

THE RIGHTS OF RIVERS MOVEMENT IN FRANCE: The Tavignanu River Rights Declaration (Corsica) and the Loire Parliament (Parlement de Loire)

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Abstract

The global Rights of Nature (RoN) movement has emerged as a response to anthropocentric environmental governance by recognising rivers and other ecosystems as rights-bearing subjects. In Europe, the RoN movement is rapidly expanding, yet it continues to face persistent structural challenges in articulating with established legal and policy frameworks. This article examines the development of RoN in France through two pioneering case studies: the Parlement de Loire (PdL), launched in 2019 as France's earliest RoN initiative and inspired by Bruno Latour's concept of the Parliament of Things, and the Tavignanu River Rights Declaration in Corsica, the first formal RoN recognition in France. Our analysis shows that the PdL uses art-based transdisciplinary collaboration and a diverse repertoire of participatory practices, including public hearings, immersive games, and fluvial festivals, to construct the Loire's subjectivity and reconfigure human–river relationships. However, its fluid organisational structure and explicitly fictional framing have so far limited its capacity to generate any policy impacts. By contrast, the Tavignanu Declaration emerged from grassroots mobilisation against a proposed landfill project and anchors the river's personhood in Corsican cultural identity. Despite securing substantial political support, it has remained largely symbolic and was not invoked in the final judicial decision. Although both initiatives still lack effective pathways into France's highly institutionalised water governance regime, they demonstrate the transformative potential of RoN by mobilising relational values and bottom-up practices rooted in local cultural heritage, thereby offering important lessons while also highlighting key challenges for the broader European RoN trajectory.

Keywords: Rights of Nature; river personhood; relational values; water governance; environmental law; citizen initiative; France

1. Introduction

In the Anthropocene, water is treated as "resources" or "services" for human use and benefit while nonhuman entities, i.e., fauna, flora, and ecosystems, are granted neither rights nor agency, their protection depending entirely on human decisions (Linton, 2022; Strang, 2021). The water crisis has catalysed a global movement to grant legal personhood and rights to nonhumans, a shift often traced back to Christopher Stone's 1972 essay, *Should Trees Have Standing?*, which argued that nature should be recognised as a legal subject capable of defending its interests in court and preventing harm (Stone, 2010). Over the following decades, these ideas have been progressively translated into various legal and political frameworks: Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2010) incorporated the concept of Mother Earth (Pachamama) into their constitutions; In 2017, New Zealand became the first country to formally recognise the legal rights of a river, the Whanganui, followed the same year by judicial recognitions of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers in India, as well as the Atrato River in Colombia (Arreaga-Vicuña et al., 2026; Corrigan and Oksanen, 2021). In most

RoN cases, Indigenous communities were appointed as designated guardians or stewardship bodies to represent the rivers' interests, reflecting their eco-centric cosmologies in which rivers are understood as living beings (O'Donnell and Talbot-Jones, 2018). Building on this momentum, the 2020 Universal Declaration of River Rights articulated seven fundamental rights for rivers: the rights to flow, to remain free from pollution, to sustain native biodiversity, to maintain ecological functions, to interact with aquifers, and to regenerate through restoration (Earth Law Center, 2020).

In 2022, Spain became the first European country to grant legal personhood to an ecosystem through Law 19/2022; the Mar Menor lagoon and its basin became rights-bearing legal subjects (Krämer, 2023). This precedent has since galvanised the European RoN movement: according to the Eco Jurisprudence Monitor database, 121 RoN initiatives had been recorded across Europe as of May 2026, ranging from local actions, e.g., the 2025 motion recognising the rights of the River Rother in the UK, to national-level legislative proposals, e.g., the 2026 proposal concerning the Seine River in France (Kauffman et al., 2026). Building on this momentum, a coalition of NGOs launched a European Citizens' Initiative on the Rights of Nature in 2026, with signature collection beginning that autumn to gather the one million statements of support required to bring the demand before the European Commission (ECI Rights For Nature, 2026).

