

“Delivering green space for all within a 10-minute walk”

Interview with Guillaume Laval,

Trees and Biodiversity Officer,
Plant Heritage and Environment
Department,
City of Albi (Tarn).

KEY POINTS

► To monitor the progress of greening in a number of neighbourhoods, the local authority in Albi (Tarn) has set up a digital monitoring tool. This measure includes a well-being index, based on the distance residents have to travel to enjoy a green space or access a cycle path. However, some local residents see the development of nature in the city as an inconvenience. Outreach and education are needed to help people discover and reclaim the local flora and fauna.

La Santé en action: Why does Albi want to be recognised as a capital of biodiversity?

Guillaume Laval: The municipality has participated in the Capitales Françaises de la Biodiversité (French Capitals of Biodiversity) competition¹ for around ten years now because we want to showcase our actions and inspire other local authorities. In 2016, we won the title of best medium-sized city. In 2024, we want to promote a new “nature-based solutions” project, focusing in particular on bats. Since bats feed on mosquitoes, we aim to measure the impact of their presence in terms of regulating this population. Rather than setting up CO₂ traps to kill mosquitoes, a costly and energy-intensive solution, we chose to turn

to an ecological engineering solution. Around a hundred bat nesting boxes will be installed in various test sites around the city. For tiger mosquitoes, we are counting on swallows and swifts to control them.

S.A.: How is the city encouraging the residents of Albi to reconnect with nature?

G.L.: Albi is a town with a population of 51,000 inhabitants and the ambition of their elected representatives is that by 2026 every resident of Albi will have access to a green space within a 10-minute walk of their home. The digital tool to monitor the city’s vegetation programme was launched in 2022. This mapping work will enable us to create a well-being index for the various neighbourhoods based on the distance residents need to travel to find a natural area or cycle path. The municipality is therefore buying up land to provide areas for development and biodiversity conservation. The areas acquired along the Tarn are intended to preserve secure sites for beavers, while others could be transformed into squares or green spaces. This system, which uses satellite photos, will be in place for several years so that we can assess how much vegetation has increased through our initiatives. For example, we have planted over 3,000 trees over the last ten years, but they are still young and not always visible on the maps. In a few years, we should have a developed canopy.

S.A.: How did you identify that residents felt a need for more nature?

G.L.: We took a somewhat empirical approach. We realised that people spontaneously go to places

where nature is better preserved. For example, in 2007 we laid out a large, modern park, the Parc de La Renaudié, over several hectares; right next to it, in a field that had been somewhat abandoned, we planted fruit trees, ash trees and wild cherry trees, while preserving spontaneous vegetation as part of a differentiated management approach². Residents prefer to stroll around this rural and natural setting, following the paths between grasses and wildflowers, rather than walk through the regularly mown, more sterile park. The same goes for the outdoor leisure areas where we have begun using sustainable management techniques. Here again, people appreciate small natural areas of 6 to 7 m² surrounded by trees and vegetation, even when the grass is 50 cm high.

S.A.: Have you worked with the local authority’s health department on these initiatives?

G.L.: We certainly need to achieve a joint effort, the question being: How can we involve the health department in this ecological approach? We are already seeing closer tangible links. We have a local gardener working with a nurse from the ASALEE³ network and together they support patients to grow vegetables on land provided by the municipality. A number of initiatives are improving social ties. A good example is the project that introduced conservation grazing to a 3-hectare site previously used as a floodplain. An agreement was signed with a farmer: we provide the land, water and hay; he manages the sheep and goats. The area attracts local residents who come to bottle-feed the lambs or have a go at shearing; local childminders bring toddlers in pushchairs here; children

play in this protected space. A walkway has been laid out around the pond, so that elderly people can take their dogs for a stroll without any problems.

S.A.: Do local residents appreciate seeing nature restored to these urban areas?

