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Loyettes, an Unbuilt Dam: Breaking up the Rhône River's Geohistory

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1. Context: Looking at Social and Ecological Changes

Since its foundation the OHM Vallée du Rhône focused on events which led to **changes** and **shifts** in the **Rhône River's** planning and management.

It highlighted in particular 2 periods characterized by major floods and their consequences: 1856 and 2003 (Fig. 1).

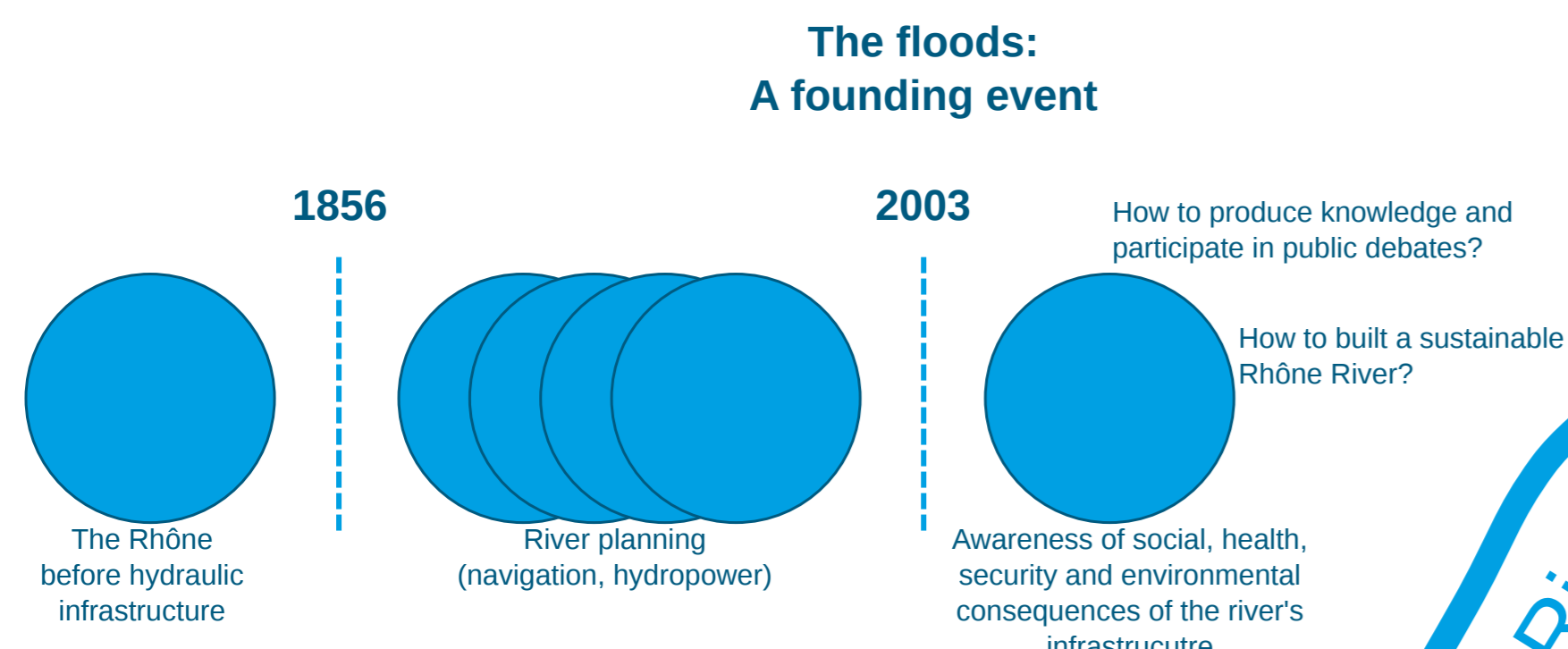


Fig. 1. Framework of the OHM Vallée du Rhône
Source: Arnaud, 2018 (translated from)

To further explore the trajectory of the Rhône River and identify other historical turning points, two projects were financed by the OHM-VR (Le Lay et al. 2015; 2017).

Both these projects brought to consideration the case of the **Loyettes dam** (1979-1990) whose history is still little known.

