



Voices Seeking to Be Heard: Rethinking Nature's Role in Deliberative Processes for an Ecological Democracy

INTRODUCTION

Backdrop: Ecological crisis plus democratic erosion challenge human-centred governance (Abbasi et al., 2023; Druckman, 2024)

Research Gap: Ecological democracy lacks practical models for including nature (Dryzek, 2012; Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2016)

Research Objective: Examine how nature can be represented in participatory governance via PHOENIX H2020 project findings

METHOD

Design: Qualitative participatory case study across 8 co-design sites in 7 EU countries

Data Collection: Open-ended surveys co-developed with local partners

Participants: 56 diverse participants (citizens, NGOs, experts)

Ethics: Approved by the University of Southampton Ethics Committee (ERGO II 85579).

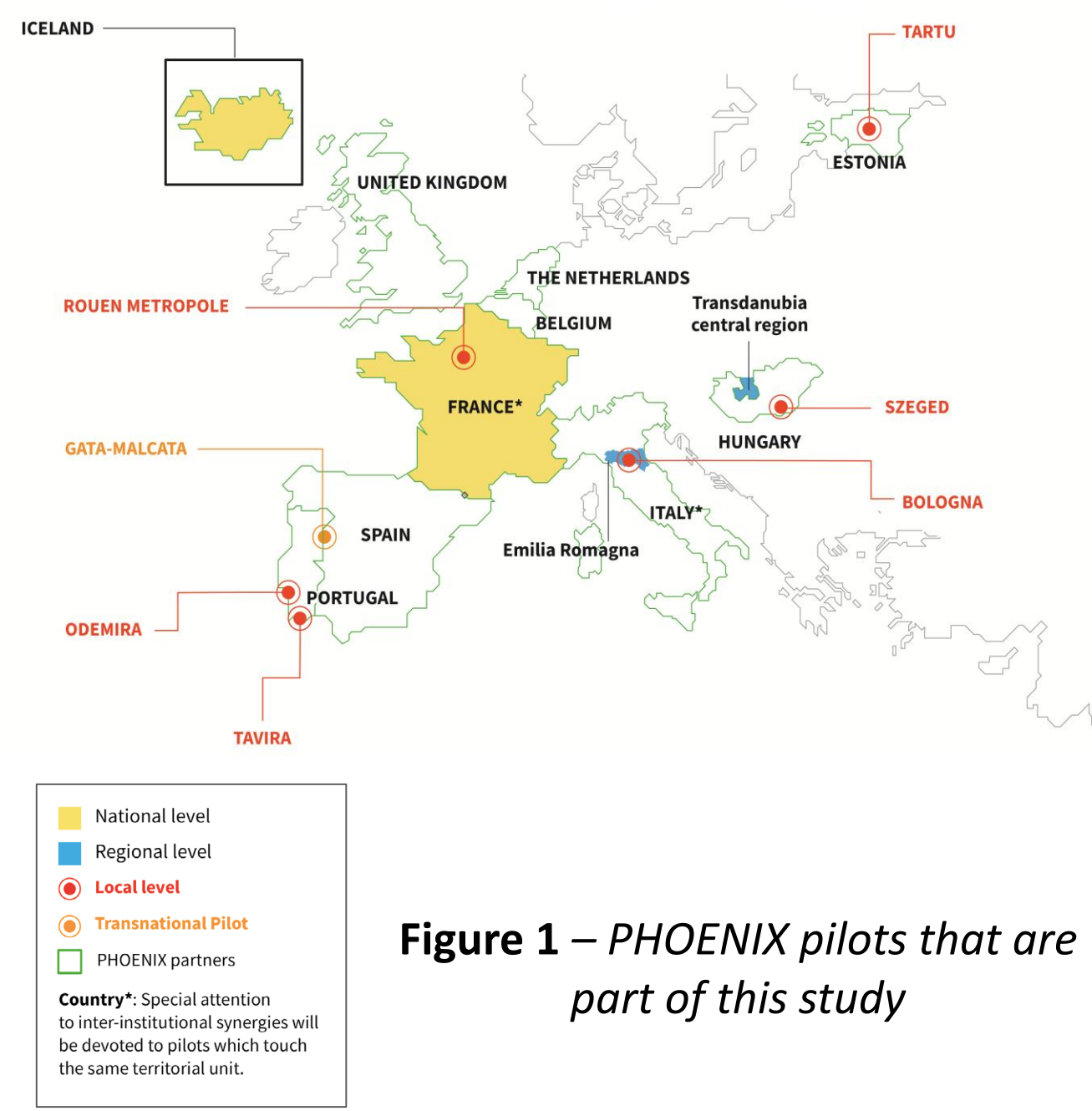


Figure 1 – PHOENIX pilots that are part of this study

DATA ANALYSIS

Analytical Framework: Inductive thematic analysis using NVivo, capturing both individual (vertical) and collective (horizontal) perspectives (Basnou et al., 2020).