Despite the rapid expansion of the RoN, its implementation is often hindered by a complex interplay of conceptual, legal, and institutional obstacles in Europe. A first concern is legal redundancy: European water systems are already managed under dense regulatory frameworks, including the EU Water Framework Directive, the Natura 2000 network, and the 2024 Nature Restoration Law, which may render a RoN legislation superfluous or duplicative (Suarez, 2023). Beyond this regulatory overlap lie the representation and accountability of nonhumans, as ambiguities in the role of "river spokespersons"; in the European context, enforcement also depends on the fluctuating political will and the capacity of local authorities (Cao et al., 2026). At an ontological level, RoN risks reinforcing the very anthropocentric logics it seeks to dismantle by mobilising Western legal categories of property and personhood (Reeves and Peters, 2021). This tension is compounded by the fact that, unlike the Indigenous-led movements in New Zealand/Latin America, which frame rivers as ancestral kin, Europe lacks a comparable, widely shared cultural tradition on which to ground such a paradigm shift (Alves et al., 2023).

In France, the RoN movement is growing through a number of experiments. Inspired by Bruno Latour's concept of the "Parliament of Things," (Latour and Porter, 1993) the Parlement de Loire (PdL, 2019) and the Parlement de l'Isère (2024) have created representative forums in which rivers are symbolically granted a political voice. Grassroots guardianship models empowered activists and NGOs as to "speak for" rivers, as illustrated by the Gardien·ne·s de la Seine in Paris (2020) and the Tavignanu River Rights Declaration (hereafter Tavignanu Declaration) in Corsica (2021) (Tavignanu Vivu, 2021). Although these bottom-up initiatives have not yet been formally codified into law, they are driving demands for innovating governance mechanisms, e.g., river-basin citizen councils, while demonstrating the place-based attachments that communities maintain with rivers.

This study examines two emblematic RoN initiatives in France: The PdL and the Tavignanu Declaration. The former, centered on France's last undammed river, functions as a transdisciplinary laboratory where scientists, artists, and citizens engage in legal and political imagination to transition the Loire to a living subject (Le Flo'h and de Toledo, 2021). In contrast, the Tavignanu Declaration emerged from grassroots NGO mobilisation against a landfill project and garnered the first formal regional political endorsement of river rights from the Corsican Assembly (Boulard and Zabotin, 2025). While the PdL focuses on fictional reconfiguration, the Tavignanu Declaration is specifically oriented toward litigation. With two case studies, this research is guided by three objectives: first, to analyse how the Loire and the Tavignanu are articulated as "subjects of rights"; second, to critically evaluate the institutional impact of river rights on France's water governance frameworks; and third, to explore the transformative potential of European RoN movement.

2. Methods

This study was conducted at the University of Strasbourg (France) as part of "Target Project 7 (PC7) - Water Governance and Social-Ecological Transition" within the "OneWater – Eau Bien Commun¹" program, a PEPR² launched in 2021 under Plan France 2030. Empirical data were collected during two fieldwork campaigns in 2025, one in Centre-Val de Loire region (Figure 1), where the PdL is based, and one in Corsica (Figure 2), where the Tavignanu Declaration was issued. A total of 38 semi-structured interviews were conducted — 13 with actors engaged in the PdL and 25 with stakeholders involved in the Tavignanu case — covering a deliberately broad range of profiles: local elected officials, river managers, socio-economic actors, NGOs and citizen associations, artists, researchers, urban planners, farmers, and private developers. This interview material was complemented by archival sources, grey literature, participant observation, field notes, and informal exchanges with communities, allowing each case to be situated within its territorial dynamics.



Figure 1: Loire Festival 2025 in Orléans, where the PdL carried out activities. (Source: Claire Perilhou.)



Figure 2: The Tavignanu River in Corsica. (Source: Jules Dupont.)

¹ <https://www.onewater.fr/fr>

² The Programmes et Équipements Prioritaires de Recherche (PEPR; Priority Research Programmes and Equipment) is a French national research funding scheme launched as part of the France 2030 investment plan. It is coordinated by the ANR (Agence Nationale de la Recherche).

Interviews were manually transcribed, coded, and thematically analysed along two complementary axes. The first examined the epistemological framings of rivers, i.e., how different actors conceptualize rivers as social-ecological entities, and compared stakeholder interpretations of RoN, with particular attention to how these understandings shape notions of nonhuman agency, responsibility, and stewardship. The second assessed the practical implications of RoN discourses for both institutional actors (e.g., water agencies, local authorities) and non-institutional actors (e.g., NGOs, artists, citizen collectives), Identifying the opportunities and tensions involved in translating RoN principles into water governance practices in France.

