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From Paris Plages to a Sustainable River

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Abstract
Two decades ago, Paris shifted from a functional municipal policy for the Seine to one that approached the river as an extension of the city. Until the 1990s, the Seine was a service area that fulfilled very specific transport functions. The same period saw growing concern about heritage and a need to preserve the river landscape and its architecture. In the 2000s, the Paris-Plage program marked a transition to a policy focused on the variety of ways the river is used. It also led to the establishment of new urban lifestyles along the river and, as a result, to imagining new ways of using the water. Today, three new trends are emerging: the need to broaden our perspective and consider the Seine on the scale of the entire valley; the return of the "river system" with all its hydrological and natural characteristics; and finally, the slow emergence of "rights of nature" in political debates.

KEYWORDS

Seine River
Paris
usages
heritage
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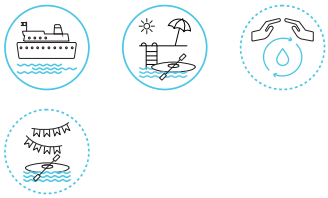
WATER ICONS



Policy Recommendations

- The City of Paris and the Port Authorities should develop a new master plan with a 20 year perspective for the Seine River and its banks that includes neighboring local authorities. This master plan should specify main uses of the river such as for freight, sports and leisure, or biodiversity.
- The City of Paris should experiment with new natural riverfront developments in order to promote permeability of ground, natural air refreshment and new trees and aquatic plants, in accordance with its new biodiversity plan (City of Paris, June 2025a).

< Fig. 1 A barge crossing Paris on the Seine (Source: Jean-Baptiste Gurliat / Ville de Paris, 2025).

Introduction

My perspective is not that of a researcher: It is the perspective of an urban planner and the project manager for numerous public spaces in Paris. This article will attempt to interpret public policy concerning the Seine in Paris over the last 30-some years. During the 1990s, an imperceptible shift took place in municipal policy. At the beginning of the decade the Seine and its banks were largely perceived as service areas and the river as a fluid, aquatic space radically distinct from the rest of the city. By the end of the decade, as clear in various urban projects, the Seine was more often seen as an extension of the city. These two approaches continue to coexist, but they are also being challenged by new perspectives: the scale of the Seine Valley, the resurgence of hydrological and natural issues, and the rights of nature.

The Seine as Functional Resource and Heritage Site (Late Twentieth Century)

Until the 1990s, the Seine was primarily a service area, fulfilling very specific transport/mobility functions. The river hosted inland waterway transport, including bulk freight transport (of cereals, sand, gravel, construction waste, etc., amounting to 4 million tons crossing Paris in 2020) and tourist traffic on passenger boats. A significant portion of the banks was devoted to car traffic, with distinct sections open to walkers and serving boats at the quays, many of which were houseboats.

Everyday pedestrian use of the area at that time mainly consisted of walking along the high quays and looking down on the moving landscape of boats and cars crossing the Seine. This was also the period when the last bridges over the Seine were built, such as the Charles de Gaulle Bridge, opened in 1996, the last road bridge, and the two pedestrian bridges at Solférino/Léopold Sédar Senghor (1996) between the Tuileries Garden and the Musée d'Orsay, and the Simone de Beauvoir footbridge (2006) between the Parc de Bercy and the BnF-François Mitterrand (Pavillon de l'Arsenal 1998) (fig. 1).

At the same time, concerns were growing about the heritage of the riverbanks and the built and floating structures along the river. In 1991, UNESCO classified the banks of the Seine in Paris (an area of more than 500 hectares between the Île St-Louis and the Eiffel Tower-Trocadéro) as a World Heritage Site. Then, in 1997, Mayor Jean Tiberi announced an ambitious plan to reclaim the riverbanks, including the renovation of numerous historic bridges, the illumination of some of the bridges and the creation of a continuous promenade along the banks.

At the end of this period, the state services, the City of Paris services and the Paris Urban Planning Agency (APUR) drew up the first version of a charter of architectural and landscaping requirements for the banks of the Seine, which was approved in 1999 (APUR 2010).

Paris-Plages as a transition towards a more usage-oriented political vision (2000s)

In 2001, newly elected city mayor Bertrand Delanoë announced plans for Paris-Plages (Paris Beaches), which was presented as a first step in reclaiming the banks of the Seine for Parisians. The program consisted of providing spaces along the river, including sandy beaches, during the summer months, along with cultural and recreational activities including sports, as well as temporary refreshment stands.



