

Water Experiences

Landscapes, Communities, and Climate Adaptation Practices at the Po River Blue Fest

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Abstract

This article analyses the Po River Blue Fest, held between Bologna and Ravenna in May 2025 as part of the LIFE CLIMAX PO project, as a cultural tool for raising awareness of water and climate change issues. Spread over two complementary days — dedicated respectively to storytelling and situated experiences — the festival intertwined environmental communication, landscape crossing practices and collective design processes. The first day, focused on the role of scientific and territorial narratives, featured a contribution by journalist Elisabetta Tola, offering a critical look at the responsibility of climate storytelling in the current information ecosystem. The second day translated these contents into experiential practices, developed by students of the Master's Degree in Advanced Design at the University of Bologna, who activated forms of ecological learning in the landscapes of the San Vitale Pine Forest and the Darsena di Ravenna.

The text offers a reflection on the value of experiences — both narrated and lived — as tools for realigning perception, knowledge and action, highlighting the role of design in generating forms of collective awareness and building climate communities capable of addressing the environmental transformations currently underway.

Keywords

Experiences
Festival
Climate Change
Adaptation
Waterscape

Introduction. The Unpredictable as a Projective Threshold

During an inspection of the San Vitale Pine Forest, a group of horses discreetly crossed a clearing. Their presence was entirely consistent with the context, yet it generated a sense of unexpected surprise. That moment highlighted an increasingly widespread perceptual condition: even things that belong to places can appear unexpected when our gaze is no longer accustomed to recognising their vitality.

Similarly, the effects of climate change — long announced and documented — often continue to surprise us, as if they were emerging suddenly. It is not their nature that is unpredictable, but the difficulty of our perceptual and planning categories to keep pace with the rapidity of environmental transformations.

This observation was the starting point for the Po River Blue Fest, held between Bologna and Ravenna on 16 and 17 May 2025 as part of the European LIFE CLIMAX PO project: a festival that aims to realign perception, knowledge and action through narratives, situated practices and forms of shared planning. Spread over two complementary days, the programme addressed both the communicative and narrative dimensions of climate change and direct experience in coastal and port landscapes, with a particular focus on water resources as an ecological, cultural and symbolic infrastructure of the territory.

Part I — Narrated Experiences

The event in Bologna focused on the role of environmental communication and local narratives in building a shared awareness of climate change. Contributions from the worlds of research, information, design and institutions outlined a complex picture, in which understanding the climate and water dynamics requires an alliance between data, interpretations and imagery.

In this context, the contribution of science journalist Elisabetta Tola provided a privileged point of view. Her work, which focuses on communicating complexity and the responsibility of storytelling, offers fundamental tools for dealing with a fragmented and sometimes polarised information landscape. The following interview brings together a series of questions aimed at exploring her point of view in greater depth.

RM How do you think the way climate change is reported has changed in recent years? And what, in your opinion, are the elements that are still difficult to report on?

ET The narrative has changed enormously. Until 2015, until the Paris Agreement, it was a niche topic: extremely difficult to bring into mainstream media and public debate. It seemed to mainly concern the scientific community and some populations around the world that were already experiencing the consequences, but



Fig. 1
San Vitale Pine Forest (Source: Elena Vai, 2025).

were treated as almost marginal. The shift in public perception occurred when the way of telling the story changed. The scientific community began to accept that it needed to move beyond the “here is the data” dynamic, adopting other tools: more visualizations, the involvement of information designers to make reports more accessible, and greater attention to stories rather than only scenarios. It was a slow transformation, but it marked an internal awareness. At the same time, what truly made the difference was the connection with the youth movement that emerged between 2018 and 2019. Greta Thunberg is only a symbol, but she illustrates it well: from a girl with a sign outside her school to a million people in the streets of New York within a year. There was an alliance between a very young and worried generation and an environmentalism that was perhaps looking for new ways to mobilize. Leveraging young people was a strategy for changing the narrative. Then there was a collapse with Covid: for two years that was the only topic. And then, in the past two years, a recovery has begun, not because “we are talking about climate again”, but because the impacts no longer affect only distant populations. The narrative has shifted from a phenomenon described mainly in scientific terms to one that to a far greater degree incorporates the stories of people, examples, as well as positive possibilities: helping people understand that solutions exist and that the transition can generate concrete effects. There is more talk of transition and decarbonization, but in an operational, not abstract, perspective. This shift has positive aspects but also risks. One of these risks is creating the illusion that ready techno-scientific solutions exist for everything, which is not true. It is important not to give the impression that “the solution” already exists. When talking about solutions, it must be made clear that systemic solutions are needed. Achieving results requires systemic action by countries, continents, and institutions. Therefore, while we change

the narrative by introducing the theme of solutions, we must avoid fostering the idea that they are all currently available.

