CO-CREATION FRAMEWORK
FOR WETLAND CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION
a practicioner's guide



Wetlands INTERNATIONAL

WaterLANDS



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INTRODUCTION



Wetland restoration involves complex ecological, social, economic, and governance spheres interacting at the landscape level that cannot be addressed by a single actor alone. **Co-creation helps bring together diverse knowledge, perspectives, and interests, enabling stakeholders to jointly identify priorities, develop locally relevant solutions, and build shared ownership of restoration outcomes.** In this process, co-creation improves legitimacy, effectiveness and long-term sustainability of restoration outcomes, while helping to anticipate conflicts and strengthen support for implementation and stewardship.

For wetlands, this process comes with particular challenges. Many wetlands are in areas with difficult access and people often have little familiarity with them. For a long time, they were seen as wastelands, drained or avoided, and their ecological functions were not well known or valued. These perceptions still influence how people relate to restoration and shape what is needed to create a meaningful dialogue. Given this history of marginalisation and competing interests, co-creation in wetlands is rarely neutral: actors often hold conflicting values and visions for a landscape's future, and co-creation must articulate, share influence, negotiate and reconcile these differences. Most importantly, **co-creation is not about getting people to support restoration, it is about creating the conditions for different actors to shape how restoration is understood and implemented.**

Creating those conditions inevitably surfaces disagreement, and the rise of conflict does not signal failed co-creation: governance scholars increasingly see it as inherent, even productive, in collaborative decision-making[1,2]. Handled constructively, disagreement can surface concerns, expose power imbalances, and strengthen legitimacy. Equally important is recognising that consensus may not always be achievable or desirable: where strong scientific rationale meets local opposition, the goal may be mutual understanding and procedural fairness, not full agreement[3,4].

None of this diminishes the importance of engagement itself, its absence is, in fact, frequently cited as a main reason restoration efforts fail or struggle for acceptance[5]. Several international frameworks[6,7,8] similarly emphasise inclusive governance and the active involvement of local actors and stakeholders as a prerequisite for long-term success. Communities, Indigenous Peoples, land managers and other stakeholders are increasingly recognised as **knowledge and rights-holders equal partners in decision-making.**

Recognising that collaborative restoration is inherently context-dependent, this framework offers guidance, strategies, reflections and real-world stories from restoration sites efforts across Europe, acknowledging inherent challenges and conflicts associated with working in wetlands landscapes. It shares lessons from the WaterLANDS project, drawn from two types of sites: **Action Sites**, where work is under way to restore damaged wetlands, and **Knowledge Sites,** which are examples of successful restoration.

In this way, these experiences are not presented as fixed models but as inspiration to help practitioners design and navigate their own participatory processes.

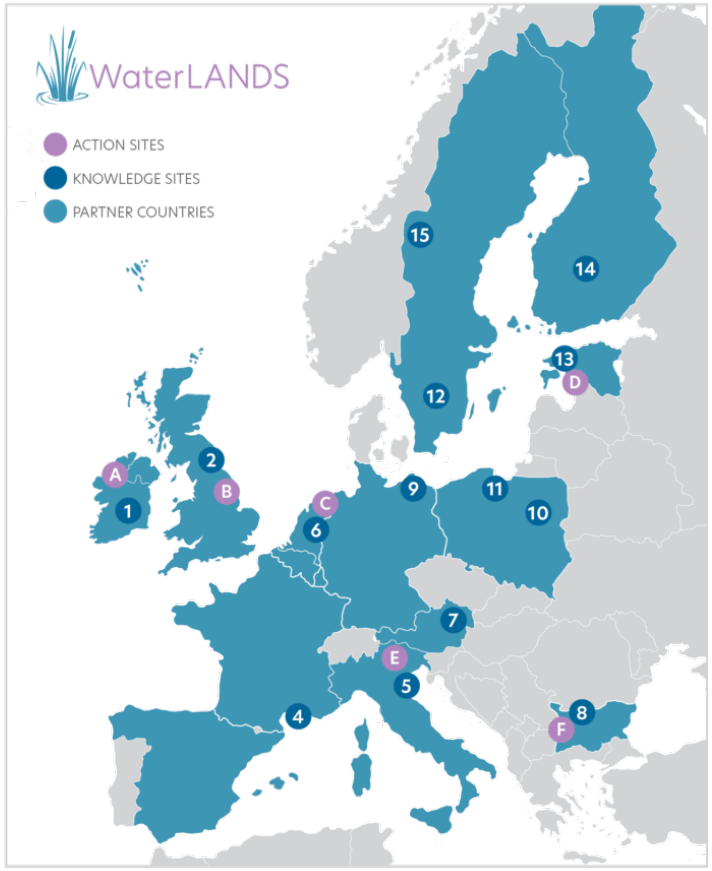


ACTION SITES

- A LIFE-IP Wild Atlantic Nature (Ireland)
- B Yorkshire iCASP (The United Kingdom)
- C Eems-Dollard Estuary (The Netherlands)
- D Pärnu Catchment (Estonia)
- E Venice Lagoon (Italy)
- F Dragoman Marsh (Bulgaria)

KNOWLEDGE SITES

1. Abbeyleix Bog (Ireland)
2. Water@Leeds (The United Kingdom)
3. Doñana Wetland (Spain)
4. Camargue (France)
5. Venice Lagoon (Italy)
6. Engbertsdijksvenen (The Netherlands)
7. Landscape Finance Lab (Austria)
8. Belene Island (Bulgaria)
9. M. Succow Foundation (Germany)
10. Wetlands around Warsaw (Poland)
11. Mazury Forest Mire (Poland)
12. Store Mosse (Sweden)
13. Maima Bog (Estonia)
14. Siikaneva (Finland)
15. Jämtland Mountains (Sweden)





CO-CREATION FRAMEWORK TO WHOM?

This framework is intended for anyone involved in the co-creation of wetland restoration, whether you are designing a participatory process from scratch or reflecting on one that is already underway, we hope this document offers both inspiration and practical guidance.

End users of this framework can be:

- **Restoration practitioners and project managers** – to design inclusive and adaptive engagement processes.
- **Policy actors and public authorities** – to embed co-creation principles into governance models and policy design.
- **Researchers and educators** – as a tool for training in participatory environmental management.
- **Community groups, NGOs, and local stakeholders** – to advocate for collaborative, equitable roles in restoration projects.
- **Artists and social scientists** – to co-develop creative and reflective engagement tools that foster connection and understanding.



HOW TO USE THIS FRAMEWORK?

The framework consists of three main sections.

- **FOUNDATIONS: Headwaters** introduces the concept of co-creation, outlining its guiding principles, core values, who needs to be involved, and the typical stages of the process.
- **THE JOURNEY: Flowing together** presents short co-creation stories from the wetlands restoration Action Sites, showing

how teams adapted their methods to local needs and unforeseen challenges. It also identifies the main challenges of applying participatory approaches in wetland restoration, along with potential strategies to overcome them. This section includes a practical toolbox, as a curated selection of innovative tools and methods tested across the WaterLANDS project.

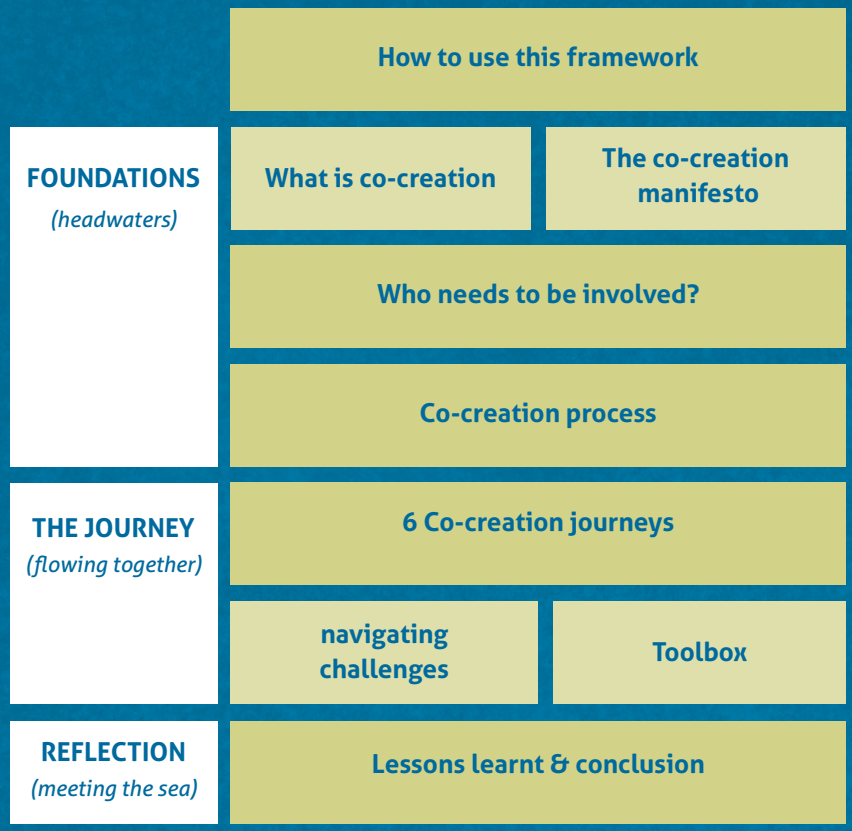
- **REFLECTION: Meeting the sea** closes with end-of-project reflections, looking back on the co-creation journeys and the experiences that shaped their wetland restoration efforts.

Below, we present a simplified overview of the framework's modules or elements. This document can be read sequentially, like a book, but it can also be explored by module depending on your level of familiarity with the topic.

It is worth noting that the co-creation framework consists of 2 documents with a similar structure and core content.

- A **full version** corresponds to one Technical report from **WaterLANDS project (Deliverable 5.4)**, which provides a comprehensive account of the co-creation experiences across the restoration sites. It includes a more detailed conceptual foundation, an in-depth analysis of the challenges encountered, and the strategies identified to address them.
- The **Practitioners' guide** keeps the same structure as the main document but is shorter, designed to increase the framework's accessibility and impact, and to support broader dissemination.

FRAMEWORK MODULES





FOUNDATIONS: HEADWATERS

What is co-creation?

Co-creation... you may have heard about it before. The method is increasingly being applied in all kinds of disciplines, from the field of business and innovation[9], to policymaking , to academic spheres[10]. Generally, co-creation can be understood as:

> ***The creative process of bringing a diverse range of actors and knowledge types together to build a shared understanding of local values and needs, and together design and implement context-based initiatives through early and active collaboration and empowerment.***

Co-creation is about creating meaningful opportunities for local actors and other stakeholders to shape project goals, design strategies and take part in implementation[11]. This should ideally begin at the very start of a project, before plans are drafted. **What matter is that the intend is genuine and that stakeholders are invited into a process where their perspectives can influence both the direction and the outcomes.** During this process and regardless of the timeline, it is essential to identify and acknowledge **historical processes** and **existing initiatives** in order to integrate them into planning efforts.

The early and continuous engagement of actors stimulates a sense of ownership and this **increases the prospects of acceptance of change[12]. Dialogue is therefore at the centre of the co-creation process**, aimed at trust building and the empower-

ment of voices and different knowledge types[13]. By acknowledging local values and needs, co-creation aims to yield novel solutions to societal challenges that are tailored to their specific context. In particular, it can support the design and implementation of nature-based solutions, helping communities, governments, and businesses recognise and embrace nature as a powerful ally in addressing planetary challenges.

IS CO-CREATION MORE THAN PARTICIPATION?

Yes. While participation and co-creation are closely related, co-creation goes a step further. Participation can involve informing, consulting, or gathering feedback from stakeholders, whereas co-creation seeks to actively involve them in shaping project goals, while designing strategies, and directly contributing to implementation.

Co-creation, along with related terms like **co-design** and **co-production**, shares many characteristics with participatory processes but involves a distinct approach. Participation can take many forms, from simple information sharing to full power sharing and joint decision making, as illustrated by Arnstein's ladder of participation[14] (Figure 1).

