

## **The GEMEL experience: an association as a link between estuarine environment, scientific research and stakeholders**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents the French association (according to 1901 law) GEMEL, acronym for Groupe d'Etude des Milieux Estuariens et Littoraux that can be translate in Estuarine and Coastal Environments Research Group. Since its creation and through its organization and aims, the originality of the structure is explained. Some examples of GEMEL initiatives are given, showing its independent and special position in the network of the environmental lobby, from study and monitoring to management and e-learning.

Keywords: Association; Estuarine and coastal research; Environmental education.

### **Creation**

In the early 1970s, French oceanographic research was mostly dedicated to open sea and deep sea research. There were little scientific activities dealing with the coast and tidal shores, generating a lag in organized data acquisition. At the same time, the teaching of oceanography, as an academic subject, was developing in selected universities. In 1981, in order to fill the gap, researchers at the start of their careers created GEMEL (Groupe d'Etude des Milieux Estuariens et Littoraux).

GEMEL was established as an association, according to French legislation, encouraging mutual support between members, in order to found and promote coastal and estuarine research. This coincided with a growing demand for studies on intertidal and subtidal coastal areas, as a result of coastal developments and the need for proper (integrated) management. One of the first multidisciplinary research teams on estuarine and coastal environments was built on both a scientific and social basis.

## **Organization and aims**

After more than 20 years of activity on the western French coast (Picardie, Haute Normandie and Basse Normandie regions) GEMEL offers a high level of experience and maturity. The group has now found its niche as part of the civil society as a link between environmental scientists, stakeholders and citizens. The association is financed through members contributions, local and national governmental grants, and participation in research programs at local and European scale (*i.e.* COST 647 in the 1980s, MOREST in the 2000s) and involves non-profit making financial management.

The aims of the organisation are researching (including consultancy), acquiring structured data sets, proposing practical training, providing information and finally widely communicating about estuaries to a large public through a range of supports (international symposium organisation, teaching, exhibitions, world wide web,...). At the international level, links with global organisations such as EMECS (Environmental Management of Enclosed Coastal Seas) provide GEMEL with a mission well beyond France and Europe.

## **Originality of the association**

The associative structure offers a high flexibility which facilitates the setting up of projects and efficient communication: between each member on the one hand (through communication and so enhancement of the expertise together with institutes such as IFREMER, French Water Agency, universities...) and politicians and managers on the other hand. The originality and strength of the association reside in its ability to deal both with fundamental research and practical applications.

GEMEL is dedicated to methodological and inter calibration approaches and to ecological surveys. It further provides objective expertise and carries out monitoring in a long term perspective (long data series of selected parameters, mainly in the Somme, Seine and Veys). Such data is valuable in the context of an increasing pollution risk. It also provides knowledge of community dynamics and biodiversity in the context of the global change, helping to distinguish between “natural” and anthropogenic influences. The understanding of trends is necessary to supporting the rational and integrated management of sensitive areas such as estuaries.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, it seems that such organization can be particularly interesting in a context of environmental education emergence and of debate on the future of French and European research and university.