

# PASTORAL (2003) *Trends and threats to the viability of European pastoral systems*

## PASTORAL Project Information Note 5

*EU -Funded  
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SAC, EFNCP,  
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This series of eight Information Notes and accompanying video are intended to provide a brief introduction to some of the issues facing pastoralism in Europe today. They were produced as part of the output from the PASTORAL project, an EU-funded Concerted Action which considered the agricultural, socio-economic and ecological characteristics of high nature value pastoral systems in Europe.

The PASTORAL project was steered by a consortium consisting of the Scottish Agricultural College (UK), European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism, ALTERRA, (The Netherlands),

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).

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Further detailed information on the PASTORAL project and European pastoralism can be found at: [www.sac.ac.uk/envsci/external/Pastoral/default.htm](http://www.sac.ac.uk/envsci/external/Pastoral/default.htm)

### Introduction

- Overall, pastoral systems are declining in area, distribution and status and this has significant implications for Europe's wildlife. Research has shown that 65 of the 198 priority habitats listed in Annex 1 of the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) are threatened by the intensification of pastoral agriculture<sup>1</sup>, whilst 26 pasture habitats and 6 grass/hay habitats, also listed in Annex 1, are threatened by the abandonment of pastoral management practices.
- The number of habitats threatened by abandonment is likely to increase with the expansion of the EU as the European Commission's Biodiversity Action Plan for Agriculture highlights:

*'the main issue of concern in Eastern Europe with a view to the impacts on biodiversity, is the decline of farmed land. Under-utilisation of agricultural land and its abandonment can have disastrous consequences for the natural environment. In mountain areas and other less-favoured areas such as drylands and northern areas, the cessation of agriculture quickly leads to the reversion of higher flora rich areas to scrubs; this affects also vertebrate and invertebrate population'<sup>2</sup>.*

- This Information Note describes some of the trends and threats facing high nature value pastoral systems in Europe today.

<sup>1</sup> Ostermann, O.P. 1998 The need for management of nature conservation sites designated under Natura 2000. *Journal of Applied Ecology* 35 968-973

<sup>2</sup> [http://biodiversitychm.eea.eu.int/convention/cbd\\_ec/strategy/agri/ENV-2000-681-EN-02-02-AGRI.pdf](http://biodiversitychm.eea.eu.int/convention/cbd_ec/strategy/agri/ENV-2000-681-EN-02-02-AGRI.pdf)

### **Trends related to perception of pastoralism**

- In general, and particularly amongst European decision-makers, there is a lack of awareness and understanding of pastoral systems and the benefits that they deliver. The reform of agricultural policy is generally focused on more competitive, intensive agricultural sectors. The social, cultural and environmental benefits that pastoral systems deliver are not recognised or acknowledged even though they reflect the principles set out in the European Model of Agriculture.
- In many sectors of society, there is a perception that pastoral systems are archaic and even backward. Shepherds are often viewed with mistrust.
- The biodiversity benefits of pastoralism are not widely recognised but rather, especially in north-western Europe, sheep production is equated to environmental damage through overgrazing and soil erosion. As a result, pastoralists have been excluded from protected areas and nature value has declined in these sites.
- Throughout Europe, agricultural universities and colleges tend to ignore traditional pastoral farming, despite the increase in the number of environmental science and conservation/countryside management courses that they now offer.

### **The marginalisation of traditional pastoral systems**

- During the last century, considerable technological advances transformed agriculture throughout much of Europe. Management of the most productive land has been intensified through mechanisation and the application of agrochemicals. Over the last thirty years in particular, large areas of species-rich semi-natural grasslands have been converted into species-poor but agriculturally more productive grasslands e.g. hay has been replaced by silage.
- Supplementary feeding has enabled livestock numbers to be increased and the drive for increased productivity has led to the development of modern breeds. These can produce a lot of milk and meat but only at the expense of losing the characteristics that allowed traditional breeds to adapt to regional environmental conditions. Modern breeds need large quantities of high nutrient grass and supplementary feeds and cannot cope with the harsh conditions of extensive pastoralism. As a consequence, whilst more productive pastures have been intensified, many remote pastures have been abandoned.
- Extensive pastoralism is now generally practised in remote regions where the land is too wet, dry or steep to intensify. These regions often lack infrastructure and are often far from markets. For the reasons listed above and because production is lower, traditional pastoralism is unable to compete with modern livestock systems. Pastoral systems have marginal economic viability at current prices. Such marginal economic and social viability make them prone to abandonment.