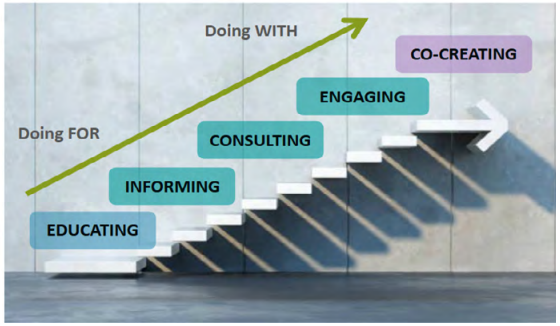


Figure 1: Different levels of engagement with stakeholders. Adapted from Arnstein's ladder of participation

The ladder is a useful reminder of how power shapes participation[15]. However, it also presents engagement as a linear pathway in which higher steps are seen as better. You can argue that in practice, participatory processes often involve several levels at the same time or shift between them as relationships evolve, as highlighted by Reed[4]. The **wheel of participation** offers a complementary view by distinguishing different modes of engagement and combining **top-down and bottom-up agency**. It emphasises that no single approach is universally best, and that engagement methods should be selected based on what works best in a given context and for the intended outcomes.

CO-CREATION MANIFESTO

Aiming to generate a broader impact in communicating the main principles for co-creation practices, we propose below a manifesto presenting a set of declarative and aspirational principles designed to inspire and influence behaviour. The manifesto helps align diverse actors, including scientists, practitioners, communities, and other local stakeholders around common goals and collaborative practices. These principles were defined together with WaterLANDS partners and are also grounded in established co-production and stakeholder engagement literature[16,17,18].

MANIFESTO

- **BUILD A SHARED UNDERSTANDING** of challenges and opportunities, and co-develop a common vision that guides collective action.
- **ENSURE INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION** where all stakeholders, including under-represented, marginalized, or less vocal groups have meaningful influence in decision-making.
- **ENGAGE IN OPEN CONVERSATIONS** through dialogue, discover each other's values, needs and interests, listen without judgement or offering an immediate solution.
- **BUILD AND NURTURE TRUST** between actors, this is the foundation for effective collaboration and long-term relationships.
- **TIMELY AND CONTINUOUS ENGAGEMENT** is important for trust. Stakeholders should be involved from the start and on an ongoing basis.
- **EMBRACE DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES** and recognise different ways of knowing and doing, including local and traditional knowledge.
- **BE REFLECTIVE AND ADAPTIVE**, stay flexible and ready to adjust as new insights and challenges arise.
- **COLLABORATION IS EQUAL AND TRANSPARENT**, share responsibility, recognize contributions, and celebrate achievements together.
- **ACKNOWLEDGE ONGOING CONFLICTS AND RESOLVE THEM CONSTRUCTIVELY**, addressing disagreements openly and working toward mutually beneficial solutions.
- **BE TRANSPARENT ABOUT THE BOUNDARIES OF CO-CREATION.** Respect legal, scientific, and safety requirements while creating meaningful opportunities for stakeholders to shape how solutions are designed and implemented.

WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN CO-CREATION?

We propose using the **Quintuple Helix Model**[19] (Figure 2), a framework widely used in interdisciplinary innovation studies to describe the collaboration needed among five **primary stakeholder** groups to support transformative change towards sustainability. It is important to acknowledge that within these big groups there is a more detailed list of actors to be involved, for instance from **the civil society group relevant stakeholders can be farmers, landowners, fishers, hunters, grazers, youth and schools, and within government administration, different national, regional, local levels.** These 5 groups have different needs and require different types of engagement, and therefore it is important to understand this when bringing them all together in co-creation processes.

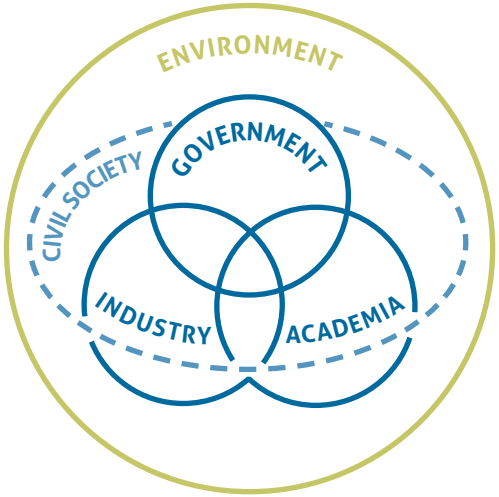


Figure 2, Quintuple Helix of innovation identifying different groups to be involved in the co-creation process.

To identify who needs to be involved in a co-creation process, it is important to conduct a stakeholder mapping or analysis (More information: WaterLANDS deliverable 2.1). This helps ensure that all relevant actors are identified, including those

who influence decisions, are affected by restoration activities, hold valuable knowledge, or have a legitimate interest in the

Groups usually excluded or with limited influence in decision making are referred as 'commonly excluded stakeholders'. This often includes younger people, women, ethnic minority groups, lower income households, migrants, people with disabilities, smallholder farmers, people with limited digital access, parents of young children and refugees. In some landscapes, indigenous groups may also be relevant.

outcomes. It also helps identify less visible or under-represented groups whose perspectives should be included[20].

The Quintuple Helix model places the *environment* alongside academia, industry, government, and civil society as one of **five interacting systems.** In this view, nature is not a passive backdrop but an active stakeholder in shaping and benefits from restoration processes.

Wetland restoration always involves **more-than-human** interests alone. The concept[21] emerged from the desire to "articulate the real relation between our species and the countless other shapes of sensitivity and sentience with whom our lives are entangled". In this way, **co-creation processes can benefit from recognising the ecological conditions or "needs" that species and ecosystems require in order to function**[22]. This is not necessarily about assuming a single ethical position but about understanding how the natural environment interacts with the choices people make. This perspective also resonates with the growing **Rights of Nature** movement, which recognises ecosystems and species as entities with intrinsic value and, in some cases, legal rights to exist, thrive, and regenerate.

APPLYING CO-CREATION IN WETLANDS RESTORATION



In co-creation rather than assuming that local mindsets need to be stimulated or transformed, co-creation offers **a space in which different forms of knowledge and experience can meet on more equal terms.** This is particularly important in wetland restoration, where **ecological, historical, and cultural conditions** strongly influence how engagement processes unfold. Below some **specific wetland-related challenges** WaterLANDS partners identified (General Assembly, 2026 – WP2 session) and are supported by literature[23,24,25].



- **Wetlands are often undervalued or misunderstood:** Wetlands have historically been perceived as unproductive, inaccessible, unhealthy, or "wasteland" areas. Their ecological functions are often less visible to the public than forests or agricultural landscapes, and many ecosystem services they provide remain poorly recognised. This can create difficulties in generating public support for restoration, particularly when restoration goals are framed mainly through technical or ecological language.

- **Rewetting practices to restore wetlands can generate fear and resistance:** Wetland restoration frequently involves rewetting practices, which may trigger concerns around flooding, land loss, infrastructure damage, or reduced agricultural productivity. These concerns can be especially strong in areas with historical experiences of destructive floods.

- **Peatlands and sometimes "invisible" water surface:** Unlike lakes or rivers, peatlands and mires may not visibly appear as "wet" landscapes, even though they can consist of up to 95 % water. The absence of open water can make ecological functions difficult to perceive. As a result, degraded peatlands are often interpreted as empty, dry, or biologically inactive landscapes.



- **Restoration operates at landscape and catchment scales:** Wetland restoration rarely functions effectively at the scale of a single site. Hydrology and ecological processes often extend across entire catchments and landscapes. This enlarges the spatial scale of restoration and the number of actors involved.

- **Wetlands and peatlands carry deep cultural meanings:** In many regions, wetlands and peatlands have historically been associated with danger, mystery, liminality, or the underworld. At the same time, they can also hold strong cultural meanings connected to labour, memory, heritage, fuel extraction, spirituality, or local identity.

- **Ecological benefits may take time to become visible:** Wetland restoration outcomes are often gradual, uncertain, or difficult to observe immediately. This can reduce motivation and create frustration among participants expecting rapid visible change.



THE CO-CREATION PROCESS

At the core, co-creation involves an **iterative process** that is structured around phases and guided by principles and attitudes (Figure 3). The aim of the process is to not only collaboratively implement actions that contribute to a sustainable future, but also to create a shared understanding, produce context-specific knowledge, develop capacity, build networks and foster trust[26], together the legacy of co-creation. While the process can be understood as cyclical, allow phases to be revisited and reinforced where necessary, since **new partnerships may emerge over time, also values or visions may evolve, and novel insights may be gained during implementation.**

Throughout the process, all actors continuously deepen their understanding through knowledge exchange and by learning through trial and error. Going through the phases of co-creation therefore requires a **reflective** and **adaptive** attitude, remaining flexible enough to accommodate changes and adjustments when needed.

We present a **diagram** on page 21 outlining the main phases that may be encountered when applying participatory processes guided by co-creation principles. These phases[27] are commonly found in nature conservation and restoration initiatives and are informed and adapted by the five elements of the **4 Returns Framework for Landscape[28] Restoration**. To reflect both the focus of this framework and the learnings from the WaterLANDS project, we added an additional phase: **Recognize and integrate historical conditions**, to emphasize the importance of an appropriate analysis of past land use and previous initiatives to enhance knowledge on the landscape and potential related conflicts.

It is important to highlight that **co-creation does not begin with formal project implementation**; its foundations are already shaped in the pre-project phase through agenda setting or when building a coalition. These early dynamics strongly influence later subsequent collaboration dynamics, and overall direction of the initiative. At the same time, **co-creation does not end when a project officially closes.** Processes often continue through ongoing stewardship and evolving stakeholder engagement, where learning and adaptation remain active beyond formal project boundaries.

— Timeframe: 20+ years —

Wetland restoration unfolds over decades, sometimes a full generation. In many landscapes, meaningful ecological recovery may only become visible after twenty years or more, far beyond the timelines of most funding cycles. **It is important to clarify that this timeframe refers to the restoration process itself, not to the co-creation cycle.** Co-creation itself does not require continuous participation over decades, but it does require recognis-

ing that projects, facilitators, and institutions may change while communities and landscapes remain. Sustaining relationships and connecting restoration to long-term local values can help maintain continuity across different project cycles and generations.

A more detailed description of the phases and the context in which they operate is described below:

Phase 1: Establish a Landscape Partnership: engaging from the beginning

Create a multi-stakeholder space where different actors and knowledge systems can meet from the beginning. As a recommendation, before engaging widely, first clarify with your team on purpose and messaging. In some situations, co-creation may begin later, for example when re-adjusting to previous top-down decisions or when a project is already underway.

Insights from Toolbox: Multi-stakeholder Committees & Governance models

Phase 2: Exploring values, needs and reaching a shared understanding

Developing a shared understanding of the landscape requires recognising that all actors hold partial knowledge. Researchers may contribute ecological expertise, while communities bring cultural memory and practical knowledge. Exploring overlaps between these values or hidden tensions helps identify what different groups value and need from the restoration process.

Insights from Toolbox: Deliberative Process, Participatory mapping, Collaboration with artists.

Phase 3: Create a shared vision and build a landscape/wetlands plan

Based on that shared understanding, stakeholders co-develop a future vision for the landscape: what they want it to look like? To provide? and how it balances entangled socio-ecological, and economic goals. Then, together they design a plan that lays out how to get from the current state to that vision, where to act, what kind of restoration or sustainable land-use strategies to apply, who does what, and when.

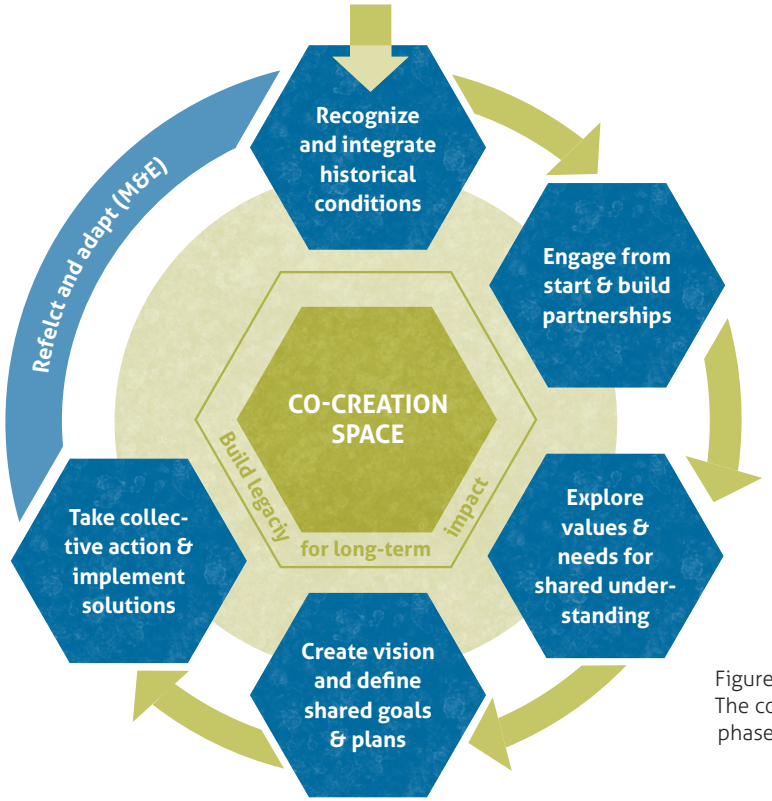


Figure 3, The co-creation phases

Insight from Toolbox: Visioning, Scenario analysis, back-casting exercise

Phase 4: Take collective action and implement solutions

Implementation requires coordinated, adaptive action: resources have to be mobilised and responsibilities clearly assigned, while training, capacity-building and collaboration are sustained over

the long term. Flexibility remains essential throughout, since the conditions a plan was designed around rarely stay the same.

