

European pastoralism: farming with nature

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Introduction

Most people have quite contrasting views of European farming and Europe's biodiversity, nature reserves and national parks being protected from the need to produce food. There is an overriding impression that the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has caused environmental damage virtually everywhere. In reality the picture across Europe is much more complicated. Agriculture has been around for so long, in some areas for up to 10,000 years, that much of Europe's wildlife has developed alongside it. Consequently, much of the high value wildlife and habitats are not in areas untouched by humans but rather are intimately linked to pastoralism. Indeed, the richest mixtures of flowering plants, with the greatest diversity of species, are often found in open grasslands and heaths periodically grazed by farm livestock. Low stocking rates with breeds retaining natural grazing behaviour patterns strongly influences the vegetation of these landscapes. A complex interwoven mosaic of different communities of vegetation is created, containing a range of plants varying in height and density. The subtle patterning of textures and colours that can be seen from a distance represents a broad spectrum of habitats for associated wildlife.

The area of Europe under high nature value (HNV) pastoralism has declined over the past thirty years, but despite this there are about 30 million hectares of open land covered by natural and semi-natural vegetation maintained by pastoralism. HNV pastoral systems are a European policy priority because the continuation of their practices is fundamental to the maintenance of such a wide range of habitats and species of conservation importance. How these systems function must be understood in order to develop effective policies.

To this end, the European Commission funded a Concerted Action, *PASTORAL: the agricultural, ecological and socio-economic importance of free-ranging livestock systems in Europe*, to bring together individuals from throughout Europe with a range of backgrounds and disciplines to consolidate present knowledge and identify the gaps. The consortium comprised SAC, the European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism, ALTERRA (Netherlands), the Institute for European Environmental Policy (UK), Asociacion para el Analisis y Reforma de la Politica Agrorural (Spain), Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Spain), Escola Superior Agraria de Castelo Branco (Portugal) and Coordination Paysanne Européenne (Belgium).

Meetings were held over two years in the Sierra de Guadarrama Mountains (Spain), Transylvania (Romanian Carpathians), Islay (Scotland) and La Crau (south-east France). Each meeting drew in experts from throughout both EU and Accession countries. All four meetings integrated field visits with formal discussion sessions to provide the participants with opportunities to speak directly to shepherds, landowners and local experts. In this way, the delegates were able to obtain a first-hand impression of what the management practices consist of, how these link to produce the environmental conditions of biodiversity value, and what the key issues are affecting the continuing viability of the enterprises.

Overview of findings

Most HNV pastoral systems are now confined to mountainous or remote regions of Europe. They are very diverse, reflecting the climates, topographies and cultures that shaped them. For example, in mountainous areas, the short growing season and the difficult terrain limit the potential for intensive agriculture. Whether in the Carpathian mountain area of Romania, or the Gredos

Mountains of central Spain sheep, goats and cattle need to move from the lower ground to higher pastures in summer, a practice known as transhumance. Some transhumance is short and local, while other movements cover hundreds of kilometres to high-altitude summer shepherd camps. The lower ground is mown for hay to provide winter fodder while the livestock are away - in the process creating an unenclosed mosaic of species-rich meadows in different stages of growth that are also of high nature value.

Closer to home, the western part of the British Isles and Norway experience the highest rainfalls in Europe. The growing season is very short and livestock have to cope with long bleak winters and low productivity pastures. On Islay, traditional cattle and sheep breeds able to withstand a very wet and windy climate produce high quality meat from open pasture. This extends across a mosaic of Atlantic bogs, heaths and grasslands identified as important for biodiversity at an international level under *Natura 2000*.

Conversely, Mediterranean areas experience pronounced drought in the summer which influences the location and timing of grazing practices. In La Crau, in south-eastern France, a complex system of sheep rearing has evolved over time linking the distant summer alpine pastures with spring grazing on the local open steppe-like habitat and autumn and winter use of the aftermath grazing on the unique hay fields. In the past the transhumant journeys to and from the Alps were on foot, but now use a fleet of lorries. The dry steppe, known as coussoul, is an integral part of this system of pastoralism and it is also very important for its wildlife, including the little bustard and the sandgrouse.

