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# From Global Flows to Territorial Bonds: Towards a Bioregional Governance of the Living in the Taravu Valley

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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses the theoretical and operational challenge of redefining the relationship between human communities and natural systems through the bioregionalist paradigm. Moving beyond the view of territory as an inert substrate, the research proposes a perspective in which natural elements are recognized as "actants" endowed with political agency and intrinsic rights. The study focuses on the case of the Taravu Valley in Corsica, where the river serves not merely as a hydrographic boundary but as a living individual that shapes socio-economic relations. Adopting a situated approach based on Grounded Theory, the article analyzes the evolution of the valley as a laboratory for institutional innovation, examining the tensions between administrative fragmentation and ecological identity. The findings highlight how a governance of care and co-creation can transform the territory into a radical political project, capable of mending the dualism between declining inland areas and global extractive pressures while ensuring the resilience of vital metabolisms.

**Keywords:** Bioregionalism, Governance of Care, Taravu Valley.

## **1. Introduction**

The contemporary debate on planetary survival necessitates a radical redefinition of the relationship between the human species and nature, urging territorial planning to interpret a new ontological paradigm. The theoretical challenge addressed in this contribution lies in overcoming the vision of the territory as an inert substrate in favour of a bioregionalist perspective that understands it as a complex biocenosis and a relational geography. Within this framework, emphasis is placed on the recognition of natural elements as active agents and subjects of rights, endowed with a political agency that exists independently of economic utility. Planning thus emerges as a practice of co-creation and care, where the protection of ecological metabolisms is intertwined with the deliberative power of local communities from a perspective of municipalist and solidarity-based self-government. The research investigates these dynamics through the case study of the Taravu Valley in Corsica, a context where the river is not merely a hydrographic boundary but a living individual that orders socio-economic relations. The working

partnership, established through the collaboration between the FRES (France) and LAPEI (Italy)<sup>1</sup> units in the spring of 2025, adopted a situated approach based on Grounded Theory, triangulating empirical material collected through direct immersion and interviews with bioregionalist literature. The structure of the article is divided into three main moments: a first part defines the theoretical framework of collaborative and multi-species governance; the second analyses the morphologies of the living and the territorial resistances of the Taravu Valley, highlighting the role of the river as an actant; the third and final section reconstructs the evolution of the valley as a laboratory of institutional innovation, examining the various phases of administrative experimentation and the tensions between bureaucratic fragmentation and ecological identity. The final objective is to demonstrate how the governance of care can transform the territory into a radical political project of reconnection between institutions and living systems.

## **2. The territory between co-creation and care: towards new forms of collaborative and multi-species governance**

The conditions for humanity's permanence on Earth, in a context marked by ecosystem crises and the upheaval of the climate regime, today occupy a central place in the international scientific debate. A wide range of theoretical contributions – spanning from political philosophy to socio-ecological studies, and the humanities and social sciences (Barad, 2003, 2007; Bennett, 2010; Bookchin, 1982; Braun, 2015; Coole and Frost, 2010; Haraway, 2016; Latour, 2015; Papadopoulos, 2018; Pellizzoni, 2015, 2023) – agree on affirming the need to radically redefine the relationship between the human species and nature as a fundamental condition for the survival of the planet. In this context, *‘ánthrōpos’* is called upon to reconsider its position in the world: no longer as an external, superordinate subject or a dominator of nature, but as a component of a complex relational system of horizontal multi-species evolutionary coexistence.

This ontological repositioning calls into question territorial planning as a privileged context for the study and experimentation of its operational consequences. The very object of its action – the territory – undergoes, first and foremost, a profound semantic reconfiguration. It can no longer be interpreted as an inert substrate solely at the service of human activities, but as a complex relational system based on the interdependence between the geosphere, biosphere, and sociosphere.

Among the different ways in which this process of re-semanticisation has been articulated in the international scientific landscape, this essay places itself within the Italian bioregionalist approach (Magnaghi, 2020). In this framework of reference, the territory is understood as a processual construct; a historical sedimentation co-created over time by the interaction between human communities and nature (*ivi*); a complex ecological biocenosis (Cevasco et al., 2022), composed of places, heritage, knowledge, imaginaries, and invariant rules necessary for the reproduction of the living (Magnaghi, 2020; Cevasco et al., 2022). That is, it is reconceptualised as a complex relational geography, understood as the domain of an emerging multi-species mediation in which space is defined not by administrative boundaries, but by the vital connections between the different ‘agents’ (human and non-human) that inhabit it (Decandia, 2025).