Insights from Toolbox: Citizen science, conflict resolution, deep listening walks, community outreach & volunteering.

Permanent phase: Develop impact monitoring and learning
Outcomes need to be tracked over time to see whether restoration efforts are achieving desired results (ecological, social, economic). In practice, some outcomes are rarely tracked. For example, social outcomes are often omitted, partly because there can be resistance to measuring social change, but also because they can appear difficult to track and are therefore simply neglected. However, tools and models do exist to support this work (e.g., SER social benefit wheel[29]).

Insights from Toolbox: Monitoring & Evaluation

Project Legacy

When implementing landscape restoration, it is essential to think beyond immediate outcomes and embed actions that secure long-term impact and legacy. A legacy perspective means designing restoration as a foundation for future landscape regeneration. To ensure this perspective, one must ensure actions towards local ownership, establishing appropriate governance structures, long-term funding mechanisms, and align with national policies and global frameworks.

STRENGTHENING CO-CREATION THROUGH CRITICAL REFLECTION

The majority of literature on co-creation often presents it as an inherently empowering, inclusive process. But while this is most definitely appealing, the reality on the ground can often be more complicated. For example, it is argued[30] that many co-creation examples are aspirational; they provide checklists and best practice guidelines without examining why co-creation frequently fails. One of the most persistent challenges is unequal power relations. Elite actors like scientists, government agencies and large NGOs tend to set the agenda, define the scope of participation and possess the time and resources to influence outcomes. In wetland restoration, these imbalances can shape whose priorities are ultimately reflected in restoration plans. These power dynamics can also contribute to depoliticization, a related problem where co-creation processes sometimes prioritise consensus pushing participants to conform to a scientific discourse and suppress conflict.

Similarly, other authors[31] refers to the fact that in many contemporary projects, co-creation is framed as something positive, open and empowering, but it often comes with an unspoken demand that participants must be able and willing to behave in certain ways. and warns that co-creation can unintentionally favour participants who are comfortable with brainstorming, public discussion, and "creative" forms of participation, potentially excluding those who engage differently.

We believe that even if it is rarely perfect or complete, co-creation can still work. In practice, success is often modest and highly contextual. It may take the form of a small shift rather than a fully shared decision-making process. Seen in this way, the critiques of co-creation should not negate the immense potential value of co-creation, rather highlight some of the inherent limitations, difficulties and conditions under which co-creation might not achieve its intended goals. For wetlands initiatives alike, co-creation should be approached not as a neutral technique or as a checklist, but as a political practice. This means asking difficult questions and acknowledging power asymmetries from the outset, making problem framing transparent, and ensuring that processes are open to contestation rather than prematurely seeking consensus.



THE JOURNEY: FLOWING TOGETHER

Co-creation efforts across six wetland restoration sites

The WaterLANDS project has brought together diverse sites, from tidal estuaries and drained peatlands to karst marshes and blanket bogs. Each with its own history and local pressures. This brief section presents stories from the Netherlands, Estonia, the UK, Bulgaria, Ireland and Italy. These stories capture different facets and stages of co-creation in practice: how project sites adapt to land ownership challenges, how teams navigate institutional inertia, how local values are acknowledged, and how creative methods such as citizen science or art can spark connection.



NETHERLANDS

The Ems-Dollard estuary lies on the Dutch-German border where the River Ems flows into the Wadden Sea. The landscape is characterised by mudflats, salt marshes, and open polders shaped by dike construction and land reclamation. These interventions reduced the estuary while creating a highly engineered landscape now valued as both cultural heritage and a symbol of safety. Today, large port infrastructure and shipping activities coexist with Natura 2000 protected nature, while the system faces pressure from sea level rise and high sediment loads caused by river deepening.





Restoration efforts take place in a complex social context. Traditional engineering approaches are widely trusted, while nature-based solutions are sometimes met with scepticism. A history of top-down decision making, including gas extraction impacts and industrial expansion, has contributed to distrust towards new initiatives. Learning from past mistakes, the site has now started with building a collaborative vision for the area to captured residents needs and wishes for the area. The case demonstrates that co-creation and trust-building must be followed by concrete action. Without this, trust in the process can quickly erode, and a project runs the risk of merely informing rather than genuinely involving.

The Ems-Dollard case illustrates that wetland restoration is not only a technical task but also a cultural process, requiring recognition of the deep relationship between landscape, (historical) water management, and local identity.



ESTONIA

The Pärnu catchment in western Estonia includes over 3,500 hectares of drained peatlands, former peat extraction sites, and degraded wetlands. The hydrologically connected area consists of three main sites: Kõrsa, Lavassaare, and Kikepera. Restoration has required careful engagement with nearby communities. Collaboration progressed relatively well in Kõrsa and Lavassaare, but restoration plans in the Kikepera Nature Reserve triggered





strong opposition aimed at undermining wet forest restoration in favour of continued forest management, despite being located in strictly protected and sparsely populated areas. This highlighted how values and emotional attachment to the landscape has a strong impact on restoration processes. Regardless of land ownership or the technical rationale behind restoration, opposition can emerge even where it is least anticipated.

Despite challenges, participatory activities such as wetland trails, citizen science initiatives, and artistic collaborations created new entry points for engagement. These activities helped connect ecological restoration with local knowledge and experience, supporting a sense of shared ownership. The Pärnu case shows that landscape restoration is as much about social navigation as ecological recovery.



UNITED KINGDOM

The Great North Bog Action Site spans blanket peatlands across Northern England, including parts of the Peak District, Yorkshire Dales, and North York Moors National Parks. Around 80,000 hectares of degraded peatland remain to be restored. These deep peat systems are important carbon stores and major water sources, supplying drinking water to millions of people mostly in North England. Restoration focuses on improving carbon storage, water regulation and biodiversity, while creating a basis for scaling restoration across the wider landscape. Land ownership is mixed, including the private regional water utility, large private estates and charitable organisations, with restoration financed through a combination of public and private funding.

Working at this scale requires navigating diverse landowner interests, ranging from strong conservation support to scepticism, reflecting different views on land management and peatland use. Long project timelines also create risks of stakeholder fatigue. In response, public engagement has focused on reflect with stakeholders on their values, building stronger connections to peatlands through citizen science including peat coring activities, listening guided walks, storytelling events such as BogFilmFest, and artistic collaborations, helping translate technical restoration goals into lived landscape experiences.

Compared to other sites, institutional resistance has been relatively limited, allowing more focus on engagement with land managers and farmers. However, policy changes and funding uncertainties remain important factors. The Great North Bog illustrates how large-scale peatland restoration depends on ecological techniques and on aligning diverse interests and maintaining long-term commitment across a complex landscape and multi-layered network of organizations involved.





BULGARIA



Dragoman Marsh is Bulgaria's largest natural karst wetland. Once largely drained under communist-era agricultural policies, the marsh has been slowly recovering since the 1990s but remains degraded due to fragmented land ownership, institutional barriers and long-term ecological pressures. Today it is protected under Natura 2000, the European Green Belt, and the Ramsar Convention, yet faces continued threats from untreated wastewater from the nearby town of Dragoman, altered hydrology, the accumulation of biomass in the wetland and adjacent meadows, and increasing agricultural pressure on its border.

Restoration efforts focus on biodiversity recovery, carbon sequestration and sustainable land use, but progress is slowed by complex ownership patterns between private actors, NGOs and the state. While work has started on land owned by Balkani Wildlife Society, long-term impact depends on cooperation across these boundaries. In addition, efforts to reclassify the marsh from agricultural land to a water body, have gone unanswered. This bureaucratic deadlock has blocked funding and planning opportunities.

Despite institutional challenges, the recent collaborative construction of a boardwalk, community activities such as bird ringing events, wetland walks and artistic collaborations have helped reconnect people to the marsh. The Dragoman case shows how restoration depends on ecological action as well as on navigating governance systems and building collaboration across fragmented landscapes.





IRELAND

The Cuilcagh-Anierin Uplands are a 9,735-hectare blanket bog landscape containing multiple protected habitats and species. These upland peatlands provide important ecosystem services and play important function for local farming activities. Erosion, peat-cutting, burning, invasive conifer and unmanaged recreation are the primary threats to the site. Restoration actions are being driven through engagement with a results based agri-environment payment scheme (RBPS) whereby farmers receive payments directly based on habitat quality and biodiversity. WaterLANDS partners help farmers address peatland threats through restoration that improves ecological conditions and therefore RBPS payments, emphasizing integrated land use for better water quality, climate regulation, and biodiversity.

As much of the land is managed through complex grazing rights, restoration depends heavily on farmer engagement. Efforts therefore focused on building trust, understanding farmers' needs and aligning restoration with viable land use. These actions were paired with capacity building activities that empowered local communities to lead peatland restoration, including training farmers to carry out restoration work through a purpose-built toolkit.

Beyond farmers, outreach activities such as school visits and artistic collaboration helped connect wider communities to peatland restoration. The Irish case shows that by choosing to listen, adapt and work alongside farmers and local communities, the project could turn scepticism and resistance into a shared challenge to be solved. Successful restoration thus depends on aligning ecological goals with the realities of land management, and deepening relationships with the people who shape the landscape.



ITALY

The Venetian Lagoon, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is Italy's largest coastal wetland at 55,000 hectares. Shaped by tides and centuries of human intervention, it includes salt marshes, mudflats, reed beds, and seagrass systems. Today, the lagoon faces pressures from erosion, loss of salt marshes, reduced sediment flows, urbanization, and intensive shipping. Restoration efforts focus on recovering salt marsh ecosystems to strengthen biodiversity and ecological functioning, recognising the close connection between the health of Venice and its surrounding lagoon.

Initial engagement focused on participatory mapping and citizen science to better understand how residents, fishers, researchers and others relate to the lagoon. These activities successfully re-awakened interest in the fate and state of the salt marsh and exploring the relationships, needs and values of the local stakeholders with the lagoon and how these interact with the proposed restoration solutions. The project invested in creative approaches such as art, education, and community activities to strengthen emotional connections between people and the lagoon with a good example of Giants of the Lagoon initiative. At the same time, collaboration with public authorities proved challenging due to slow communication and complex governance structures. Over time, visible restoration progress helped build credibility and improve cooperation.

The Venice case shows how restoration in complex urban landscapes depends on patience, showcasing good practices for trust building, and sustaining engagement year-round across communities and institutions, alongside ecological action.







THE JOURNEY: FLOWING TOGETHER

Navigating challenges when applying co-creation in wetlands restoration

Stakeholder engagement has been an important thread throughout the WaterLANDS project, shaping how partners work together and adapt in these complex environments. For the restoration sites in particular, this has meant putting in place the **foundations for co-creation, through ongoing experimentation, by adapting and learning in real time.**

Below is a list of the c**hallenges we – together with our project partners - have identified in applying co-creation to wetland restoration**. Most of the challenges are connected to proposed strategies that can be explored in order to overcome them. Several strategies identified had been already tested by our project partners and should be contextualized and adapted to local conditions. The following content is based on the **direct work** of the restoration sites (**Knowledge** and **Action Sites**) in connection to the experience collected during the project implementation, from field visits, project events, meetings and technical reports from WaterLANDS project. It also draws on the experience Wetlands International has had from previous initiatives in the field of co-creation.

PROJECT TIMELINES AND STRUCTURES



Co-creation in wetland restoration is strongly shaped by the way projects are designed and funded. Restoration processes require time to build relationships and understand local dynamics. However, many projects operate within short funding cycles and pre-defined work plans. This creates a tension between the relational and adaptive nature of co-creation and the more rigid structures through which restoration projects are often delivered.

