

Michel Leenhardt (1942-2023) and the beginnings of the Regional Natural Park of Corsica

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Abstract. Michel Leenhardt was born in Montpellier (Occitania, France). He graduated from the most prestigious of the French *Grandes Écoles*, the École Polytechnique, and in 1969 chose to start work on setting up the Regional Natural Park of Corsica (RNPC), an innovative type of organisation at the time, before the concept of sustainable development became popular. He succeeded in creating the RNPC, with the decisive help of a visionary politician, François Giacobbi and an outstanding scientist, Prof. Roger Molinier. Between 1972, when the RNPC was created, and 1997, Michel was director of the RNPC, an exceptionally long tenure in the French administration. Michel had to overcome wide-ranging obstacles, from issues related to the creation of the park to its day-to-day management. He uniquely knew how to understand the elected officials, the State administrations and the aspirations of the Corsican people and transformed the RNPC into an internationally recognized success. In 1975, Michel set up, within the RNPC, the iconic Scàndula Nature Reserve. At the French national level, he participated in the foundation of the Permanent Conference of Nature Reserves (subsequently *Réserves Naturelles de France*); he was its first president (1982-1983), then again president in 1990-1991. Between 1997 and his retirement, Michel worked at the French Federation of Regional Natural Parks. After his retirement, he devoted his energies to the Association of Friends of the RNPC, which in 1992 became the Conservatory of Natural Areas of Corsica. It seems sad, distressing and unfair that, barely half a century later, the outstanding work of Michel Leenhardt for the benefit of the environment and sustainable development in Corsica has been forgotten by the younger generation.

Keywords: Corsica, François Giacobbi, Michel Leenhardt, nature reserves, protected areas, Roger Molinier, sustainable development.

Résumé. Michel Leenhardt (1942-2023) et les débuts du Parc naturel régional de Corse. Michel Leenhardt est né à Montpellier (Occitanie, France). Il est diplômé de l'une des plus prestigieuses Grandes Écoles de France, l'École Polytechnique. En 1969, il a choisi de préparer la création du Parc naturel régional de Corse (PNRC). Tombé sous le charme de la Corse, il ne la quittera jamais. Le PNRC constituait un projet innovant, à une époque où la notion de développement durable n'était pas encore populaire. Michel a réussi à créer le PNRC, avec l'aide décisive d'un homme politique visionnaire, François Giacobbi, et d'un scientifique d'exception, lui aussi visionnaire, dans le domaine de l'écologie, le Pr Roger Molinier. Entre 1972, date de la création du PNRC, et 1997, Michel Leenhardt en a été le directeur, ce qui constitue une longévité exceptionnelle dans l'administration française. Michel a eu à surmonter de nombreux obstacles, entre la création du PNRC et sa gestion au jour le jour. Il a su comprendre les élus, les administrations de l'État et les aspirations du peuple corse. Il a su faire du PNRC un succès, aujourd'hui reconnu à l'échelle internationale. En 1975, Michel a créé, au sein du PNRC, l'emblématique Réserve naturelle de Scàndula. Au niveau national, il a participé à la création de la Conférence permanente des réserves naturelles, devenue par la suite Réserves naturelles de France ; il en fut le premier président, de 1982 à 1983, puis en

fut à nouveau président de 1990 à 1991. Entre 1997 et son départ à la retraite, Michel a travaillé à la Fédération des parcs naturels régionaux de France. Après sa retraite, Michel s'est consacré à l'Association des amis du parc naturel régional de Corse (AAPNRC), devenue en 1992 le Conservatoire des espaces naturels de Corse (CENC). Il est triste, perturbant et injuste que, à peine un demi-siècle après la création du PNRC, l'œuvre déterminante de Michel Leenhardt en faveur de l'environnement et du développement durable de la Corse soit un peu trop oubliée par la jeune génération.

Mots-clés : Corse, développement durable, espaces protégés, François Giacobbi, Michel Leenhardt, réserves naturelles, Roger Molinier.

Youth and education

Michel Leenhardt was born on April 12, 1942 in Montpellier (Occitania, France). He lived there until he was 18 years old. His father Raymond Leenhardt (1901-1965) was an insurance agent, and his mother Françoise Carrieu (1916-2001) a 'housewife', as they used to say. Both came from the distinguished bourgeoisie of Montpellier. His mother came from a family of professors at the Faculty of Medicine of Montpellier. His grandfather, a professor of hygiene, but also a hunter, amateur fisherman and naturalist, was his first guide in matters of nature, and it was he who gave Michel a taste for protecting it.

Michel considered that he had been a rather good student. However, he twice failed the *baccalauréat*, the French secondary school final examination and qualification for university entrance, in July and September 1958 ⁽¹⁾. This failure prompted him to put more effort into his work, and to try to follow in the footsteps of his elder brother, who was then studying for the highly competitive entrance examinations for the *École Polytechnique*, popularly known as 'the X', the most prestigious of French '*Grandes Ecoles*'.

Having finally succeeded in the *baccalauréat*, in July 1959, Michel left Montpellier for Paris, took the *Mathématiques spéciales* course, and passed the *École Polytechnique* entrance examination in July 1963. He then joined the ENGREF (*École Nationale du Génie Rural, des Eaux et des Forêts*). An unexpected opportunity then presented itself to him: a training course focused on the future Regional Natural Parks was launched in 1967. This course was intended to familiarize participants with the environment (the Ministry of the Environment was only created in 1970) and to study the ways other countries managed their protected areas. Michel was one of the first fifteen people selected to take this one-year course; the first and the last, because the course was discontinued, perhaps considered useless by the people in charge at the ENGREF.

¹ For those French readers who passed the *baccalauréat* recently, it should be noted that the pass rate, three quarters of a century ago, was much lower than today. Was the examination more difficult? Were the students less hardworking or less intelligent? Were the teachers less competent?