Emergent Categories:

- Ontological barriers (Latour, 2005; Plumwood, 2002)
- Ethical dilemmas (Leopold, 1949; Naess, 1973)
- Knowledge gaps and institutional inertia

Ambiguity in nature’s formal representation

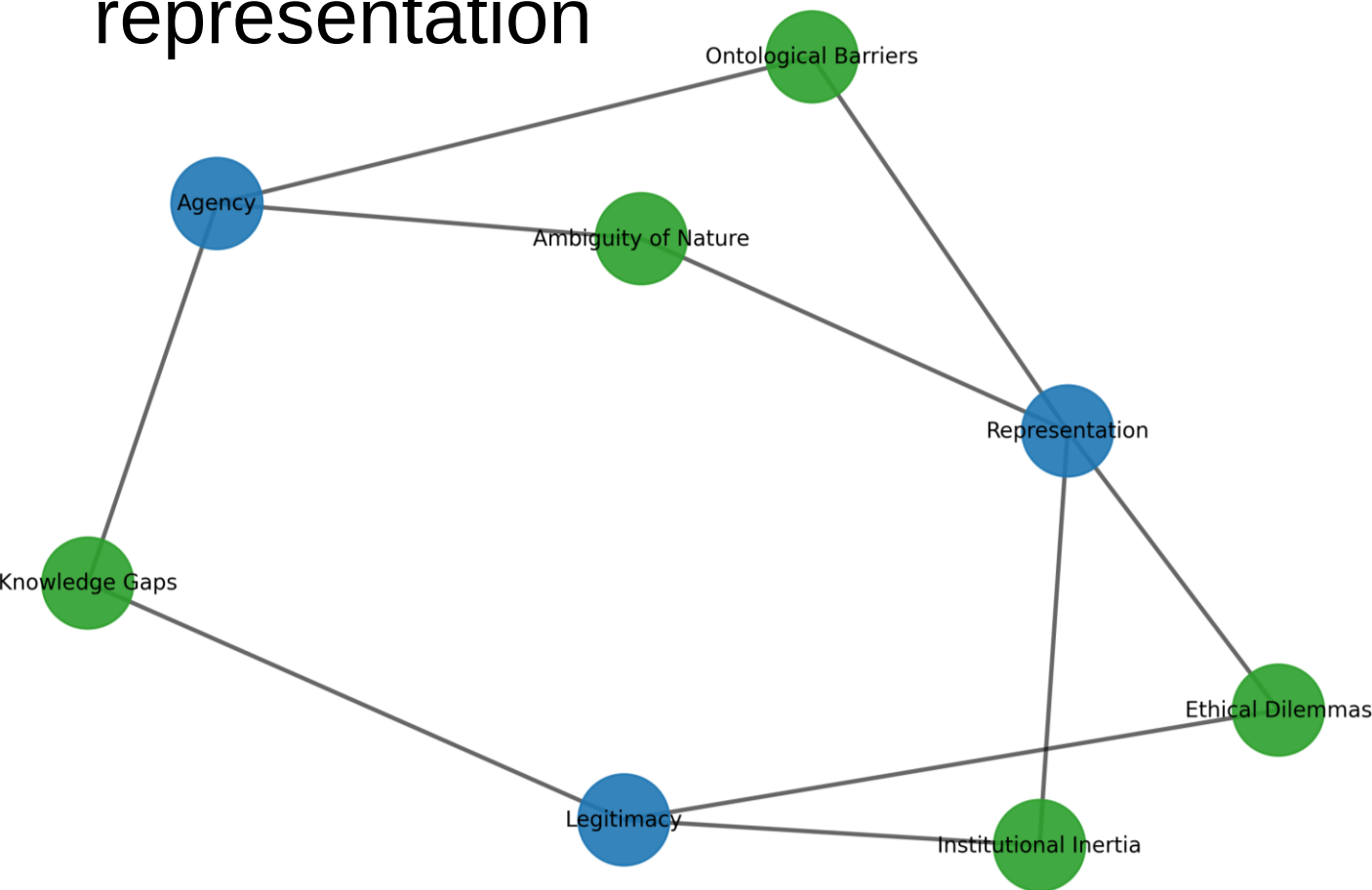


Figure 2 – Thematic map of the interconnections of analytical categories

RESULTS

Key findings:

- Only ~50% perceived nature as represented in TCCDs; ambiguity was high.
- Nature’s presence was mostly indirect (through scientists, NGOs, protected areas).
- Respondents valued these contributions for technical expertise and ethical advocacy.

RESULTS

Table 1 – What Challenges Block Nature’s Full Participation?

With Nature’s Voice	Without Nature’s Voice
Ethical representation (via NGOs/scientists)	Symbolic tokenism
Technical input (ecological data, expertise)	Anthropocentric decisions
Moral dialogue (inter-species justice)	Procedural dominance

“He (nature representative) illuminated our emerging problems from a different perspective.”
— Szeged, anonymous respondent

Table 2 – Suggested Strategies for Inclusion

Strategy	Purpose
Assign “spokespersons” for Nature	Advocacy and representation
Use ecological indicators/proxies	Measurable ecosystem voice
Multispecies justice approaches	Ethical rebalancing
Leverage technical expertise	Science-based guidance

CONCLUSIONS

Contributions:

- Bridges empirical, ethical, and ontological discussions
- Suggests operational tools for participatory inclusion
- Advocates a shift toward multispecies democracy

Implications:

- Future co-design must formalise nonhuman representation
- Institutional innovation and ecological literacy are needed to move beyond symbolic inclusion

Co-design must go beyond humans – to achieve cohabitation, not just consultation.