### **Market driven threats to the viability of pastoral systems**

- Pastoralists cannot meet the demands of supermarkets. Traditional pastoral breeds are slow-maturing and cannot produce the quantity of meat that modern breeds can produce.
- Consumers are still primarily influenced by cost rather than the quality and 'environmentally credentials' of the product. Few links are made between production

system, the product and the environmental cost or benefit of products. The chain between pastoral producers and consumers is too long and product returns are poor.

### **Policy driven threats to pastoralism**

- Long before the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), it was the policy of many European countries to encourage the technological development of agriculture in the drive for greater production. The CAP reinforced this approach, encouraging the amalgamation of small farms, a loss of agricultural biodiversity and the homogenisation of rural landscapes.
- World Trade Organisation negotiations focus on intensive agriculture and an increasing desire to reduce production-oriented payments to farmers. They also determine the conditions for money that can be offered to farmers via European rural development policies (such as Less Favoured Areas and agri-environment programmes).
- Within the EU, 70% of agricultural subsidies go to 20% of large commercial farmers. CAP measures favour intensive systems on more productive land. Combined with commercial competition and technological change, these policies create an operating environment in which traditional pastoral systems face a choice between intensification (e.g. higher stocking rates, switch to fast maturing commercial breeds) or abandonment.
- Environmental concerns are often focussed on intensive farms and are designed to mitigate negative impacts such as pollution rather than maintaining more environmentally sustainable production and farmland habitats of high nature value.
- Although the CAP is often defended as a policy which is needed in order to prevent rural abandonment, there is no EU policy or strategy for addressing this issues in a coherent way, for example, by identifying which farming systems and areas are most vulnerable to abandonment, which need to be maintained for environmental reasons, and how this can best be achieved.
- Often there is a lack of integration and complementarity between policies. In some regions, farmers may have to choose between conflicting policies e.g. agri-environment payments or payments for afforestation of high nature value farmland.
- Small-scale, tenant, landless and part-time pastoralists are often not eligible to apply for support.
- Producers need stability and find it very difficult to plan ahead and invest in their farm or flock when policies change direction frequently. There are numerous rules and regulations with which farmers have to comply. Small-scale producers are less able to meet hygiene and welfare regulation requirements. For small farmers, there is still a considerable amount of form-filling and this is a burden, which dissuades many to continue in the profession.
- The Mid-Term Review (MTR) proposals advocate the decoupling of support from production. Farmers will be required to maintain their land in Good Agricultural Condition. However, Good Agricultural Condition may not equate with 'Good Environmental Condition' and there have been no environmental impact assessments of decoupling support in high nature value areas. Pastoralists in some areas may well reduce their animal numbers resulting in undergrazing and scrub encroachment of

semi-natural grasslands. Similarly, the MTR proposals include modulation but there is no guarantee that money will be redistributed to support high nature value farming systems despite the multiple benefits they deliver.

### **Agri-environment driven threats to pastoralism**

- Twenty percent of the EU's agricultural land is covered by agri-environment measures. However, only five Member States account for 86% of the expenditure.
- Agri-environment schemes are too often developed without the participation of farmers and the incorporation of local knowledge. As a result, they do not take into account pastoral system as a whole and instead of maintaining functioning systems just maintain material elements such as dry stone walls. Many schemes do not address biodiversity at all and even when they do, they often have very detailed prescriptions aimed at just a few conspicuous species. By being overly prescriptive, many schemes can act to homogenise high nature value farmland.
- Many schemes fail to deliver due to a lack of resources for their administration including agricultural advisory workers and monitoring. In particular, the purpose of schemes is not always clearly communicated to the farmers that have to implement them.
- Agri-environment payments are often insufficient to compete with conflicting policies . Uptake of schemes is generally low in productive and intensive areas because of conflicts with policies aimed at supporting intensive production. Similarly, in areas prone of abandonment, and especially if the owners of the land are different from the pastoralists, afforestation schemes are competing with agri-environmental schemes.

### **Social factors influencing the viability of pastoralism**

- Many of the people practising pastoralism are close to retirement age. When they retire, the systems will also die out as too few younger people are taking their place. Recruitment of younger people is hindered by low wages, poor working conditions and low social status.
- Transhumance pastoralists endure particularly difficult working conditions, e.g. many months away from home and inadequate accommodation at summer and winter pastures. They also face conflicts with settled agriculturists along their migration routes, e.g. Romanian transhumance shepherds are often forced to move at night along railway lines and river banks to avoid such conflicts.
- Shepherds and pastoralists often find it difficult to marry, as their lifestyles are becoming less and less socially acceptable and financially viable. Many areas in which pastoralism still exists are remote and lack social infrastructure such as schools and doctors and are therefore unattractive places to live and raise families. Depopulation and abandonment of remote areas is therefore increasing.
- High labour costs, unacceptable working conditions are technical change (e.g. fencing) encouraging the switch away from free-ranging or closely shepherded systems towards sedentary systems. This leads to an associated decrease in nature value and environmental sustainability.
- As pastoralism declines, pastoralists are becoming increasingly isolated. This hinders the exchange of information and expertise that is necessary to ensure that pastoralism

remains viable. Skills are being lost due to a lack of recruitment into the sector. Reintroducing traditional skills is difficult and more expensive than maintaining a skills base. Farming unions are often run for and by commercial farmers and small economically marginal farmers lack the capacity to influence and promote their interests with European decision-makers.

