubs but also professional, competitive ones), via a forum of associations and the Boucles de la Seine Normande Regional Nature Park (at the reception, online, and during events). Using targeted and controlled networks for the survey made it possible to interview individuals who would have been difficult to approach in the woods to answer a questionnaire, such as horse riders, mountain bikers, and runners. The random face-to-face survey carried out in the forest, for its part, presented the advantage of reaching people who did not necessarily consider themselves to have legitimacy for responding and, consequently, tended to exclude themselves from spontaneous online participation (as for the public “consultation”). Spreading the survey over eight months made it possible to collect responses from individuals who use the forest during off-peak periods (winter and weekdays), and peak periods (summer, weekends, and events), as well as during and outside of health lockdowns. To compare the results of this global survey (n = 1526) with those of the public consultation (n = 375), we extracted from the university survey 774 questionnaires filled in only by inhabitants of the RNM (cf. third column of Table 1).

The university survey also includes a series of semi-structured interviews (n = 21). They are not at the heart of the analysis, but they have allowed us to gain a deeper knowledge of the points of view of the actors involved, either closely or at a distance, in opening up the forest to the general public: foresters, public and private owners, organisers of forest competitions, etc.

The factor analysis (see Figure 3) is based on the 1,526 questionnaires collected within the scope of the global university survey and was created with the software Modalisa. After checking the reliability of the correlations (Chi² test) within cross-referencing, we carried out a factor analysis based on the intersection of the following four variables: *respondent’s gender* (in blue; two possible answers); *place of residence in town or country* (in purple; recoding of the declared place of residence into two answers); *most common sporting activity practised in the forest* (in red; 25 possible answers recoded

Table 1. Characteristics of the two surveys.

	RNM public dialogue (n = 375)	University survey targeting the population of the RNM (n = 774) extracted from the global survey carried out among users of the Seine Normande forests (n = 1526)
Purpose	Public “consultation”	Scientific
Survey technique and sampling	Online, open to all on the Metropolitan area’s website	Hybrid and controlled: limited distribution to users of the Seine Normande forests
Duration	March 2020—November 2020 (9 months)	June 2020—January 2021 (8 months)
Number of questions	45	51
Organisers	RNM’s Environment and Participation and Citizenship departments and the Office National des Forêts	Lecturers and researchers at the University of Rouen
Additional collections	Two other online questionnaires Participatory workshops in the forest	Interviews (n = 21)
Time spent drafting the questionnaire	About 15 hours for the three questionnaires (92 questions)	Approximately 20 hours for 51 questions
Testing of the questionnaire during the preparation	Only when put online to check how it works	Yes

into nine answers); and *perception of the forest as public property* (in green; four possible answers).

3. Results

3.1. Two Surveys, Two Samples

While giving voice to some residents inevitably means silencing others (Callon et al., 2001, p. 190), the RNM survey offers very little information on the characteristics of the respondents who expressed their opinions. The only data available is limited to the age and gender of the respondents. Very little information is available on this active minority of 357 people (out of a total population of 492,000), who considered themselves entitled to legitimately take part in the public debate on forests. It is therefore impossible to know how to relate this sample to the resident population in all its diversity and to claim to have overcome the possibly biased point of view of elected officials and professionals through this method of consultation. The aims of this survey did not include the identification of the respondents’ levels of education, their social status, their housing conditions, their commitment in terms of ecology (see

Table 2), or, quite simply, whether or not they actually frequent the woodlands. Women are slightly over-represented in this survey (58% of respondents), which may explain why the results show a demand for more monitoring and policing of the forest. Indeed, we know that men frequent forests more than women, and that women report being more “worried about their safety” in forests than men (Cordellier & Dobré, 2015; Lepillé, 2017; Lewis, 2007).

By comparison, with 52% men, the university survey sample is true to the gender of the people who most frequent French forests (Cordellier & Dobré, 2015; Kalaora, 1993; Lepillé, 2017). The educational levels and professional positions of people who frequent forests are often higher than those of the general population (Cordellier & Dobré, 2015; Kalaora, 1993; Lepillé, 2017), which is also the case in the university survey sample but to a greater extent. The university survey also shows that the most popular sports activities, namely walking, jogging, mountain biking, and hiking, correspond to those described in other comparable works of research (Cordellier & Dobré, 2015; Lepillé, 2017). The over-representation of respondents under 34 years of age in the university survey can be explained by a survey method focused on sports

Table 2. Characteristics of the samples compared to the 2018 Metropolitan Population Census.