This course on Regional Natural Parks, which were created by a decree of March 1st, 1967, when General De Gaulle was the French President (Streib and Petel, 2019), was the trigger that determined Michel Leenhardt's future professional career. Passionate about both the sea and the mountains, he chose to go to Corsica to try to set up the Regional Natural Park of Corsica (*Parc naturel régional de Corse*, PNRC - in Corsican *Parcu di Corsica*). Corsica is often nicknamed 'the mountain in the sea', and it thus well-suited Michel's preferences for the first steps of his professional life.

The main characteristics of the Regional Natural Parks (RNPs), in France, are: **(i)** a regional initiative; **(ii)** a project basing the development of a territory on the protection of the natural and cultural heritage, spatialized in a reference plan, which does not introduce any specific regulations, enforceable against town planning rules; **(iii)** a commitment by local authorities (municipal, regional) on the basis of a negotiated and contractual charter. In the charter, it is written, for example, that '*The park is not a museum*' and that '*the park is not a sum of prohibitions*' (Leenhardt and Breton, 2009); **(iv)** management by a *syndicat mixte* (a joint association of local authorities, from municipal to the regional level); **(v)** a paid management team (including park wardens); **(vi)** statutory operating budget, provided by the State (10%), the Region and the Departments (60-70%), the municipalities (10-15%) and from European Union funds; **(vii)** validation by a French decree for 10 years; criteria fixed by the decree of 1.9.1994. Upon renewal, possibility of revision of the charter; and **(viii)** an implementation agreement drawn up with the State (Leenhardt, 1970; Leenhardt and Molinier, 1985; Leenhardt, 1990; Grossetete, 2001; Streib and Petel, 2019). The status and objectives of RNPs are therefore very different from those of French National Parks: an RNP is a regional project validated by the State (see e.g. Leenhardt, 1990; Barnaud and Ramade, 1993; Jaffeux, 2010; Barthod and Millet, 2011; Boudouresque *et al.*, 2013; Gérardin, 2013; Mabile, 2013; Parcs nationaux de France, 2015; Giran, 2018; Boudouresque *et al.*, 2020; Martin, 2020; Boudouresque *et al.*, 2021a).

The birth of the Regional Natural Park of Corsica

On July 23rd, 1969, just two days after Neil Amstrong, the US astronaut, first stepped onto the surface of the moon and spoke the famous words '*That's one small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind*', Michel Leenhardt landed in Corsica to take up the post of project manager (*chargé de mission*) for the creation of the Regional Natural Park of Corsica (RNPC). Michel liked to underline this coincidence between the two dates (Colonna d'Istria, 2011).

In Corsica, Michel Leenhardt met the two other major actors in the creation of the RNPC: François Giacobbi (1919-1997) (Fig. 1),

president of the *Conseil général de la Corse* (1959-1976), president of the *Conseil général de la Haute-Corse* (1976-1992) and president of the *Conseil régional de Corse* (1974-1979), and Roger Molinier (1927-1991), professor at Aix-Marseille University (Provence). Both, with more passion for the former, more scientific rigour for the latter, were determinedly defending the idea of a regional natural park in Corsica (Giacobbi, 1970; Boudouresque *et al.*, 2021b).

Roger Molinier's research for his doctoral thesis, defended in 1958, took place in Cap Corse (Capicorsu², northern Corsica) (Molinier, 1959, 1960). It was a very original work, concerning both terrestrial vegetation and marine biocenoses (fauna and flora); such an approach is unique, unless we go back several centuries, as the work of researchers has become increasingly specialised. This PhD work, which combined terrestrial and marine ecology, flora and fauna, gave Roger Molinier a unique and very broad-based naturalist culture. Roger Molinier was also an exceptional teacher and lecturer, one of the best of his generation (Boudouresque, 1992; Boudouresque and Olivier, 2013). It is not surprising that he quickly turned to ecology applied to the management and protection of the environment, at a time when human impact (e.g. pollution) was at its peak and when protective measures (e.g. protected areas) were limited or non-existent. But unlike political ecologists (Greens), Roger Molinier's approach was based on solid scientific knowledge and not only on the emotions and the feel-good factor (see e.g. Boudouresque *et al.*, 2022).

Roger Molinier (and the Association of Friends of the Regional Natural Park of Corsica - see below) made headlines in the Corsican, Provençal and national press when he got involved in the Montedison 'red mud' affair. Montedison, the leading Italian chemical group, had built a factory in Tuscany to manufacture titanium dioxide; since 1972, it had been discharging 3 000 t of waste per day (sulphuric acid, iron sulphate, trace metals such as titanium and vanadium, etc.) in the form of sludge, 40 km off the coast of Corsica. Feelings ran high; Roger Molinier testified at a first trial, in 1974, in Italy; Montedison was ultimately not found guilty. It was after a second trial, in Bastia (Corsica), that Montedison was condemned, in July 1985, putting an end to the waste discharge definitively (Maillard and Geronimi, 1974; Colonna d'Istria, 2011; Boudouresque and Olivier, 2013; Huglo, 2013).

² Corsican toponymy is of Tuscan (Italian) origin, from the time when Corsica was under the rule of the Republic of Genoa; this toponymy was taken over by France when Genoa ceded Corsica to France in the 18th century. Here, we have chosen to adopt the modern Corsican toponymy, which differs to a greater or lesser extent from the Tuscan (Aedis, 2016; Canioni, 2017).



Figure 1. François Giacobbi, one of the three 'fathers' of the Regional Natural Park of Corsica (*Parc naturel régional de Corse*), together with Roger Molinier and Michel Leenhardt, in the 1970s. Photo D.R. *in* Leenhardt and Breton (2009).