- RM The focus is shifting towards making a process systemic. The solution, if there is one, will perhaps arrive in a hundred years.
- ET The difficult part is shifting the focus from finding immediate solutions to working on the process, i.e. a profound cultural change in the way we live. We don't have much time to do this without negative impacts. And as we know, the real problem with climate communication is that the impacts are very uneven. No place is completely safe. This creates a major imbalance: for some, it will be much more difficult to live in a changed climate, because it means a less acceptable environment. But in human history, the most liveable areas, such as the Mediterranean, have always led development. If those conditions change, so do the places most suitable for life. And this implies a major rebalancing of positions in the world.
- RM In this scenario of change, water becomes a powerful narrative backdrop, a clear indicator of the climate crisis. Amongst risks, adaptations and transformations, which stories about water do you consider most urgent to bring to the public's attention?
- ET I believe that some of the themes we touched on that morning at the Po River Blue Fest are central. Thinking about it, because it is a topic I have been working on for a long time, I would say this first: everything related to water resources is something we have shaped and managed for centuries. We have drained land, diverted river courses, dug canals, installed pumps, built dams. The waterscape is highly anthropized. Many people are not aware of this. I come from the lagoon area — I am from Treviso, my mother was from Torcello — I used to think of the lagoon as a natural environment. I knew it had been modified during the twentieth century, but not that the process had begun in the fourteenth

century. People do not know this: we live in an environment and think it is “nature,” but it is the result of very deep historical choices.

This is the first point: making everyone aware that the territory is the result of past decisions, and that today those decisions must be reconsidered in light of current climate balances. If we have to manage the Po, a stream, or a lake, we must do so considering what we have modified and how climate scenarios are evolving.

The second point concerns territorial knowledge. There are areas, especially in the mid-mountain Apennines, that have been depopulated. There we have lost fundamental expertise in land management. The territory we have is neither accidental nor natural: it is the result of historical management.

The third element is understanding what is truly essential to do today. We cannot modify the environment only to maintain the status quo: we must accept that the status quo will change. These decisions, however, require sacrifices. They cannot be made only from the top down. We need genuinely shared processes, otherwise social conflicts emerge and block everything. If you do not bring people into a path of awareness, you will never have public support. Technical knowledge alone is not enough: people are convinced only if they feel that their point of view has been acknowledged.

RM With the Festival, we tried to focus heavily on the theme of experience to bring people closer to climate issues. From your point of view, what role do direct experiences play in building environmental awareness? And also, in constructing your own narrative or your own work?

ET In my view it is central. This is where the aspect comes in that makes me believe, for instance, that journalism can seriously contribute to this process and to this collective responsibility. It is not the only key, but it is one of the keys to bring into play, because people’s experiences are always the starting point.

I began working on wetlands two years ago. One of the projects we carried out was visiting some wetlands in Sardinia, in the Oristano area, which include one of the most important lagoons and one of the main protected areas. There is a controversy there that has been ongoing for years among farmers, fishermen, bird-watchers, and municipalities, because there is a proposal to create a park such as the Po Delta Park. Precisely because of the Delta experience, some of these stakeholders want nothing to do with it. A purely conflictual process leads nowhere: this proposed park has been at a standstill for ten years and benefits no one. Lived experience is therefore a central key.

Another key point is comparing experiences: helping people understand that a community is made up of individuals with different life stories.

We tend to think in terms of community when we clearly understand what the collective interests are. The issue is being able to reason together about collective needs. Experiences are a fundamental starting point. However, we should not turn experience into an absolute criterion: we cannot base reasoning only on emotional or experiential terms, nor allow the experience of one person to override all the others. For me, the key is collective experience.

