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Making Sustainability Transitions Appealing: The Need for Alternative Narratives in France

Maëlle Salzinger 

Abstract

Sustainability transitions offer opportunities to rethink and improve society, such as by improving well-being, reducing inequalities and reconnecting with nature. Yet, mainstream political narratives focus on the short-term costs of sustainability transitions and fail to highlight environmental measures that consider people's social and cultural realities. This article discusses the shortcomings of current narratives of sustainability transitions in France and explores alternative approaches. Drawing on water heritage and local values can help shape narratives that resonate with people in their context, and allow them to take a long-term view. The lake and city of Annecy is an interesting example of how water heritage and local values can be used to shape appealing narratives in support of sustainability transitions.

Policy Recommendations

- Policy, media and education actors should emphasize the long-term benefits of sustainability transitions and counter the narrative that climate action conflicts with social and economic justice. The initiative of the French Agency for the ecological transition (ADEME) to promote positive narratives through popular culture (Martin 2023) is promising and should be expanded.
- Knowledge institutions should develop and share practical, place-specific, multidimensional methodologies and tools that support political and grassroots actors and foster democratic dialogue.
- The European Commission should continue funding programs that mobilize water heritage for sustainability transitions under the New European Bauhaus, as seen in projects like Bauhaus of the Sea Sails.

KEYWORDS

Narratives
Climate action
Water heritage
Climate justice
Sustainability transitions

WATER ICONS



Introduction

"Eco-anxiety is a healthy response to a sick world." With these words, French climate activist Camille Étienne powerfully reframes the narrative on eco-anxiety, which posits that fear of climate change is causing growing mental health issues, especially among young people (Zarachowicz and Couston 2023). Eco-anxiety, she says, is a collective response to a structural issue, not a private matter (Ramsay et al. 2025). And this fear, which affects large parts of the population across countries and regions (Hickman et al. 2021), in her view does not need to be paralyzing. It can spark action and hope for a more sustainable future.

Camille Étienne provides an inspiring vision for climate action and highlights the power of narratives in shaping how we, as members of society, view problems like climate change and the solutions to these problems. The rich literature on narratives (Wittmayer et al. 2019), the way they are framed in a context of climate change (Guenther et al. 2024) and how they influence policy making (see the narrative policy framework approach, Jones and McBeth 2010; Kuenzler et al. 2025) supports this analysis of narratives of sustainability transitions.

This article discusses the shortcomings of mainstream political narratives of sustainability transitions, taking France as an example. It explores alternative narratives that draw on history and culture to appeal to people's sense of identity and enable them to take a long-term view (da Cunha et al. 2020; Abherve 2024; Hein 2022). Water heritage, in particular, highlights how water has shaped the ways humans live and engage with their surroundings across time and space, and the social and cultural conditions that have shaped this process (Hein 2022). Annecy, located in the French

Alps and often presented as "the cleanest lake in Europe," provides an example of how water heritage can inspire positive narratives for a sustainable future.

Shortcomings of Mainstream Narratives on Sustainability Transitions in France

In France, like in other countries, mainstream politicians – especially from the center, right and far-right leaning parties that have increasingly shaped government policy since 2021 (Cébille 2021) – frame sustainability transitions as a costly endeavor that requires huge sacrifices (of profits, comfort, lifestyles). They rarely frame them as an opportunity to rethink and improve society in the long term. The sustainability transition is framed as a zero-sum game: if the environment benefits, the economy loses. This narrative fails to envision climate action beyond technical and technological solutions like improving the energy efficiency of buildings and systems of production. It does not recognize opportunities to use transitions as a way to promote environmental, social and economic objectives jointly.

This failure sparks fear and resistance among the population, especially low-income groups who already struggle to maintain their livelihoods. A striking example from France is the "Yellow Vest" movement (*gilets jaunes*), which was composed of largely rural, lower and middle-class citizens who protested against a government tax on automobile fuel, enacted in October 2018 to accelerate the energy transition (Mehling 2018). A key demand of the *gilets jaunes* was territorial and fiscal justice for rural areas that are underserved and overlooked compared to cities and wealthier regions (Bordenet 2024). This crisis revealed the inadequacy of seeing technical solutions as a

panacea for the climate crisis, without considering the lived experiences of the population.