Loyettes

"Not only do these infrastructures [i.e. Loyettes and another dam] present national economic interests but they are also useful on a regional scale" (CNR, 1982, doc. DT-82-762a)

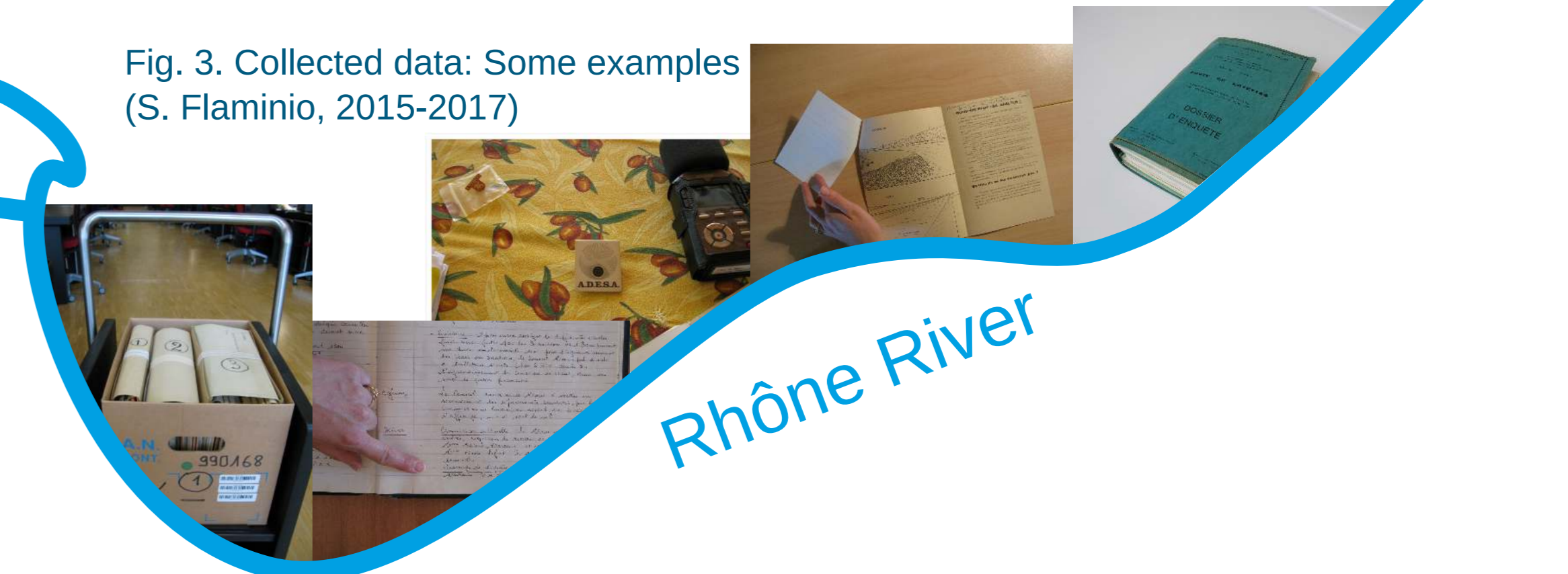
"Build Loyettes or die" (Le Monde, 1st August 1987)

2. Material & Methods

To collect **data** on the Loyettes project:

- **Oral histories** were collected (n=17);
- **Archives documents** were consulted: Archives municipales d'Anthon, Archives de la Frapna, Archives départementales du Rhône, Archives nationales.

Fig. 3. Collected data: Some examples (S. Flaminio, 2015-2017)



3. The Loyettes dam project and the CNR's hydraulic mission

The **Compagnie nationale du Rhône** (CNR) put forward its hydro-power project for the Upper Rhône in **1979**.

It included the **Loyettes dam**, at the **confluence** of the **Ain** and **Rhône** Rivers.

The project was presented as a necessity and alternatives were suggested (Fig. 4) to respond to the original project's criticism.