RM How does the Facta project, which you also mentioned during your speech on the first day of the Festival, fit into all this? How do you deal with the complexity of narratives on climate change?

ET We spent a lot of time thinking about what kind of journalism we consider both feasible and useful. The reason we founded our own media outlet is that we could not find space for this kind of journalism in traditional media. To do journalism that goes beyond daily news reporting, I had to create my own publication. Our ambition is to work with a clear methodology, parallel to that of scientific research: using data and scientific sources and integrating

them with experiences and stories. The scientific method alone does not lend itself to narrative storytelling; we have tried to weave together field experience with a rigorous framing of the issue. On the topic of water, we have covered several projects. The one I might mention here, and that I care about even though I personally worked on it the least, is “Flooded,” an investigation into Faenza that I also mentioned during the Festival. We had been struck by a clear figure: the increasing frequency of floods in certain areas. Romagna is one of the most at-risk regions in Italy. This was not an abstract figure, but a concrete one. We were aware of some paradigmatic stories in Faenza: for example, a music school that lost all its instruments in the first flood in May 2023, then reconstructed them thanks to the community, only to have them destroyed again in the 2024 flood. It is a powerful story: you rebuild because you do not expect the event to return after seven months. There, the experiential dimension became central. Most people instinctively think about rebuilding as things were before, about restoring the status quo as it was prior to the damage. But through these experiences, and by relating them to scenarios and return periods, you understand that maybe you should not rebuild as before. In *Flooded* we also included an element that is fundamental for us: the impact on mental health. Living in a territory subject to recurring disasters generates enormous stress. *Flooded* is a project developed primarily by my colleague Marco Boscolo, but I consider it one of the most complete: it brings together experience, land management, adaptation, and the cultural, mental, and social resilience of the community.

RM How important is it for those who communicate about climate change to balance data, scientific uncertainties and the emotional dimension of the narrative? *Flooded* is perhaps a clear example of this.

ET It is fundamental. The emotional dimen-

sion is the trigger with which you enter into a relationship, starting from a dimension of listening. What we know is that if you work on an emotional level, you activate a completely different level of attention, openness and involvement than when you appeal only to rationality. This is one of the reasons why much scientific communication fails: it thinks it is providing a package of information and data, and that is the basis upon which people should take action. In climate communication, the emotional dimension must be both the starting point and the end point. Once you have really listened and opened up that space, then you can also introduce scientific knowledge.

I would also add that this raises the issue of valuing non-expert knowledge. We tend to overlook this dimension because we feel we no longer have that knowledge, except in limited forms. But it is an important point: in addition to the data and scientific aspects, and in addition to the emotional dimension, there is also the ability to live and know a territory from within.

RM What images do you consider most effective today in helping communities understand the transformations underway and try to prepare for change?

ET This is a really difficult question, and the one that I find most difficult to answer. In my opinion, the point is to try to make the effort to give communities and societies the right space: not an information vacuum, but exactly the opposite - a place where a collective future can be imagined, where different types of imagination can coexist. A space where needs, expectations, visions and requirements can be put on the table. And here is a key issue that we have perhaps not touched on so far: the imposition of collective needs. Let me give you an example. Some of my colleagues have worked in Sardinia on what is now called “green colonisation”: areas where it has been decided to build entire wind farms. This idea - that one area can be sacrificed to

develop another - is an old one, dating back to the 20th century. That is what Sardinia feels like today: a place where wind farms are installed because “there is wind”, while other less suitable regions benefit from the energy without bearing the costs. And the people who live there say: “It’s not pleasant to live under a wind farm, especially without compensation”. This is a perfect example. So: an imaginary must be constructed together with the community. A shared platform for reasoning is needed: it cannot be imposed by politics.

San Vitale Pine Forest

In the pine forest, the work activated forms of ecological attention and foregrounded the relationship between body, environment, and attentive listening. *A Spasso coi Sensi* proposed a perceptual walk aimed at a slow reading of the landscape. *Tracce Blu* constructed a situated narrative based on material traces, territorial data, and micro-testimonies collected by the students. Together, these activities turned the forest into a sensitive learning environment in which perception operates as a cognitive instrument.



Fig. 2
Piallassa Baiona (Source: Riccardo Mercuri, 2025).



Fig. 3
A spasso coi Sensi (Source: Riccardo Mercuri, 2025).