This tension becomes particularly visible when engagement starts late. In several restoration sites, co-creation principles were introduced only once the project was already underway, rather than being embedded from the beginning. By that point, key decisions, narratives and working relationships may already have been established. This makes it more difficult to involve new actors in a way that feels genuine, especially stakeholders who are less visible, harder to reach, or usually excluded from formal engagement processes. The Groningen case illustrates how late engagement can weaken trust when people feel that plans have already been shaped without them. This can be exacerbated when there exists a history of past injustice and mistrust in governance actors. In such situations, participation risks being perceived as tokenistic, even when project teams are still genuinely trying to open up the process.

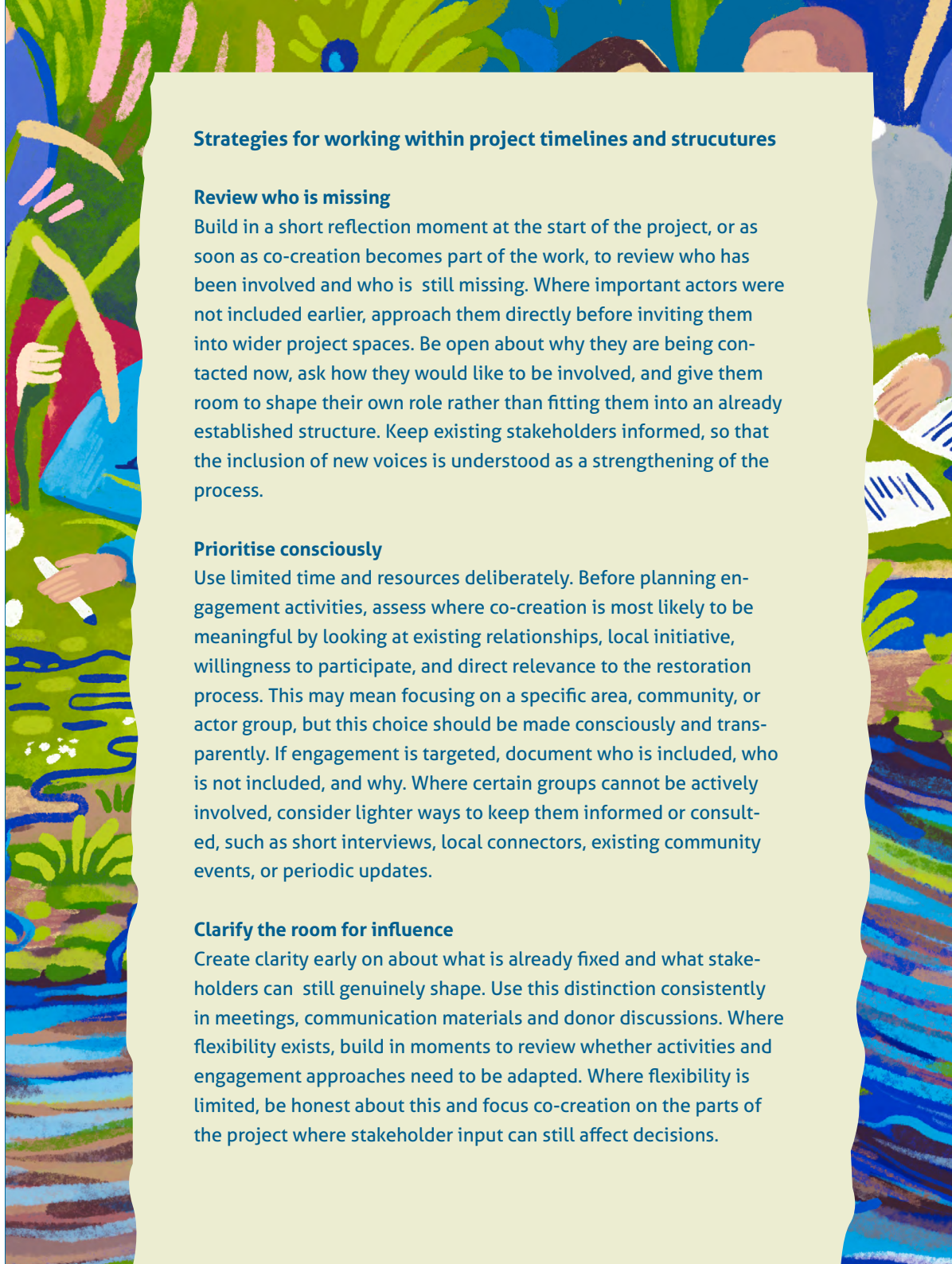
These challenges are reinforced by **limited project budget and tight timelines**. Co-creation depends on regular interaction and personal engagement sustained over time. These processes take time and often require resources that are not fully accounted for in project budgets, especially when actors are located in remote areas or when trust needs to be built gradually. In practice, project teams may need to make difficult choices about who to involve, when to include them in the process, and how. The Estonian case shows that this does not always mean focusing only on densely populated or easily accessible areas. Promising opportunities for co-creation can also emerge in sparsely populated landscapes where there is strong place attachment or where local initiatives already exist. This points to the need to prioritise engagement not only on the basis of geography or numbers, but also on whether the conditions for meaningful co-creation are present.

At times, **limited resources** may also lead teams to **focus on a specific stakeholder group**. Targeted co-creation with farmers, for instance, makes sense when the restoration approach depends directly on how land is managed, as with results-based payment schemes. In landscapes where farming communities are dominant and attachment to land is strong, farmers may be reluctant to involve non-farming voices, even though wider society also has a stake in restoration outcomes. This does not mean that targeted co-creation is wrong. It does mean that project teams should keep asking who has a seat at the table and who does not, because the answer shapes how fair the process feels and whether its outcomes will still be accepted once the project has ended.

A further constraint lies in the tension between **pre-defined project proposals and adaptive management**. Many projects have fix goals, deliverables, work packages, timelines, and reporting outputs before meaningful stakeholder engagement has taken place. While this may be necessary for funding and accountability, it can limit the space for co-created solutions to emerge. When too much is decided in advance, stakeholder input risks shaping only the margins of a project rather than its direction. This can turn co-creation into consultation within fixed boundaries, rather than a process of joint learning and shared decision-making.

This challenge is particularly relevant when co-creation is expected to respond to new insights from stakeholders, while the project structure has already locked in what needs to be delivered. **Stakeholder involvement during proposal development** can help avoid this problem. Additionally, maintaining dialogue with donors during implementation, so that some flexibility can be preserved within the project structure can help. Without this space, co-created outcomes may be difficult to act on, even when they are more legitimate or better suited to the local context.

These challenges show that co-creation cannot be treated as an activity that is simply added once implementation has started. It needs to be considered early and supported by project structures that allow for reflection and adaptation over time. Without these enabling conditions, co-creation risks remaining short-lived, symbolic or limited to the actors who are easiest to reach within the available time and budget.



Strategies for working within project timelines and strucutures

Review who is missing

Build in a short reflection moment at the start of the project, or as soon as co-creation becomes part of the work, to review who has been involved and who is still missing. Where important actors were not included earlier, approach them directly before inviting them into wider project spaces. Be open about why they are being contacted now, ask how they would like to be involved, and give them room to shape their own role rather than fitting them into an already established structure. Keep existing stakeholders informed, so that the inclusion of new voices is understood as a strengthening of the process.

Prioritise consciously

Use limited time and resources deliberately. Before planning engagement activities, assess where co-creation is most likely to be meaningful by looking at existing relationships, local initiative, willingness to participate, and direct relevance to the restoration process. This may mean focusing on a specific area, community, or actor group, but this choice should be made consciously and transparently. If engagement is targeted, document who is included, who is not included, and why. Where certain groups cannot be actively involved, consider lighter ways to keep them informed or consulted, such as short interviews, local connectors, existing community events, or periodic updates.

Clarify the room for influence

Create clarity early on about what is already fixed and what stakeholders can still genuinely shape. Use this distinction consistently in meetings, communication materials and donor discussions. Where flexibility exists, build in moments to review whether activities and engagement approaches need to be adapted. Where flexibility is limited, be honest about this and focus co-creation on the parts of the project where stakeholder input can still affect decisions.

Protect space for adaptation

Where possible, involve stakeholders before the proposal is finalised, even if this is through light-touch consultation rather than a full co-creation process. If this is not feasible, reserve space in the proposal for adaptive activities, follow-up engagement, and budget lines that can respond to emerging needs. During implementation, maintain dialogue with partners about why adaptation may be needed, using stakeholder input and learning moments as evidence. This helps ensure that co-creation leads to practical adjustments, rather than remaining limited to consultation within a fixed project design.

GOVERNANCE, POLITICAL, AND FINANCIAL CONDITIONS

Co-creation in wetland restoration is shaped by the quality of engagement as well as by the governance and financial conditions in which restoration takes place. Even when stakeholders are willing to collaborate, the process can stall if responsibilities are unclear or public institutions are not engaged. Funding shapes the longer view: when it is too short-term, the trust built during a project has little chance of lasting beyond it.

This becomes especially visible in relation to land ownership and land-use planning. In many wetland landscapes, land is divided among many owners, and it is often unclear who owns what or who is responsible for managing it. A water body may have no clear owner, surrounding land may be classified as agricultural land even when it functions ecologically as a wetland, or ownership may be divided between public and private actors. In such situations, no single actor may feel empowered or obliged to take responsibility. This can lead to paralysis: there



may be limited time, motivation, resources, or even political will to co-develop solutions, let alone implement them collectively. The Bulgarian case provides a particularly relevant example here, as it shows how even an inclusive co-creation process can stall when participants are unsure who holds decision-making authority or who will be responsible for follow-up.

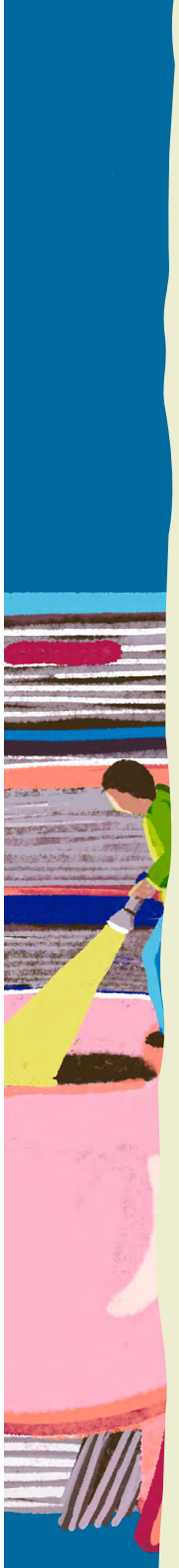
Restoration on privately owned land adds another layer of complexity. Unlike publicly managed landscapes, private land involves a mosaic of individual rights and interests. Restoration efforts may depend on the goodwill and cooperation of individual landowners, each with different concerns and levels of openness to conservation. In these contexts, co-creation also entails navigating the legal and practical realities that decide how far a shared plan can be put into practice.

These governance constraints are closely connected to **political willingness and lack of interest from government.** Wetland restoration often depends on public actors for permits, funding resources and long-term protection of the sites. However, restoration is not always politically salient. Government actors may show limited interest in taking up their responsibilities, question the viability of nature-based solutions, or engage only when

there is a clear short-term political benefit. This creates a **mismatch between the long-term nature of ecological restoration and the short political cycles that shape decision-making**. Political leaders may be reluctant to commit to restoration agendas that extend beyond their term, while changes in leadership can weaken earlier agreements.

This lack of political commitment affects the foundations of co-creation itself. Co-creation depends on a shared sense of purpose and input and willingness to steward change over time. When government actors are absent, reluctant or only superficially involved, even technically feasible and legally sound solutions may fail to gain traction. This also points to the importance of identifying **institutional champions**: individuals within government who recognise the ecological and social value of wetlands and can help navigate bureaucracy and connect restoration to other policy goals.

The challenge is further reinforced by **lack of sustainable funding and engagement.** Wetland restoration requires long-term action, often over decades, while project funding is usually limited to much shorter periods, commonly three to five years. This makes it difficult to maintain partnerships, continue monitoring, assess long-term effects and keep communities engaged once a project has ended. This highlights the risks of relying on a single funding source, as this can reinforce existing power structures and create vulnerability to external shocks such as political instability or funding cuts[32].