Criteria	RNM public dialogue (n = 375)	University survey (n = 774)
Gender	Over-representation of women (+5 pts)	Over-representation of men (+3 pts)
Age	Under-representation of under 34s (-11 pts) and over 65s (-8 pts) Over-representation of 35–49-year-olds (+19 pts)	Over-representation of under 34s (+10 pts) Under-representation of over 65s (-10 pts)
Resident in the RNM	93% of respondents	100% of respondents
Occupation or socio-professional category	Not surveyed	Under-representation of workers (-17 pts) and intermediate occupations (-19 pts) Over-representation of executives and higher intellectual professions (+35 pts)
Diplomas	Not surveyed	Under-representation of people with no qualifications (-22 pts) and people with a vocational qualification (CAP, BEP or equivalent; -15 pts) Over-representation of people with a baccalaureate (+14pts) and higher education (+26pts)
Sports activity	Not surveyed	Walking, jogging, mountain biking, hiking, etc.
Grey areas	Who responded to the survey (occupations, credentials, uses of the forest, etc.)?	No data on people who do not frequent the woodlands
Limits	Method that emphasises the “engaged” or “concerned” prism	Methods that accentuate the “sports,” “family outings with children,” and “northern plateau” aspects of the Metropolis

Note: Over- or under-representation is only indicated when there is a difference of three points or more compared to the census.

activities during which a large number of young people were interviewed during their sports competitions in the forest or during orienteering, running, and mountain biking training as part of their academic curriculum (bachelor’s degree in science and techniques of physical and sports activities [*licence de sciences et techniques des activités physiques et sportives*]).

3.2. Metropolitan Area “Dialogue”: The Manufacture of Opinions

Surveys often reveal more about the political subconscious of the interviewers than about the respondents (Champagne, 2015, p. 36.). The RNM’s “digital dialogue” is no exception to this observation. While the local authority wishes to develop, target and prioritise its action in the forest, the tool built by the agents of the “environment” and “dialogue” departments reveals multiple ambiguities, which we can reveal and examine.

Many of the questions are presented as follows: “In your opinion, which areas should be given priority for action to improve the social role of the forest?” The word-

ing introduces two presuppositions, which guide the respondent: on the one hand, “action” is required and, on the other hand, it is necessary to “improve the social role of the forest,” without defining said “social role.” Similarly, the survey asks: “What action would you propose to encourage people who never go to the forest to go there?” This question is based on the premise that people “should” necessarily go to the forest more and that it is appropriate to take action in this direction. Formulating the questions in this way shows underlying interpretations of the missions of public service (duty to “take action” and “animate” the forests) and fails to take into account, for example, the consequences on the environment that certain forms of frequentation sometimes cause (trampling, erosion, noise, disturbance of the fauna, withdrawal or imbalance of plant coverage, etc.). One might consider that these formulations explain why a minority of respondents answer “Other” when this type of response is offered. Nine respondents (out of 375) replied in a similar way: “More animated: definitely not!”, “The forest comes alive on its own,” “A forest is not a city...”, “The woodland is not an amusement park.”

Other forms of “prompting” or “guiding” responses can be identified, such as the “actions” that are proposed and on which respondents are invited to “vote” on a scale from 0 to 5. The “actions” are expressed in the infinitive as follows: “Prohibit access to certain areas to protect them.” This proposal is given as an assertion, which evacuates or ignores any prior questioning such as: “Should there be prohibitions?” Sixty-eight percent of respondents ticked 4 to 5 “stars” for “prohibiting access” to “certain areas” of the forest. Starting from a similar formulation, 46% of respondents “voted” 4 to 5 stars in favour of “boosting monitoring and policing.” What “results” like this mean can only be a subject for speculation. We shall see that they do not converge with those obtained as part of the university survey, which are expanded on in the next section.

