

“Soil is heritage: it must be preserved and passed on”

Interview with Raphaël Dormoy,
Ecological Transition Officer,
Ris-Orangis Town Council (Essonne).

KEY POINTS

► To provide high-quality natural spaces for its residents, the district of Ris-Orangis (Essonne) is implementing a number of projects, from the No Net Land Take experiment to the allotment gardens provided to individuals for pesticide-free vegetable growing. This working-class district in the greater Paris suburbs has an ace up its sleeve: large industrial and agricultural brownfield areas. The pressure to build housing is strong but there is still an opportunity to create a modern town connected to the living world.

La Santé en action: Why has Ris-Orangis joined the programme “Territoires engagés pour la nature” (Communities Invested in Nature)?

Raphaël Dormoy: The town is committed to the ecological transition in a number of ways and this programme from the French Office for Biodiversity (OFB) is one of them. Ris-Orangis was the only Île-de-France district selected in 2021 in the call for bids launched by the French Agency for Ecological Transition (ADEME) for the No Net Land Take experiment, which aims to preserve natural, agricultural and forestry land. For a working-class area with a population of 30,000 in the outer suburbs of Paris, winning was a real boost. As part of this three-year project, we are mapping urban soils in order to understand their content and assess their ecological functions. This approach is set to revolutionise the way in which the local urban development plan (PLU) is implemented: the soil is no longer seen simply as a surface area on which to build but as heritage that must be

preserved and passed on. However, the situation is rather complex: some land belongs to the municipality and some to private owners, while other areas belong to the state-owned developer Grand Paris Aménagement or to social-housing landlords. The Grand Paris Sud conurbation, to which Essonne belongs, decided to integrate our project which had the effect of amplifying the results across the broader inter-municipal planning policy, known as the Territorial Coherence Scheme (SCoT).

S.A.: How can land takes be reconciled with projects to reconnect residents with nature?

R.D.: In parallel, we are producing an atlas of local biodiversity to make an inventory of our natural spaces and identify the species living there. The aim is to draw up a PLU that safeguards high-quality soils and habitats conducive to biodiversity. One feature specific to Ris-Orangis is that brownfield sites still account for a third of its surface area. However, the pressure to use this land for new houses remains strong because the district has good public transport links and is bordered by two major roads. The challenge is to deliver an ecological transition while still developing the town. For example, we have just completed a participatory project on the Pré-aux-Vaches brownfield site, which we carried out with around thirty students from the Versailles School of Agriculture. They suggested that the site’s future development should be based on its history, its ecology and the perceptions expressed by local residents. Through this educational, inclusive, site-specific project, local residents reclaimed a space of around

4 hectares. Using landscaping created from natural materials collected and processed on site, pedestrians are guided through the area creating new urban connections. Another 11-hectare brownfield site, originally intended for a housing development, has been converted into the Aunette urban farm. This site, opened in 2023, hosts two organic market gardens set up on 6 hectares that sell their produce directly to customers.

S.A.: Are local residents involved in these initiatives?

R.D.: It’s important for everyone to be involved, like with the example of the participatory project on the Pré-aux-Vaches brownfield site. Another experiment in participatory democracy, conducted over the course of a year, helped to define the future of a run-down 3.7-hectare urban park, La Theuillerie. Every stage of the assessment included all of the park’s potential users – residents, the nearby college and business centre, local associations – alongside those involved in managing the site: the Green Spaces Department, Maintenance Department and local police. Through this process, comprising around 70 active stakeholders, the project management teams saved time on defining the area’s rehabilitation objectives and development plan. To create our atlas of biodiversity, we are working with the Muséum national d’Histoire naturelle (MNHN) using citizen science protocols. One group of residents has been working to identify and list the town’s heritage trees. Another group has been looking at the spontaneous flora that grows in the cracks under walls: to do this, we asked the Green Spaces Department to stop cutting

back this vegetation. This new practice needs to be explained to people for them to understand the changes they see, particularly local residents who may complain that the streets look unkempt.

S.A.: Have you set up any initiatives aimed at children?