The Yellow Vest movement was a turning point that profoundly changed narratives and perceptions of climate policies in France (Martin and Islar 2021). Indeed, positive and hopeful narratives about sustainability transitions abounded following the signature of the Paris Agreement in 2015 at the United Nations Conference of Parties (COP21), facilitated by French diplomats. Former president François Hollande framed the agreement as a historic moment reminiscent of the French Revolution ("a revolution for the climate") and a mark of national success, universalism and a victory for "the rights of humanity." These frames provided strong historical and cultural references that contributed to a sense of enthusiasm and pride in French society. Yet, only three years later, the Yellow Vest movement turned the narrative around. The carbon tax was the spark and became the symbol of an unequal and polarized French society where "elites are talking about the end of the world" while "we are talking about the end of the month," in the words of a protestor (in Rérolle 2018, cited in Martin and Islar 2020). Reference to the French Revolution was made again, but this time in a depiction of President Emmanuel Macron as king committing injustice against the people.

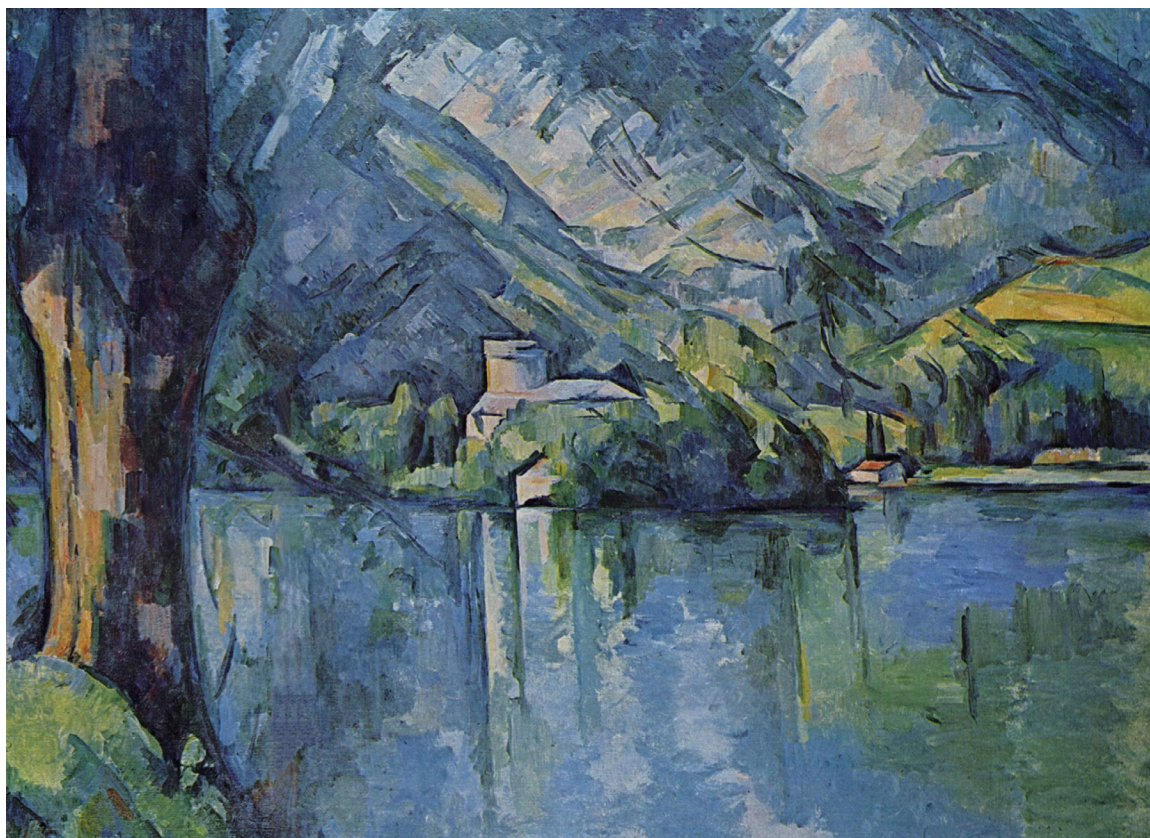
This moment fragmented cultural support for sustainability transitions in France, and altered political narratives, bringing social and economic justice to the forefront of political discourse. However, instead of engendering more holistic climate policies that integrate social, economic and cultural dimensions, mainstream politicians including President Macron have turned to a discourse of "climate relativism," prioritizing (short-term) socio-economic considerations over environmen-

tal ones (Dormagen 2024). According to this framing, the sustainability transition is necessary but should not become "excessive" or "a punishment" for citizens (in reference, for instance, to the degrowth movement). The interpretation of the *gilets jaunes* through this frame was the chosen political strategy, instead of drawing lessons from the movement to enact more just, holistic climate policies. This change in narrative concerning sustainability transitions is not unique to France and can be observed in several right and far-right leaning parties across Europe that are pushing back on parts of the European Green Deal, the European Union's main policy framework to tackle climate change (Dormagen 2024).