The “results” constructed in this way show differences in the preferences of the respondents and suggest a very wide disparity in the levels of knowledge of the environment. Deadwood in forests fulfils many useful ecosystem functions, serving as a crucial refuge and food source for many species, allowing for the decomposition of organic matter, etc. The action worded as “keep more deadwood in exploited forests” was liked by 38% of respondents, who voted 4 to 5 stars, and seemed to repel 33% of respondents, who voted 0 to 1 star. With no knowledge of the reasons behind these preferences, we assume that 33% of respondents were not aware of all the uses of deadwood. These results show the gaps in knowledge within the population groups consulted (Dobré & Caraire, 2000, p. 33). The respondents in the RNM survey were also “against” the exploitation of wood for energy production (59% were 4- and 5-star responses) and “in favour” of the conservation of old trees (62% were 4- and 5-star responses). The majority of respondents were interested in taking part in public discussions, and 59% would like to be informed of the next stages of citizen dialogue on forests. To sum up, the participatory approach reveals that there are more women involved and people of intermediate ages (35 to 49 years old), who are against the exploitation of wood for fuel, but a third of whom know relatively little about how a forest ecosystem works. On the one hand, there emerges the image of a heritage forest (mature trees) to be preserved and, on the other, a landscape forest to be maintained and animated.

3.3. The University Survey: Results That Are Less Clear-Cut

The university survey yielded results that are in some respects quite similar to those of the RNM survey. For example, the university survey also reveals a wide disparity in levels of knowledge of the forest ecosystem among forest users. One thing that is remarkable above all is that 91% of respondents to the university survey consider forest management to be a public matter, involving elected representatives, experts, and users.

Only 5% of respondents feel that management should be exclusively left to the owner. And so even with large differences in the levels of knowledge of the ecosystem, 60% of the respondents to the university survey believe that the management of the forest (flora, fauna, public) concerns everyone and implies participation on their part. This “desire for participation” echoes the results of the RNM’s “dialogue” procedure. In both cases, the geographical context of Rouen must be taken into consideration, that is to say, a life setting consisting of 70% public forests and exceptional woodlands rendered even more precious by the health crisis.

There are numerous differences between the surveys, however, and the university survey cross-references questions on both fact and opinion. On the issue of forest guards and security, the university survey asked whether people had ever been troubled “by the presence of other users.” While 34% of respondents stated that they had already been inconvenienced, the problems encountered had multiple causes (occupation of space, noise pollution, degradation of the place, etc.). Only 15% of respondents said that they had come across “security” problems (118 out of 774 respondents, including non-responses). As a reminder, the RNM survey indicates that 46% of its respondents are in favour of boosting monitoring and policing missions. Similarly, when the university survey asks respondents whether they would like the forest to be better equipped, more managed and monitored, only 15% agree with the suggestion and 78% would prefer the forest remain as it is.

In other words, the layout of the RNM’s citizen dialogue methods and the way they are organised seems to bring out “needs” that a non-action-oriented survey does not identify in the same way. The university survey shows actors who believe that this is neither a need nor a realistic action, both in the quantitative part and in the use made of interviews. “We’re not going to put a guard behind every tree,” is expressed in the same way (in separate interviews) by a mayor in charge of a municipal forest (also chair of the Regional Natural Park) and the private owner of a 315-hectare forest (also vice-chair of the Regional Centre of Forest Property). Beyond the cost of surveillance, which would be too high, the actors prefer to encourage mediation and awareness-raising rather than repressive measures and say they would prefer to create more spaces (within or outside the woodlands) that are adapted to channelling the troublesome activities (motorbikes, quad bikes, paintballs, rave parties) rather than having to exclude categories of users deemed unwelcome.

The RNM survey highlighted the desire, which was apparently widely shared (68%), to prohibit access to certain areas of the forest to protect it, although it was not clear from whom or from what. The university survey poses the question in a different way, asking respondents to give their opinion on the way ownership relates to accessibility regarding woodland areas. The results are different—in fact, quite opposite. In Figure 2, the

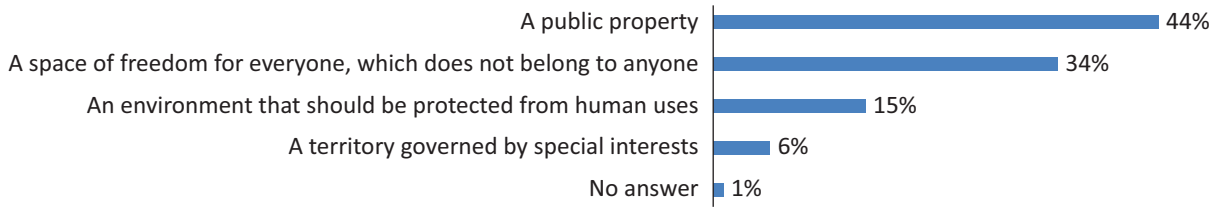


Figure 2. Possible answers to complete the sentence: “For me the forest is....”