3. Results

3.1. PdL: a political fiction built through art–science collaboration

3.1.1. Constructing the Loire River as subject

Initially emerging from efforts to raise awareness of fluvial flood risks in the Loire Valley and later consolidated as a collective in 2022, the PdL, developed by the association POLAU-pôle Arts & Urbanisme (Le Floc'h and de Toledo, 2021), operates at the intersection of art and science, aiming to reimagine human–river relationships and promote recognition of the Loire River as a living entity. Since 2019, the PdL has developed a series of performative, cultural, and participatory activities. The *Auditions du PdL*³ (2019–2020) consisted of thirteen public hearings staged in cities of Tours, Blois, and Saint-Pierre-des-Corps, during which invited participants, including landscape architects, philosophers, heritage conservators, environmental scientists, and legal scholars, collectively reflected on the potential representation of the river's voice; these deliberations were later transcribed in Camille de Toledo's book *Le fleuve qui voulait écrire* (2021) (de Toledo, 2021). The *Assemblées de Loire*⁴ (2021) brought together round tables and artistic installations to reconnect inhabitants with the Loire, while the *Manifeste de Loire*⁵ (2023), symbolically signed during the festival *Grandes Remontées*⁶ (2023, 2025), articulated shared principles of river protection and the possible content of a future *Déclaration de Loire*. Other initiatives further expanded this experimental repertoire, such as the *Assemblée immatérielle*⁷ (2021), composed of a circle of empty blue chairs symbolising human and nonhumans sharing the river future; the role-playing game *Faiseurs de Loire*⁸ (2021), inviting participants to inhabit the perceptual world of Loire fauna and translate nonhuman sensibilities beyond human language; as well as the *Fresques de Loire*⁹ (since 2021), an evolving radiophonic archive collecting inhabitants' sensory and emotional attachments to the river through in-situ recordings. The two public events, *Grandes Remontées*, inviting traditional boats navigating upstream along the Loire, fostered encounters between artists, scientists, and riverine communities aboard. These dynamics also contributed to broader symbolic recognition of the river, notably through the City of Tours granting honorary citizenship to the

³ A series of public hearings was held from October 2019 to December 2020 in cities across the Centre-Val de Loire region, during which thinkers, jurists, ecologists, fishermen, and local residents were consulted to conceptualize the Loire's legal personhood.

⁴ Loire Assemblies is a four-day arts–science RoN event held in Tours from 9–12 September 2021, co-organized by the Mission Val de Loire, La Rabouilleuse–École de Loire, and the Université Populaire pour la Terre de Tours. The event explored the contours of a hypothetical parliament representing the Loire River.

⁵ The Loire Manifesto, co-written by the PdL in 2023 and signed on 24 May 2024, warns about the river's degradation and encourages individuals and organizations to commit to its protection. It aims to evolve into a "Declaration of the Rights and Voices of the Loire" across the entire Loire basin.

⁶ Grandes Remontées (Great Upstream Journeys) were large collective expeditions held along the Loire River in September 2023 and 2025, during which flotillas of around 25–30 traditional boats travelled upstream from Saint-Nazaire/Nantes to Orléans over several weeks. Bringing together mariniers, artists, scientists, activists, and local residents through around twenty stopovers, the journeys combined navigation, arts, participatory science, and public debates to strengthen human–river relations.

⁷ Immaterial Assembly is a sensitive democracy exercise held in September 2021 in Tours during the Assemblées de Loire, where 150 residents deposited written texts into an urn, instituting themselves as "representatives of the Loire people".

⁸ Loire Makers is a game organized during the Assemblées de Loire in September 2021. Participants receive part of a scenario and must agree on the complete scenario using nonhumans' communication forms (gestures, sound, modeling) without verbal language.

⁹ Loire Frescoes is research-creation project developed since September 2021 by the Liq̄ar̄ to make visible/hear/smell the Loire through river residents' sensory attachments. Each person deposits their sensory memory (photograph + text) joining the "Chorale de Loire," a murmur of the Loire people, with stops in Tours, Blois, and on boats during the Grande Remontée.