This new declination of the concept of territory presents territorial planning with a new responsibility: to act as a guarantor of life on the planet. Operationally, this means that its objective cannot be reduced to the simple regulation of land use or the maximisation of economic yield according to exogenous neoliberal logics, aimed only at making the territory more ‘attractive’ for global flows and markets. On the contrary, the priority must become the reproduction of the ecological and social bonds and metabolisms that make life possible and meaningful at the local (bioregional) scale. Concretely, this implies the adoption of the territory's biophysical limits as ordering principles for every planning decision. In such a perspective, planning becomes a practice of co-creation and care; a tool to recognise, investigate, and consolidate new ‘geographies of the living’ as contexts defined by the coherence of ecological cycles and the density of the social relations that inhabit them, capable of regenerating their own vital metabolisms.

This highlights two fundamental dimensions with which planning is called to engage today.

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<sup>1</sup> This research is the result of a collaboration agreement between the Ecological Design of Settlements Laboratory (LAPEI) of the Department of Architecture (DIDA) at the University of Florence and the Fédération de Recherche Environnement et Société (Frés), which brings together the Université de Corse Pasquale Paoli, the Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and Environment (INRAE), and the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS, FR).

The first dimension concerns the recognition of natural elements as active agents in territorial projects and, consequently, as subjects entitled to rights. In a framework of multi-species coexistence, animals, plants, and entire ecosystems are seen as actors and co-creators of territorial transformations and, therefore, bearers – equal to human beings – of specific claims and rights. In this view, they are understood as ‘goods in themselves’, endowed with an intrinsic value that is independent of any human evaluation of their economic utility and which confers upon them political ‘agency’ (Cacciari, 2025).

The second dimension concerns the role of local communities in territorial projects. Every territorial project that aims to mend the vital relations (ecological and symbolic) of a place cannot be reduced to a mere technical-administrative procedure. It must, on the contrary, be understood as a collective and choral path of re-fertilising the co-evolutionary bond between local communities and natural resources. It is linked, therefore, to the possibility of communities reappropriating deliberative power over the decisions that affect their own living context, from a perspective of eco-solidary care of places understood as common goods (Magnaghi, 2020), entrusting them with a central role in the management of bioregional systems, transforming the care of ecosystem cycles into a political project of self-government (*ivi*) based on a reinterpretation of bioregionalism in a deliberative, federative, solidary, and municipalist key.

These two dimensions imply a profound redefinition of roles, responsibilities, and modes of action for all subjects involved in the territorial project – whether they be human or non-human. At the centre of collective action are placed the concepts of co-creation and mutual care, understood as generative principles of bioregional systems according to a multi-species, multi-scale, and multi-sectoral approach. It therefore appears necessary to explore and design new operational tools to govern the emerging relational geographies of the living.

The reflections proposed in this contribution regarding the Taravu Valley in Corsica are articulated around the theoretical perspective outlined above. In this context, in fact, the river has historically been the ordering principle of the socio-economic relations of the local community, which still considers it an actant endowed with its own agency in the process of territorial co-creation. Furthermore, it has been involved over time in multiple experiments of collaborative care governance aimed at its protection and the maintenance of co-evolutionary relations between the human species and nature.

### 3. The Taravu Valley

The Taravu Valley, in south-western Corsica, is configured as a longitudinal territorial system of extraordinary complexity, capable of organically connecting the inland mountain ridges to the Gulf of Valinco (Vella, 2023). Geologically rooted in the granitic substrates of Hercynian Corsica, the basin (331 sq km) is modelled by a dynamic hydrographic network that defines not only its orography but its profound identity as a living organism, which has historically oriented and shaped the socio-economic relations of its communities.

However, the twentieth century brought an end to such balances. The crisis of the agro-pastoral model and the advent of mass tourism led to a new territorial organisation, guided by extractive interests and dynamics external to the territory. Today, the valley is thus characterised by a profound spatial asymmetry: the coastal dynamism driven by tourism contrasts with the fragility of the interior, marked by demographic decline and the contraction of services. This imbalance is not just a statistical fact, but a crisis of historical territorial metabolisms, which risks undermining the transmission of knowledge and the ability of communities to exercise stable forms of self-government.