R.D.: Following a request from the local children's council, a school composting project was launched. The Environment Centre of Grand Paris Sud supported us in this trial project, which brought together local authority services and staff from the French Education Ministry. Food waste was weighed in the canteens of eight primary schools and composters were installed in three of them, with the aim of equipping five schools by the end of the year. The coordinators at each site were given training that led to certification. The children are fully involved in the scheme, which is also connected to the educational gardens in their schools. In a separate project, a school playground will be completely stripped of artificial covering to make way for facilities that promote children's well-being and biodiversity (trees, an educational pond, etc.). Since the start of the 2023 school year, we have also been trialling a training course in a class of 8–9 year-olds: *Voyage au pays des arbres* ("Journey to the land of trees") is an initiative that has been awarded the Cité Educative (Educational City) label¹. Throughout the seasons, children follow practical workshops in class and in the forest school to explore the world of trees, their roles, their cycles and their needs, fostering a sense of wonder at the living things that surround them. Still under the Cité Educative umbrella, all pupils aged 9 to 11 have access to a 20-hour course to learn how to ride a bike safely in the city. Nearly 1,000 children were trained this year.

S.A.: Was it the local authority that identified this need for contact with nature?

R.D.: This need is implicit. The people of Ris-Orangis have taken full advantage of the high-quality green spaces that have been developed, whether this is the greenway created

in 2015 or the 2 km of pedestrian walkways along the banks of the Seine in 2020. People come here for active walking, running and Sunday strolls. This 2 km walkway includes 11 natural habitats, where 50 bird species and numerous bat species, including three on endangered red lists, have been identified. It's fabulous! In addition, residents have access to allotments provided by the local authority. They grow vegetables there to cook at home, in line with a charter that stipulates pesticide-free growing. To date, 256 families have each been allocated a 100 m² plot, with a further 200 families on the waiting list. Despite its proximity to the A6 motorway, this leafy and peaceful site is a communal green space where everyone can take a stroll along the shared paths. This is yet another way to bring nature closer to home, almost to our doorsteps!

S.A.: Do these facilities strengthen social ties and enhance the well-being of the people of Ris-Orangis?

R.D.: At the allotments, that's something that really shows. These areas have a real ecological and social purpose. Young people go there to meet up in a beautiful, peaceful setting. There are people from fourteen different nationalities growing vegetables linked to their culinary cultures; they are proud of producing their own food, which provides them with both sustenance and economic well-being. We also have a citizens' project to plant fruit trees in the town, based on the principle of a productive urban space, connected to the living world. Taking care of others and of the living things around us gives us a beacon of hope that we must hold on to in the face of anxiety-provoking predictions of climate change and biodiversity loss. The fundamental link between the ecological transition and health should be a main focus of our actions from the start of the school year in September 2024. Ris-Orangis has just successfully completed the *Bienfaits de l'Environnement sur la Santé* ("Environmental Benefits for Health") scheme run by the Île-de-France Nature and Environment Information

and Events Group (GRAINE). This is a four-day course, funded by the Regional Health Agency (ARS) and the Interdepartmental Environment, Development and Transport Department (DRIEAT). The aim is to give local authority staff working with different sections of the public (young people, retired people, leisure users, urban health workshop scheme, etc.) the knowledge and tools they need to incorporate aspects of well-being, the environment and health into their activities.

S.A.: Which partners support your initiatives?

R.D.: ADEME is providing us with financial support to structure the No Net Land Take initiative. We are also working on this programme with the Centre for Studies on Risk, Environment, Mobility and Development (CEREMA), the bank Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations and the Sol Paysage consultancy in Essonne. For our other projects, we work with a number of institutional partners: we receive funding from the Regional Biodiversity Agency and the Conservation of Natural Spaces association for the department of Essonne, for example. For a town of 30,000 inhabitants, with the current constraints linked to rising energy costs and the tax reform concerning second homes, the budget cannot support this type of project without external funding. That said, by positioning the district as an experimental laboratory for the ecological transition, we are at the heart of a network that makes it easier to identify new partners. ■

Interview by Joëlle Maraschin, journalist.

1. Launched in September 2019, the Cités Educatives programme aims to revitalise deprived urban neighbourhoods by involving people through an educational challenge, coordinated by the prefecture, academic services and local authorities.