Strategies for navigating governance, political and financial conditions

Map authority before expanding co-creation

Start by clarifying who owns the land or water body and who has formal decision-making authority. Where land ownership, land-use classification or governance responsibilities are unclear, make this visible early in the process. This prevents co-creation from generating ideas that no actor is able or willing to implement. In privately owned landscapes, use this mapping to identify which landowners need tailored engagement, what concerns or incentives may shape their participation, and where resistance is likely to emerge.

Use institutional and legal entry points

Where public institutions are inactive or responsibilities are unclear, use existing legislation, policy commitments and formal mandates as entry points for engagement. European environmental frameworks, Natura 2000 obligations, Water Framework Directive requirements or national restoration commitments can help make public responsibilities visible. The aim is not necessarily to confront government actors, but to show where action is required, where overlap exists, and where collaboration is needed. In some cases, this may also open space for delegation, public-private partnerships or other governance arrangements that allow restoration to move forward.

Build political relevance and find champions

Do not approach government as one single actor. Identify individuals within municipalities, provinces, ministries or public agencies who understand the value of wetland restoration and can help navigate internal procedures. At the same time, frame restoration in terms that connect to local political priorities, such as flood safety, tourism, liveability, climate adaptation, quality of life or local economic opportunities. Valuation exercises, cost-benefit arguments



and concrete examples of local benefits can help make restoration more relevant to decision-makers, especially in cases where nature-based solutions are not strongly supported.

Secure continuity beyond the project cycle

Co-creation needs financial and institutional arrangements that last beyond short project periods. Where possible, formalise agreements through multi-year contracts, a memorandum of understanding, governance committees, long-term funding arrangements or public-private partnerships. At the same time, reduce dependence on a single funding source by exploring blended finance, complementary donor funding or carefully designed payment schemes. Where results-based payment schemes are used, especially with farmers, they should be designed to support restoration outcomes without creating long-term dependency. Sustainable financing should be treated as part of the co-creation process itself.



SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL CHALLENGES



How people feel about a wetland shapes co-creation as much as what they know about it. To the people who live beside it, it is a source of livelihood and memory as well as an ecosystem, so technical explanations will not be enough. They also need to see why restoration is urgent and to accept that the landscape may change visibly, and sometimes uncomfortably, along the way.

In this context, a recurring challenge is the limited recognition of the value of wetlands. Despite their role in carbon storage, biodiversity, water regulation and climate resilience, wetlands, and peatlands in particular, are still often seen as marginal, unproductive or unpleasant landscapes. This perception is shaped by cultural history and past land uses such as peat extraction and agricultural drainage, which have long framed wetlands as places to be drained or converted. Muddy terrain, standing water, insects, strong odours and remoteness can further reinforce the idea that wetlands have little relevance to daily life. Where wetlands seem to have no place in daily life, people have little reason to take part, so **co-creation has to begin by showing how restoration relates to what they already care about.**

This is not simply a knowledge gap. It is often a deeper form of disconnection. Ecological processes such as carbon sequestration or biodiversity recovery can feel abstract, especially when people do not experience wetlands as part of their everyday landscape. Nonetheless, this distance can be reduced by **bringing people closer to the landscape.** For instance, in Groningen case people joined walks along dikes, collected samples and discussed sedimentation with ecologists. In that setting, a technical issue becomes more personal and open to dialogue. Similarly, participatory mapping and digital story maps can invite residents to reflect on their relationship with wetlands across the past, present and future.

Distance from the landscape is not the only barrier, the **lack of urgency around climate change and environmental degradation** which shows up as reluctance or inaction, is not necessarily rooted in denial, but in the fact that environmental change is slow-moving, difficult to observe directly or as is most often the case, overshadowed by more immediate concerns. In some contexts, climate and environmental issues have also become politically polarised, which can make restoration feel contested rather than shared.

Without a **sense of urgency**, restoration can appear optional or idealistic instead of necessary. This reduces the motivation to invest time and energy in co-creation, especially when people are asked to participate in meetings, discussions or long-term planning processes **without a clear sense of what is at stake**. Formats such as walk-and-talks, risk scenario mapping and visualisation can similarly help people connect environmental change to their own livelihoods and the places they care about[33].

Even when people do see why restoration matters, the process itself can be hard to accept, because it often involves an **'ugly' side**. Wetland restoration is often communicated through hopeful images of recovery, biodiversity and climate benefits, but the process itself can look messy or even destructive. Excavators, cleared trees, exposed soil and slow vegetation recovery are sometimes necessary parts of restoration, and they can come as a shock when they are not clearly explained[34]. People may not distinguish between a degraded peatland and a natural peatland, and a drained peatland covered in birch or pine may appear more attractive than a recovering wetland in its early stages. The Estonian case exemplifies that when trees are removed, this can feel contradictory to climate and biodiversity goals, especially when trees are associated with environmental protection or local identity.

This creates a risk of disappointment and distrust. If restoration is presented only through **"before" and "after" images**, people are not prepared for the long and uncertain phases in between. In some cases, it may take five, ten or even twenty years before vegetation recovers and the site stabilises. This highlights the importance of early, open and place-based communication, especially on-site, so that people understand what will happen and why.

Taken together, these challenges show that people need more than an explanation of why wetlands matter ecologically. They need to see what restoration means for the place they live in and the future they hope for. At the same time, project teams need to communicate the **full story of restoration, including the difficult phases and trade-offs**. Without this, co-creation is being built on abstract benefits or unrealistic expectations.



Strategies for tackling socio-ecological challenges

Make wetlands tangible
Use field-based formats such as walk-and-talks, wetland trails, citizen science, cycling routes or floating seminars to let people experience wetlands directly. These formats help translate ecological functions into something people can see, discuss and relate to. Where possible, combine site visits with simple observation tasks, local stories or conversations with ecologists, so that engagement becomes experiential rather than only informational.

Connect restoration to local values and future choices
Frame restoration around the issues people already care about, such as livelihoods, safety, cultural identity, recreation, landscape memory or future land use. Tools such as participatory mapping, story maps, scenario visualisation and landscape stories can help stakeholders explore what different futures may look like. This makes restoration less abstract and creates space to discuss trade-offs, risks and opportunities in relation to people's own lives.

Restoration a "work in progress"
Communicate restoration as a long-term process, not only as a desired end result. Show what will happen during the messy middle stages, explain why interventions such as tree removal or water table changes may be needed, and clarify what risks are avoided by taking action. Use clear and context-sensitive language. For example, in some farming contexts, "water table management" may open more constructive dialogue than "rewetting". Honest communication helps manage expectations and builds trust in the process, not just in the final outcome.

COMMON ENGAGEMENT CHALLENGES



Common engagement challenges in wetland restoration often arise when the social conditions for co-creation are fragile. A strong technical case does not settle this on its own, because people bring their past experiences with them, some voices carry more weight than others, different ways of knowing the land can clash, and restoration takes so long that it is hard to keep people involved.

The first of these challenges, and often the hardest to undo, is **distrust by the community**. In some contexts, distrust is rooted in previous experiences of exclusion, lack of transparency, broken promises or environmental interventions that caused harm. New restoration initiatives can therefore be met with suspicion, even when they are designed with good intentions. Communities may feel that decisions have already been made, that participation is symbolic, or that engagement will once again lead to disappointment. The Groningen case is relevant here, as it shows how distrust can quickly become visible when peo-

ple feel that plans are already fixed or that their concerns are not being taken seriously. In these situations, resistance should not be treated as a communication problem only. It may reflect deeper frustration with restoration processes, with institutions or legitimate past governance failures.

This also means that **conflict needs to be understood as part of the engagement context.** At several restoration sites, conflict appears to be directed not necessarily on an individual level but more so at restoration as a project or institutional process. People often object to what restoration represents, such as uncertainty and a loss of control over familiar landscapes, or decisions that seem to have been imposed from outside. If these concerns go unheard early on, conflict can escalate and erode the trust that co-creation needs.

At the same time, the aim should not be to avoid conflict at all costs. Disagreement can reveal real concerns, values[35] and priorities that would otherwise remain hidden. A process that moves too quickly towards consensus may create the appearance of agreement, while underlying resistance remains unresolved[36]. Rather than smoothing over disagreement, project teams should create space to explore it carefully, **distinguish between negotiable and non-negotiable issues,** and be transparent about where restoration objectives may not fully align with local preferences[37].

Working through disagreement takes time and energy, which leads to another recurring challenge: **stakeholder fatigue**. Co-creation depends on continued engagement, but people's time and willingness to participate are limited. Fatigue can emerge when stakeholders are invited to too many workshops, consultations or meetings without seeing clear results. The UK example points to the risk of over-engagement, where even interested stakeholders can become tired of repeated requests to contribute. **Disengagement can also have a quite different cause.** Once trust has been built, some stakeholders step back because they feel the project is in good hands. This is not necessarily a rejection of the process, but it can reduce the ongoing community presence that co-creation depends on.

Fatigue gets harder to manage when people use engagement meetings to raise things the project was never set up to deal with. In both the Dutch and the Estonian case, people brought broader frustrations about daily life, local government and changes in the landscape. Those concerns may sit outside the project's boundaries, but they are tied to how people experience the place and the institutions around it. Project teams are left in a difficult spot. They want to hear what matters to people locally, but they also owe them an honest answer about what the project can and cannot change.

Behind many of these difficulties lies the challenge of **tackling unequal power structures and integrating and recognising multiple ways of knowing and doing**. Co-creation brings together people with very different levels of authority and confidence, and institutions, scientists and landowners usually have more say over the terms of the discussion than residents or less visible community groups. These imbalances are part of the wider governance landscape. A restoration project cannot remove them, but it can recognise how they shape who speaks and whose interests are acted upon.

Knowledge is uneven in the same way. Scientists tend to trust ecological evidence, policymakers look to mandates, and community members draw on lived experience and memory of the place. These perspectives do not always sit comfortably together, yet co-creation works best when they are treated as complementary rather than competing.

These challenges show that engagement in restoration is not just about bringing people into a room. It requires careful attention to trust, conflict, fatigue, power and knowledge. Project teams need to recognise that resistance may be rooted in broader concerns about restoration and institutional decision-making, not only in misunderstanding or lack of information. They also need to design engagement processes that are flexible enough

to hear different forms of knowledge, but clear enough to avoid overburdening stakeholders or creating expectations the project cannot meet.

Good engagement means listening to what lies behind resistance and making room for different kinds of knowledge, while staying clear about what the project can deliver.

Strategies for common engagement challenges

Treat conflict as information, not only as a risk

When resistance emerges, do not rush to neutralise it or force consensus. Conflict can reveal concerns that are central to the restoration process. Create space to understand what the conflict is really about, especially when opposition is directed at the restoration project rather than at individual people. Use careful listening, one-on-one conversations and small group dialogue to identify which concerns can be addressed, which trade-offs need to be made explicit, and where restoration goals may genuinely conflict with local wishes.

Rebuild trust through presence and honesty

In contexts where communities distrust restoration projects, start with informal and personal engagement before moving into formal co-creation structures. Listen without immediately defending the project and acknowledge past failures or moments where people may have felt excluded. If needed, take a step back from planned activities to recreate shared understanding. Trust is built through consistency, not through a single meeting or workshop.

Respect people's time and energy

Plan engagement around the natural rhythm of stakeholder involvement. Avoid too many repeated workshops or consultation moments, especially when people do not see how their input is being used. Vary the formats, for example through informal conversations, walks, storytelling, citizen science or local events, and be clear about when participation is needed and when it is enough to keep people informed. Where possible, share ownership with local ambassadors or trusted institutions that can maintain dialogue in a less project-driven way.

Redistribute voice and recognise different ways of knowing

Do not assume that everyone can participate equally just because they are invited. Pay attention to who speaks, who stays silent, whose knowledge is treated as evidence, and whose priorities shape decisions, also when it is your own. Use facilitation methods that redistribute voice and allow people to contribute in different ways, such as letting local actors guide site walks, separating stakeholder groups where needed, using participatory mapping, citizen science, story mapping, public exhibitions or hands-on conservation activities. These methods help bring together scientific, technical, institutional and local knowledge without forcing them into one hierarchy. Frameworks such as the Multiple Evidence Base, 4 Returns and Landscape Ecological System Analysis (LESA) can support this by creating space for different forms of evidence, experience and interpretation to inform a shared understanding of the landscape.



THE JOURNEY: FLOWING TOGETHER

CO-CREATION TOOLBOX

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THIS TOOLBOX?