In this context, the research launched in the spring of 2025 (FRES-FR and LAPEI-IT units) adopted a situated approach, aimed at refounding the territorial project on relational knowledge. Overcoming the distance between observer and object, the investigation was structured as a ‘practice of responsibility’, aimed at co-constructing transformative horizons together with places and communities. At the heart of this heuristic posture is the need to cultivate a knowledge woven of affective bonds, memories, and rituals, capable of generating true ‘geographies of reconnection’ (Cevasco, 2025).

From a methodological point of view, the investigation favoured direct immersion according to the principles of Grounded Theory. Through exploratory walks, photographic documentation, and interviews with key witnesses (approximately 15), the empirical material was synthesised and triangulated with bioregionalist literature. The objective of this in-depth exploration of the Taravu Valley territory was not mere descriptive analysis, but the evaluation of the possibility of developing new forms of collaborative governance of co-creation and care: political laboratories where the river and its emerging ecologies become the protagonists of a new territorial citizenship.

### 3.1 Morphologies of the Living and Territorial Resistances: the Taravu Organism

From a morphological and landscape perspective, the Taravu Valley can be interpreted as a sequence of three interconnected systems, united by the vital flow of the river. The upper valley is distinguished by historical villages nestled on terraces and by an agro-sylvo-pastoral fabric that is still legible; the middle valley serves as a transition space, where riparian corridors and infrastructures overlap; finally, the lower valley constitutes the sensitive ecological node towards the sea, a connective interface between terrestrial and marine ecosystems.

This configuration is not a simple physical structure, but a territorial architecture that has historically organised economies and mobility. In the *longue durée*, 'Taravu' has operated as an ecological and symbolic infrastructure, the backbone of a stratified system. For local communities, Taravu was never a simple geographical object (a 'river'); the removal of the article in local speech – calling it simply Taravu (and not *u* Taravu), as one would an individual – testifies to the recognition of a living personality, a being with which to cohabit. Between the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, this relationship consolidated 'pivot' villages that organised transhumance according to a logic of altimetric complementarity.

The decline of the agro-pastoral system and the rise of mass tourism in the 20th century marked a break in this balance, replaced by a new artificial arrangement dictated by exogenous extractive dynamics. This generated a marked dualism: a hyper-developed and attractive coast contrasted with a fragile and ageing mountain hinterland (Safer Corse, 2024).

Despite the dynamics in progress, the Taravu Valley is today configured as an exceptional laboratory for observing the morphologies of the living, understood not only as spatial configurations but as dynamic interweavings between the biotic environment and human settlement. Although qualitative research confirms the persistence of a relational unity already institutionalised in 1982 with the SIVOM (*Syndicat Intercommunal à Vocation Multiple*) of the Upper Taravu, it is in the current territorial resistances that a new political awareness emerges. The choice to inhabit the valley, evidenced by an agricultural occupational density higher than national averages, detaches itself from logics of rural resignation to become a conscious political act: a presence that regenerates the social fabric through identity devices such as fairs and the re-functionalisation of public spaces into *tiers lieux*, as demonstrated by the case of Arghjusta è Muricciu. This resistance is not mere opposition to decline, but a re-signification of the past that reads the territory through a territorialised ecological memory. The morphologies of traditional dwelling – capable of regulating water flows and microclimates through the symbiotic integration of vegetation – reveal a technical wisdom that connects architecture to the physiology of the landscape. In this frame, the Taravu ceases to be perceived as an inert water resource to assume the status of a 'living being', an integral member of the community whose biological integrity is inseparable from the social one. Local oppositions to micro-hydroelectric projects do not, therefore, represent simple NIMBY instances, but true bioregional struggles in defence of a non-human subject. Defending the river's course means, ultimately, preserving the pivot of a collaborative governance where the care of the living replaces extractive dynamics, orienting the valley towards ecologically compatible futures.

### 3.3 The valley as a Laboratory of institutional innovation

In-depth interviews conducted with key territorial witnesses, cross-referenced with a systematic review of institutional documentation, delineate the Taravu Valley as a permanent laboratory for collaborative governance experimentation. From 1976 to the present, the region has seen the overlapping of practices and tools aimed at reconnecting ecological, social, and administrative dimensions on a macro-territorial scale (Taravu–Ornanu–Valincu–Sartinesu). The central node of this experience lies in the attempt to overcome the dualism between institutional boundaries – often fragmented between different inter-municipal jurisdictions – and the sense of territorial belonging as it is lived. The experiences analysed do not outline a linear process, but a continuous and conscious attempt to implement self-government methodologies capable of protecting natural metabolisms and local production chains, often placing themselves in dialectical antithesis with the exogenous development models imposed by the central State. These experiments can be analytically organised into three main phases.

