

Social acceptability: The key ingredient for enhanced coastal wetland restoration



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KEY MESSAGES

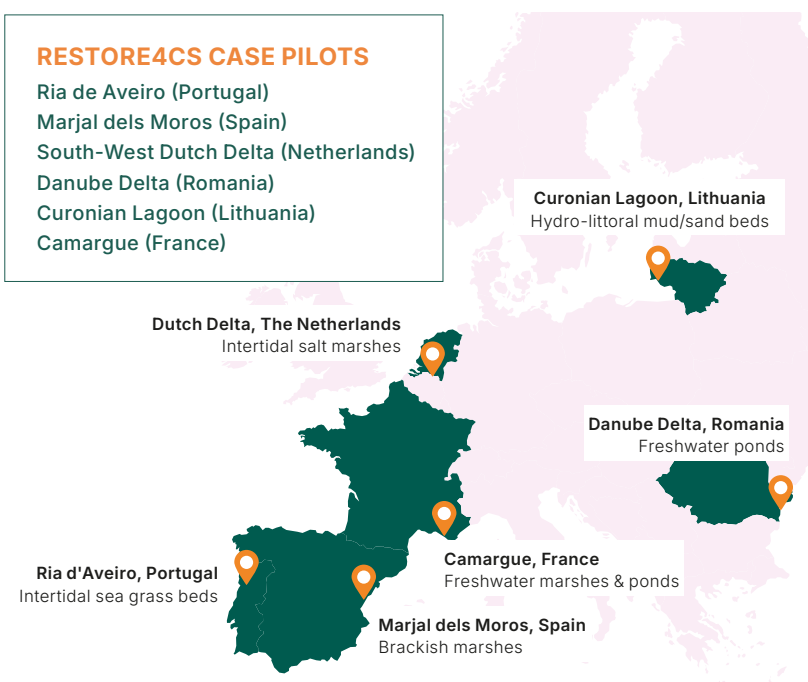
- **Social acceptability** is essential for successful coastal wetland restoration: even technically sound projects can fail if socio-economic and socio-cultural aspects—such as livelihoods, identity, and land-use priorities—are not adequately addressed.
- **Inclusive, context-sensitive engagement** between experts and local stakeholders strengthens legitimacy and leads to more widely accepted restoration choices.
- **Undervaluing socio-cultural dimensions**—trust, participation, and local knowledge—compared to ecological and economic factors hinders the identification of effective restoration scenarios.
- **Integrating social acceptability into restoration planning** supports the implementation of the **EU Nature Restoration Regulation**, ensuring actions align with local values and enhance policy credibility.

Introduction

Coastal wetlands provide vital ecosystem services — from biodiversity conservation and flood protection to carbon storage. However, they face increasing human-induced pressures that accelerate their degradation. Wetland restoration is essential to restore ecosystem balance and ensure the long-term sustainability of these vital habitats. Yet, restoration initiatives often generate social tensions, as they can alter land use, affect local livelihoods and economic activities, and challenge community identities. Understanding and fostering *social acceptability* is therefore essential to enhance the long-term sustainability of restoration efforts.

The RESTORE4Cs project examined the factors influencing social acceptability of coastal wetland restoration across six European sites (Figure 1).

Figure 1. RESTORE4Cs Case Pilot Sites





Camargue, France. © Università del Salento / LifeWatch ERIC

A participatory, multi-criteria analysis (MCA) approach was applied, combining scientific expert assessments of environmental, socio-economic, and socio-cultural impacts in restoration management with local stakeholders' preferences gathered through workshops and surveys. The results of this interaction were analysed through eight dimensions represent-

ed in the "Social acceptability flower" (Figure 2). The findings (Figure 3) indicated that the dimensions corresponding to local economic interests, environmental benefits, and cultural values are considered key drivers of the acceptability of restoration in coastal wetlands, while trust, participation, and knowledge of the local context play a lesser role.

While each coastal wetland is unique, many face common challenges, including socio-economic activities, restoration costs, environmental issues, and socio-cultural aspects such as participation and cultural heritage. This highlights the importance of collaborative planning and sharing good practices across regions.

Figure 2. The Social acceptability flower.

Source: adapted from Ministère de l'énergie et le ressource naturelles of Quebec (2025)¹