The discussions at the PASTORAL meetings proved useful in helping to highlight some potential changes to policy that might improve the viability of HNV pastoral systems. For example, there is an urgent need to ensure that reforms of the CAP ameliorating the adverse effects of intensive production systems do not inadvertently accelerate the decline of HNV systems and their associated biodiversity. By the same token, instead of taking a sectoral (e.g. focussed on beef or sheep or dairy) approach to policy development there are strong arguments for developing support policies targeted at specific regions or individual production systems. In particular, a scheme targeted specifically at transhumance flocks (and therefore able to cope with the fact that the shepherds and their livestock will use markedly different types of land in different regions areas at different times of the year) is considered essential if this form of production system and its associated biodiversity value is to stand any chance of continued survival.

It was, however, also clear from the discussions that the major threat to HNV grazing systems is a widespread misconception that these forms of pastoralism are unnecessary from a biodiversity perspective. This is shared by politicians, farmers and consumers with, surprisingly, many ecologists and conservationists. There is therefore an urgent need to continue to raise awareness among these groups of the importance of these systems, especially with regard to the intimate linkages between the agricultural practices and the biodiversity and landscapes these produce and maintain. It is also essential to ensure that the scale, diversity and extent of these systems still existing across Europe is fully appreciated. As part of this process, a series of eight brief Information Notes and an accompanying video have been produced and distributed widely. These provide an overview of the discussions at the PASTORAL project meetings and serve as a brief introduction to some of the issues facing pastoralism in Europe today.

The PASTORAL project identified that further information is needed on how HNV pastoral systems function in terms of their ecology or economics. An understanding is also required of the socio-economic and cultural aspects associated with the different farming practices. Further work in Romania has shown (see TEXT BOX) how socio-economic factors, such as the viability of an enterprise or the willingness of farmers to continue certain practices, are often the main driving

forces behind whether the long-established management practices associated with HNV pastoralism will survive.

Detailed studies of each pastoral system are necessary to understand how and why each system is of biodiversity importance, and to establish the links between the drivers affecting each system. Policy can then be developed at local and regional levels to safeguard Europe's HNV pastoral systems together with the valued landscapes and biodiversity riches that they maintain.

Acknowledgements

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TEXT BOX

'Preliminary research into the social aspects of Romanian transhumance' was funded by the British Academy and undertaken in the summer of 2003. This study found that social problems which are significant in causing the abandonment of long-distance transhumant livelihoods in Romania include:

- The arduous nature of the livelihood. Accommodation is usually no more than a wooden hut and many shepherds have no shelter at all. The work is physically hard and they risk injury protecting their flocks from bears. They have no pension and no security if they are injured and unable to work.
- Marginality of transhumant practices in Romanian agriculture and society. Many shepherds feel that they are on the 'wrong side of the law', with no rights and no power because they do not own land. Many describe how difficult it is to find land through which they can pass without problem since few landowners now want large flocks of sheep crossing their land.

The enforcement of legally underpinned rights and conflict resolution between shepherds and landowners or land managers would go some way to improving the long-term viability of transhumance in Romania. The provision of better accommodation (learning from similar initiatives in France and Spain) could also provide more incentive for people to stay in, and join, the profession. However, unless transhumance shepherds gain a voice they will be increasingly marginalised and will lose the rights to continue with their livelihoods.

Photographs



Plate 1 In the Romanian Carpathians, the agricultural landscape consists of a diverse mixture of small fields, meadows and orchards situated around villages interspersed with forest and woodlands. Hay production takes place on extraordinarily steep slopes and these hay fields are very rich in plant and insect species. Photo: Sally Huband



Plate 2 In the transhumant sheep flocks which graze La Crau, in south-eastern France in spring and autumn, goats are traditionally used to lead the flock to and from the summer pastures in the Alps. Photo: Sally Huband



Plate 3 In the Romanian Carpathians, a professional shepherd will combine the sheep from a number of owners into the one flock and take these to graze in the mountains in spring. While at the high pastures, the shepherds milk the sheep twice per day and make cheese, some of which they return to the owners of the sheep and some of which they retain in part-payment for their services. Photo: Sally Huband