The Regional Economic, Social and Environmental Council (*Conseil économique, social et environnemental régional* - CESER) is a consultative assembly that advises the regional council and the president of the regional council on economic, social and environmental issues and the consequences of regional policies. Between 1973 and 1982, Roger Molinier was a member of the CESER of Corsica, to be the 'voice of the environment' there, although at that time, the CESER was only the CESR, without the 'E' for Environment.

In the 1960s, feelings ran high in favour of the protection of nature in Corsica (Boudouresque, 2021), and the idea of a National Park or a Regional Natural Park (the public was barely aware of the difference between the two, although considerable), was making its way into public awareness. In 1965, the Corsican Assembly decided to call on a number of prestigious scientists for an assessment mission, called the '*Mission Bourlière*' (Bourlière Mission): François Bourlière, Jean Dorst, Luc Hoffman, Roger Molinier, Pierre Pfeffer and Michel Terrasse. They strongly recommended the creation of a National Park, which was unanimously approved by the *Conseil général de la Corse* (Richez and Richez-Battesti, 1970; Molinier, 1992; Leenhardt and Breton, 2009; Colonna d'Istria, 2011; Boudouresque *et al.*, 2021b). However, the

Corsica national park project was in competition with that of the Pyrenees. The Minister at the time, Edgar Faure, was scared off by the cost of two national parks. He chose the Pyrenees, and offered Corsica, as a sort of consolation prize, the status of Regional Natural Park, a concept then in the making (Leenhardt and Breton, 2009; Colonna d'Istria, 2011). Looking back, it was not such a bad idea!

Roger Molinier was an ecumenical scientist, interested in the sea as much as the land, in the flora as much as in the fauna, and was also a stylish writer. He could have been a political orator, or a candidate for the famous (in France) Goncourt prize for literature. The so-called Bourlière Report, of which he is the author, goes far beyond the results of the *Bourlière Mission*. It is in a way an environmentalist manifesto, an act of faith, a leaflet intended to 'sell' the park project (Colonna d'Istria, 2011). Roger Molinier wrote for example: *'Issues relating to the protection and conservation of nature are intimately linked to the economic and social promotion of the sectors to be developed. It would be dangerous to neglect this aspect of the problem which seems to us to be of primary interest in Corsica. There is a truth on which we cannot insist too much: for all that relates to the preservation of nature, we will do nothing without the support of the public, not only that of tourists, but also and above all that of Corsicans [...]. We will not make Corsica without the Corsicans'* ⁽³⁾ (Molinier, 1992; Leenhardt and Breton, 2009; Colonna d'Istria, 2011). Roger Molinier thus defined sustainable development, a notion that was to become popular at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, but of which he was one of the precursors (Boudouresque and Olivier, 2013). Thanks to Roger Molinier, the Bourlière Report was unanimously approved by the *Conseil général de la Corse* in January 1966.

The guiding idea of the founding fathers of the RNPC (François Giacobbi, Michel Leenhardt and Roger Molinier) was therefore to protect nature **with** man, and not **against** man (Leenhardt, 1970; Molinier, 1992; Colonna d'Istria, 2011). It was also to develop a kind of tourism which would be a driver of economic balance, a driver of geographical balance (in particular towards the interior of the island), a model of tourism adapted to Corsica, and not tourism destroying Corsican space and culture (Judais-Boielli, 1974a).

It is interesting to note that François Giacobbi and Roger Molinier had 'sold' the idea of a park in Corsica so well that, in 1969, when Michel

³ Translated from French by the authors: *'Les questions relatives à la protection et à la conservation de la nature sont intimement liées à la promotion économique et sociale des secteurs à aménager. Il serait dangereux de vouloir négliger cet aspect du problème qui nous paraît revêtir, en Corse, un intérêt primordial. Il est une vérité sur laquelle nous ne saurions trop insister : pour tout ce qui touche à la sauvegarde de la nature, on ne fera rien sans l'appui du public, non seulement celui des touristes, mais encore et surtout celui des corses [...]. On ne fera pas la Corse sans les corses'*.

Leenhardt landed in Corsica, everyone in Corsica believed that the RNPC had already been in existence since 1966, while the decree establishing the regional natural parks was only signed by the then French President, General de Gaulle, on March 1st, 1967, and that creating the RNPC in 1972.

Michel realistically told us how decisive François Giacobbi's authority was: *'He had sent the message to the elected officials that I shouldn't get in trouble, and that I was his personal representative (although, formally, I was chargé de mission - project manager - of the Préfet of Corsica, therefore of the representative of the French State)'*.

At the end of the 1960s, one of us (CFB) was a young assistant lecturer in Professor Roger Molinier's laboratory. With the other assistant lecturers, including Henry Augier, Alain Crouzet and Max Pellegrini, we printed page by page, and then laid out, the texts that Roger Molinier wanted to distribute, during his conferences or speeches before the assembly of Corsica. At that time, photocopiers did not exist; the texts were typed on stencils, placed in a mimeograph and operated manually; the ink was forced through the stencil and the mimeograph was dripping with ink. Needless to say, we saw Roger's campaign more as a chore than a major step forward in environmental protection.

For Michel Leenhardt, enthusiastic but inexperienced (Fig. 2), the three years between his arrival in Corsica in 1969 and the creation of the RNPC in 1972 were tough. Michel liked to recall, modestly, that *'Without the unfailing political support of President François Giacobbi, and without the ecological vision, teachings and charisma of Roger Molinier, I might never have made it!'*

What did Michel have to carry out his mission with? **(i)** The 1966 report of the *Mission Bourlière* of 1968 (written by Roger Molinier), relatively lacking in precise data, because the mission had been quite brief. This report pleaded for the creation of a National Park (Molinier, 1992). **(ii)** The worthless report on the creation of a Regional Natural Park, produced by a consulting firm unfamiliar with either the environment or Corsica. **(iii)** A holiday village project in the Aitone forest (*paesolu d'Aitone*), between U Portu and Bocca di Verghju (western Corsica), launched by Michel's team. **(iv)** Corsican public opinion which strongly desired a park, whether national or regional (people did not see the difference between the two), in particular to give a new lease of life to the central regions of Corsica, which were turning into an uninhabited wasteland.