Loire and the inscription of *savoirs nautiques ligériens* (Loire nautical knowledge) on national Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2025.

Explicitly inspired by Bruno Latour's Parliament of Things (Latour and Porter, 1993), which simulates the institutional representation of nonhumans by acting "as if" an interspecies assembly already exists, the PdL constructs nonhuman subjectivity through narrative and performative devices rather than through formal legal recognition. By incorporating the preposition *Vers* (Toward) into its conceptual framing, the PdL is conceived as a horizon in the making rather than a fixed institution, deliberately preserving the openness of its speculative fiction (Haraway, 2013). Its public hearings inaugurated a legal and political imaginary in which the Loire acquires a mediated voice through human representatives, namely artists, scientists, naturalists, and mariners who translate complex ecosystemic sensibilities into human epistemologies while acknowledging the impossibility of direct interspecies verbal communication. The diverse initiatives associated with the PdL mobilise immersive and empathetic dispositifs on water (Holstead et al., 2025) to render nonhuman agency perceptible; rather than claiming to speak directly on behalf of the river's interests, the PdL begins by seeking to understand "how the Loire functions." Through cultivating societal attentiveness and care, the Loire is narrativised as a dynamic, living subject actively participating in its own socio-ecological trajectory, thereby fostering a form of nonhuman agency that carefully avoids essentialist anthropomorphism (Schmitt, 2023).

3.1.2. Institutional misalignment

The PdL lacks any declared administrative status; it is neither an association, a syndicate, nor a formally constituted legal entity, functioning instead as an informal partnership among heterogeneous members from public and private sectors organised around shared objectives. Some members of the PdL were auditioned by the *comité de bassin Loire-Bretagne* (French regional water parliament composed of several hundred elected representatives of human water users), but without follow-ups. The *Déclaration de Loire*, an envisaged document that would extend the *Manifeste* toward legal recognition of the river in France, has remained on the agenda since 2022 without finalisation.

These observations reveal substantial friction between the PdL's eco-centric vision and established French water governance architectures. While informality preserves what PdL members describe as a "fluidity of action" and organic, transdisciplinary spontaneity, it restricts the collective's institutional legibility and impedes engagement with institution partners. Interviewees observe that the official *comité de bassin* operates fundamentally to aggregate utilitarian human interests, namely industrial, agricultural, and energy interests, from which nonhumans are systematically excluded from decision-making. Technical agents describe the PdL as a "nebula" whose composition and mandate are opaque, and the notion of river rights has not yet "percolated" into any ongoing urban planning. These tensions reveal a structural incompatibility between symbolic and cultural forms of RoN and France's highly institutionalised water governance system, which is organised around traditional water-user representation and technocratic management practices (Vallet, 2024; Vallet et al., 2024).

3.2. The Tavignanu Declaration: a citizen-led socio-political instrument

3.2.1. Rooting river legal personhood in Corsican culture

Drafted in July 2021 by the Corsican collective Tavignanu Vivu, together with the NGO Notre Affaire à Tous and several local associations, the Tavignanu Declaration constitutes a pioneering citizen led RoN initiative in Europe. Drawing inspiration from the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Rivers (Earth Law Center, 2020), its twelve articles attribute legal personality to the Tavignanu, the second-largest river in Corsica: 70 km in length, draining an 810 km² watershed that supports over 12,700 inhabitants and harbours several protected species and protected areas, including Natura 2000 sites. The initiative grew out of a decade-long mobilisation against a non-hazardous waste storage facility (ISDND¹⁰) proposed in 2015 in a

¹⁰ Installation de Stockage de Déchets Non Dangereux.

meander of the Tavignanu River at Giuncaggio, a 35-hectare project designed to receive, over thirty years, 2.1 million tonnes of household waste and 1.25 million tonnes of asbestos-bearing soils, with risks of geological collapse and contamination of surface and groundwater (Boulard and Zabotin, 2025). Although devoid of binding normative force, the Declaration petition gathered approx. 5,500 signatures. In December 2021, the Assembly of Corsica adopted a near-unanimous motion of support, the first formal recognition of river rights in France. In March 2026, the Bastia Administrative Court annulled the derogation authorising the ISDND project, closing the decade-long legal battle in favour of the river's protection.