### **Threats to the viability of pastoralism in central and eastern Europe**

- Livestock quotas for most Accession countries are to be based on livestock numbers within these countries during the period following independence from the former Soviet Union (e.g. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) or transition to non-communist governments (e.g. Hungary, Romania). As livestock numbers had decreased markedly at the start of this period, it is highly likely that quota levels will be set too low to maintain the vast areas of semi-natural pastoral habitats that still exist in these countries.
- The EU's rural development proposals for Accession countries places emphasis on agri-environment schemes for delivering environmental and biodiversity benefits. However, as the EU's Biodiversity Action Plan for Agriculture explains: '*CAP support can play a pre-eminent role in maintaining threatened agricultural systems, notably through LFA measures, where agriculture could otherwise disappear*'<sup>3</sup>.
- For countries in central and eastern Europe, modernising agriculture will be a major financial challenge. For example, substantial investment is needed to upgrade dairies so that they meet EU hygiene standards.
- Although some intensification will inevitably occur in Accession Countries, abandonment is a far greater threat.
- Most Accession Countries have insufficient administrative capacity to develop and implement agri-environment schemes and have limited resources for co-financing such schemes.
- In many EU Member States, the payment levels for agri-environment schemes are based upon the principle of 'profit forgone'. However, this approach is not suitable for maintaining semi-subsistence systems within the Accession countries.
- In central and eastern Europe, many pastoralists are reluctant to form associations due to the legacy of enforced collectivisation and formation of cooperatives during the communist era. Their capacity to promote their own interests and input into policy development is therefore limited.

### **Overview**

There is little time left. In another ten years most high nature value pastoral systems and the local and traditional knowledge on which they depend may have become extinct. The cost of reinstating high nature value pastoral systems would far outweigh the costs of maintaining them. Reintroducing a pastoral system would be analogous to reintroducing a language: reintroduced systems will never be as rich (agriculturally, culturally and ecologically) as those that have been passed down. Urgent action is required now. The next Information Note in this series provides an indication of some potential policy approaches to help maintain the viability of European pastoral systems<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://biodiversitychm.eea.eu.int/convention/cbd\\_ec/strategy/agri/ENV-2000-681-EN-02-02-AGRI.pdf](http://biodiversitychm.eea.eu.int/convention/cbd_ec/strategy/agri/ENV-2000-681-EN-02-02-AGRI.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> PASTORAL (2003) *Potential policy approaches to support European pastoralism*. PASTORAL Information Note 6

A total of eight Information Notes have been produced from the PASTORAL project:

- 1: *An introduction to European pastoralism*
- 2: *The need for a typology of European pastoral systems*
- 3: *The nature of European pastoralism*
- 4: *Examples of European pastoral systems*
- 5: *Trends and threats to the viability of European pastoral systems*
- 6: *Potential policy approaches to support European pastoralism*
- 7: *Gaps in the understanding of European pastoralism*
- 8: *European pastoralism: farming with nature*

Many of the points in these Information Notes are illustrated by examples taken from the location of the four main workshops held during the course of the project, Sierra de Guadarrama Mountains (Spain), Transylvania (Romanian Carpathians), Isle of Islay (Scotland) and the plain of La Crau (south-east France).

These Information Notes were compiled by Sally Huband (the dedicated officer employed by SAC on the PASTORAL project) with additional input from the other members of the project steering group: Davy McCracken and Gwyn Jones (SAC), Eric Bignal (EFNCP), Berien Elbersen (ALTERRA), David Baldock and Harriet Bennett (IEEP), Guy Beaufoy (Spain), Begoña Peco (UAM), Luis Pinto de Andrade (ESA-IPCB) and Gerard Choplin, Isabel Bermejo and Jesús Garzón (CPE). The project meetings enabled us to consider and discuss the future of pastoral systems with many colleagues drawn from our own institutes and elsewhere throughout Europe, and we offer our thanks to them for their useful contributions towards the development of many of the views presented here.