Figure 2. Michel Leenhardt. Photo © Conservatoire des espaces naturels de Corse (CENC).

The challenges that Michel faced during the three years gestation of the RNPC were numerous. **(i)** Understanding how the French administration works. It is difficult for the researchers that we are (CFB and MPB), but we discovered, speaking with Michel, that it was not easy either even for a pure product of the *Grandes Écoles* which nurture the future bosses of the French administration. **(ii)** Finding offices for the young team, still small but destined to expand rapidly. **(iii)** Finding his first collaborators (Leenhardt, 1972a). **(iv)** Defining the area of the future RNPC. In agreement with François Giacobbi and Roger Molinier, Michel transformed the initial project, centred on the high mountains, into a project integrating the watersheds and the coast (Colonna d'Istria, 2011). **(v)** Meeting (at least once) the elected representatives of the 60 municipalities invited to join the RNPC (there were finally 83; Leenhardt, 1990), and encouraging them to actually join it, by joining the *syndicat mixte*. Michel told us: *'These countless encounters have been fascinating; they allowed me to discover Corsica, to try to understand it, and finally to love it with passion'*. **(vi)** Writing the statutes of the *syndicat mixte*. **(vii)** Explaining the difference between a national park and a regional natural park (Colonna d'Istria, 2011). **(viii)** Getting the creation of the RNPC approved (scope, area, statutes of the *syndicat mixte* and charter) by the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of the Sea. And last but not the least **(ix)** getting to know a field, a human and natural environment, that was new to him.

And at the same time, Michel had to anticipate the creation of the RNPC and already prepare its future flagship actions: **(i)** Drafting the RNPC charter. As there was not yet a model for the charter of a regional natural park, Michel was inspired by ideas that had been taught to him, or that he had forged himself, during the training course for future Regional Natural Parks, in 1967. **(ii)** Ensuring the proper realization of the *paesolu d'Aitone*. **(iii)** Laying the first foundations of a nature reserve, centred on the peninsula of Scàndula. Although the future RNPC had 80 km of coastline and extended into the sea, it had

practically no authority over the sea, which is explained by the fact that it is managed by local authorities (municipalities, region) whereas in France, the marine environment is the exclusive domain of the State. The creation of a nature reserve, the management of which would be entrusted to the RNPC, would allow it to actually act at sea (Leenhardt, 1990). And (iv) developing a hiking trail, idea which had been 'in the air' since the 1950s, along the ridge line from south to north which constitutes the backbone of Corsica; this path was to be called the GR20 and would become more than famous, a kind of modern myth, among hikers all over the world.

Michel told us a story that well illustrates his perplexity as an administrator, faced with the complexity of men, the field and politics. Before a meeting on the development of the Restònica valley, well after the RNPC was created, he asked a mayor for an interview, which the latter accepted. The meeting was cordial and constructive. But just before leaving, the mayor said to him: *'Mr. Leenhardt, I have to tell you something. During the meeting, when I say 'no', it will mean 'yes', and when I say yes, it will mean no'*. As stressed by Leenhardt and Breton (2009), *'It is difficult to imagine, today, what it took in terms of discussions, debates, battles and above all new ideas, both at the regional level and in Corsica, to attach the adjectives 'natural' and 'regional' to the word 'park' (4)*.



Figure 3. The Scàndula Peninsula. Photo © Charles-François Boudouresque.

⁴ Translated from French: *On imagine difficilement, aujourd'hui, ce qu'il a fallu de réflexions, de débats, de combats et surtout d'idées neuves, tant au niveau régional qu'en Corse, pour accoler les adjectifs 'naturel' et 'régional' au mot 'parc'* (Leenhardt and Breton, 2009).

These difficulties were successfully overcome. Decree 72-397 of May 12, 1972, officially created the Regional Natural Park of Corsica⁵ (Léfigrance, 1972; Richez, 1983). Michel Leenhardt was appointed by the *syndicat mixte*, of which François Giacobbi was president, director of the Regional Natural Park of Corsica (Colonna d'Istria, 2011). The RNPC today (by 2018) includes 178 municipalities that are members of the *syndicat mixte*, covers 4 484 km², and includes iconic sites such as the Scàndula Peninsula (Fig. 3), Monte Cintu (its highest peak, 2 706 m), L'Incudine (2 136 m) and the Restònica Valley (Fig. 4) (Anonymous, 1974; Judais-Bolelli, 1974b; Leenhardt and Breton, 2009; Aedis, 2016; Streib and Petel, 2019).



Figure 4. Melu Lake, Monte Ritondu, near Corti. The figure in the foreground is Charles-François Boudouresque. Photo © Michèle Perret-Boudouresque.

The beginnings of the Regional Natural Park of Corsica

The Scàndula Nature Reserve

Michel Leenhardt told us that having barely arrived in Corsica (July 1969), he took advantage of a weekend in August to visit the region between U Portu and Scàndula. He said: *'I was stunned by the beauty and wildness of the site and I said to myself that this site deserved to be classified as a terrestrial and marine nature reserve (there were*

⁵ In fact, the RNPC was created in February 1971. It was the Ministry of the Sea, disconcerted by the fact that it included a marine part, which delayed the official publication of the decree for more than a year (Leenhardt, 1972b).

none yet in France) and that creating this reserve could be the responsibility of the future RNPC'.