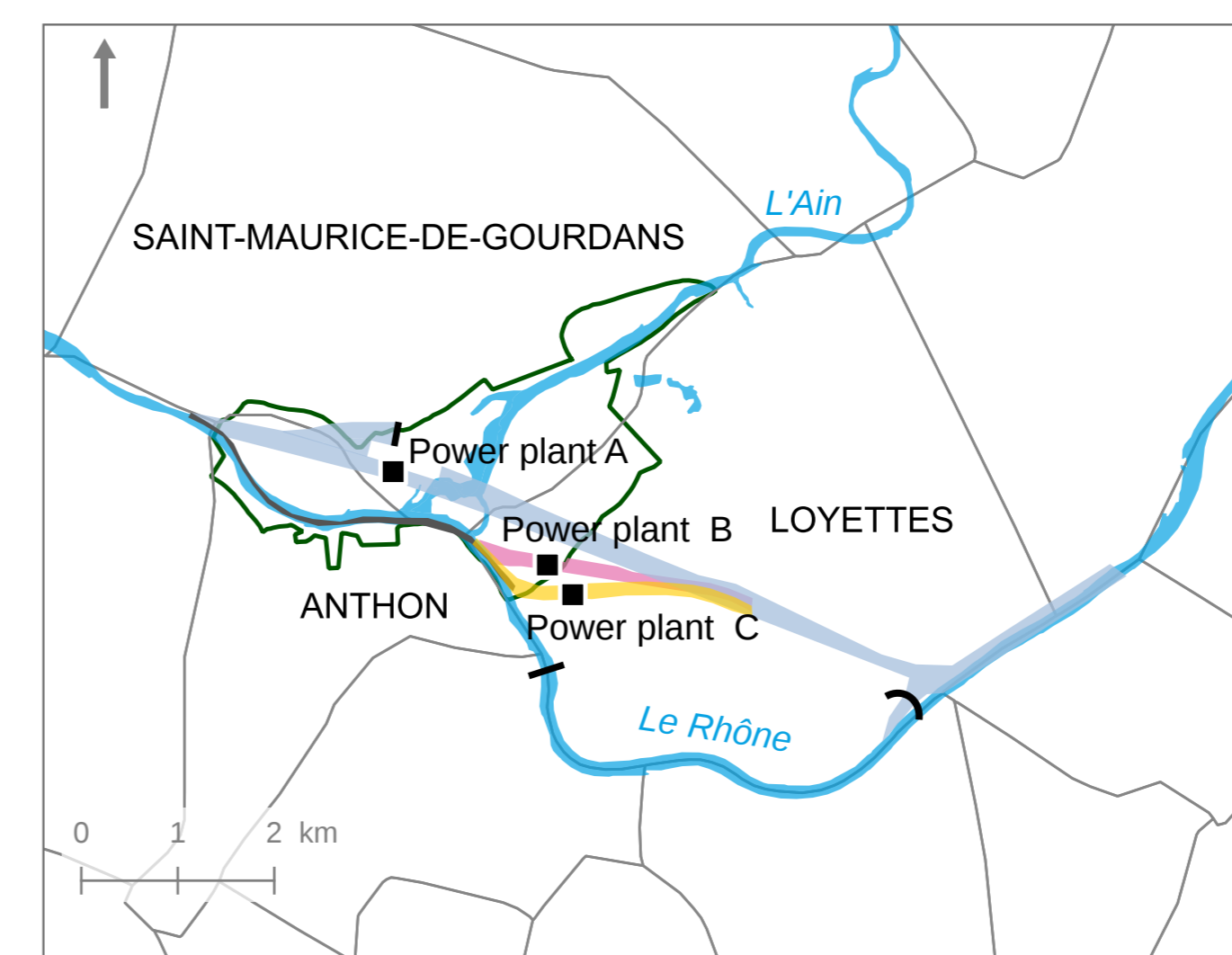


Fig. 4. Map of the Loyettes dam projects

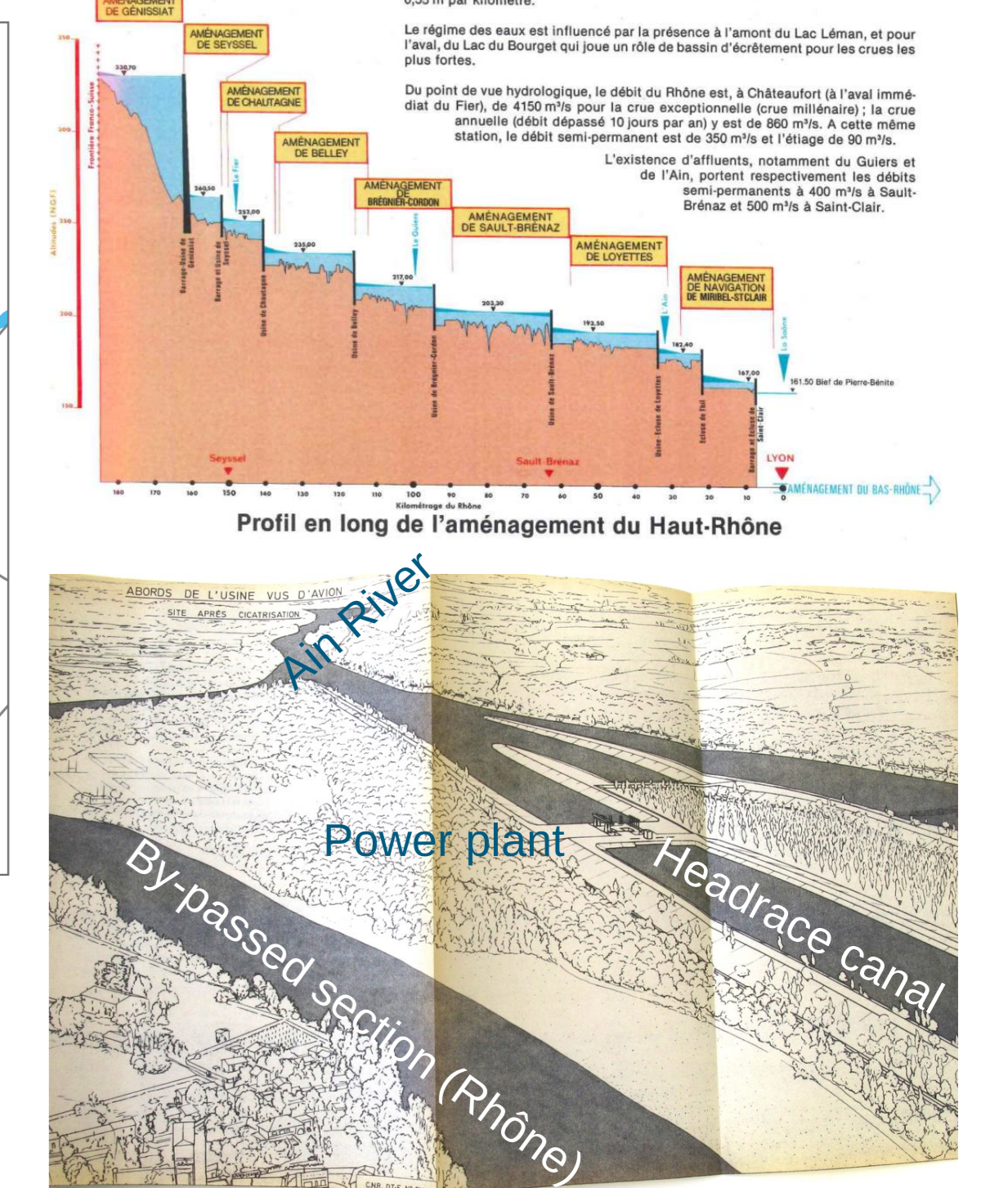


Fig. 5. Archive documents of the CNR presenting the Upper Rhône Plan (1979) and the Loyettes dam project (1980).

4. Opposing the dam: Aesthetics, Ecology and local concerns united

An unprecedented **coalition** formed to contest the dam project. It brought together **environmentalists**, **anglers**, **local residents** and **farmers**.

Scientists produced knowledge on the **unique ecology** and **geomorphology** of the Ain-Rhône confluence (Amoros et al. 1986)

The **regional antenna** of the **Ministry for Environment** (Drae) decided to put forward a **protected area** project which would prohibit the building of the dam.

"I remember the 'Wild Rhône' I used to know. The Amazonian Rhône! [...] I realised to what extent the project would destroy it all. [...] they were going to modify the Rhône's course and for me that was a lèse-majesté offence" (Interview 12, with a dam opponent, 2015)