The Declaration articulates the Tavignanu as "a living and indivisible entity from its source to its mouth, delimited by its watershed", endowed with substantive rights (to exist, flow, fulfil ecological functions, remain unpolluted, sustainably interact with aquifers, maintain its native biodiversity, regenerate, and sue) and procedural rights exercised through designated guardians. Subjectivation does not rest on an indigenous cosmology, as in New Zealand or Ecuador, but on a hybrid articulation between scientific knowledge (IUCN lists of protected species, hydrological dynamics) and the river's territorial significance, e.g., irrigation sustaining the AOP Brocciu¹¹ and IGP Corsican clementines¹², recreational practices, archaeological heritage at Aléria, etc. Furthermore, the river's nonhuman agency is reinforced through Corsican linguistic and artistic representations. In the Corsican language, the river is grammatically personified by the omission of the definite article before its name, while the Corsican term for river, "Fiume", encompasses not only the water but the entire socio-ecological system, including the riverbed, irrigated lands, and dependent human populations. Artistic and ritual performances like Jean-François Bernardini's poem *Mi chjamu Tavignanu* (2020), which gives the river a suffering first-person voice, and Antonia Taddei's staged 2025 "marriage" between the Tavignanu and the Tyrrhenian Sea, which dramatises the river's relational existence beyond its banks and speaks for the nonhumans. Local legends also reveal a vernacular cosmology in which the Tavignanu is an interface between the living and the dead, with beliefs that nocturnal processions of deceased souls traversed its waters; warning pregnant women to avoid the river at night. These cultural traditions surrounding the Tavignanu point to a possible pathway for legitimising RoN initiatives in non-Indigenous European contexts (García Ruales et al., 2024; Ugwu, 2025), in which the valourisation of alternative cosmologies are essential, and art can serve as a mediating method.

3.2.2. Symbolic legal status and territorial impacts

The Tavignanu initiative reveals the structural tension between bottom-up activism and the deeply entrenched framework of water governance in France. In France, water management relies on multi-layered planning tools (e.g., SDAGE, SAGE, PADDUC, PBACC, PTGE, PGRI, DOCOB, GEMAPI,¹³ etc.).

¹¹ AOP Brocciu is Corsica's first and only AOP (Appellation d'Origine Protégée) cheese, protected since 2003, which is the most stringent European quality label requiring all production stages to occur in Corsica using recognized know-how and terroir that defines the product's characteristics.

¹² IGP Corsican Clementines are France's only clementines with Protected Geographical Indication (IGP) status since 2007, a European label ensuring that they are grown and harvested in Corsica.

¹³ SDAGE (Schéma Directeur d'Aménagement et de Gestion des Eaux) is a water planning document established for each major hydrographic basin in France that sets fundamental orientations for sustainable water resource management, along with quality and quantity objectives to be achieved for all water bodies over a six-year period.

SAGE (Schéma d'Aménagement et de Gestion des Eaux) is a local-level water planning instrument for sub-basins or aquifer systems that serves as a territorial declination of the SDAGE, proposing more precise measures adapted to local conditions.

PADDUC (Plan d'Aménagement et de Développement Durable de la Corse) is a territorial planning document specific to Corsica, established under Article 12 of the 2002 Corsica Law, which frames land use planning on the island with objectives for sustainable development, agricultural development, environmental protection, and the social solidarity economy.

PBACC (Plan de Bassin d'Adaptation au Changement Climatique) is a basin-level climate adaptation plan under Measure 25 of the French National Climate Adaptation Plan (PNACC), serving as a technical support mechanism for local authorities in adapting their territories to climate change consequences. It presents observed and projected climate change effects on water resources and establishes six strategic principles for accelerating territorial adaptation in the water sector for 2024-2030.

PTGE (Plan Territorial de Gestion de l'Eau) is a territorial water management plan designed to coordinate water resource management actions at the local level, bringing together various stakeholders to address water availability, quality, and usage conflicts within a specific territory.

Because this existing architecture is so exhaustive, institutional actors commonly view the Tavignanu Declaration with skepticism. They argue that ecological degradation in Corsica is driven not by a deficit of substantive legal norms, but rather by chronic implementation gaps, deficient state inspection capacities, and a weak local appropriation of planning tools. The Tavignanu basin lacks a dedicated SAGE, its PTGE was suspended in 2025 following agricultural protests, and a *contrat de rivière*¹⁴ failed to federate the 23 riparian communes. In March 2026, the Bastia Administrative Court issued a decisive ruling concerning the controversial local landfill project, resolving the dispute exclusively through the application of conventional protected-species derogation frameworks, without referencing the Tavignanu Declaration.