The establishment of the Scândula Nature Reserve (SNR) was the culmination of a fifteen-year process that the young RNPC was able to bring to fruition (Richez and Richez-Battesti, 1970; Dominici, 2007; Boudouresque *et al.*, 2021b): (i) Mazodier and Balland (1970), two classmates of Michel, who were specializing in the marine environment, made 5 dives in the future Scândula Reserve, at Michel's request. The conclusions were cautious as to its state (poverty, wealth, human impact). (ii) In an unpublished document from 1973, Roger Molinier underlined the interest of protecting the Scândula area, both in terms of the natural habitats present there and the human pressures which were beginning to increase, such as boating, anchoring, spear fishing and poaching (Le Brun, 1972; Leenhardt and Molinier, 1985; Boudouresque *et al.*, 2021b). (iii) In February 1975, Marc Verlaque and one of the authors of this article (CFB) carried out a field survey of Scândula; they provided a first description of its habitats (*Lithophyllum byssoides* algal rims, *Cystoseira* forests, *Posidonia oceanica* meadows, and the coralligenous ecosystem) and of the remarkable diversity of species to be found there (Verlaque, 1975). (iv) In May 1975, the CNEXO (National Centre for the Exploration of the Oceans) and the FFESSM (French Federation for Underwater Studies and Sports) organized the COMETES expedition aboard the yacht *Rara-Avis*, in the region of Scândula, in order to establish a baseline of the marine species, populations and ecosystems (Anonymous, 1975; Boudouresque, 1980; Boudouresque *et al.*, 2021b). Another anecdote: Jacques Leoni, Michel's assistant, one day met a wealthy industrialist from the north of France. He told him that he was going to build a luxury villa in the valley of L'Elbu (Scândula Peninsula). Of course, Jacques Leoni informed him that the sector was about to be classified as a nature reserve (he was somewhat jumping the gun!) and that this was likely to hamper his plans. Thanks Jacques! The industrialist went off to build elsewhere.

The SNR (Fig. 3) was established by the French decree of December 9th, 1975 (Decree number 75 1128). The charter of the RNPC, approved in 1971 by the French Ministry of the Environment, provided for the creation of nature reserves (Leenhardt, 1992; Franceschi, 2007; Biber, 2019). It was France's first dual terrestrial and marine reserve, with a land integral reserve of 919 ha, a marine integral reserve of 82 ha and a marine partial reserve of 582 ha (Meinesz *et al.*, 1983; Meinesz and Blanfuné, 2015; Meinesz, 2020; Boudouresque *et al.*, 2021b).

Unfortunately, the French decree establishing the reserve formally indicated that navigation is allowed there. Was it a lack of foresight on the part of the young managers of the RNPC? A concession to users essential to get their agreement? An assertion of authority by the

maritime authorities of the State, always pernickety about their sovereignty at sea? Maybe all three at the same time. Michel did not admit to having lacked insight. Admittedly, navigation in the Scàndula reserve was insignificant in the early 1970s; but Le Brun (1972) was already worried about it. Be that as it may, this decree, which has become obsolete, did not anticipate the boom in pleasure boating and sightseeing boats and the overcrowding of the SNR (Boudouresque *et al.*, 2021b). Currently, the decree is finally being rewritten.

The existence of a Scientific Council (SC) is one of the criteria (but not the only one) which makes it possible to distinguish true protected areas from 'paper parks' (Boudouresque *et al.*, 2013, 2020; Martin, 2020). Michel Leenhardt was deeply aware of the essential role of research in a protected natural area; he kept repeating and hammering home: '*Never stray far from the scientists!*' (Boudouresque *et al.*, 2021). The Scientific Council of the Scàndula Nature Reserve was set up in 1979. It has between one and two dozen members, representing the social and biological sciences, both marine and terrestrial domains (history, linguistics, archaeology, ichthyology, ornithology, botany, zoology, ecology, etc.). Its members come from the universities of Corsica, mainland France and Spanish Catalonia. The first chair (1979 to 1992) of this SC was Roger Molinier. One of us (CFB) succeeded him (1992-2007). Gérard Richez was the last chairman of this council (2007-2015) (Boudouresque *et al.*, 2021).

The iconic GR20

Jean Loiseau (1896-1982) was an architect with a passion for hiking. He wanted to create marked paths and devised the now famous waymarks using white and red painted stripes. In 1952, he published '*Itinéraires de la Corse. L'île aux montagnes rouges*' (Itineraries of Corsica. The Island of red mountains – Fig. 5), whose paths largely correspond to today's Corsican GR20 (Loiseau, 1952; De Baecque, 2018; Fig. 5). 'GR' comes from the French *Grande Randonnée* (long distance hiking trail).

However, it was not Michel Loiseau who actually created the GR20. During one of the first meetings between Michel Leenhardt and Guy Degros, the Departmental Director of Agriculture and Forests, in 1969, the latter told him that he had 'in his drawer' a project devised by an admiral passionate about mountains, Michel Fabrikant. This proposed a hiking trail from Conca (southeastern Corsica, north of Portivechju) to Calinzana (northwestern Corsica, near Calvi), following the ridge that constitutes the backbone of Corsica. Guy Degros felt that this project fell more within the remit of the future RNPC than that of his administration (agriculture and forests), and he entrusted the file to Michel.

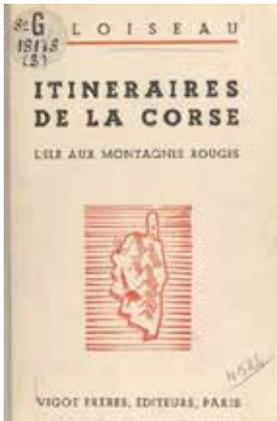


Figure 5. Left. Michel Loiseau's book (Loiseau, 1952), which foreshadows the GR20. Right. Michèle Perret-Boudouresque and her dog Chjara, in the *foresta di Vizzavona*, on today's GR20. Photo © Charles-François Boudouresque.