following results appear when respondents are asked to choose from among a selection of possible answers to complete the sentence: “For me the forest is...”:

The majority response (44% of respondents) sees the forest as “public property.” Thirty-four percent of respondents see it as “a space of freedom for all that does not belong to anyone.” If we add up these two results, it appears that for 78% of the respondents the accessibility of the forest for all seems to be a priority or fundamental. Only 6% of respondents perceive the forest as a territory governed by specific interests—this compares with the 5% of respondents who believe that forest management is the business of the forest owner. While 15% of respondents are in favour of protecting all or part of the forest from human use, this figure is considerably lower than the 68% of respondents in the RNM survey.

The contrasting results of the two surveys are not only due to the way the questions were formulated, nor

only to the way they were carried out. Sampling (or the lack of it in the case of the RNM survey) is again important. The factor analysis to follow (Figure 3), conducted this time using data from the same university survey but on a global scale (metropolis n = 1526), shows that women are more likely to feel that the forest is an environment that should be protected from human users. However, women are over-represented in the RNM survey, which also partly explains why the ban on certain areas in the forest gains all the more approval in this survey.

It should be noted that the position of the forest considered “public property,” located near the centre of the factorial design, shows that this conception is relatively independent of gender and the type of sport practised in the forest. On the other hand, the other two conceptions of the forest (“a territory governed by specific interests” and “a space of freedom for all”) are related