The Tavignanu Declaration thus lacks the institutional pathways required to translate the symbolic rights it proclaims into enforceable obligations. Unlike Spain, France has no popular legislative initiative mechanism comparable to the one that enabled the Mar Menor legalisation (Pérez-Crespo Vinader et al., 2026). Despite this non-normative legal status, the Declaration has nonetheless demonstrated tangible political and territorial impacts. At the municipal level, the rural commune of Poggio-di-Venaco, located in the upstream of the Tavignanu River, incorporated the Declaration into its *Plan Local d'Urbanisme* (PLU), using it as a guiding charter to enforce zoning protections for riparian woodlands. At the regional level, the Assembly of Corsica adopted a near-unanimous motion in support of the Declaration in 2021, making it a powerful political lever that consolidated regional opposition to the landfill project.

4. Conclusion

Both the PdL and the Tavignanu Declaration represent pioneering RoN experiments in France that advocate a deconstruction of the Western nature–culture dualism, repositioning humans as relational beings embedded within socio-ecological assemblages of rivers that have co-evolved with nonhumans (Boelens et al., 2024; de Souza et al., 2025). Yet they diverge in their operational methodologies and origins. The Tavignanu initiative emerged reactively, in response to a specific industrial threat, i.e., a planned waste landfill, which drove the citizens' collective to draft a formal, albeit non-binding, legal Declaration in the middle of decade-long court battles. This approach leverages structured legal activism, explicitly defining rivers' rights (e.g., to flow, exist, remain unpolluted) and appointing specific human "guardians" to represent the river's agency. In contrast, the PdL originated proactively as an art-science program aiming to transform public imaginaries through "cultural engineering". It deliberately avoids formal administrative structuring to preserve transdisciplinary fluidity, using a philosophical "legal fiction" where artists and scientists simulate interspecies dialogue rather than pursuing immediate legal formalisation for the Loire River.

Despite these methodological divergences, both initiatives confront a challenge common in France (Vallet, 2024; Vallet et al., 2024): securing institutional legibility within an already highly institutionalised water governance framework, characterised by multiple existing stakeholder participation mechanisms. To date, neither has produced tangible policy impact, and the notion of RoN face widespread skepticism from public authorities. Nevertheless, the PdL and Tavignanu Declaration demonstrate that, while the juridical recognition of river personhood remains an obstacle in European context (Cao et al., 2026), they could mobilise local societies around their rivers' relational values (Cohen et al., 2023) and cultivate eco-centric

PGRI (Plan de Gestion des Risques d'Inondation) is a flood risk management plan defined at the river basin scale that establishes strategic orientations and measures to prevent, protect against, and manage flood risks. It coordinates with the SDAGE and other EU-mandated planning documents to ensure integrated water and flood risk management.

DOCOB (Document d'Objectifs) is the management document for Natura 2000 protected areas in France, outlining conservation objectives, actions, and measures to maintain or restore favorable conservation status for habitats and species within the site.

GEMAPI (Gestion des Milieux Aquatiques et Prévention des Inondations) is a French mandatory competence transferred to municipalities and inter-municipal authorities since 2018, encompassing aquatic environment management and flood prevention across eight specific domains including water body maintenance, flood risk reduction, and restoration of aquatic continuity.

¹⁴ Established in the 1980s, a river contract is a voluntary governance agreement in France through which local authorities, state agencies, associations, and water users coordinate multi-year actions (often 5–7 years) for river restoration and sustainable water management at the watershed scale. Although not legally binding, it structures shared objectives and funding for issues such as water quality, biodiversity, and flood prevention, often complementing broader frameworks such as the SDAGE and SAGE.

grassroots practices, e.g., whether through Corsican linguistic heritage or through traditional Loire river-boatmen's knowledge. In this way, the symbolic and cultural deployment of RoN retains a transformative potential for shifting human-nonhuman relationships in the Anthropocene.

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Declaration of competing interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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