For Michel, a mountain enthusiast, and of course for the future RNPC, it was an incredible opportunity. A serious project already existed, a project that was completely in line with the aims of the RNPC. One of its main goals was indeed to revitalize the interior of the island, in the process of human desertification, often devastated by fires⁶, and to divert towards the interior some of the tourists who clustered on the coast and the beaches (Leenhardt, 1970, 1972a, 1972b, 1973; Judais-Bolelli, 1974b, 1974c; Richez, 1983). All that remained was to implement the project, which the park rangers did as soon as they were recruited. The park rangers identified the route, marked it with the colours (white and red) of the GR, equipped the most difficult passages with ropes and ladders, and chose the locations of the future refuges.

One more anecdote. When Michel presented the GR20 project to the *préfet* (the representative of the French State in Corsica), during a meeting with other administrative officials, in order to obtain funding for the establishment of the first sections of the GR20, the departmental director of tourism intervened to say that the GR20 was nonsense, and that there would never be more than 15 people a year who would hike along it. Fortunately, this advice was not followed. But this anecdote is a good illustration of the lack of realism of certain administrative officials, as well as the challenges that Michel had to face.

⁶ A *Corsica piccia* (in Corsican: Corsica is burning) (Judais-Bolelli, 1974c).

Very quickly, the GR20 guidebook (e.g. Haussman and Haussman, 2012) became the most widely sold of all GR guidebooks. Today, the GR20 pays the price of its fame and is overrun with visitors. Many of the hikers who follow it, who come from all over the planet, see it above all as a 'must-have', as a trophy to hang on their backpack. In summer, the GR20 looks like a busy pedestrian highway, and its refuges are swamped with ill-mannered tourists and their rubbish. As with Scàndula, it is difficult to explain that Corsica has a wealth of landscapes as beautiful as Scàndula and paths as beautiful or more beautiful than those of the GR20.

As for Scàndula, the RNPC did not foresee the overcrowding. Michel told us that he was aware of this very early on. But it is clear that he was not listened to! We readily believe it, because it was also the case of the Scientific Council of Scàndula Nature Reserve, which one of us (CFB) chairs (Boudouresque *et al.*, 2021b).

The *paesolu d'Aitone*

One of the aims of the RNPC was the rehabilitation of the Corsican mountains, in order to fight against their abandonment and their desertification. The *paesolu* (hamlet, in the Corsican language) of Aitone was one of the flagship projects that Michel supported, even before the park was officially created.

The Aitone *paesolu*, located a few kilometres from Verghju pass (between Èvisa and the Niolu valley), consisted of 60 bungalows. It was inaugurated in 1972. It was considered as one of the jewels of the RNPC in the 1970s. However, it was not a great success commercially. It was poorly maintained, deteriorated rapidly and was definitively abandoned in 2002. Although there are now plans for its rehabilitation, this failure was puzzling for Michel Lenhardt: where did they go wrong? Because, at the same time, the revitalization of the Corsican mountains has been a success. 'Success' such as the overcrowding of sites like the Restònica Valley (Corti) and the GR20 (see above) is a major problem today.

Other topics

Michel Leenhardt was neither an academic nor an author of scientific publications. We had a hard time convincing him that we couldn't say everything, tell everything. He regretted that in the biography we were writing, if we wanted it to be read, we had to be brief, and therefore not mention many of the achievements of which he was proud. This was particularly the case for the Lavezzi Islands nature reserve, which he asked us not to forget, in one of the last exchanges we had, at the end of 2022.

After the Park, life goes on

After almost 30 years of leading the RNPC, an unusually long tenure in the French administration, Michel Leenhardt left this post in 1998 (Fig. 6). But unlike Neil Armstrong, who returned to Earth after setting foot on the Moon, Michel could never break free of the pull of Corsica (Leenhardt and Breton, 2009). He decided to stay there.

The Association of Friends of the Regional Natural Park of Corsica

In August 1972, three months after the creation of the RNPC, pioneering personalities in the field of nature protection founded the *Association des amis du Parc naturel régional de Corse* (AAPNRC - Association of Friends of the Regional Natural Park of Corsica). The creation of associations of friends of regional natural parks was strongly encouraged by a circular from the French government, dated June 1st, 1967. As with the creation of the RNPC, Michel Leenhardt played an important role in the creation of the AAPNRC (Colonna d'Istria, 2011).



Figure 6. Michel Leenhardt, during an interview with Cécile Breton, editor-in-chief of Stântari. In Leenhardt and Breton (2009). Photo © Cécile Breton.

The AAPNRC is independent of the RNPC and has no legal or financial ties to it. However, it is complementary (Colonna d'Istria, 2011). The AAPNRC plays a part in the sustainable management of natural sites and in furthering the knowledge of environments and species (birds, turtles, plants, etc.). It also participates in cultural events and in environmental education (Fig. 7, 8).

The association has taken part in many battles for the environment in Corsica (Colonna d'Istria, 2011): e.g. **(i)** the fight against massive urbanization projects aimed at transposing to Corsica the same model of tourism development as in the Balearic Islands, on the Costa Brava (Catalonia) and in Languedoc-Roussillon (Occitania) (early 1970s). **(ii)** The banning of the discharge off Bastia of red muds by Montedison (1972-1974) (see above). **(iii)** Opposition to oil exploration off Corsica, by the companies Elf-Aquitaine and Total (1977-1980) (Leenhardt, 1977). **(iv)** Requesting the banning of the passage of oil tankers through the Bucchi di Bunifaziu (Bonifacio Straits) (1978-1992). **(v)** Opposition to the recreational use of four-wheel drive vehicles in the mountains and on the beaches, and in particular opposition to the route of a motorcycle rally taking in beaches of great heritage value (1991) (see Boudouresque *et al.*, 2017a, 2017b).