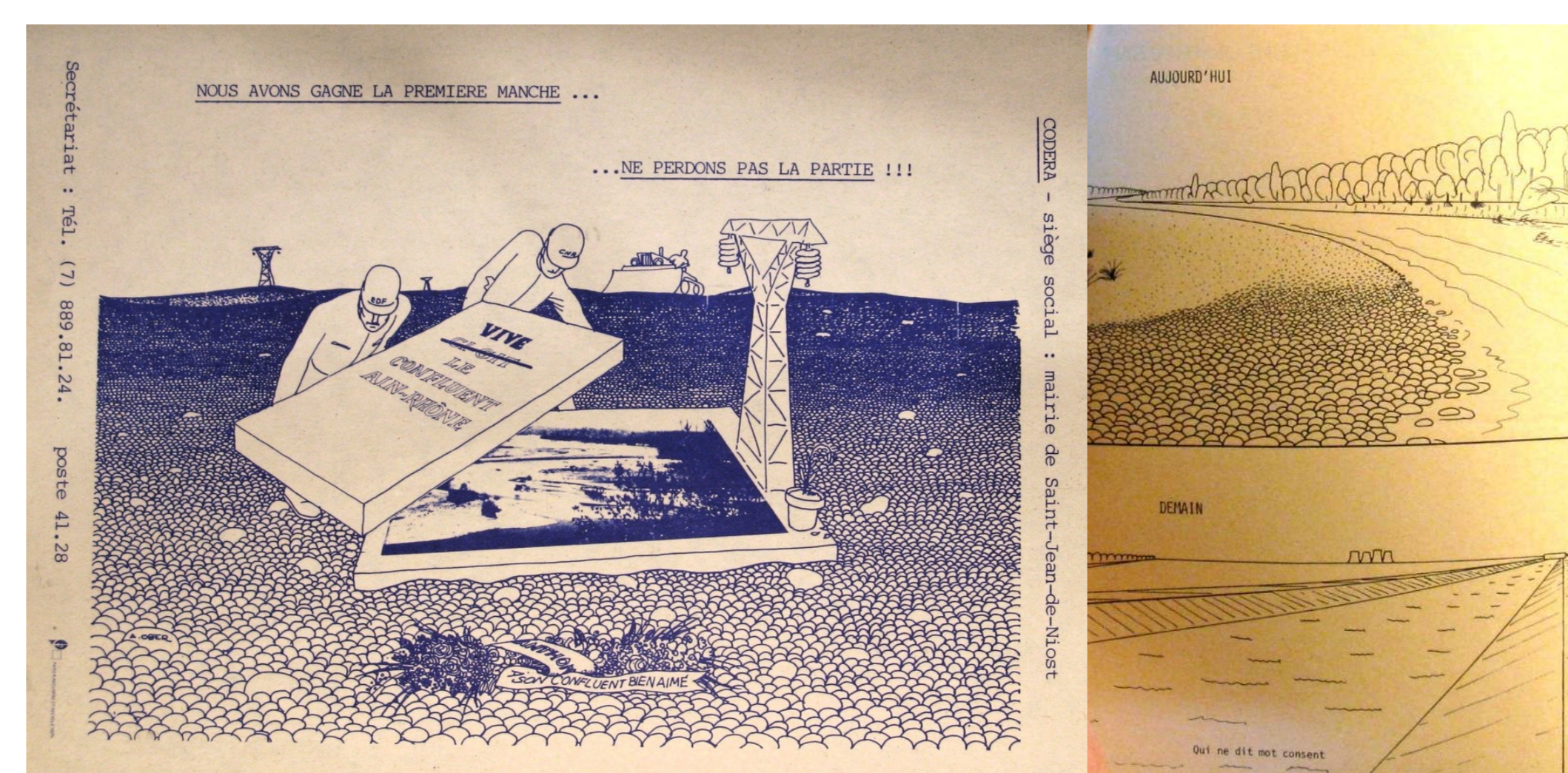


Fig. 5. Two anti-dam flyers showing the aesthetic and ecological consequences of the Loyettes project (Coordination pour la défense du fleuve Rhône et de la rivière d'Ain, n.d.)

"We had lost one, two, three issues [on the Rhône River] so we said 'for this fourth one we must make it'. That's when we came up with the idea of putting forward a protected area at the same time as the dam was being debated [instead of only considering compensation measures]" (Interview 13, with a former Drae agent, 2015)

5. Buried, Forgotten and... Resurrected: A New Conclusion?

In **1990**, the French **Prime minister** approved the **protected area** and the dam's construction was prevented.

According to some scientists, this decision—the victory the dam opponents were hoping for—had **local consequences** but also affected the **planning** and **management** of the **Rhône** River.

Nevertheless, **few people** remember the controversy today and the protected area is rather neglected.

Are **new changes** on their way? In June **2019**, the CNR announced the company was planning a **new dam** on the Rhône, a few kilometers upstream from Loyettes.

