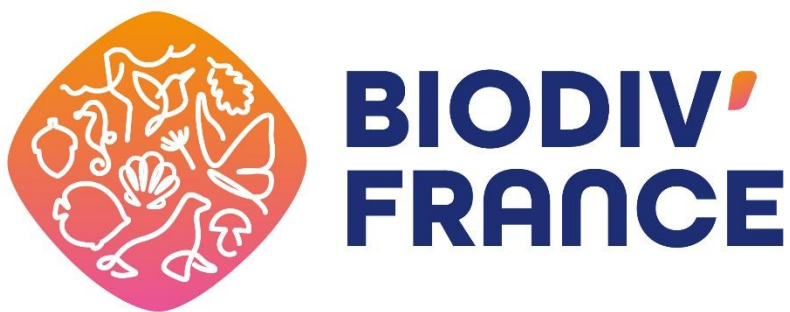




METHODOLOGICAL GUIDE

**for protected area managers responding to the
call for proposals – twinning projects**



METHODOLOGICAL GUIDE – TWINNING PROJECTS

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Context

The purpose of this guide is to establish a methodological framework for protected area managers who respond to the call for proposals concerning the implementation of experimental twinning projects across the European Union. This initiative is part of the LIFE BIODIV'FRANCE action programme and is coordinated by the French Federation of Conservancies of natural areas (Fédération des Conservatoires d'espaces naturels – FCEN). These experimental twinning projects aim at strengthening cooperation between EU members under the same European policies in terms of environmental protection and biodiversity conservation. This twinning process is thus designed to foster exchanges in terms of management practices between both twinned entities. This guide includes all necessary information and resources for applicants to prepare their proposals in response to the call, while allowing managing organisations the flexibility to develop a project tailored to their specific needs and contexts. It also provides guidance for implementing the twinning project and outlines the reporting requirements to FCEN, as part of LIFE BIODIV'FRANCE. As a recall, the experimental twinning projects will run over a two-year period: 2026–2027.

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Twinning preparation

Prior to implementing a twinning project, the following steps must be undertaken:

- Clearly identify management needs: twinning must address a real and concrete need in order to bring benefits to the participating managers. Twinning is not intended as a general exchange programme but should be based on reciprocity and focus on one or more clearly defined and relevant management issues for each entity.
- Identify a suitable partner organisation: based on the identified needs, applicants must identify an appropriate twinning partner. FCEN can support area managers in the matchmaking process.
- Define the scope of the twinning: once the twinning partner is identified, both organisations should engage in discussions to clearly define the framework of the twinning project. This includes:
 - Appointing contact persons for the twinning. It is essential that both organisations can communicate in a common language;
 - Identifying one or more topics for the twinning projects and the specific protected sites involved;
 - Drafting a provisional programme, including online exchange sessions and field study trips in each of the twinned organisations;
 - Planning joint actions and concrete reports;
 - Identifying potential funding sources to ensure the sustainability of the collaboration.

Definition of joint actions and deliverables

To ensure the twinning effectively meets the needs of both partners, the collaboration should not be limited to knowledge exchange. It must also include operational components, involving joint actions and the production of specific deliverables. These activities can be carried out during the field trips. The emphasis should be placed on management-related issues, such as ecological connectivity strengthening (especially in cross-border contexts) and/or management effectiveness evaluation, by developing shared metrics to assess and improve existing approaches. Managing organisations must define specific indicators to measure the relevance and effectiveness of their actions (exchanges number and quality, surveys and interviews of participants and stakeholders about the relevance of the twinning project, communication campaign visibility...). These indicators will facilitate the evaluation and reporting to FCEN.

Twinning project implementation

Awarded organisations must first sign a tripartite partnership agreement, based on the model provided by FCEN. This agreement is required for the funds release.

