

Abergwesyn Commons Visit
to
North Spain
with the
National Trust
and the
**European Forum on Nature
Conservation and Pastoralism
(EFNCP)**



*European Forum on
Nature Conservation
and Pastoralism*



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From left to right: Helen Barnes, Viv Lewis, Concha Salguero, Gwyn Protheroe, Tracey Protheroe, Billy Davies, David Davies.

Introduction

The opportunity arose to take one person from the National Trust and five people involved with Abergwesyn Commons, to the Asturias region and the Basque Country in North Spain. This was done as part of the 'Abergwesyn Commons project' in order to help build stronger relations with the commons graziers as well as to help expand our knowledge and perhaps learn from how other farmers use common land in another part of the European Union.

Those who attended the visit from Abergwesyn Commons:

- Jessica Tyler National Trust Abergwesyn Commons Project Officer
- Billy Davies Farmer and Secretary for Abergwesyn Hill Commons Association
- Gwyn Protheroe Farmer and Secretary for Llanafan Hill Commons Association
- David Davies Farmer and Chair for Llanafan Hill Commons Association
- Tracey Protheroe Farmer
- Helen Barnes Local FWAG representative

Two representatives from the European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism came. They acted as our British guides and translators.

- Concha Salguero Works in agricultural law
- Viv Lewis Administrator for the Cumbrian Mountains Commons Federation

Viv Lewis was our driver while in Spain and Concha Salguero organised the weeks programme.



Sheep shelter/pen in the Sierra del Sueve

In writing up my notes from the study tour if information was repeated on two separate visits I have left the repetition in. I have done this for two reasons; it corroborates certain types of information like pricing; it highlights the more serious issues and shared difficulties amongst the different graziers.

Day 1

Picos de Europa National Park. Cangas de Onis, Asturias Region

Visit to the Mayors office

The main source of economic income within the Picos de Europa National Park comes from tourism, religion (the Santiago de Compostela Pilgrim Route) and the National Park bringing people in, although it is through agriculture that the uplands of Picos de Europa are managed. The National Park covers three autonomous regions, Asturias, Castille y Leon and Cantabria. Currently there is no representation from the farming community on the board of the National Park and it has been decided that farmers need to be more involved in the administration of the Park. However, the Park Authority is being restructured so it is felt that now would be a good time to



At the Mayors Office in Cangas de Onis. The Racador for the local area is standing on the right of the picture

include representation from the farmers. They are trying to get one farming representative for the three regions on the National Park board. It is thought that it would work better within the Park if the three regions are intertwined so there is only one representative. Differences from each region make this difficult, e.g. wolves can be hunted in one of the regions but not the two others. Therefore whoever may become a representative of the three regions needs to be able to demonstrate knowledge and commitment to all the regions.

A live register was implemented in the area in 1945. A farmer fills in a form/plan as to where they are going to graze, how many, what type and the health of the flock/herd. There are 7,500 ha of summer pastures in this area. The 7,500 ha are split into 12 areas. When filling in the form they have to specify which area they will be in and have to stick to it.

Historically it has been the Racador that manages the individual farm managers and represents them in front of the National Park. The council is elected every 25th July. 287 farmers vote for 12 representatives. From the 12 one is chosen as an overall manager. The 12 that are chosen are very important as they know what the farmers from their areas want.

Dry cows and young stock can go up after the 25th April so it is in the Spring/Summer that cattle go to hill. Sheep, goats and horses can go up from 1st June. Horses are only allowed in certain areas and must come off the hill between 1st March and 1st June. The horses are generally owned by hobby farmers. No fences are used so owners must make sure the horses stay where they are supposed to as, if the horses wander, then a guard will issue a fine. Each person can have a minimum of 13 cows and a maximum of 150 cows. There is no limit

otherwise to how many animals can graze - in the past the max that could be grazed was 50 cows. The census showed that farmers who had more cows lent some of the cows to farmers who had less. It was an unfair system as everyone had to pay the same to put their cattle up no matter how many. On the 1st October all animals must come down. Generally farmers only have the numbers of animals they can keep on their in-by land. All animals come off the mountains in the winter due to snow.