The first phase – of systemic genesis and socio-territorial mobilisation (1976-1982) – formally began in 1976 with the drafting of the *Contrat de Pays* of the Upper Taravu and the establishment of a Development Committee, which for the first time introduced hybrid participation between politics, the socio-professional world, and citizenship around themes such as: land enhancement, local agricultural chains, and rural tourism. Events such as

the Cilaccia fair (1977) were not simple economic exchanges, but devices of resistance against demographic desertification, culminating in the recognition of the valley as a coherent system through the SIVOM.

The second phase – of institutionalisation and inter-municipal cooperation – consolidated during the 1990s, marking the transition towards a greater formalisation of cooperation forms. The process of formalisation consolidated with the integration of European programmes (LEADER) and the creation of inter-regional Mediterranean networks. The birth of the Community of Communes of the Taravu (1996) marks the transition towards shared territorial planning, transforming cooperation from a spontaneous instance into an administrative structure.

The third phase – of consolidation of governance structures and experimentation with multi-level organisational arrangements – began around 2008 and is still ongoing. It is marked by an operational logic based on projects and coordination between different scales. The creation of the PETR (*Pôle d'Équilibre Territorial et Rural*) in 2016 and the simultaneous signing of the Rurality Contract represent the attempt to stabilise governance through a partnership between the State, Local Authorities, and the Regional Natural Park. Between 2017 and 2019, the PETR consolidated its organisational architecture by establishing a technical team, a development council, and a conference of mayors, unanimously adopting its territorial development strategy.

This historical reconstruction allows for the interpretation of the Taravu Valley as an evolving territorial laboratory, a place where the theoretical paradigm of bioregionalism attempts to translate into collaborative governance arrangements. However, this transition is not without obstacles: the analysis reveals a profound structural fragility, in which minimal political or bureaucratic discontinuities trigger recurrent decade-long stalemates. To overcome this precariousness, the urgency emerges to stabilise processes through cohesion pacts and multi-level coordination that can finally align large institutional strategies with the specific needs of local communities.

The heart of the matter lies in the tension between administrative fragmentation and the identity unity of the valley. This mismatch risks compromising the territory's ability to act in coherence with its own ecological balances. Yet, the Taravu basin maintains a powerful symbolic and evocative value: the river ceases to be a mere physical object to transform into a political device, an axis around which to reorganise decisions and redefine the relationship between institutions and nature. In this framework of renewed ecological justice, even non-human beings begin to be recognised as subjects bearing rights.

Ultimately, the Taravu experience marks a fundamental conceptual shift: the territory is no longer reducible to a bureaucratic perimeter or a technical 'project', but reaffirms itself as a 'territory of life'. Collaborative governance is therefore not a simple administrative exercise, but a radical political act aimed at deeply redefining the relations between the human community, institutions, and the living ecosystem in which they are rooted.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The analysis conducted on the Taravu Valley confirms the urgency of a transition towards models of territorial government that can integrate the rights of nature within active citizenship practices. The synthesis of the Corsican experience highlights how the Taravu River, perceived by the community as a subject endowed with personality and agency, represents the pivot around which it is possible to reconstruct a governance of care that overcomes extractive and neoliberal logics. The concept of co-creation manifests here not only as a participatory method between human beings, but as the recognition of a multi-species cooperation necessary for the reproduction of vital metabolisms. The collaborative governance tools analysed, despite their bureaucratic fragilities and political discontinuities, demonstrate that the territorial project must evolve towards a dimension of bioregional self-government, where the biophysical limit becomes the ordering principle of collective decisions. Care, understood as ethical responsibility and political practice, emerges as the only device capable of recomposing the dualism between the declining inland areas and the coasts subject to tourism pressure, restoring value to local knowledge and territorial resistances. In conclusion, the case of the Taravu indicates that the challenge of contemporary planning lies in the capacity to stabilise cohesion pacts that recognise the territory as a living organism and not as a mere administrative perimeter. Only through the institutionalisation of co-creation processes and the strengthening of multi-level partnerships will it be possible to transform resource management into an act of collective care, ensuring the resilience of ecosystems and ecological justice for all species that inhabit the geographies of the living. The territory of life thus reaffirms itself as the place of possible mediation between human communities and natural cycles, where politics becomes the guardian of the biosphere.

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