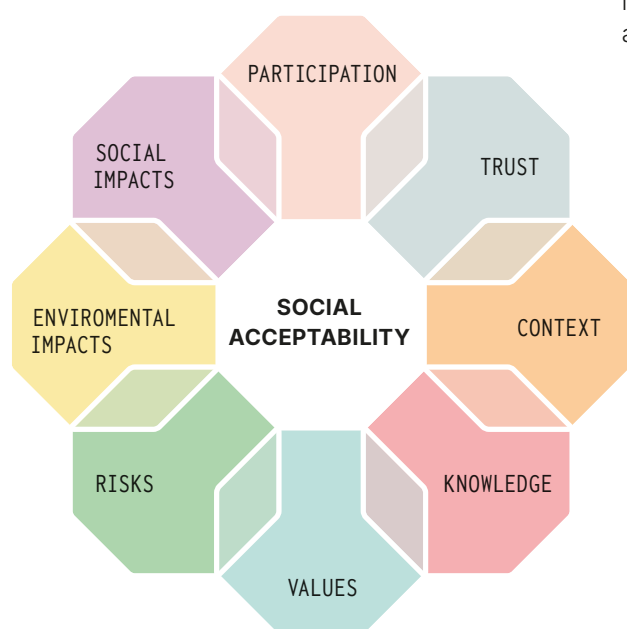
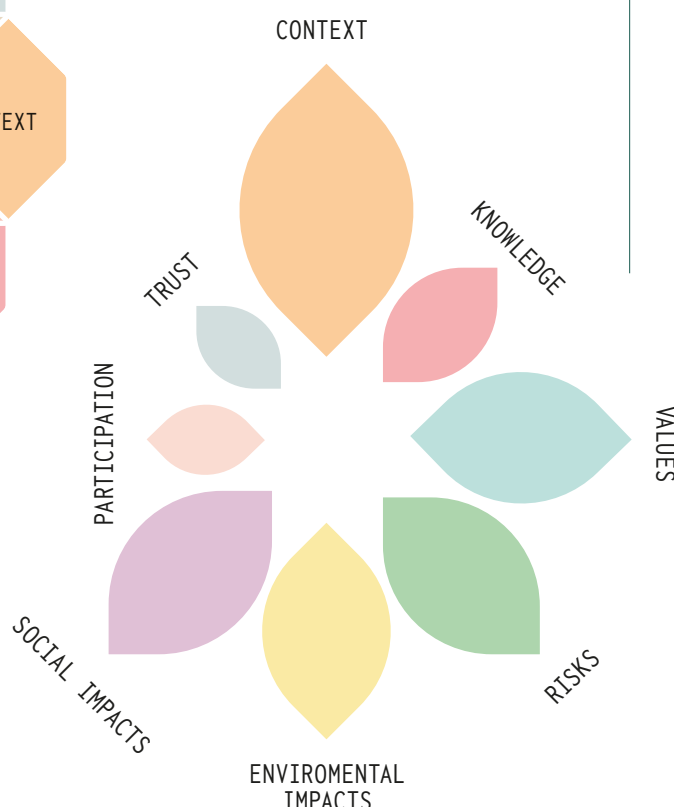


Figure 3. Relative importance of the dimensions of social acceptability in RESTORE4Cs case pilots.

Source: own elaboration based on stakeholders' preferences and scientific experts' criteria selection



Relevance of social acceptability to the legislation and strategic frameworks

Integrating social acceptability drivers into the decision-making process, alongside economic and environmental factors, aligns with the key EU and international frameworks promoting ecosystem restoration and stakeholder engagement. It also strengthens the credibility of restoration efforts and promotes public ownership of environmental outcomes, thereby increasing the likelihood of long-term success. It particularly supports implementation of:

- **EU Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR)** – requires Member States to restore degraded ecosystems through inclusive planning and public participation, highlighting the need for local support.
- **EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030** – calls for protecting and restoring habitats with strong community involvement to ensure practical effectiveness.
- **EU Climate Law and the European Green Deal** – emphasizes nature-based solutions, including wetlands, where social acceptability is critical for implementation.
- **Ramsar Convention on Wetlands** – promotes conservation and sustainable wetland use through participatory governance.
- **Barcelona Convention** and its **Protocols** promote the conservation and sustainable use of coastal wetlands in the Mediterranean region through a participatory approach.
- The **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)** and its **Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF)** – emphasizes the importance of involving local communities and other stakeholders in biodiversity conservation efforts.



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Ria de Aveiro, Portugal. © Università del Salento / LifeWatch ERIC

Policy recommendations

Achieving effective coastal wetland restoration requires strong stakeholders' support. Policy makers can advance this by embedding social acceptability in restoration policies and actions.

Based on the experiences of the RESTORE4Cs project, this Policy Brief offers the following key recommendations:

→ Mainstream social acceptability in restoration planning and funding

EU and national programmes should explicitly require social acceptability assessments in feasibility and monitoring frameworks for wetland restoration. These should analyse local perceptions and preferences, risks, and co-benefits alongside ecological and economic indicators.

→ Identify key drivers that impact social acceptability

Identifying which sociocultural, economic, and environmental criteria local stakeholders value most can help target the most critical issues and strengthen the credibility of restoration decisions.

→ Strengthen early and continuous stakeholder engagement

Participation should move beyond information and consultation. Local actors must be involved in defining goals, evaluating options, and assessing trade-offs. Co-designing actions enhance legitimacy, ownership, and long-term support.

→ Improve communication on climate and ecosystem service benefits

Awareness of wetlands' importance for ecosystem preservation, as well as carbon storage and climate regulation remains limited. Targeted campaigns, citizen science, and educational activities can bridge this gap and reinforce social acceptability of restoration measures.

→ Build and maintain trust among institutions, managers, and communities

Transparent governance, clear responsibilities, and open information foster trust. Local intermediaries—such as NGOs, research institutions, and community groups—can act as credible facilitators.

→ Integrate local knowledge and socio-cultural values in restoration actions

Incorporating traditional practices, aesthetic values, and cultural heritage into restoration design strengthens cooperation, mutual respect, and place-based stewardship.

References

Policy Brief based on: RESTORE4Cs Deliverable 5.4 "Social Acceptability of Wetland Restoration and Management"

1. MERN - Ministère de l'Énergie et de Ressource Naturelles of Québec (2017), Guidelines of the Ministère de l'Énergie et de Ressource Naturelles in the area of social acceptability, Gouvernement du Québec.

RESTORE4Cs is a Horizon Europe project that aims to evaluate the effects of restoration actions on wetlands' ability to mitigate climate change and deliver a range of ecosystem services, using an integrative socio-ecological systems approach. More information is available at: <https://www.restore4cs.eu/>

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