The main threats to agriculture in the uplands of Northern Spain are the lack of succession and wolves. There is no succession from youngsters so they are trying to transfer knowledge to younger generations through agricultural education; they are also trying to make tourism and farming compatible by showing farming to the tourists.

There is a lack of pasture now as well. Farmers want controlled burning but authorities won't allow it so pasture is being lost due to vegetation going rank. There has also been a large reduction in sheep and goats, partly because of wolves, so this lack of grazing is causing pastures to go rank or allowing scrub to move in and become uncontrollable. As animals are being lost and flocks are decreasing in size when younger generations of people do not want to take over there are not enough animals to herd. The animals also build up a local immunity to disease. Farmers have been leaving the hill in favour of intensification. Upland farm skills and sheep/livestock are being lost, as a result pastures are lost as not being grazed.



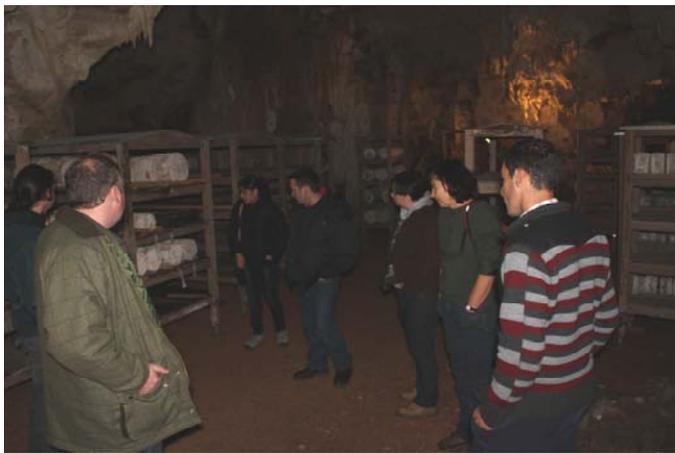
The town hall where we met the mayor of Cangas de Onís

Politicians take the side of the majority, so generally they side with the towns folk. Because of this they take the side of the ecologists in protecting the wolves. The wolves will take adult sheep and calves. Their behaviour has changed as they aren't hunted in this area so are less cautious over encroaching onto farmed land. The wolves have spread out from where they have been protected. It is unclear whether they have been introduced in some places. If there are no wolves the sheep go up to the mountain, if the wolves are around they keep the sheep around the farm. Between the 1950's and 2000 there were no wolves. For the sheep that do go to graze the mountains in the summer, big dogs, Perimastarets, protect the sheep but if the dog is not fed and looked after it will feed on the neighbours' sheep.



Looking North away from Picos de Europa National Park from the cheese cave

Cheese cave



In the cheese cave

The area is famous for cheese and offers 40 varieties. Cheese is the most important animal product from the area. One of the main cheeses sold is made from goats, sheep and cow milk - 5 L cow milk, 3 L goat milk, 2 L of sheep milk, the mix does depend on milk availability. After putting cheese into a mould, salt is added on the second day then the cheese is smoked for 21 days. After this, when the cheese is one month and 20 days old, the

cheese is taken to a cave for a couple of months to mature. The cave has to be a limestone cave because of the humidity. This particular cave has to be used in order for the cheese to receive its Product of Origin (PDO) status, this adds value to the cheese. Penicillin, which helps mature the cheese, occurs naturally within this cave. There are only eight cheese producers left of this cheese and only four of those producers meet the PDO standards.

For the sheep that are milked, lactation lasts 90-100 days. If they leave the lamb to suckle a bit each day the ewe lactates for longer.



