

# The Versailles Plain: from plans to reality

**Marie de Naurois**

Local Action Group Leader: Versailles Plain

**The Versailles Plain is an area that has been closely tied to the château and its park right from Louis 14th's *Grand Parc* up to the protection of a 2,600 ha site in the 2000s. In response to the government's conservation drive, farmers launched a sustainable development initiative with the combined support of elected officials and residents. In 2004, an association was set up on the plain extending to the Alluets Plateau and the Mauldre Valley.**

In the 17th century, this western-facing valley was chosen as the natural stage for an outstanding architectural project. Today, it remains an unbroken farming area surrounded by urbanisation to the north, east and south. Although conservation policies put a stop to the rampant urban sprawl, the situation is nonetheless deteriorating due to the insidious encroachment of farmland. In many cases, the regulations are powerless to prevent the infringements. The unchecked construction spawns further urbanisation. Towns get rid of anything they don't want outside their boundaries: industrial estates, Travellers, treatment plants, landfill sites, etc. The Versailles Plain is faced with a paradox. Thanks to the work of local councils and residents, the non-protected part of the plain is better preserved and maximised than the protected part near the built-up areas.

## Moving from total preservation to management policy

Local authorities asked that a management document be drawn up in relation to the listing of the site as a protected area. This was done by a consulting firm over a period of almost ten years. Although it contains extremely in-depth analysis, it also represents an expert's vision on the rebuilding of the area's heritage. It also serves as a reference work for an operational programme.

During this time and backed by the departmental council, farmers launched a wide-reaching consultative process to build cooperative links between farming and urban neighbours to ensure the management of environmental quality. This "heritage audit"<sup>1</sup> gave rise to the recognition of a shared heritage and the desire to build ties. An association was soon created in 2004, made up of three colleges (officials, farmers and civil society): The Heritage Association for the Versailles Plain and the Alluets Plateau (Association Patrimoniale de la Plaine de Versailles et du Plateau des Alluets, APPVA). Since 2008, the association has had support from the departmental council's programme for agri-urban areas.

In addition, the Leader projects first arrived in Île-de-France in 2007. Leader is a European rural development mechanism that uses a bottom-up regional strategy in tandem with the public-private support of a local committee. The local action group (LAG) of the Versailles Plain Leader project is provided by the APPVA and has led to the creation of a development strategy, the employment of full-time staff and the financing of the actions proposed by the association's colleges: a

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on the method devised by Professor Henry Ollagnon, director of the Institute of Heritage Strategy at AgroParisTech.

hiking guide, heritage map, signage at the approach to villages... Following meetings between farmers, several projects are now underway: Versailles Plain flour, wildlife preservation, farming interpretive signage, network-building between direct-sale producers, services to the community, landscape charter, etc. A group of officials recently took up the task of promoting the identity of the plain by means of a brochure distributed in letterboxes. These officials believe that a genuine area identity is impossible unless it has real meaning for local residents. A slow-burning transformation is taking place, fuelled by interactions between people. As people get to know each other better, projects can get off the ground and this develops a sense of belonging to the area and to the shared heritage of the community.

However, this dynamic is at odds with other forces at work. The reform of regional bodies implies an “administrative” framework built around towns. The natural entity of the Versailles Plain will be broken up into four or five urban intermunicipal bodies (aside from the one rural intermunicipal body being created), and efforts to build an identity there may be in vain. The intermunicipal groups will also be adopting the type of governance currently in use in France. It uses “collective” management, where the responsibility for action is given to a third party, as constituted by the “collective body”. The “participative” framework of collective bodies often offers little more than a “consultation” on a project defined by the collective body itself or by an expert. We are a long way from an action “for the common good” built by all the stakeholders involved.

## **From plans to reality: the keys to implementing real action**

The difficulty is addressing multiple issues simultaneously. Various international and local stakeholders have recognised a real heritage. How can we come together to manage it effectively? A number of conditions may be put forward:

- to recognise the existence of a “local heritage in the common interest” for a given area;
- to engage in a strategic approach involving all the stakeholders (co-build concept);
- to secure management resources.

How can all of this be achieved? A “heritage institution” would now be necessary, in which all the stakeholders could participate. It is for this reason that the APPVPA is considering setting up a public interest group (Groupement d’Intérêt Public, GIP), which would increase the involvement of the public sector at various levels without diminishing that of local stakeholders. The answer to the question put by the IAU île-de-France: “how do we turn our plans into reality?” could therefore be to “turn reality into plans” with the help of a suitable policy.

### **The restoration of the Royal Avenue: a threat or a shared project?**

The Villepreux Royal Avenue is listed with the château and the park as a “World Heritage Site” by Unesco. A restoration project is underway and is managed by the Versailles Grand Parc intermunicipal body. To the west of the A12 motorway, this avenue crosses farming land where it is little more than a country trail. The restoration project is seen as a threat by farmers whose land is dwindling away to nothing. To ensure that the project become a reality, it is essential that it be created by them with possibly some innovation and transformations needed along the way<sup>2</sup>. So

---

<sup>2</sup> Pierre-Marie Tricaud, *Conservation et transformation du patrimoine vivant* (Conservation and transformation of the living

rather than negotiate compulsory purchases for a predefined project, why not leave the land with the farmers and give them the time to come up with solutions suitable for them (by incorporating agroforestry for example)? Another strong argument is the existence of a group of active farmers who innovate towards the improved management of farmland, the preservation of wildlife and the education of hikers.

The goal behind the restoration of the avenue will be to rediscover the links between society and nature (as symbolised by the Park of Versailles), not as the pastime (and power) of the King, but as a sign of a new era of “shared heritage management”.