We acknowledge the extensive range of existing co-creation toolboxes. Therefore, rather than incorporating the most commonly used methods for participatory processes, we have sought to identify and select a set of innovative and creative methodologies that have been tested and validated in the context of wetland restoration, particularly within the WaterLANDS project. When combined, these tools can effectively support co-creation processes by guiding and inspiring practitioners through each phase, fostering collaboration, creativity, and shared ownership. They are organized according to the co-creation phases and where possible, we provide links to original sources, enabling you to explore them further and adapt them to the specific needs and aspirations of your own restoration journeys.

1 MULTI-STAKEHOLDER COMMITTEES & GOVERNANCE MODELS



Purpose: Government systems can act as barrier due to the possibility of conflicts between stakeholders. Applying a governance system adapted to site specific features such as geographical features, ownership type and historical context is highly relevant for effective restoration and can enable upscaling.

Identify Theoretical Governance Framework: Four government models can be identified: The Polycentric Governance Model includes collaborative decision-making, co-creating mechanisms and multiple independent actors. It can operate at different scales and across multiple sectors. Steering committees or multi-actor coordination groups can support this model by providing a platform for joint planning, information exchange, and collective decision-making. The Monocentric Governance Model applies a hierarchical system, where one actor is active in the decision-making process. Goals, decisions and policy is applied in a top-down approach. In the Community-Based Governance Model, the participation of local communities and indigenous people is central. Citizens manage projects, often on small scale project focussed on local issues. The Networking Governance Model works with various governance bodies, inclusive participation and partnership. Conduct interviews with key informants to identify the type of governance model based on government structure, ownership, stakeholder participation and site history.

Identify supporting and limiting factors: Identifying governance factors that can support, or limit restoration efforts are important to address focus points and ensure effective restoration.

Factors that support ecological restoration are: (1) political and financial support from the government, (2) well functioning multi-stakeholder steering committees or coordination platforms that facilitate dialogue, build trust, and coordinate actions across sectors. Factors that limit restoration are: (1) conflicting interest and land use preference of different stakeholders, (2) coordination between multiple overlapping governance bodies, and (3) scattered land ownership and a lack of cross-sectoral dialog. Conduct interviews to determine case specific supporting and limiting governance factors and determine recommendations.

How to continue: Analysing the type of governance structure is important to make recommendations, but it is important to keep in mind that governance structures are not fixed and are often composed of multiple models. Each model has strengths and weaknesses, and constant adaptation and combination of models is key for effective ecological restoration and upscaling. Additionally, governance mechanisms such as steering committees can help bridge different actors and governance levels, and they are most effective when their composition, mandate, role definition and decision-making processes are adapted to the local context.

Source: Read more about governance models for wetland restoration in Terrisse, et al., (2025)[38].

2 DELIBERATIVE PROCESS & STAKEHOLDER VALUES



Purpose: Deliberation is understood as a joint process where diverse stakeholders engage in thoughtful discussion, reasoning, and the exchange of ideas to develop innovative solutions to complex problem. This process can be formulated through a workshop-based discussion to provide local people and stakeholders information on proposed interventions and expected benefits, and to acquire a better understanding of local values, opinions, advice, knowledge and needs.

Format recommendations: Groups of 8-12 people, at least 2 sessions.

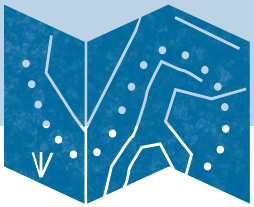
Why use deliberation? Deliberation workshops give stakeholders the opportunity to explore their values regarding wetlands and voice their opinions and knowledge. This provides the project team with insights in the diversity of values and can reveal potential conflicts or barriers. Understanding the values of the local community guides the process of restoration, helps understand how to communicate to the wider community and how to secure local support and co-creation.

First session: Introduce the concept of deliberation, explain the process and its benefits, present applications and describe main outcomes of these applications. This first workshop is mostly focussed on understanding people's values about the area and natural environment. You can ask questions about transcendental values, about local concerns regarding water supply, flooding or drought, pollution, land use change, etc. and ask if participants are worried about climate change. Also ask about their knowledge on the site, how often they visit the site, how accessible it is and if anybody makes a living from it. If possible: You can include a participatory mapping exercise (See tool number 3). Conclude the workshop by summarising and discussing the topics of the next meetings.

Second meeting: Present and discuss an analysis of raised issues in restoration and introduce the identified values from the last session. Introduce a scoring exercise in which participants score the importance of wetlands features or benefits. Identify the importance of services for different stakeholder and which could be beneficial to the community. Next, use a network diagram to link values to ecosystem services. Also discuss what the participants think about restoration proposals.

Subsequent meetings: you could re-run the scoring and network exercises and see if changes have occurred. You could also introduce on-site visits, scenario analysis (see tool number 6 or one-on-one interviews for more in-depth analyses.

PARTICIPATORY MAPPING 3



Purpose: Community mapping helps communities and stakeholders explore the benefits and values of wetlands. By working together around a map, participants express what they appreciate about their local site and how they want it protected. While various technical maps exist, such as geological, hydrological, and habitat maps, they rarely show the cultural and personal value wetlands hold for local people. These values are vital for wellbeing, education, and a sense of place, however often overlooked by decision makers. Mapping also helps reveal power dynamics and include perspectives that are usually excluded.

Preparation/materials: Print a large A0 map of the wetland or peatland site using suitable mapping software or satellite imagery. Include boundaries, protected areas, archaeological sites, trails, car parks, boardwalks, and other key landmarks to help participants orient themselves. Provide markers, sticky dots, and post-its. The map serves as a focal point for discussion, helping capture nonmaterial values often missed in ecosystem assessments[39,40]

1. Introduction and presentation: *30 mins*
Explain the research context and workshop format; introduce community mapping and its purposes, such as identifying local values, raising awareness, and sharing place-based perspectives with restoration teams and decision makers.

2. Mapping activities: *120 minutes*
The following exercises can be done together or separately. They help participants express the personal and community importance of the site by sharing experiences, relationships, and cultural values.

- **Exercise 1: Encounters with the landscape:** Participants create an A3 "Encounters" timeline showing meaningful experiences at the site; favourite places, memories, activities, wildlife sightings, social interactions, skills gained and emotions. Encourage people to express sensory experiences including smells, sights, sounds and tastes, as well as memories, emotions and history. These can be expressed through words or drawings and often reveal how people value, use, and care for the site. You can include questions which can be adapted for each site, for example:

  1. *Are there particular places you like to go when you visit this site?*
  2. *Have you seen any interesting animals, birds, insects, plants, or fungi at this site?*
  3. *What have you learned about this site?*
  4. *Who have you met at this site or through your involvement with it? Or do you prefer to go there alone?*
  5. *Are you inspired by your visits to the site - do you create art, take photos, or write?*
  6. *What other activities do you do at the site?*
  7. *How does being there make you feel?*

- **Exercise 2: Mapping the site:** Participants then transfer places, activities, and experiences from Exercise 1 onto the A0 map of the site using sticky dots and notes. This encourages discussion about memories, current uses, sensory experiences, wildlife, landscape elements, and future hopes or concerns. With permission, conversations can be recorded.

- **Exercise 3: Local wetland scenarios:** This exercise explores how the site has changed over time by asking participants to reflect on the past, present, and future[41]. They can work in pairs or individually before group discussion. A creative way to conclude is to have participants write a "Postcard from the future," either from their own perspective or the site's. Guiding questions address lessons from past events, current changes in the local site, potential future changes, any fears or worries about the site in the future, worries, preparedness for these potential events, and future hopes for the site.

- **Data and analysis:** Workshops generate several types of data: individual encounter timelines (Exercise 1), the annotated A0 map (Exercise 2), and discussion transcripts if recorded. It is recommended to share a report with participants that includes a visual summary of the map and key findings so it can be confirmed by them.

- **Variations:** Community maps can also be hand-drawn, painted, web-based, or produced as fold-out maps. When possible, a group field trip to the site can help start or conclude the workshop, reinforce learning, and strengthen relationships for future engagement. Please see example here: Abbeyleix bog & "Voci dalla laguna" interactive map, available as an open-access StoryMap online here (only in Italian for now).

4 COLLABORATION WITH ARTISTS



Nature restoration, especially wetland restoration, is complex, urgent, and deeply interconnected with culture and community relationships with place. Artists contribute with unique, creative methods that complement scientific processes. Their exploratory and less-formalized practices open new ways of seeing landscapes and communicating complex information[42].

Purpose: The purpose of involving artists in restoration projects can be related to different objectives such as:

- Capture values that may not emerge in technical discussions,
- Enhance community and stakeholder engagement and build support for restoration actions,
- Improve communication between scientists, coordinators, and local communities,
- Promote public awareness of restoration challenges and benefits,
- Generate new forms of knowledge through artistic inquiry,
- Facilitate creative co-creation of visions for restored landscapes
- Address barriers, misconceptions, or resistance through imaginative and relatable approaches.

Process: To begin the process, local artists or artist collectives with an interest in ecology, landscape, heritage, or socially engaged practice should be identified and brought into the project from the outset, ensuring they are included in communications, technical discussions, steering group meetings, and site visits.

Once involved, artists spend time at the restoration site to closely observe ecological processes, cultural histories, and local narratives, allowing these insights to shape their understanding of the landscape.

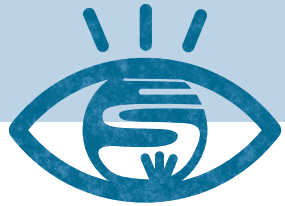
Considerations to take into account include:

- **Allocate a realistic and dedicated budget:** Make sure to budget not only for the final artwork, but also for artists' time, materials, travel, site visits, and possibly workshops or exhibitions.
- **Ensure equitable collaboration and shared respect:** Treat artists as equal contributors. Their creative methods, perspectives, and knowledge are equally valuable and principles of mutual respect, openness to different epistemologies should be acknowledged.
- **Plan for long-term engagement and follow-up (not just one-off events):** Restoration is a long-term process, so should be art engagement. Include workshops/events over time, opportunities to revisit and adapt artworks/activities as restoration proceeds and integrate feedback loops with scientists and communities.
- **Clarity on role and what is expected:** Artists can be involved in projects like this on a research basis (residency), to support engagement, or to create artworks (i.e., as a commission) - all of these have different expectations and involve different types of remuneration. Information about appropriate payment for artists are available from national artist organisations and it's important to be fair about the role of the artists, how much is asked of them, and how it is compensated.
- **Collaboration with other artists:** If you have a network of artists, like in the WaterLANDS project, and would like

them to work in a collaborative way - make sure to build in time and budget for the artists to meet in person from an early point in the project. This is invaluable in creating synergies and connections across the project.

- **Bringing in artists as early as possible:** The WaterLANDS artists started in year 2. The artists have said they would like to have been part of the project from the very start, and even, if this had been possible, as part of the proposal development (this would be tricky to achieve logistically, but is something to consider for future projects)
- **Engagement at local sites and across the project:** Embedding the artists locally was heavily dependent on a proactive and receptive local 'host organisation' - make sure that someone is clearly responsible for connecting the artist to the restoration site and local communities. It's also possible that the artists can become a bit silo-ed and disconnected from the other cross-project work packages, so work needs to be done to make sure the artists are included formally and their work is integrated into the project - e.g., at the General Assemblies, important work package meetings, etc.

VISIONING 5



Purpose: This is where we move from plausible to desirable futures. Central questions in a visioning process are: Where are you now and where can you realistically expect to be in the future? Desirable futures can only become reality when they are imagined: a concrete vision of what exactly a desirable future would look like helps to identify concrete actions that lead towards that future.

Option 1: Freely! One way to imagine a desirable future is for participants to freely develop visions based on their own imagination, so not guided by questions or using existing examples as inspiration source. Real imagination that deliberates the mind from present-day constraints happens when people are stimulated to use all their senses. Creative tools like Predict Future Headlines and creative collage or Photovoice stimulate imagination in a playful way and invite people to freely develop their own desirable future. Creative and artistic tools also set the tone for a relaxed informal sphere in which participants feel safe to be open-minded.

Option 2: A bit more guidance: Sometimes participants need more guidance to be able to imagine the future. One way is to ask guiding questions during the exercise. Visions reflect a future state, yet experience shows that citizens often build their visions on memories and experiences from the past.

Asking the right questions: Instead of asking 'What will happen to us? How should we respond?', organizers could ask participants 'What do we need to carry through with us? What should we tend to?'. Possible questions to get participants started are:

'Given the trends in our region/city/area – what do we value, what do we see as problematic, and what would we really like to achieve here?

Source: *Towards a climate-resilient future together: A toolbox with participatory foresight methods, tools and examples from climate and food governance*[43].