Penicillin occurs naturally in the cave, helping to mature the cheese

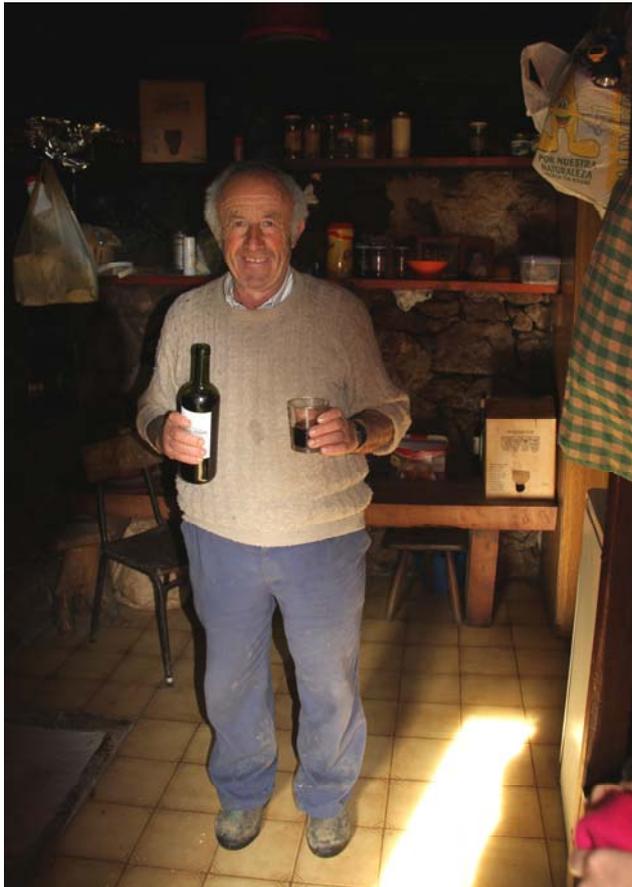
Lambs are removed at 9 days and



The cheese is stacked throughout the cave

sold if possible. If the lambs can't be sold they are bottle reared.

Antonio's summer farm



Antonio in his summer hut, he used to smoke the cheese in here on the left. His bed is on the right

It is said locally that Antonio has been 'Lifted by the donkey'. This saying refers to the fact he has been brought up on the mountain, he is a true native of the mountains. Antonio has 86 sheep and 120 goats on his summer farm.

Antonio uses the milk of his sheep and goats to make the cheese that is matured in the limestone cave. Investment has been made by the local administration, the local authority and politicians. They supported bringing water and solar electricity to this summer farm and facilitated getting through the bureaucracy of the local National Park in order to get the licences etc. for the works. Antonio's farm now meets trading standards and health and hygiene regulations for producing cheese. He has students on the farm that he teaches about the cheese production.

meat production by making a better cheese. The milk in the uplands is better for making cheese as its butter content is 7% as opposed to the 5% butter content of lowland milk, this makes a real difference to the taste and quality of the cheese. The variety of herbage in the upland pastures also improves the taste of the cheese.

Through his experience, Antonio knows when to add the salt and when it is ready for smoking.

Students from shepherding school who would like to go into this type of cheese production / animal husbandry struggle as they do not have the support from their family as the people who have been born into this life do.

People are trying to create a more stable income through cheese and



Outside Antonio's summer farm house

To try and encourage new comers into this industry they are providing good accommodation to try and alleviate the shock of such a simple life that the shepherd has.

The building to the right of the milking pallor is where the cheese is now produced (out of picture below). Antonio used to smoke the cheese in the hut he lives in. The dairy is designed so that Antonio doesn't have to bend down to milk the sheep and goats. Like us all their animals have to be electronically tagged, for their goats, sheep and cattle, they use rumen boluses, small plastic or ceramic capsules that sit at the front of the rumen.



From left to right: Antonio's summer hut, old cheesery, sheep pen (behind cheesery), dairy. The dairy is designed in a way that allows Antonio to milk the sheep by hand while standing. The new huts for shepherds have solar heating and photo voltaic cells that provide electricity for use of a TV or laptop. Antonio brings his sheep and goats back to the farm every night for protection from wolves.



Pigs on Antonio's Summer farm

Lunch - Vega de Enol Refuge

On the 25th July the shepherds go to the chapel below Vega de Enol Refuge for a blessing/service before voting (see picture of chapel to the right). The refuge is the meeting point for the local shepherds.