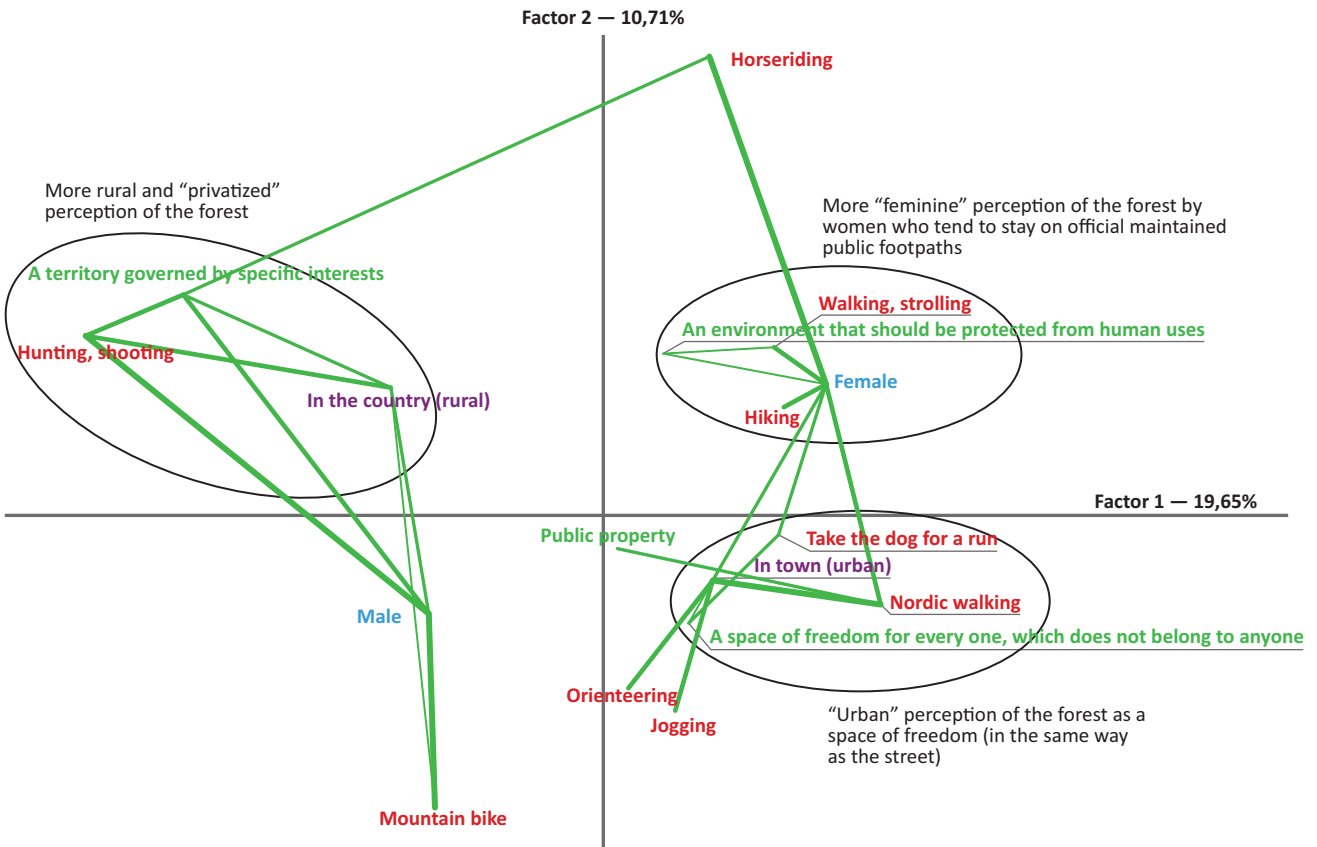


Figure 3. Factor analysis of forest design by gender and type of activity, based on the scope of the global university survey (n = 1,526).

to sports practices and the location of the respondent’s main residence (in the country/town): Hunters have a better perception of the property relations that govern forest areas, whereas urban dwellers see woodland as a kind of “extended” public garden.

Allowing the population to express their opinions in a public debate assumes the sharing of references and a common language (Desrosières, 2010, p. 407). What can we say about the knowledge of the people about the bans on access in certain areas of the forest? Are those who take part in the discussions aware of the consequences of their use of the forest environment? When asked about the regulations in force (knowledge of the forestry code), the participants in the university survey gave their opinion on what they could do when walking their dog in the forest.

The results presented in Figure 4 show that only 16% of respondents knew the forestry code (answer “yes, in the vicinity of his master during the authorised period”). However, this does not mean that those individuals who know there are regulations are really aware of their meaning and implications. Not everyone understands, for example, the way pets disturb the fauna and flora along the sides of paths (stress during the birthing of mammals, abandoning of breeding sites, etc.). We can see clearly, here, that “one of the most pernicious effects of the opinion poll consists precisely in making people give answers to questions they did not ask themselves” (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 226). In the case in point, people were asked about protection and prohibiting access to certain areas in the forest, whereas the majority of them do not seem to be aware of the consequences of their presence or that of their dogs on the edges of the paths.

4. Discussion

While the environment is a global issue, on a local level, the two surveys deployed showed members of the population who wish to express themselves and “participate” in the political decisions that concern their living environment. Collecting and taking into account these individual situations seems legitimate, but implicitly one expects responses that come from a citizen’s position, which take into account the general interest (Desjardins, 2020). This can be seen as a source of misunderstanding. The analyses also showed wide disparities in the levels of

knowledge of the respondents, which makes it more difficult to take their answers into consideration. However, it would be absurd to compare lay knowledge and scholarly knowledge (Callon et al., 2001, p. 135) insofar as, over and above the fact that each person has specific knowledge that can be enriched and complement each other (Callon et al., 2001, p. 62), what remains at stake for all policy decisions remains, fundamentally, the need to bring about the emergence of a world that is both diverse and shared (Latour, 2005). For all that, organising a participatory approach implies control over the meaning and importance of the instruments used to govern (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2005). It also requires that a distinction be made between consultation and dialogue, and that public speaking/communication is organised in terms of meaning and place.

When an online questionnaire is presented as a tool for “digital dialogue” this tends, on the one hand, to confuse the instrument and the approach, and, on the other hand, to make an implicit promise that may be difficult to keep if we are not able to obtain a minimum amount of information on the people expressing their opinions, because we have no visibility over the sample of respondents and, at the same time, over the extent to which they are out of step or in line with the overall population. The other major problem with the approach analysed lies in the nature of the suggested answers, which provide little information on the intentions or motives behind the “likes” or “approvals/disapprovals.” This gives the impression that planned actions are being submitted for popular approval rather than discussion and deliberation. The way actions are expressed and the respondents then invited to “vote” heavily influences the answers, at the risk of distorting the results but, at the same time, this has the merit of setting up a sort of trial for testing concrete proposals. In the end, with these results, it is difficult to gain an understanding of what is being expressed, beyond the actual subject of the question-response. This article does not claim to find a solution to these classic difficulties, which are inherent to the mechanisms of democratic participation; we are merely pointing out that there is a fairly systematic use of the term “dialogue” when in fact the process is more akin to a “consultation.” We also identify the risk inherent in this method, which may tend to produce clear-cut and fixed “opinions” somewhat artificially, when it should be fuelling contradictory expressions, with a concern to enter into