6 SCENARIO ANALYSIS



What are exploratory scenarios:
exploratory scenario are storylines that describe how the future can develop under different assumptions. They start from the present and explore alternative futures.

Purpose: The exercises are important for raising awareness on the complexity and uncertainty in climate and socio-economic systems, identifying risk and opportunities and for testing the strength of strategies.

Below are three approaches of integrating exploratory scenarios in participatory exercises.

Option 1: Quantitative tools, such as databases or computer models, can be used to show long-term prediction under different scenarios. These tools can help explore realistic and plausible scenarios. To communicate these complex problems to participants, it is important to use visualization like maps, photographs and illustrative charts adapted to the local context. `

Option 2: Semi-quantitative tools are less data-intensive and focus on co-creation. This approach is useful when data availability is limited. Participants define plausible future situation (e.g. low vs high rainfall; economic growth vs economic decline; extreme vs moderate temperature increase) and identify drivers of change (e.g. water availability, stakeholder support, political instability). Participants then discuss and score how each future affects each driver, thereby creating multiple scenarios.

Option 3: Futures can also be explored using **qualitative tools**. One method is a *poker design card* exercise. In preparation, collect **narratives** of the local community through interviews, surveys or focus groups. These narratives refer to stories, perceptions and experiences about their community, values and expectations for the future. For the *poker design card* exercise, these narratives have to be translated into themes, statements or viewpoints. Define at least two categories of narratives and at least two categories of possible effects (e.g., climate change, infrastructure, policy, resources). Participants randomly pick one card of each category (narrative and effects) and describe possible futures.

Creating exploratory scenarios is an important first step to build toward a desirable future. It is recommended to continue participatory exercises with *visioning* and *backcasting exercises*. For more explanation, see the Toolkit *Towards a climate-resilience future together*[43].

7 PARTICIPATORY BACKCASTING EXERCISE



What is backcasting? Backcasting exercises build on visioning exercises. During a backcasting exercise, participants are stimulated to create solutions, actions or measures that are essential to achieve their desired vision.

Purpose: Backcasting exercises can be a source of inspiration for local authorities, help gaining public support for adaptation plans and raises awareness on climate change.

Three backcasting exercises are shortly explained. The first a standard approach and the following tow are more advanced.

Regular backcasting:

Step 1: Divide the participants in subgroups of about 4 participants. Each subgroup selects one vision previously developed vision.

Step 2: Participants create measures, interventions, actions or strategies needed to achieve their climate-resilient future. Providing expert knowledge can help ensure that proposed actions are realistic, impactful and meaningful.

Step 3: Each subgroup ranks their action by importance and identifies which are short-, medium-, or long-term. Optionally, these can be visualised on a backcasting timeline.

Step 4: Analyse the action together with the group and uncover underlying themes or storylines (e.g. social cohesion, policy actions, increase of greenery). Identifying the theme helps outline a complete pathway to the envisioned future.

Incremental backcasting: In this more advanced exercise, the backcasting pathway needs to be clearly visualised on a timeline. Participants explore potential positive and negative events that could influence the pathway, such as sudden climate disasters, technological breakthroughs or large donations. Use post-its to represent events, alternative pathways or actions along the timeline. The goal is to create multiple scenarios.

Another backcasting method is called the **seed-based pathways**. This method focusses on identifying what needs to change for existing sustainable initiatives to develop. Participants build creatively on successful example of initiatives and adapt these for their local situation. For more detailed explanation and additional exercises, see the *Toolkit Towards a climate-resilience future together.*

Phase 4: Take collective action and implement solutions

CITIZEN SCIENCE 8



What is Citizen Science? This research approach involves active participation of citizens in social and environmental research activities, such as workshops, co-designed learning experiences and monitoring programs. The overall aim is to include local communities in the design, implementation and evaluation of restoration projects.

Purpose: including local communities is crucial for the success of ecological restoration. Citizen Science integrates scientific and local knowledge, resulting in a more complete understanding of socio-ecological systems. For the communities, participation creates a sense of ownership, therefore increasing support and involvement. Moreover, Citizen Science can also shift perspectives, help overcome social or cultural barriers and strengthens people's connection to wetlands[44].

Strategy: For short time frames, as it was the case of WaterLANDS project, the project can apply an "opening" strategy: instead of targeting highly resistant stakeholders, Citizen Science engages groups who are reachable within the project scope and who may later influence more resistant groups. This enhances long-term impact (legacy) while ensuring feasibility.

Step 1: **Co-design of activities:** Citizen Science or nature education activities were co-created by local partners, including stakeholder organisations, teachers and scientists. The co-design phase should ensure relevance to local wetland issues and alignment with the perception barriers identified in the site. The stakeholder groups can be selected based on: accessibility within the project timeline, potential ability to influence broader

community perceptions and target audiences include children, local residents, landowners, and land managers.

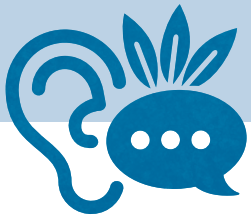
Step 2: Implementation: Activities aimed to promote direct interaction with wetland environments, reinforce local ecological knowledge, encourage reflection on wetland value and change, foster emotional and cognitive connections with the landscape. These activities combined hands-on fieldwork, observation, nature education, and simple data collection.

Step 3: Assessment of perceptions: Wetland perceptions are measured before and after participation. The assessment tools should be tailored to each audience and local context (e.g., age-appropriate questionnaires for children, structured reflections for landowners). The evaluations may documented changes in perception of wetlands, awareness and knowledge, attitudes toward ecological restoration and perceived barriers.

Tip: Art as engagement tool: You can integrate art-based Citizen Science activities, such as creative visualisation workshops, to help communities understand restoration projects and raise awareness.

Source: For further information on community engagement approaches, see ***Deliverable 5.3*** of the WaterLANDS project (Wageningen University).

9 CONFLICT RESOLUTION: LISTENING PRACTICE



Purpose: When addressing a conflict aim to focus on interests, not positions. Encourage stakeholders to articulate why they hold a viewpoint, this reveals common ground (two groups might both want community well-being, even if they disagree on method).

Understanding conflict types also reminds us to address the correct layer: if the conflict is really about lack of trust, no technical solution will stick until trust is rebuilt.

If it's about values, creating opportunities for cross-cultural understanding or finding a unifying vision (like community pride or future generations' benefit) can help. Use theory as a lens, but always tailor to the human context at hand.

EXERCISE 1: SHORT LISTENING PRACTICE (PAIRS)

Duration: ~15–20 minutes | Participants form pairs (Person A + Person B).

Step 1: Speaker talks, listener stays silent: Person A speaks for 2–3 minutes on any topic (work, a hobby, a recent experience, anything) while Person B listens without speaking, they cannot ask questions or make comments, only non-verbal signals (nodding, smiling, eye contact).

Step 2: Quick reflection (in pairs): Discuss: How did it feel to speak without being interrupted? As the listener, what happened in your mind? Did you feel the urge to speak?

Step 3: Switch roles — with a new instruction: Now Person B speaks. Person A listens with the added instructions. Note: "As a listener, notice where your attention is. When your mind drifts, gently bring it back to the speaker."

Step 4: Group debrief: As a group, discuss: **Speakers:** Did you feel heard? Could you sense when attention drifted? **Listeners:** What did you notice about your focus and impulses? When was it hard to stay present?

Trainer Tip: If listeners say they wanted to ask questions, invite them to practice holding back the first two questions in future conversations. Questions may steer the discussion too early; allowing silence often leads people to share more openly.

10 CONFLICT RESOLUTION: ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS



Purpose: Practice asking questions that lead to deeper understanding, especially through open-ended questions.

Option 1: Short exercise asking questions (Follow-up)

Exercise: Pairs with a Drawing (Do not tell participants the goal beforehand.)

1. Person A receives a drawing.
2. Person B has a blank sheet and pen.
   B's task is to ask questions to recreate the drawing, without seeing it.

A only answers B's questions, no extra information or hints. After a few minutes, stop the activity and let pairs compare drawings.

Group discussion:

- Who asked: *'Tell me, what's on your drawing?'*
  Those who asked this open-ended question often got the best result.
- Emphasize: We rarely ask such open questions — especially when we disagree. But they yield the most insight.
- Discuss how this might be helpful in group meetings or situations where people resist or challenge your ideas.

Option 2: Short exercise Moles and Butterflies (types of questions)

Objective: To see that there are no "good" or "bad" questions — only questions that fit certain moments.

1. One participant sits in front of the group.
2. The group may ask any question, one at a time, in no particular order.
3. The person in the chair can choose to answer or say "pass".

Each participant must decide before asking: Is my question a butterfly (light, surface-level, changes topic)? Or a mole (digs deeper, explores something in detail)?

The trainer lets the session unfold organically, stepping in if only one type of question dominates. Group debrief: What do different types of questions reveal? Did any question feel uncomfortable, and if so, why? How can this be helpful in your conversations and meetings?

11 CONFLICT RESOLUTION: FORUM THEATRE



What it is: Forum Theatre is a participatory theatre method developed by Augusto Boal as part of the *Theatre of the Oppressed*. It uses short, staged scenarios based on real-life conflicts to explore power dynamics, obstacles, and alternative actions. Participants are not passive spectators but become active contributors, stepping into the scene to test different solutions.

Purpose: The method is used to surface personal and collective experiences of conflict, particularly situations where individuals or groups tried to achieve positive change but faced barriers. In the context of wetlands restoration, Forum Theatre helps stakeholders explore tensions such as land-use conflicts, competing values, governance challenges, or misunderstandings between communities, authorities, and conservation actors. It supports dialogue, empathy, and collective problem-solving key elements of co-creation.

Method Steps:

Identify the Conflict: Participants collectively identify a real conflict or challenge related to wetlands restoration that they wish to address (e.g. grazing rights, water management, access restrictions, or trust between actors).

Develop the Storyline: In small groups, participants write a short storyline based on personal or shared experience. The story should include:

- A clear protagonist (the person or group seeking change),
- An antagonist (a person, institution, or system creating obstacles),
- Clearly defined obstacles,
- Potential allies who could help or hinder the protagonist,
- The story must end in a moment of crisis, where the protagonist fails to achieve their goal, leaving room for alternative actions.

Create Still Images: Participants identify five key plot points and create five still images (tableaux) representing the main actions in the story. Each image is given a title to clarify its meaning.

Perform and Intervene: The scenes are presented to the wider group. Audience members are invited to step into the role of the protagonist (or another character) and try different actions to change the outcome. This allows participants to experiment with new approaches to negotiation, communication, and collaboration.

Reflect and Co-Create Solutions: After each intervention, the group reflects on what changed, what worked, and what did not. These reflections are linked back to real-world wetlands restoration processes, helping identify practical strategies, shared responsibilities, and pathways for cooperation.

Value for Wetlands Restoration and Co-Creation: Forum Theatre creates a safe, inclusive space for expressing tensions that are often difficult to discuss openly. By embodying different perspectives, participants gain insight into others' constraints and motivations. The method strengthens trust, supports mutual understanding, and enables stakeholders to co-create more socially acceptable and resilient restoration solutions.

Source: Boal, A. (2002). *Games for Actors and Non-Actors. Routledge*[45].

IDEAS TO ENGAGE: COMMUNITY OUTREACH & VOLUNTEERING 12



BIRD RINGING CAMP

Purpose & strategy: Enhance awareness of wetlands' ecological value and invite diverse stakeholders to participate directly in conservation and scientific monitoring. Implement activities that bridge research, citizen science, community engagement, and education. Birds are excellent indicators of wetland health and biodiversity; therefore, providing hands-on learning opportunities that allow participants to observe and understand bird biology and wetland ecology is essential.

Activities should be interactive and informative, strengthening local stewardship while also generating valuable ecological data. For effective implementation, bring together licensed ringers, volunteers, students, and visitors, including local residents and families. Offering the chance to observe birds up close and learn about their migration patterns and the role of wetlands fosters deeper appreciation of these ecosystems and encourages long-term engagement in their conservation (more information *here*).

FILM FESTIVAL

Purpose & strategy: The aim is to use film to capture the imagination and attention of people who wouldn't normally be involved in peatland restoration to find out more and the hard work going on to restore them. When possible, you can invite film makers and organize a panel of discussion. In order to amplify the impact you can use the activity to celebrate relevant dates such as wetlands day (2nd February) or bog day (27th July).