We went up to the higher lake. The rangers stay in the hut here during summer till 10pm to watch for fires, accidents and other tourism problems. Many tourists visit this area during the summer months.



The Shepherds go down to this 'chapel' where they receive a blessing before voting for their Racador

Evening Meeting/Presentations

Before the 19th Century the commons belonged to the neighbours in the villages. In 1855 there was a new law that meant the commons became public, belonging to the town councils and therefore government goods. Central state decided then that as they were owned they could be sold. Some were sold to private owners, some to the communities, some were never sold. Management that had been used on some of the commons since medieval times was implemented on all the commons. The commons were then offered for sale again, some were sold to farmers, other areas were sold to private buyers illegally.

Asturias uses a Land Bank system. It is up to the town councils here to manage the lands. 55% of the grazing land in Asturias is Common land.

During the Spanish Civil War, many town halls were burnt down and records lost. During the 19th Century the lands were sold to raise money for the state. Landlords bought many of the lands in the area, they then sold the commons to some farmers, but did not offer the land to all the farmers. The Common lands then went back to the local authorities.



Latxa sheep used for milk

Things are very different now as the farmers have to comply with regulations and requirements from the European Union. These regulations often don't apply well to practical land management. In Asturias shepherds villages exist in the 'middlelands' between the lowlands and uplands. One village would grow up around a medieval manorial house and another would be built a little way away, typically less than half a mile away. A Macahara was a summer village in the uplands.

Because of the quality of the milk from the upland;

- 10 L of milk in the lowlands makes 1 Kg of cheese.
- 5 L of milk in the uplands makes 1Kg of cheese.

The huts on the commons are built by the commoners who are 'allowed' to build on the commons. The huts are not owned by the farmers that use them. The commons are historically organised on a parish pattern. They used to use a bell to communicate if there was a fire, a wolf or a death - different bell rings would indicate what it was and if it was a man or a women who died. Farming was the foundation of the population.

There used to be 600 shepherd villages with two shepherds in each village. 50 years ago there was 1,200 shepherds in the upland area of this region. There are now only 10. Up until the 1980's farmers lived in remote valleys and lived in caves and under rocks during the summer months. Connectivity among the shepherds was important then.

The Economics are currently in place to support and sort the farming in the uplands but the organisation and management isn't in place.



Vega de Enol Refuge is situated on the green patch to the left above the lake in the above picture. This lake and the lake in the picture below are naturally occurring lakes. The lakes have a sub-species fish specific to the lakes. Unfortunately, a helicopter fighting a wildfire introduced a disease into the lake in the picture below that is killing the inhabitants. There are fears that the disease will soon spread to the other lake. There is only a ridge separating these two lakes.



The lakes are used as a water source when fighting wildfires in the area. This leaves the lakes vulnerable to diseases being introduced.

Day 2

Sierra del Suevo Visitors Centre

On the way over to the Sierra del Suevo Visitors centre we stopped at El Fito view point. From here you could see the Highest point in area, 1,600m. This mountain is the highest mountain close to the sea in Europe. We could also see the birch woodlands which are valuable as it is rare for them to be so close to the sea. The woodland is the best preserved of its type in Europe. There were also 'native' pine forests that had in fact been introduced 3,000 years ago. The pine forests were also protected due to their importance.



A memorial at the view point we stopped at



On the way over to the visitor centre we stopped and helped Afonzo, a local farmer in charge of this area, move some ponies back on to the area they are supposed to be grazing

'Junta Administrativa de la Mancomunidad del Puerto Suevo'

Once we arrived at Sierra del Suevo Visitors centre we saw presentations given by some of the local people.

'Junta' is the body managing commons in the local area managing all uses in common land. They manage most of the local parishes and within these parishes they managed resources and usage such as grazing, recreation, timber and firewood as well as other things. The neighbours vote and choose a 'Vocal' for their Parish. The Vocal then works for four years.