In sum, mainstream political narratives are using short-term social and economic justice arguments to oppose an acceleration of the sustainability transition in France. Meanwhile the Haut Conseil pour le Climat, a consultative body of scientific experts appointed by President Macron to advise on national climate policy, reports that France is not on track to meet its climate commitments and urges an acceleration of actions in most sectors such as transport, construction, agriculture, energy and waste (Haut Conseil pour le Climat 2023). Alternative narratives are urgently needed to enact the policies and actions to fulfill France's climate mitigation and adaptation commitments, in a socially just manner.

Alternative Narratives to Make Sustainability Transitions Appealing: The Example of Annecy

Alternative narratives could help overcome the perceived incompatibility between sustainability transitions and people's social, economic and cultural realities. A shift in narrative could also send more hopeful, action-oriented



^ Fig. 2 Lake Annecy, by Paul Cézanne (Source: Paul Cézanne, 1896. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons).

messages to the many people in France (8 out of 10) who report being worried about climate change, according to a recent survey by the Economic, Social and Environmental Council of the French government (Tordeux-Bitker 2023).

History and culture offer opportunities to reanchor climate and environmental policies within longer-term processes, and appeal to people's sense of identity and belonging to a particular place. As shown in the above section, historical references to the French revolution and the values associated with it (human rights, equality) continue to be a powerful political frame in France. Another powerful frame is the relationship between people and their environment. Remembering the different ways we have lived

with our environment over time, and how our values have changed accordingly, can help people envision future changes (da Cunha et al. 2020; Hein 2022). In the case of communities living near water bodies like lakes, rivers or the sea, the concept of water heritage can help uncover the memories attached to water and how these can be mobilized for, or against, sustainability transitions. (Re)activating history and culture with a focus on water heritage helps develop future sustainability pathways that are more holistic, place-specific, and rooted in long-term development and sociocultural contexts (Hein 2022).

In the French context, Abherve (2024) investigated how history is used strategically to



^ Fig. 3 View of Annecy from Mount Veyrier (Source: Basteran, 2005. CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons).

support different political positions on the ecological restoration of the Haut-Rhône River. History and water heritage has also been mobilized to facilitate long-term thinking and foresight (Da Cunha et al. 2020). Using past narratives about the Gulf of Morbihan in workshops with community actors helped these actors to envision future pathways for their region and feel a sense of ownership over them.

The lake and city of Annecy provides an opportunity to explore past, present and future narratives about living with water sustainably. Located in the Alps, the lake of Annecy is the second-largest natural lake in France (Janjua and Gerdeaux 2009). It is famous within the country and beyond for its crystal-clear

waters and scenic landscape, which are used strategically by city actors to attract visitors. Terms such as “pure,” “pristine” and “dreamy” are commonly used when referring to the lake (e.g., John 2024). The official website of tourism in Savoie and Haute-Savoie emphasizes Annecy’s natural landscapes, its rich culture and history and the inspiration the lake has provided to famous artists, including Paul Cézanne, who painted the lake in 1896 (Office de Tourisme Savoie Mont-Blanc 2025). This strategy seems to be effective: the city attracts over 3 million tourists per year, an important source of employment for the city’s 135,000 inhabitants, especially during the summer season when tourism accounts for around 35 per cent of the city’s employment

(Bianco and Marza 2022). The lake also supports commercial and recreational fishing activities, consisting of more than one thousand recreational fishermen and four commercial fishermen (Janjua and Gerdeaux 2009).

However, the prevalent narrative of the lake's purity and aesthetics might need to be updated to address growing ecological challenges. Indeed, the lake benefits from low levels of nitrate, pesticides and phosphorus, and serves as the main source of drinking water of the city of Annecy (70 per cent) (Agglomération du Grand Annecy 2024). Nonetheless, over-tourism and car traffic close to the lake are bringing other forms of water pollution, like hydrocarbons and heavy metal residues, and non-native species have been introduced via the use of leisure boats (Vinet 2022; Soares et al. 2025). In particular, there are signs that the quagga mussel is present in the lake, a non-native species that poses a high risk of disruption for local ecosystems (e.g., food chains, water deoxygenation) (Syndicat Mixte du Lac d'Annecy 2023; Annecy Ville 2024). Natural ecosystems have also been impacted by water infrastructures like marinas, bridges and sluice gates used for tourism, industry and flood management. Strikingly, 80 per cent of the lake's reed beds have disappeared (Massemin 2018; Nikolli 2022).