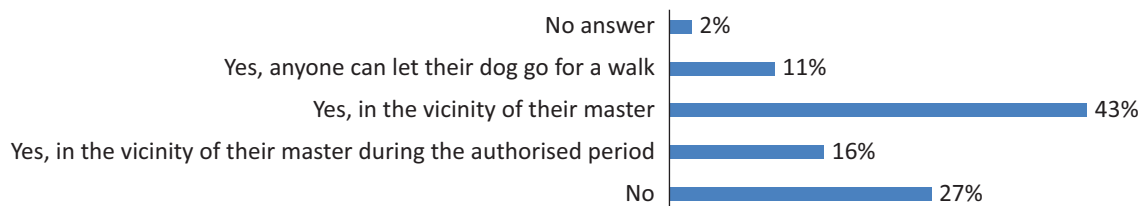


Figure 4. Possible answers to the sentence: “In the forest that I frequent, people can allow their dogs to walk around freely?”

an ethical consideration of discussion and deliberation (Habermas, 1983, 1991). Over and above any issues regarding the sampling and how the questions are formulated, it appears that the cross-referencing of factual questions and opinion questions makes it possible to relate uses and opinions, and to nuance the expression of the latter. For example, the perception of how woodland is threatened varies with the social origin of the respondent, but also according to the frequency of their visits (Dobré & Caraire, pp. 141–142).

5. Conclusion

The planning pioneer Patrick Geddes affirmed the central role of sociological enquiry (de Biase et al., 2016). In his opinion, the “science of cities” is based on the ability to observe them, because they cannot be built without the knowledge of their inhabitants, nor without the latter feeling concerned and being involved in the future of their city. By looking at the participation process implemented in the framework of the drafting of the 4th Forest Management Charter, our study shows how a metropolis explores, or even “creates” its own courses of action, its responsibilities, and ultimately “politicises” forest management. While the literature points to a progressive depoliticisation of ecological issues (Comby, 2015), we have shown how, in the case of urban forest management, a community with a high budgetary capacity, when seeking to vitalise and create an identity for a region, can on the contrary endeavour to become involved in the problem issues of woodland management. This even sometimes means “overplaying” divergences or requirements, as shown by the comparison of the consultation questionnaires and the university survey. If the formulation of questions and answers plays a part in the politicisation-de politicisation of social issues into “public issues,” the question remains of how to carry out this work of formatting/contenting, which is potentially pedagogical or educational for the participants.

At the risk of having to change its internal organisation and its relationship with the National Forestry Organisation, the local authority wanted to know if the respondents thought it was necessary “to adapt forest management so that it takes greater account of ecological issues” as a priority field of action “to improve the environmental role of the forest.” Fifty-five percent of the respondents answered “yes.” Remarkably, 91% of respondents to the university survey consider forest management to be a public matter, which concerns elected representatives, experts and users. Only 5% of respondents feel that management should be exclusively left to the owner. Sixty percent of respondents to the university survey believe that forest management (flora, fauna, and the public) is everyone’s business and implies their participation; 21% believe that it is the business of elected officials and experts and 11% that it is the business of elected officials and that they should consult users. All of these indicators seem to converge, arguing

not only for “greener” policies but also for more “participatory” approaches.

Having come thus far, it should be remembered that the participatory management of forest areas in our case, as in the case of natural parks, is often driven by the technical managers who are not, we insist, elected representatives. One might think that they do not necessarily have their “dialogue” protocols validated by their elected representatives, and wonder what would happen to the “results” of these digital dialogues if the people surveyed showed a concern to have their opinions transformed into concrete action. While consultation allows for dialogue, there is no guarantee that it will be taken into account, nor does it allow residents to give advice or make proposals. To overcome this state of “symbolic cooperation,” it is undoubtedly possible to envisage—on the model of what is done in town planning (Donzelot & Epstein, 2006)—forms of delegation of power and citizen control at the level of the drafting of the forest management charter as well as the implementation of the action plan.