"We helped improve river planning practices" (Interview 3, with a scientist, 2015)

"A victory" (Lebreton, 1984)

"Never remembered" (Interview 9, with an angler, 2015)

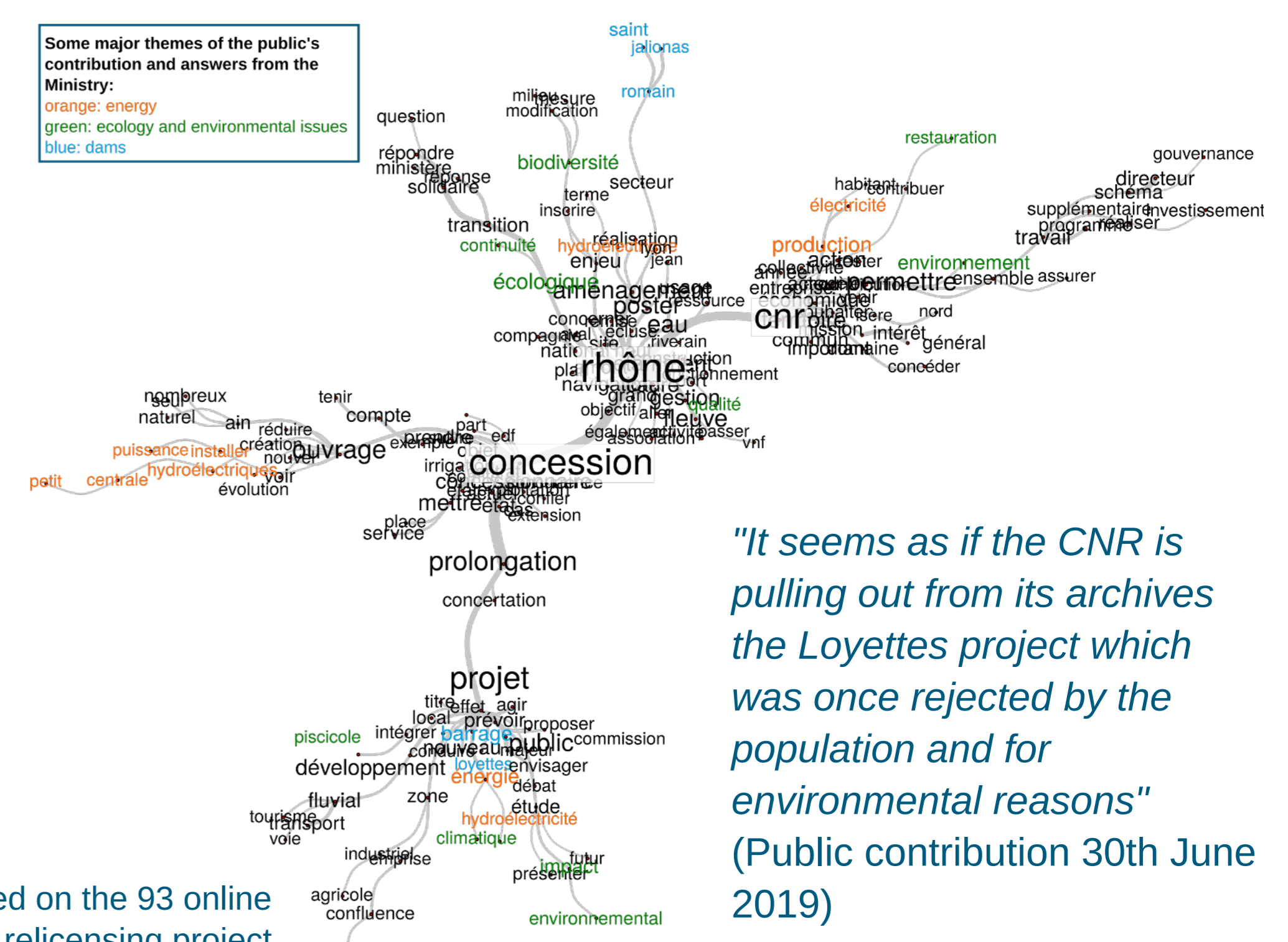


Fig. 6. Co-occurrences based on the 93 online public contributions on the CNR's relicensing project

"It seems as if the CNR is pulling out from its archives the Loyettes project which was once rejected by the population and for environmental reasons" (Public contribution 30th June 2019)