Figure 7. A cultural event, organized by the AAPNRC in Ascu (between Ponte à a Leccia and Monte Cintu). **Far left:** Michel Leenhardt. From Colonna d'Istria (2011).



Figure 8. An AAPNRC operation for the protection of dunes and beaches, in 1999. **Left:** Michel Leenhardt and Rosy Judais-Bolleli. From Colonna d'Istria (2011).

These few examples (above) illustrate the great complementarity between the RNPC and the AAPNRC: when the director of a park, appointed by a *syndicat mixte* made up of elected officials with differing motivations, cannot say or do anything, an independent association can 'step up' and call a spade a spade.

Roger Molinier was elected in 1972 president of the AAPNRC, and he held this position until his death in 1991. Rosy Judais-Bolelli (?-2017), who was general secretary, succeeded him (Fig. 9). Finally, Michel Leenhardt, once retired, became president of the AAPNRC.

In 1992, the AAPNRC was transformed into the Conservatory of Natural Areas of Corsica (*Conservatoire des espaces naturels de Corse* - CENC). The reason given is that since 1972, when the AAPNRC was created, things had changed. According to Colonna d'Istria (2011), environmental protection and sustainable development were now widely accepted and militant commitment was no longer as necessary. We are not of this opinion (Boudouresque, 2021; Boudouresque and Perret-Boudouresque, 2022), and Michel, during our interviews, had difficulty convincing us. Had Michel become politically correct?



Figure 9. A meeting of the Board of Directors of the AAPNRC (Association of the Friends of the Regional Natural Park of Corsica). From right to left, Roger Molinier (second; partly hidden), Marcelle Conrad (third; the famous Corsican botanist) and Rosy Judais-Bolleli (fourth; the president). Photo © AAPNRC.

The Federation of Regional Natural Parks of France

The French administration, like those of most democratic countries, is not in the habit of keeping its agents in post for long time. This is generally a wise measure, insofar as it prevents civil servants from becoming local potentates. It also has disadvantages because, once a civil servant knows his subject well, when he has understood everything and has begun to be effective, he must leave for other horizons.

It should be noted that a *syndicat mixte* of an RNP is not just an administration like others. Be that as it may, the longevity of Michel Leenhardt at the head of the RNPC is unusual, almost unbelievable: nearly 30 years. This underlines quite how exceptional a man Michel was, with an exceptional destiny. Of course, he left an indelible mark on the history of the RNPC and of Corsica.

Perhaps Michel would have remained director of the RNPC until his retirement if it had been up to him. When we asked him the question, point blank, he answered us, in a very politically correct way, that the change of director had become necessary, and that it was a good thing for the future of the RNPC. We do not have to believe him. The Ministry of the Environment offered Michel a position in charge of international relations, within the Federation of Regional Natural Parks of France (*Fédération française des parcs naturels régionaux*). He got them to agree that he could work from Corsica and could therefore stay there. In contrast to Neil Armstrong leaving the Moon, Michel never broke free of the attraction of Corsica. Michel held this position until his retirement. He then focused on the AAPNRC (see above). Be that as it may, the

CENC now concentrates on the management of the natural areas entrusted to it and on the study of a few emblematic taxa and habitats, such as birds and beaches.

Michel Leenhardt and the French nature reserves

Michel Leenhardt has left us.

In 1981, the Ministry of the Environment was only less than a dozen years old. It was still the period of enthusiasm, pioneers, militants. In the offices, alongside new administrative teams, still few in number, representatives of associations and people coming from civil society were present, all united in the desire to act for the protection of nature for which they had all been engaged for a long time. Remember that the law on the protection of nature adopted in 1976 had given them new fields of action (nature and voluntary reserves, impact studies, *Arrêtés de protection de biotope*, etc.).

About fifty nature reserves existed at the time. The Ministry of the Environment was funding them without really knowing what was going on there, without even receiving activity reports. A meeting was called to which all the local actors were invited. In a large crowded room on the ground floor of the headquarters of the Ministry, then housed in a far from eco-friendly building in Neuilly, a district of Paris, Michel Brosselin (representing environmental associations) and Jean Servat (Director of Nature Protection at the Ministry) proposed to create a national structure for grouping and coordinating nature reserves, similar to what already existed for regional natural parks. Nothing more. A room was then reserved in another building (just as un-eco-friendly – without windows) to follow up on the proposal quite independently. I remember that day well. I was then the new general secretary of the SEPNB (Society for the study and protection of nature in Brittany), created in 1958, which had already set up a network of nature reserves in the Brittany area. Michel Leenhardt (director of the Regional Natural Park of Corsica and one of the creators of the Scândula Nature Reserve) was there, very much in evidence with a natural authority emanating from his obvious competence, his obvious experience, based on his several years of working on the Island of Corsica with the same goal. We did a rapid *tour de table*, enabling each participant in turn to give their point of view, in order to distribute the responsibilities within the new structure. Of course, Michel became president. Young and enthusiastic, I managed to get the position of treasurer.

For 20 years, our paths regularly crossed in the course of the adventure of the nature reserves of France. With his experience, his good knowledge of the functioning of institutions, Michel paved the way. For me, in this adventure he was a father, a guide, a reference as much as

a colleague, then a friend. Modelled on the organization of the Federation of Regional Natural Parks of France, the Permanent Conference of Nature Reserves (*Conférence permanente des réserves naturelles* – CPRN) was officially launched in 1982. Under his leadership, work progressed at a good pace. The CPRN network was set up and proved effective in first bringing people together then organizing them, providing rigorous management, initiating policy and strategy, imposing management plans, and even ‘inventing’ (already!) the notion of regional nature reserve (the work of the so-called ‘Garti commission’) in an associative atmosphere full of cordiality, solidarity and friendship. The CPRN subsequently became the RNF (*Réserves naturelles de France*), a network today well established and recognized in the nation-wide landscape of protected natural areas. The RNF and the entire network owe a lot to Michel Leenhardt, who laid solid foundations for a management system based upon fairness, loyalty, sharing and competence.