In the RNM, as in other areas, some residents do not hesitate to intervene directly in the management of forest areas by demolishing hunting lodges, setting up (sometimes dangerous) roadblocks on paths used by mountain bikers, or by contesting clear-cuts. These direct interventions are an invitation to rethink institutionalised participation at all stages of planning and management and beyond mandatory participation instruments. These interventions are not insignificant and, as the comparison between our two surveys shows, encourage wider participation. In this way, we will seek to increase our level of mutual knowledge to define a common order made up of shared references and futures (Desjardins, 2020). To strengthen local society, we can only lean in favour of the proposal of setting up participatory committees that are more open, as close to the ground as possible, that cannot be reduced to their “spokespersons.” Their membership should be not frozen but open to individuals interested in the management of their living environment—the region lived in (Rech & Mounet, 2011). Increasing the level of participation obviously implies questioning the conditions for greater delegation of power and the exercise of control by residents (Donzelot & Epstein, 2006).

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by the Normandy region (RIN) and Europe (FEDER). The authors would like to thank the agents of the Environment Department of the Metropolitan Area of Rouen for providing them with the “digital dialogue” survey data.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

- Bourdieu, P. (2002). *Questions de sociologie* [Questions of sociology]. Les Éditions de Minuit.
- Callon, M., Lascoumes, P., & Barthe, Y. (2001). *Agir dans un monde incertain. Essai sur la démocratie technique* [Acting in an uncertain world. Essay on technical democracy]. Seuil.
- Champagne, P. (2015). *Faire l'opinion* [Making opinion]. Les Éditions de Minuit.
- Claeys-Mekdade, C. (2006). La participation environnementale à la Française: Le citoyen, l'État... et le sociologue [French-style environmental participation: Citizen, state... and sociologist]. *Vertigo*, 7(3). <https://doi.org/10.4000/vertigo.8446>
- Collectif d'enquête sur les Gilets jaunes. (2019). Enquêter in situ par questionnaire sur une mobilisation en cours: Une étude sur les Gilets jaunes [Investigating in situ by questionnaire on an ongoing mobilization: A study of the Yellow Vests]. *Revue française de science politique*, 69(5/6), 869–892.
- Comby, J.-B. (2015). *La question climatique. Genèse et dépolitisation d'un problème public* [Climate issue. Genesis and depoliticization of a public problem]. Raisons d'agir.
- Comby, J.-B. (2019). Retour sur la dépolitisation des enjeux écologiques [Review of the depoliticization of ecological issues]. In La Découverte (Eds.), *Manuel indocile de sciences sociales* [Uncompliant textbook of social sciences] (pp. 470–480). La Découverte.
- Cordellier, M., & Dobré, M. (2015). *Usages et images de la forêt en France, Enquête "forêt et société"* [Uses and images of the forest in France, "forest and society" survey] (Research Report). ONF; CERRReV. <https://draaf.nouvelle-aquitaine.agriculture.gouv.fr>
- de Biase, A., Levy, A., & Castrillo Romón, M. A. (2016). Patrick Geddes en héritage [Patrick Geddes' contribution]. *Espaces et sociétés*, 4(167), 7–25. <https://doi.org/10.3917/esp.167.0007>
- Desjardins, X. (2020). *Planification urbaine. La ville en devenir* [Urban planning. The city in the making]. Armand Colin.
- Desrosières, A. (2010). *La politique des grands nombres, histoire de la raison statistique* [The politics of large numbers: A history of statistical reasoning]. La Découverte.
- Dewey, J. (2010). *Le public et ses problèmes* [The public and its problems]. Gallimard.
- Dobré, M., & Caraire, C. (2000). *La sensibilité écologique des Français à travers l'opinion public* [Ecological sensitivity of the French through public opinion]. IFEN.
- Donzelot, J., & Epstein, R. (2006). Démocratie et participation: L'exemple de la rénovation urbaine [Democracy and participation: The example of urban renewal]. *Esprit*, 7, 5–34.
- Dormagen, J. Y., Michel, L., & Reungoat, E. (2021). Le mouvement des Gilets jaunes, un mouvement anti-écologie? [Yellow Vests movement, an anti-ecology movement?]. *Écologie & politique*, 62.
- Geddes, P. (1904). *Civics. An applied sociology* [Speech transcript]. Gutenberg. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13205/13205-h/13205-h.htm>
- Guerra, T., Alexandre, C., & Gonthier, F. (2019). Populist attitudes among the French Yellow Vests. *Populism*, 3(1), 1–12.
- Habermas, J. (1983). *Morale et communication* [Moral consciousness and communicative action]. Flammarion.
- Habermas, J. (1991). *De l'éthique de la discussion* [The ethics of discourse]. Flammarion.
- Hoibian, S., Briera, T., Crouette, P., Gauthier, R., Jauneau-Cottet, P., & Muller, J. (2019). *Le mouvement des Gilets jaunes ou les limites d'un modèle de société* [The Yellow Vest movement and the limits of a model of society] (CAHIER DE RECHERCHE N° 349). CRÉDOC. <https://www.credoc.fr/download/pdf/Rech/C349.pdf>
- INSEE. (2018). *Intercommunalité–Métropole de Métropole Rouen Normandie* [Rouen Normandy Metropolis intermunicipality]. <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques>
- Kalaora, B. (1993). *Le musée vert: Radiographie du loisir en forêt* [The green museum: Radiography of recreation in forests]. L'Harmattan.
- Lascoumes, P., & Le Galès, P. (2005). *Gouverner par les instruments* [Governing by instruments]. Puf.
- Lascoumes, P., & Le Galès, P. (2018). *Sociologie de l'action publique* [Sociology of public action]. Nathan.
- Latour, B. (2005). *Un monde pluriel mais commun* [A plural but common world]. L'aube.
- Lepillé, R. (2017). *Forêts urbaines de loisirs. Usages récréatifs et manières d'habiter* [Recreational urban forests. Recreational uses and ways of living] [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. University of Lyon.
- Lewis, N. (2007). Les femmes et la forêt, un regard partagé entre peur et sociabilité [Women and woodland, a position between fear and sociability]. *RDV Techniques de l'ONF*, 17, 68–72.
- Manin, B. (1996). *Principes du gouvernement représentatif* [The principles of representative government]. Flammarion.
- Nicodème, M. (2020). *Le maire Nicolas Mayer-Rossignol veut faire de Rouen la "capitale du Monde d'après"* [The Mayor Nicolas Mayer-Rossignol wants to make Rouen the "Capital of the World After"]. 76 Actu. https://actu.fr/societe/le-maire-nicolas-mayer-rossignol-veut-faire-de-rouen-la-capitale-du-monde-d-apres_35917192.html
- Noiriél, G. (2018). *Les gilets jaunes et les "leçons de l'histoire"* [The Yellow Vests and "lessons of history"]. Fondation Copernic. <https://noiriél.wordpress.com/2018/11/21/les-gilets-jaunes-et-les-lecons-de-histoire>
- Rech, Y., & Mounet, J. P. (2011). Les sports de nature en débat [Outdoor sports in debate]. *Développement*