One of the key objectives of the twinning initiative is to enhance European cooperation in protected area management. Thus, the core of the twinning process lies in the organisation of relevant exchanges between the twinned managing organisations to share experiences. These exchanges include:

- Online meetings: at least three videoconferences per year during the experimental phase are recommended. One at the beginning of the year to confirm the provisional programme; one mid-year check-in, and one at the end of the year to review the outcomes. Additional meetings are encouraged to adjust the twinning project as needed throughout the year.
- Study field trips: one visit per year should be organised, including site visits and in-person meetings in both protected areas (one trip in France, the other in the partnered country). These visits are essential to the twinning's success. Each visit should involve at least two representatives from the partnered organisation. Everyone is encouraged to prioritise low-carbon transportation options.

Special attention should be paid to involving local socio-professional stakeholders, such as local authorities, land users, and residents, in the project. For instance, meetings with local elected officials or protected area users may be scheduled during study visits.

A representative of FCEN will systematically attend the field trip taking place at the French protected site and may accompany the French representatives to the European partner site. FCEN's participation does not need to be included in the twinning project's budget.

Reporting to FCEN

Under the LIFE BIODIV'FRANCE programme and in line with the partnership agreement, managing organisations must report on the activities carried out as part of the twinning project, in compliance with European Commission requirements. Reporting obligations include:

- Regular updates to FCEN and answers to solicitations;
- At least one tripartite meeting per year between the persons in charge of the twinning project in both organisations and FCEN;

- A concise annual report, jointly prepared by both twinned organisations, including:
 - Photographs and detailed descriptions of actions and study visits;
 - A focus on management-related aspects: highlighting successes and areas needing improvement in protected area management.

Twinning must be seen as a reciprocal exchange between the two European partners, with FCEN playing a coordinating role. Any difficulty must be communicated promptly to seek solutions.

The purpose of this regular reporting is to generate in-depth feedback that may support the long-term continuation of the twinning and foster broader EU-level cooperation for biodiversity by involving new managers in future initiatives.

Funding

The experimental twinning period covers two years: 2026 and 2027. Only expenses incurred within this timeframe are eligible.

The eligible expenses follow the same rules as any LIFE programme, and include:

- Staff costs dedicated to the twinning project during the experimental phase (supporting documents: time sheets if already in use within the organisation, or alternatively a signed statement indicating name, position, cost, and hours worked, and payslips);
- Travel expenses (particularly for study visits): national and European transport, accommodation, meals (invoices must be retained and submitted to FCEN);
- Expenses related to joint actions (e.g., management activities, communication tools, equipment), up to a maximum of 30% of the total budget.
- General fees (7% of the total budget)

Each organisation may request a grant between €5,000 and €19,000, for a maximum total of €38,000 for the full two-year common twinning project. A 20% variance between the grants requested by each twinned partners is permitted, based on the total grant allocated to the common twinning project.

Payment schedule:

- 50% of the requested amount per organisation at the start of the experimental phase, upon signature of the partnership agreement;
- Final balance based on actual expenses incurred, disbursed after the two-year period, and upon submission of complete supporting documentation.

Managing organisations are responsible for retaining all invoices and proof of expenses directly related to the twinning project in order to justify the final payment.

Communication

Communication activities of the beneficiaries related to the action (including media relations, conferences, seminars, information material, such as brochures, leaflets, posters, presentations, etc., in electronic form, via traditional or social media, etc.), dissemination activities and any infrastructure, equipment, vehicles, supplies or major result funded by the grant must acknowledge EU support and display the LIFE flag and funding statement "Co-funded by the European Union" (translated into local languages, where appropriate):

- Please use this disclaimer whenever using the funding logo: « *Co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or CINEA. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.* »;
- LIFE logo;
- LIFE BIODIV'FRANCE logo;
- For nature conservation and biodiversity projects in Natura 2000 sites, you should also display the Natura 2000 logo;
- Conservancies of natural areas logo;
- French Agency of Biodiversity logo;
- Ministère de la Transition écologique, de la Biodiversité, de la Forêt, de la Mer et de la Pêche (French Ministry of Ecological Transition) logo.

FCEN will provide a communications pack containing all the necessary logos at the start of the experimental phase. FCEN will help twinned organisations in their communication, in order to highlight their project at a larger scale in concordance with LIFE BIODIV'FRANCE rules, so as to perpetuate this kind of twinning measures.