G.L.: If there's one thing we're careful about it's that residents mustn't get the impression that green spaces are being abandoned. Pavements must remain clear enough to use. There can't be any areas where you would get wet up to your knees just walking through. However, we do have to deal with disapproval, of course. A dirt track with stones is certainly less easy to navigate as you get older. Some people like nature in the city... except when it's near their homes; they call us to report a noisy blackbird under their window and ask us to clear the undergrowth. Everyone wants to have access to biodiversity, without really knowing what that means. People don't always make the connection between the insect in the uncut grass and the bird that will feed on it. We need to do some educational work to explain food chains and food webs⁴. However, feedback from local residents and tourists is generally positive.

S.A.: Are the people of Albi involved in these projects?

G.L.: A local biodiversity council has been set up, bringing together the area's institutional partners and stakeholders in the local ecology, including associations and local residents. We organise meetings to keep everyone informed and we offer them the opportunity to participate in projects such as planting hedges or building dry stone walls. Educational guides – such as *Amphibians and Reptiles of Albi* or *Explore Albi's Remarkable Flora* – have been published to provide people with another way to explore nature. In addition, each local authority has a participatory budget, for which residents are invited to submit bids. One example was a suggestion to plant fruit trees. Many of the participatory budget proposals put forward by the people of Albi concern green spaces.

The staff responsible for maintaining the green spaces are fully involved in the process. They can be trained in differentiated management and biodiversity preservation. Many of them appreciate this change of direction, as long as we don't question the value of their work on landscaping and ornamental species. One gardener was upset by the disappearance of the town's orchids, which were regularly being cut down, and suggested that we put up explanatory signs and markers to help avoid this. As a result, 24 different species of orchid now flourish in our area.

S.A.: Which partners do you rely on to support your initiatives?

G.L.: We work with a number of partners, including non-profit associations such as the Office for Insects and their Environment, the French League for the Protection of Birds, the French Society of Natural Sciences and the Federation of Hunters, as well as institutions such as the French Ministry of Education, the Regional Biodiversity Agency, the French Office for Biodiversity, the chambers of agriculture and the Departmental Land Management Divisions. We also call on the services of research consultancies for specific problems. These partners offer us their time and expertise in a mutually beneficial partnership, as we give them access to areas for analysis. We have little financial support, other than from the French Office for Biodiversity for the creation of an atlas of biodiversity in the municipality. Most of our projects are self-financed by the local authority, and we don't expect any grants to advance our objectives.

S.A.: Is the city's budget for biodiversity and arboriculture sustainable?

G.L.: There is a biodiversity budget, which is protected and balanced, with sums set aside for events, studies, acquisition of equipment and field work. In addition, nature restoration is a theme that runs through our other projects, such as the €3 million renovation of a school, which includes a biodiversity component.

S.A.: What is your assessment of the current situation?

G.L.: We've done a lot in ten years, but we're not the only ones. Although we're often cited as an example, we are no more deserving than others. That said, the municipality has decided to set up a delegation with an elected representative dedicated to biodiversity. We are fortunate to be able to experiment without being held back, especially as we have an area that is conducive to the return of biodiversity. Outreach work remains essential. We have to be careful not to go overboard and insist that residents embrace natural areas, at the risk of depleting the nature in these sites and losing the biodiversity that has been reintroduced. When people appreciate a particular space, they end up asking if they can put on a circus or organise a festival or concert there. ■

Interview by Joëlle Maraschin, journalist.

1. For the past ten years, the French Capitals of Biodiversity competition has been identifying and promoting the municipalities and areas with the best nature-friendly practices. It is organised by the French Office for Biodiversity, the non-profit Plante & Cité and the Île-de-France Regional Biodiversity Agency.
2. Differentiated management involves maintaining green spaces in a way that is suited to their characteristics and uses, so pesticides can be avoided.
3. Association between general practitioners and public health nurses to manage patients suffering from chronic illnesses and offer therapeutic education.
4. A food web represents all the feeding relationships between living beings in an ecosystem.