Deep listening peatland walks – *"Binoculars for the Ears"*

Purpose & strategy: Use sound walks to deepen participants' emotional and sensory connection to wetlands, fostering meaningful engagement and reflection within restoration processes.

Method: Sound walks invite participants to explore wetlands through focused listening.

Using **alternative microphones and headphones**, normally faint or unnoticed environmental sounds are amplified, allowing participants to experience the landscape in a new and immersive way. This is often described as "binoculars for the ears."

Implementation: During guided walks, participants listen to amplified sounds such as flowing water, booted feet in the boggy ground vegetation underfoot, wind, and subtle movements within the wetland. This heightened auditory awareness draws attention to ecological processes and encourages a slower, more attentive presence in the landscape. Complement the walk with reflective moments —such as shared readings, storytelling, or group discussions —to help participants articulate their sensory and emotional experiences (More information ***here***).

MONITORING & EVALUATION 13



Why: M&E are essential because community-engagement processes in restoration are complex, non-linear, and shaped by diverse actors whose goals must remain aligned throughout the project. A participatory and transdisciplinary M&E approach enables continuous adjustment of engagement activities through learning-by-doing and adaptive co-management. It provides a structured yet flexible way to capture sensitive, qualitative insights ethically, supporting reflexive practice and co-creation.

Purpose: M&E Track engagement, support reflexive practice, capture qualitative data, co-create shared understanding and support long-term restoration practice.

Step 1: Develop a Flexible Indicator Framework: The indicators should be co-designed with project coordinators and developed through a combination of literature review and dialogue with the local project team, ensuring they are not generic categories but instead reflect widely recognised engagement dimensions while remaining relevant to local contexts, priorities, and restoration challenges. Some examples of Overarching Indicators are: **Governance**, **Finance**, **Attitudes**, **Practices & Behaviours**, **Restoration**, **Implementation** and **Knowledge**.

Step 2: Introduce "Overarching Indicator X": A placeholder indicator allows for emerging issues not covered by existing OIs, keeping the framework adaptive.

Step 3: Develop Site-Specific Indicators: Build them collaboratively with the site, these reflect local conditions and engagement goals. They function as reflection tools, helping site coordinators consider how their processes are unfolding.

Step 4: Conduct Regular, Iterative reflection: Every 3 – 4 months, on-site or online interviews with coordinators help capture qualitative insights and track indicator-related progress.

Step 5: Support Adaptive Co-management: Use the monitoring results to adjust engagement approaches. Monitoring is not only descriptive, but it also directly informs action and adaptation across restoration activities and pillars of the project (e.g. governance, engagement, financial).

Considerations:

- **Use multiple formats:** short online questionnaires, ad-hoc feedback forms following events, regular interviews, in-depth conversations, on-site visits.
- **Reduce participant fatigue:** feedback forms are coordinated centrally and embedded in existing activities rather than added as separate tasks.
- **Maintain data sensitivity and ethical sharing:** Site coordinators decide who can view their detailed logs. Only "headline" updates are shared universally.

Source: WaterLANDS Deliverable 5.3 & D2.4

SHOULD WE SAY YES TO THIS RESEARCH? 14



Purpose: Partnerships between research institutions and community organisations are increasingly common, yet most guidance is written for researchers. This tool helps community groups – especially volunteer-led environmental and conservation organisations, to assess an incoming research proposal, weigh its benefits against their capacity, and decide whether to accept, negotiate or decline. It is also worth asking whether research is the right approach at all, or whether another form of collaboration would be more useful.

How to use it: This is not a checklist. Not every question will apply to every project or organisation, so choose those that matter most to your group, add your own, and use them to negotiate arrangements with your research partner – whether it is a large project, a national study or an individual master's or doctoral study.

1. Relevance, benefits and value

- Does the research address something important to us, and do the priorities of the university or project align with our objectives and mission?
- What will the community gain: knowledge, skills, infrastructure, funding, future opportunities?

2. Capacity and expectations

- What will this require from us in people, time, expertise and resources, and can we realistically provide it?
- Are the roles and responsibilities of each partner clear?

3. Power and co-creation

- Who defines the research questions, and how are decisions made between partners?
- Do we have meaningful influence over the design, interpretation and outputs?
- What is the process if disagreements happen?

4. Knowledge

- How will our local, experiential and historical knowledge be acknowledged and used?
- Will community members be listed as co-authors, credited contributors or partners where appropriate?

5. Data, ownership and intellectual property

- Who owns the data we contribute (recordings, photographs, stories), and who controls access and future use?
- Can information about our place or community be reused?

6. Resources

- Is our contribution funded or resourced, and are community members compensated for expenses?
- Could the funders' interests or requirements conflict with community interests?

7. Outputs and dissemination

- What will be produced, how will it be communicated in our community, and will we be able to review it first?
- Will results be shared in accessible formats as well as academic publications?
- What agreements are needed – e.g. an MoU, confidentiality or data protection terms?

8. Risk

- Could the research harm our organisation, community or place, create conflict or misrepresentation, or be used for purposes we do not support?
- What happens if a partner cannot fulfil its commitments?
- Can either party renegotiate or end the partnership if it is not working or circumstances change?

9. Legacy

- What will remain with the community when the project ends – relationships, knowledge, skills, resources, infrastructure?
- What happens to the data, equipment, publications and future funding or policy opportunities?

Source: Based on established guidance on community–research partnerships and on experiences with the Community Wetlands Forum and the Abbeyleix Bog Project Knowledge Site in the WaterLANDS project.





REFLECTION: MEETING THE SEA

Lessons learned from the co-creation journey

As part of the documentation and reflection process within the WaterLANDS project, and towards the end of the initiative, Action Sites and Knowledge Sites were invited to look back on their co-creation journeys and share the experiences that shaped their wetland restoration efforts. These reflections were gathered, and represented below as 10 lessons learned.

1. Some decisions may not require co-creation

A recurring discussion across the Action Sites concerned the question: Should co-creation always be used?

The experience from WaterLANDS highlights that some decisions are constrained by legal, technical, and in many cases safety requirements. For example, dike reinforcement works must be implemented regardless of public opinion because they are necessary for public safety. In such cases, co-creation may be more appropriate for exploring complementary environmental or social benefits rather than debating the core decision itself.

Key lesson: Co-creation is one form of participation, but it is not appropriate for every decision. The level of participation should match the purpose, scope, and constraints of the project.

2. Co-creation is not always comfortable

Co-creation involves both positive and difficult moments. Partic-

ipants experienced collaboration, learning, and visible progress, but also conflict, disagreement, frustration, and uncertainty. These tensions should not necessarily be viewed as failures. Differences in perspectives are often a natural part of collaborative decision-making or ongoing conflict resolution dynamics, particularly in complex environmental projects.

Key lesson: Productive co-creation requires creating space for conflict, disagreement, negotiation, and learning rather than expecting consensus at all times.

3. Inclusion does not automatically lead to co-creation

Experience from WaterLANDS highlighted an important distinction: although participation can be embedded in legislation, legal requirements alone do not guarantee meaningful and inclusive collaboration.

Inviting stakeholders to participate is different from sharing influence over decisions. Effective co-creation requires deliberate efforts to build trust, dialogue, and concrete opportunities for joint learning and problem-solving.

Key lesson: Participation creates opportunities for engagement, but co-creation requires deeper collaboration and shared ownership.

4. Co-creation extends beyond project timelines

The experiences from the Knowledge and Action Sites show that co-creation often starts before a project officially begins and continues after it ends. During the pre-project phase, stakeholder identification and the development of early coalitions and relationships already shape how collaboration will unfold. By the time formal engagement begins, important directions and expectations may already have been established.

Similarly, co-creation does not necessarily end when a project closes. Relationships are therefore among the most important outcomes of co-creation. Physical outputs such as boardwalks or restoration measures matter, but the relationships, shared narrative, and spirit of collaboration developed throughout the process can become a more lasting legacy.

Key lesson: Co-creation should be understood as an ongoing process that extends beyond the formal project cycle. Attention is needed both before implementation, to develop a shared narrative and create the conditions for meaningful collaboration, and after project closure, to sustain relationships, learning, and stewardship.

5. Scaling co-creation requires balancing standardization and local diversity

Experience from the project has shown the importance of developing tools (e.g., restoration toolkits) that can be used across different sites, while still remaining accessible and adaptable to local conditions. Involving 'non-experts' in developing tools like this is extremely valuable because they bring fresh perspectives and create something that is genuinely accessible. At the same time, the practitioners highlighted how difficult it is to apply a single engagement approach across a large, fragmented landscape with multiple actors and funding streams. This tension between consistency and flexibility becomes more pronounced at scale.

Key lesson: Scaling co-creation requires balancing shared frameworks (for coherence and learning) with flexible approaches that reflect local ecological, social, economic and institutional diversity.

6. Engagement formats are not one-size-fits-all

Different groups engage through different channels: some through science, others through storytelling, art, or informal interaction. Relying on standard meetings systematically excludes

parts of society. For example, experiences from WaterLANDS showed that public meetings, while intended to be inclusive, sometimes created or amplified divisions between opposing perspectives. Even well-intentioned participatory formats can structure interaction in adversarial ways when positions are not yet stable or shared.

Key lesson: Co-creation must be structured as a multi-format system (formal, informal, artistic, digital, place-based) to ensure diverse entry points into participation. Engagement format matters as much as timing; some formats (e.g. open public meetings) can unintentionally harden conflict rather than support dialogue.

7. "Assumed absence" of stakeholders can be a critical blind spot

Restoration sites, are at times expected to have low human presence and limited social complexity. Yet experience from WaterLANDS showed that sites like these can turn out to be the most challenging due to unexpected local dynamics and forms of opposition. This misjudgement can significantly affected engagement strategies and team preparedness.

Key lesson: Lack of visible activity or settlement does not imply lack of stakeholders, interests, or opposition; social complexity must be actively investigated rather than inferred from landscape assumptions.

8. Engagement fatigue is an expected phase, not a failure

Over time, enthusiasm within teams and wider stakeholder groups can shift into fatigue, resistance, or withdrawal. This is not exceptional but a recurring pattern in long-term co-creation processes, especially in multi-year environmental projects.

Key lesson: Declining engagement over time should be anticipated and actively managed through renewal strategies, rather than interpreted as project failure.

9. Managing expectations and continuously renewing project narratives is critical across all phases

Action Sites highlighted the risk of overselling outcomes at the beginning of the project. Rather, they emphasize, to start modestly and manage expectations among landowners and participants carefully. In several sites from WaterLANDS, early framing of goals, funding assumptions, and engagement scope strongly influenced later perceptions of success or frustration, particularly when narratives were overly abstract or "buzzword-heavy" rather than transparent about what could realistically be achieved.

At the same time, co-creation does not rely on a fixed narrative. As fatigue, turnover, and changing political and project contexts emerge, there is a need to repeatedly "rebuild the story" for both internal teams and external stakeholders. Without this renewal, motivation and shared direction erode over time as expectations and circumstances evolve.

Key lesson: Co-creation requires both continuous alignment between project narratives, stakeholder expectations, and delivery realities, and ongoing narrative renewal to maintain shared direction throughout the project lifecycle.

10. Artistic and narrative approaches are functional tools for engagement

Art-based methods, storytelling, exhibitions, and sensory experiences are not just outreach tools; they actively reshape how people understand ecological change and their own role in it. In this way, co-creation teams are more resilient and innovative when they include dedicated roles for engagement facilitation and creative interpretation, not only technical expertise.

Key Lesson: Creative practices should be treated as core co-creation methods because they expand who can participate in meaning-making and decision formation.



FINAL WORDS

This framework is the result of a journey that we have shared with many people. The content was created through several conversations, workshops sessions, experimenting, and learning alongside our partners throughout the WaterLANDS project. We are deeply grateful to our "WaterLANDS family" for their openness and trust for sharing not only what worked, but also what was difficult, uncertain, and sometimes uncomfortable.

We hope this framework becomes a companion rather than a manual: something you can return to, adapt, question, and build upon in your own context. Although it draws on experiences from wetland restoration across Europe, we believe many of its ideas can support collaborative environmental work far beyond these places. We hope it gives you the confidence to experiment new ways of doing participation and to embrace co-creation as a continuous learning process.

We are living at a time when both nature and society are asking us to work in innovative ways. In restoring ecosystems, we believe that more human-centred, inclusive, and caring approaches can help make restoration more meaningful, more responsible, and therefore lasting. If this framework encourages even one conversation, one new partnership, or one different way of working together, then it has achieved its purpose.

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