

Voice of Nature: Persona-Based Deliberation for Non-Human Interests

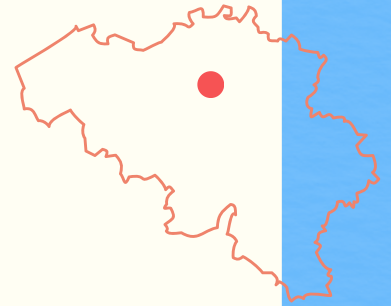
City of Mechelen

INTRODUCTION

Most citizen assemblies only hear the people in the room. Mechelen's assembly went further: it tried to give the river itself, and everything living in and around it, a seat at the table too.

Voice of Nature is the persona-based method Mechelen used within the Citizens' Assembly on the River Dijle, where participants represented plants and animals to voice non-human interests directly in the deliberation. It also tackled a separate, very human problem: the participation paradox, where the same familiar voices tend to dominate civic processes, over and over. By adding this non-human perspective, the city aimed to make the assembly's 15 guiding principles reflect a genuinely wider set of interests.

Unlike the Citizens' Assembly itself, Voice of Nature didn't end when the assembly closed. The same method kept resurfacing afterward, in co-creation sessions, design discussions, and public awareness activities, keeping non-human interests visible as the project moved forward.



BELGIUM

ENGAGEMENT LEVEL

- ☐ Inform
- ☐ Consult
- ☒ **Involve**
- ☐ Collaborate
- ☒ **Empower**



MANDATE

Giving nature a formal voice was a **deliberate political choice**, folded into the same mandate that set up the Citizens' Assembly itself. That choice responded to a specific problem: the participation paradox, where the same familiar voices tend to dominate civic processes, leaving many perspectives out entirely, human and non-human alike. Representing plants and animals through personas was one of the city's answers to that problem, alongside the stratified lottery and targeted outreach described in the Citizens' Assembly case.

Participants of the Citizens' Assembly generated **122 nature-based recommendations** specifically, which were merged with the more than **400 human-generated recommendations** into the assembly's **15 guiding principles**.

The city's commitment went further than this one assembly, though. Mechelen also built a **reusable framework for "more-than-human-inclusive design"**, meant to embed non-human perspectives in future adaptation projects and city renewal work too, not just this one riverside project.

PROCESS DESIGN

Each **persona** represented a specific plant, animal, or ecosystem along the river Dijle, such as a heron, a specific tree species, or the riverbed itself. Participants took on one of these roles, and **spoke from that perspective during the deliberation** (see Citizens' Assembly), across both plenary and small-group sessions. Participants had to set aside their own view, and instead argue specifically for the interests of the plant, animal, or ecosystem they represented.

RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Beyond the assembly itself, Voice of Nature kept a visible presence in Mechelen's **public communication**: on info-totems along the project sites, on the city's website, and during presentations and debate evenings with residents, target groups, and stakeholders.

The **immersive booth** (see: Immersive and Visualisation Tools) carried that visibility further. It travelled to major city events, including the Summer Kick Off, World Wetland Day, the Week of the Water, and 'College op stap', bringing the personas of plants and animals in front of audiences well beyond the original 35 assembly participants.

The method also travelled internationally. The city presented the Voice of Nature methodology at conferences and workshops abroad, including NSP Heidelberg and Urban Future Lodz, and hosted its own dedicated session on it at the Lost in Transition conference in Mechelen. Several other cities have since asked Mechelen to run workshops on the method themselves, a clear sign of interest well beyond the original project.

RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Voice of Nature ran within the same budget and staffing already described for the Citizens' Assembly and the Immersive and Visualisation Tools.

What's specific to this method is the **outside expertise** the city brought in to develop it properly. Building credible, well-informed personas took more than good intentions. The city consulted legal experts from the University of Antwerp, associations working on rights for nature, projects focused on rights for rivers, and both artists and philosophers, to make sure the personas reflected real ecological and legal thinking, not just a creative guess at what a heron or a tree "might say".

STRENGTHS

- Raised **public awareness of nature's own interests**, not just abstract environmental policy goals.
- The persona method built **real empathy**, letting participants argue for interests other than their own.
- **Reached far beyond the assembly itself**, through the immersive booth, city events, and international conferences.
- Sparked **genuine outside interest**. Several other cities have since asked Mechelen to run workshops on the method themselves.

CHALLENGES

- Building credible personas required **serious desk research** into ecology, law, and philosophy, not just creative writing.
- A **well-designed script** was essential. A weak persona simply doesn't spark real discussion.
- The method depends on a **solid educational track beforehand**, so participants understand enough to represent a species convincingly.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Build personas that are genuinely **comprehensive**, and give them something concrete to say.
- Invest in an **immersive atmosphere**. It's easier to feel empathy for another creature's interests when the setting supports that emotionally, not just intellectually.
- Bring in **expertise** (legal, ecological, philosophical) when developing personas, rather than relying on assumptions.
- Introduce methods like this **early in a process**, so they can shape everything that follows, and not just supplement decisions already made.
- **Be transparent about follow-up**. Giving honest feedback, including when something can't be done, takes real courage, but builds trust. Translate recommendations into a concrete, usable checklist, and use it as a steering tool in your own specifications and those of third parties.
- **Be proud** of what a small, unconventional method achieved. It's worth celebrating when something unusual actually works.



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