^ Fig. 2 Swimming in the Baignade de Grenelle in the Seine, at Île aux Cygnes in the summer (Source: Josephine Brueder / Ville de Paris, 2025).

The program emphasized the preeminence of scenography over permanent works and the creation of an ephemeral decor designed to change representations of space and allow for new uses, based on the code of seaside resorts. Spaces began to be seen as having a temporary and reversible nature. This contributed to the emergence of new urban practices in which users become actors engaging in leisure activities on the banks of the Seine.

The early 2000s are the momentum of several public and private initiatives on the Seine and its banks. In particular, the construction of the national François Mitterrand Library and its opening to the public in 1998 led to a change in the perception of the ports located below key locations. The government decided to remove the industrial facilities from the Port de la Gare and relocate them upstream to the Port de Tolbiac, which was itself undergoing redevelopment. The Port de la Gare became the first urban port entirely devoted to leisure and dining activities. In the mid-2000s, it welcomed a public swimming pool on the water and a dozen restaurant boats. In fine weather, from May to October, the quays are covered by huge temporary terraces, hosting cafés, restaurants and leisure facilities that are popular with Parisian visitors and residents of the larger metropolitan

area. It was within the perimeter of the Port de la Gare that the first charter for the use of Parisian ports was established in the early 2010s.

In the mid-2010s, it was finally time to transform the riverside roads with the Parc Rives de Seine project, starting with the right bank, then the left. Once again, the ports became leisure areas and locations for new boats and floating facilities: the Hôtel de Ville port, the Solferino port, the Invalides port and so on.

The 2000s were a transitional period of converging, but often competing, visions of the uses and functions assigned to the river and its banks. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive. All these projects continue to be confronted with the structural elements that constitute the reality of the river in Paris (DRIET 2019; APUR 2020; Council of Paris 2021).

It is, first of all, a body of water, the Seine in Paris, that dictates the pace of activities on the river and its banks, depending on the season and the river's water level: high water in winter, low water in summer, thanks to the dams located upstream and immediately downstream from Paris.

Of course, the Seine remains a transport route that experiences tensions between the very high number of passenger boats, which have become increasingly numerous in recent decades, and freight boats that travel up and down the Seine, weaving their way between hundreds of leisure boats.

The morphology of the ports has remained unchanged in the last century, with the old gently sloping ports giving way to horizontal embankments and vertical quay walls: This has made urban integration and access to the water more complex, often requiring connecting structures (footbridges, pontoons) that fluctuate with changes in water levels.

The urban ensemble of the riverbanks, high quays and the buildings constructed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is particularly imposing and could be intimidating. However, it offers the possibility of playing with extraordinary scenography. This was invented in 2002 by Jean-Christophe Choblet and was even more exceptional during the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games on July 26, 2024 (City of Paris no date; City of Paris 2025b; City of Paris 2025c; Pradelle and Lallemant 2004).

Conclusion

At this point, we need to broaden our perspective, look beyond Paris, and consider the Seine on the scale of the Seine valley and its emerging and ongoing dynamics. Since 2020, the metropolitan areas of Le Havre, Rouen, the city of Paris, and the Greater Paris metropolitan area have come together in an agreement called “Axe Seine” and have invited the 12 other inter-municipal communities between Paris and Le Havre to join.

At the same time, we are seeing a return to the preeminence of the river as a “river system” in all its hydrological and natural characteristics. Consequently, we need to work on various long-term programs simultaneously: water-climate action plans (e.g., to preserve water resources and prevent drought) and management plans (e.g., for the protection of wetlands and flood prevention).

At the request of the City of Paris, a public law research group, GRIDAUH, conducted a legal study on the feasibility of recognizing the Seine as a legal entity. To explore this possibility, the

City of Paris launched a citizens' convention in the spring of 2025, enabling some 50 Parisian citizens to consider and produce a statement regarding the idea that the Seine has legal rights and how to strengthen protection of those rights.

Finally, the summer of 2025 saw the first swimming sessions in the Seine in Paris. Their success (100,000 swimmers, good water quality, no incidents or accidents) bodes well for the development of this practice on the Seine and other rivers in France.

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