Figure 10. Michel Leenhardt, in late June 1991, during a workshop of the Permanent Conference of Nature Reserves (CPRN) in Paris. Photo © Éric Bernard (*Réserves naturelles de France*).

On a human level, Michel - although a graduate of the prestigious *École Polytechnique* - was a simple, generous man, totally committed to the protection of the natural heritage for which he had a vision. He was a leading light. The history of nature protection in France, when it is written, will remember him as such. Our thanks to you, Michel.

Michel Leenhardt was the first president of *Réserves Naturelles de France*, from 1982 through 1983 (we decided on a rotating presidency

every two years). He was again its president in 1990-1991 (Fig. 10), to pass a delicate period for RNF.

Max Jonin

Conclusions

Michel Leenhardt suffered a stroke at the end of the 2010s, from which he largely recovered, thanks to a long rehabilitation. His intellectual faculties were intact, but until the end he had to move around in an electric wheelchair, which did not prevent him from remaining active. He participated in the events which marked the 50th anniversary of the founding of the RNPC, in October 2022 in Corti. He left us on March 20, 2023, in Ajacciu (Corsica).

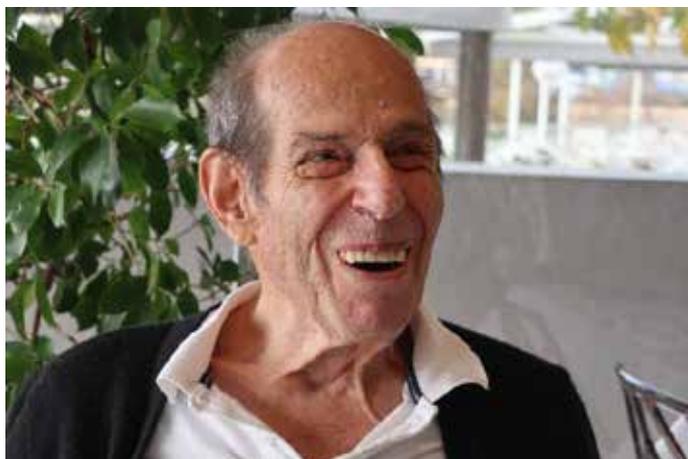


Figure 11. One on the last photographs of Michel Leenhardt, Ajacciu, in late November 2021. Although physically diminished, he was in great intellectual shape. The discussion was lively and fascinating. He seemed happy. Photo © Michèle Perret-Boudouresque.

The tribute paid to Michel Leenhardt, in late March 2023, by the French *Conservatoire du Littoral*, deserves to be reproduced here, because it summarizes in a few words all of the above: *'The Conservatoire du littoral would like to pay tribute to Michel Leenhardt, who recently passed away. First director of the Regional Natural Park of Corsica, he was an initiator of nature protection in Corsica and worked with passion and high standards for balanced rural development that respects the natural environment. He has thus contributed to generating a broad awareness in favour of sustainable development and the safeguarding of biodiversity in Corsica. He also*

very early on accompanied with enthusiasm the Conservatoire du Littoral which was able to benefit from his knowledge of the territories and ecological issues as well as his experience in the management of protected areas to develop its action, in particular in the protection of the site of the Agriate' (translated from French).

Our great regret is that Michel did not have the opportunity to read this tribute. Our intention was to write and publish it during his lifetime. But we were too busy writing scientific papers, there was too much to do, and time slipped by. But we know that Michel was aware of our admiration for him and he must have guessed what would be the gist of our tribute. In addition, this tribute extensively includes information that he transmitted to us, orally or in writing (Fig. 11, 12).

Another regret is that Michel's disappearance went almost unnoticed in the press: just an article in *Corse-Matin* (Kruslin, 2023) and a paragraph in *Midi Libre*, the Montpellier daily. So many unimportant events occupy dozens of pages in the press, yet the media were indifferent to the disappearance of one of the men who played the most important role in the future of Corsica. But in fact, we are not so surprised. Several times, with regard to the Regional Natural Park of Corsica, we mentioned to journalists the names of Roger Molinier and Michel Leenhardt and each time they said to us: *'But who are they? Wasn't the Park created by XX?'* (the name of a contemporary politician, which varied over time). Yes, human memory is very short (see e.g. Pauly, 1995; Jackson, 1997; Faget, 2020; Boudouresque and Perret-Boudouresque, 2022): *Sic transit gloria mundi* (Thus passes the glory of the world).



Figure 12. Michèle Perret-Boudouresque (**left**) and Michel Leenhardt (**right**), Ajacciu, on late November 2021. Photo © Charles-François Boudouresque.

Acknowledgements. Michel Leenhardt was aware of our intention to tell the story of the adventure of his life, intimately linked to that of the Regional Natural Park of Corsica. We had talked about it several times, in person or by email. We thought we would do it during his lifetime, but unfortunately fate turned what was supposed to be a biography into an obituary. He entrusted us with his memories with emotion, supplementing our own memories, told us significant anecdotes, entrusted us with personal documents, and finally provided us with information about his childhood and his education that we would have had difficulty finding. Michel would have been happy to read the present article, but he somehow knew its content and tone in advance. He knew of our admiration, as well as that of all those who knew him and collaborated with him, for his work. Thank you Michel! *T'abbracciemu forti forti* (in Corsican: we embrace you with all our force). Thanks also to Karine Michea (Réserves Naturelles de France) for providing Éric Bernard's photo (Fig. 10), to Frédéric Bioret who put two of the authors (CFB and MPB) in contact Max Jonin, to Michel Métails who re-read the Max Jonin's insert, to Michael Paul for proofreading the English text, and to two reviewers, Gilles Martin and Marc Verlaque, for their valuable suggestions.

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