

# Reconciling outdoor sport, biodiversity and wood production in a peri-urban forest – using the example of Fontainebleau Forest

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## Fontainebleau Forest: an outdoor sports stadium for over a century

Fontainebleau Forest is a 23,000-hectare forest located 60km south of Paris, managed by a government body specialised in wood production, the National Office for Forestry (ONF). Being so close to Paris and its ever-growing expansion, a law was passed in 2002 to prevent any land purchase in this area.

Data provided by a recent study (*ONF, 2015*) measured that there are between 4 and 10 million visits every year<sup>1</sup>. Visitors are either people living in Paris and surroundings, coming for short visits, walks and outdoor sports, or international visitors, mostly coming for outdoor sports. Boulder climbing attracts around a third of the visitors, 50% of them being international visitors.

In the middle of a highly productive agricultural region, Fontainebleau's soil is actually dry and poor. Forestry was seen as more suitable than agriculture from early times and a royal forest and castle were built in the area in the 11th century. It rapidly became one of the main hunting lodges for all the French kings practising the spectacular sport of deer-hunting with hounds.

Later, when the steam train first arrived from Paris, more visitors arrived, keen on getting out of the newly industrialised cities. One of them, Claude François Dénecourt, marked up to 200km of walking tracks, with the sole purpose of revealing a diverse landscape. Those tracks allowed more tourists to enter the forest. In 1853, pre-Impressionist artists obtained an agreement that part of the forest wouldn't be cut, to maintain their cherished landscape. Fontainebleau landscapes were officially protected when the forest was registered as a "classified area" in 1965.

Similarly, other visitors were also paying attention to the fauna and the flora. One of the most prominent botanists of the time chose Fontainebleau to open the first in-situ ecology research Centre. Any naturalist from Paris and the surrounding area would come to Fontainebleau, as it combines various habitats: old-growth oak groves, open moorland, sandstone plateaus. In May 2010, Fontainebleau Forest was officially registered as a "Natura 2000" area.

In this context, the ONF is facing a complex challenge: managing the timing and location of outdoor events, while maintaining wood production and biodiversity conservation.

## A cornerstone: authorising sporting events

A formal authorisation is needed to organise any sporting events with more than 60 people. There are around 350 sporting events organised every year in Fontainebleau.

The criteria analysed while processing sports organisers' requests are: other existing activities (forestry, hunting, research) on the same day and in the same location, environmental impacts, erosive impacts. Event organisers have to provide a copy of their itinerary. Up until recently, the process was based on paper copies and both the ONF and users would regard this process as "another administrative constraint".

Due to the increasing number of requests, the ONF has changed its strategy and is developing an online tool to process them. It is also seen as a communication tool. It is made up of an

interactive map, containing most of the relevant georeferenced data for a given year, and entry forms where users can describe their event. The georeferenced data includes (see figure 1): parking locations and capacities, different types of roads, tracks and their recommended uses, environmental sensitivity or other georeferenced constraints: cultural items, private properties, restricted areas, biodiversity sensitivity. Users also have the capacity to modify their routes as they discover possible constraints. They receive a summary of their request, with detailed information on the possible impact of their sporting event and clear information on the rest of the process. When their event requires more work, they are offered the opportunity of contributing directly by participating in workshops.

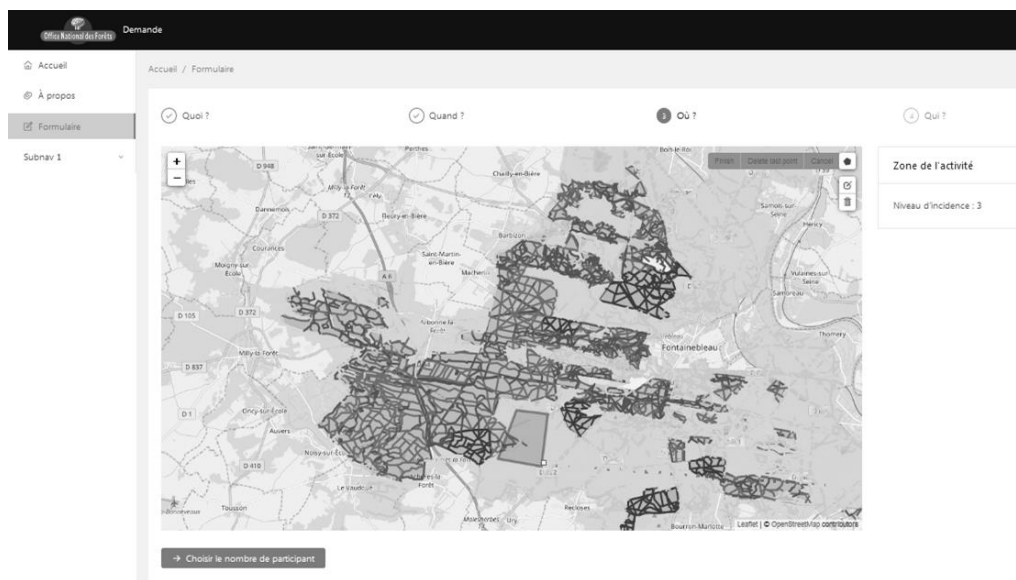


Figure 1: Web page to create a sporting event's itinerary by showing its ecological impacts (Source: ONF)

## A broad range of outdoor sports users: how to inform a complex web of stakeholders

Most visitors believe this area is a “public space”, but it is actually a private space open to the public, which is slightly different. Individuals can enter and exit the forest as they please, as long as they respect general rules, which are often unknown to them.

Outdoor sports most frequently practised are: boulder climbing, mountain biking, trail-running, orienteering and horse riding. The majority of those sports are “self-organised”; users don't belong to a club. This creates difficulties, as no professional entity oversees the safety of the users, or communicates about good practices.

Through the development of private interactive maps and corresponding apps, most users can find sites corresponding to their sporting expectations. Most of those tools have been developed using users' data but without ONF consent. This situation increases the risk of conflict: mountain bikers eroding pedestrian tracks, climbers publicising routes in non-secure sites, trail-runners creating new tracks in very sensitive areas.

Different strategies have been trialled in order to convey important information regarding both rules and good practice:

- Using illustration-based noticeboards instead of text-based noticeboards
- Educating and giving responsibility to active volunteers (VTT)

- Choosing respected champions to become ambassadors of the forest (climbing)
- Using social media to communicate.

Much more needs to be done, with mountain biking and climbing becoming the main sports practised in the forest.

At a time when outdoor sport in natural areas is developing widely and when sports users are more and more autonomous, it is imperative to find ways to reconcile the different priorities of these natural sites. Fontainebleau Forest is a French peri-urban forest historically regarded as a local outdoor facility for an increasing number of outdoor sports users. Considering most of these outdoor sports have direct and indirect impacts on the area, where a series of complex rules apply, the ONF has endeavoured to create new policy instruments to target more and more autonomous users. In a context where public funding is constrained, it is also time to ask whether the outdoor sports industry needs to take these questions more seriously.

## References

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