Part II — Lived Experiences

The second day, hosted in Ravenna, translated the themes that emerged in Bologna into situated practices of traversal, observation, and design. The activities were conceived and carried out by the students of the Master’s Programme in Advanced Design at the University of Bologna. They animated two crucial sites in the area: the San Vitale Pine Forest and the Docks, configuring a distributed laboratory that wove together perception, imagination, and design inquiry.



Fig. 4
Tracce Blu (Source: Matilde Larizza, 2025).

Ravenna Docks

At the Docks, the activities focused more explicitly on design-oriented practices and the imagination of climate futures. *Ecotopie* transformed the port area into a speculative device for exploring alternative scenarios. *Coltivare Futuri* addressed the management of water resources and agri-food systems and highlighted the tensions produced by drought, salinisation, and ecosystemic transformations.

The activities unfolded around the Roller Pavilions, three mobile modules self-built by the students the day before and completed on the morning of 17 May. Conceived as temporary and adaptable infrastructures, the Roller Pavilions hosted both the day's activities and the closing moment of the festival.



Fig. 5
Ecotopie (Source: Nicole Marchi, 2025).

Unconventional Event. A Collective Closure

The festival concluded with the Unconventional Event, organised by *Legambiente Emilia-Romagna* and hosted within the Roller Pavilions. For the occasion, the three modules were joined into a single pergola-like structure that served as a roundtable setting. Around the tables, on which the materials and notes produced during the previous activities were arranged, students, researchers, faculty members, residents and local producers came together. The discussion highlighted how water management and responses to climate change require collective processes capable of integrating technical expertise, situated knowledge, and territorial sensitivities. The image of the Pavilions as a shared space for discussion reflects the cultural dimension of the festival: an invitation to consider dialogue as a design practice and to recognise environmental complexity as a shared field of responsibility.

The Roller Pavilions are lightweight and mobile structures conceived to temporarily activate public spaces through forms of direct engagement with themes related to ecological transition. Their function becomes particularly clear when observing not only what happens when they are installed but also how they are conceived and produced. The self-construction process is central to understanding their aggregative and relational capacity within urban public spaces. Students take part in building the pavilions and learn, through hands-on work, to manage materials, components, constraints, and solutions in a context that combines technical training with collective awareness. Shared construction enables participants to understand directly how a temporary infrastructure can be conceived, assembled, modified, and adapted.

Once installed, the Roller Pavilions operate as temporary activators. Even without elaborate setups, their presence is enough to define a recognisable space - a focal point that facilitates the emergence of public conversations and moments of collective reflection. The mobile and provisional character of the structures allows them to be placed in highly diverse contexts, such as squares, parks, and residual urban spaces.

For a limited time, these places become informal gathering environments: pop-up settings where activities related to information, dialogue, and ecological awareness can take place within public space. Temporariness is not a limitation but a resource, as it allows rapid interventions without permanent transformations or barriers to access. People can stop, listen, interact, or simply observe. In this sense, the Roller Pavilions are neither a stage nor a service point. They are devices oriented towards bringing an issue into the public sphere, allowing it to surface within urban space, and supporting the formation of climatic publics.

Epilogue — Climate Communities and Water Cultures

The Po River Blue Fest demonstrates that climate awareness is not solely a technical matter but a cultural process that requires the integration of research, design, imagination, and participation. Across the two days, the programme highlighted the centrality of water as both an ecological and cultural resource and showed how territories can become sites of shared learning.

In the final image of the Roller Pavilions, animated by a heterogeneous community gathered around newly built tables, one can discern a possible direction for future action. It points to the formation of climate communities capable of interpreting ongoing transformations and activating shared responses that remain grounded in local specificities. In this sense, a culture of water emerges as one of the prerequisites for inhabiting climate change in a conscious and design-oriented manner.

Fig. 6
Ecotopie (Source: Nicole Marchi, 2025).



Elisabetta Tola

Science journalist, host of Radio3Scienza, and chief editor of *Il BO Live* magazine published by the Università di Padova. She is the founder of Facta.eu, an independent media applying scientific methodology to journalism, and the author of several cross-border environmental investigations such as *Wasted Wetlands*; *Under the Surface*; *Forever Lobbying Project*; *Green to Grey*.

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