durable & territoires, 2(3). <http://developpementdurable.revues.org/9085>

Rosanvallon, P. (2021). *Les épreuves de la vie. Comprendre les français autrement* [Life's challenges. Understanding the French differently]. Seuil.

Rouen Normandy Metropolis. (n.d.). *Et si on parlait de la forêt? (1/3)* [What if we talked about the forest? (1/3)]. <https://jeparticipe.metropole-rouen-normandie.fr/questionnaire/et-si-parlait-de-la-foret-13>

Rouen Normandy Metropolis. (2020, September 11). *La métropole Rouen Normandie, capitale du monde d'après* [Rouen Normandy Metropolis, capital of

the World After] [Press release]. <https://www.metropole-rouen-normandie.fr/presse/2020/la-metropole-rouen-normandie-capitale-de-lapres-demain-se-construit-aujourd'hui-9523>

Sebbah, B., Loubère, L., Souillard, N., Thiong-Kay, L., & Smyrnaio, N. (2018). *Les Gilets jaunes se font une place dans les médias et l'agenda politique* [Yellow Vests make their way into the media and the political agenda] (Research Report). LERASS.

Spire, A. (2018). *Résistances à l'impôt, attachement à l'Etat* [Resistance to taxation, attachment to the state]. Seuil.

About the Authors



Charlotte Birks teaches at the University of Rouen Normandy. She has a PhD in sociology and her research fields are focused on public policy, nature, leisure, and sport activities.



Damien Féménias is a university professor and works on territorialisation (territorial mediations) produced by sports leisure activities.



Charly Machemehl is a lecturer at the University of Rouen Normandy and a member of CETAPS. His research focus is on the development of sport and sports leisure since the end of the 19th century in singular urban contexts.