In addition, climate change will impact the entire lake ecosystem in the long term, as the Alps will see the melting of glaciers and snow, floods, debris flows and landslides, but also oxygen depletion in the water which threatens fish, as explained in the magazine *Outside* (2021). According to Soares and colleagues (2025), "climate change is the most important threat to the lake [of Annecy] in comparison to other anthropic pressures" and will impact water temperatures and the fish population. These climatic and environmental changes present a

complex future for Annecy and its lake, where values and narratives of economic prosperity and leisure will need to be balanced with the imperatives of climate resilience, biodiversity restoration and sustainable livelihoods. Prevalent narratives of the lake could evolve to better highlight the lake's ecological value alongside its aesthetic value.

Annecy's long history of coexistence with the lake can be mobilized to support this rebalancing of values and narratives. Indeed, this history shows how the values and practices around the lake have evolved to meet challenges, and how policymakers have supported these changes. The current uses of the lake for recreation and drinking water would not have been possible if not for key turning points, especially when grassroots pressures and policy changes helped "save" the lake from pollution in the 1950s and 1960s (Barraqué 1986). Local divers, fisherfolks and scientists sounded the alarm and elected officials responded to prevent the eutrophication of the lake (Vinet 2022). In 1957, eight communes around the lake created an intercommunal public body, the Syndicat Mixte du Lac d'Annecy (SILA), to treat sewage water and monitor water quality. This response institutionalized long-term mechanisms that have benefitted the lake environment and public health in the long run, as the SILA has played a key role in the scientific monitoring of the lake's ecological conditions since the 1960s (Barraqué 1986; Conservatoire d'espaces naturels de Haute-Savoie 2016). Today, the SILA has expanded and manages 1,323 km of collectors, 100 pumping stations and 12 wastewater treatment plants, as reported on its website. It is administered by "delegates" appointed by public intercommunal entities. Alongside the SILA, a range of local actors and associations continue to mobilize for the preservation of the lake (Vinet 2022).



^ Fig. 4 Annecy city view (Source: François Goglines, 2007. CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons).

This memory of the lake's "rescue" is a local success story that can be mobilized in public narratives to highlight Annecy's capacity to adapt to new climate and environmental challenges. It demonstrates what may happen when local actors become proactive stewards of their environment, are listened to by policymakers, and met with meaningful reform (Vinet 2022). It also sends a positive message, whereby prioritizing health and environmental protection ultimately supported the city's prosperity by boosting the tourism sector for the following decades. As such, a better recognition of the lake's ecological value can be framed as an opportunity to ensure Annecy's long-term prosperity for all inhabitants of the area (humans and other species) in the face of a changing climate. This provides an alternative to the narrative that has emerged after the Yellow Vest movement in France, which pits climate policies against economic justice. For Annecy, this shift in narrative may require

rethinking the current tourism model of the city, to consider the lake as a living ecosystem rather than a landscape. The rising ecotourism ecosystem in the area (Office de Tourisme du Lac d'Annecy 2025) can be a driving force in these efforts. In sum, Annecy's water heritage can support inspiring narratives about sustainability transitions and their potential for the advancement of environmental, social and economic objectives jointly, in a way that enhances local cultural identities.

Conclusion

Despite the urgency of accelerating sustainability transitions, mainstream political narratives are spreading fear among citizens and promote a form of "climate relativism," as seen in the case of France. Popular support for values of social and economic justice – as seen in the Yellow Vest movement and its impact

on climate narratives – could foster more equitable climate policies and transform society in the long term. Yet, current narratives focus on the short-term costs of transitions and omit climate solutions that embed technological change within social and cultural contexts. Current political narratives not only generate low popular support and even backlash against transitions in large economies like France. They also fail to inspire and give hope to a population that increasingly feels fearful and anxious about the future – feelings on which far-right populist parties thrive.

Fortunately, narratives are fluid and can be reshaped to support different visions for a sustainable future. History and culture provide many opportunities to make sustainability transitions more inspiring and grounded in local realities. Due to the close relationship between communities and water across history, water heritage offers a unique potential to rethink how we coexist with nature and each other. This is striking in the case of Annecy, where city dwellers have coexisted with the lake for centuries. Powerful narratives around the lake's cleanliness and beauty have taken hold to support a local sense of pride and attract tourists. But narratives should be adapted in the face of climate change and ecological crisis and reflect the values of Annecy's residents beyond the dominant focus on tourism.

French politicians, from the local to the national level, bear a huge responsibility as to what narratives they choose to highlight, in support of which policies, and the long-term costs of inaction for their citizens and humanity as a whole. Remembering and recounting history remains the best defense against populism. Culture and heritage can revive a sense of belonging, community and agency, fostering a shift from hopelessness and apathy to action.

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