The farmers and local representatives of the Puerto Suevo area met with us at the presentation before taking us up to their upland common. We were given brochures of the area and a Sierra del Suevo glass

In 1863 this area asked not to sell the commons so none of the commons were sold to private ownership. Documents certified that they owned the land continuously. In 1979 official papers saying the land would not be sold were drawn up. This legally established that the neighbours were the sole owners and managers of the land. After the Civil War in 1942 one area had no grazing land left so they were bringing their animals on to this area. They were taken to court and it was confirmed that no one other than the local region had rights so therefore were allowed to graze on this area.

As part of the agreement if people want to put livestock on the commons then everyone has to pay:

€2:00 for every horse or cow put onto the common.

€0:50 for every sheep put onto the common.



A native pony, with a bell, on the common. The local farmers can tell their own animals from the sound that the bells make. Each shepherd pays €2.00 for each pony they put on the common.

Each year, through this payment and extra money that comes in from licences for hunting, €3,000.00 is raised to manage the commons. Each farmer also donates a day a year to do work on the common. If they don't work the day they have to donate €50:00 instead. This gets match funded so that a total of €6,000:00 a year is available to get water up into the mountains, creating tracks to improve access, creating reservoirs and fencing etc.



Most of the cattle have already left the uplands at this time of year. Although it is difficult to see in this picture, sheep and ponies are grazing. Note the reservoir on the left that provides water for the area, this was put in using the money that is made through the organisation they have on this common

It costs €3,000:00 to pump water up onto the hills/mountains each year so more reservoirs are needed to store water from rainfall.

A shepherds' guide has been created with all the information of the shepherds using the land including addresses and phone numbers linked to the brandings on the animals. This way people can find out who particular animals belong to and how to contact the owner. The way that this common is set up means that it is effectively state run, it's more like what we would class as commons council.

Calves are weaned at 5 months to be sold or fattened and then sold as 1 year olds. Due to welfare regulations calves cannot be weaned before they are 5 months of age. The mayor commented that he was not a farmer himself but he was from a farming family and many of his family still farm so he is sympathetic to farming. This area is important for farming and tourism.



Looking over towards the Picos de Europa. We spotted a stag with a bad leg trying to keep up with a deer herd. An easy meal for the wolves?

Walk in the Sierra del Sueve



Walking back to the shepherds village

After the presentations at the museum the shepherds took us up to where they farm on the common.



The shepherds village

On this common the ponies compete with the cattle for grazing.

At the site we visited they have a horse festival. The shepherds ride a wild horse and they do different games based around horses.

There are mainly cattle grazing the area. Due to less sheep there has been an imbalance in grazing so areas have become under grazed due to only cattle grazing. Because dead



A spring was tapped to provide running water in the village, a very important site.

stock have to be cleared off the hills there is no food for the wolves and being opportunists the wolves go for the easy kill which is the sheep. Because the wolves go for sheep and not the cattle the farmers are putting less sheep out and more cattle. Fires are more of a problem now due to under grazing in this way. One of the farmers hadn't joined our group as his cattle had been scattered by wolves and he was busy rounding them up.



The shepherds who farm here came, some with their families. Only one shepherd was unable to come. His cattle had been scattered by wolves and he had to round them up



A cattle handling area was put in by the shepherds. The money used to improve facilities for farming here is initially from the organisation. This money is then match funded from Europe



With the shepherds of the Sierra del Sueve

Day 3

Transfer to Sierra Salvada in the Basque Country, visit to Dairy

Sheep Farm with cheese production
300 sheep and 14 cows
Enrique - Parish Mayor

The cows can reach more areas, they finish a pasture off after sheep, they are less selective and are also used for meat.



After lambing, the lambs are taken away so the sheep can be milked.

Rams go to sheep 8th August to start lambing 8th January. There is usually a good rate of insemination at 150% but this year has been a very bad year as out of 170 ewes only 32 lambed. They try to get the ewes to lamb over a very tight period. The rest of the sheep not used for milking will be used for meat. The first lot of inseminated sheep are the best for milking, they are looked after very well and kept in blocks of 20 - the best tup goes in with lots of 20. The breeding here is very tightly controlled. The second lot of sheep don't matter so much as they are for meat.

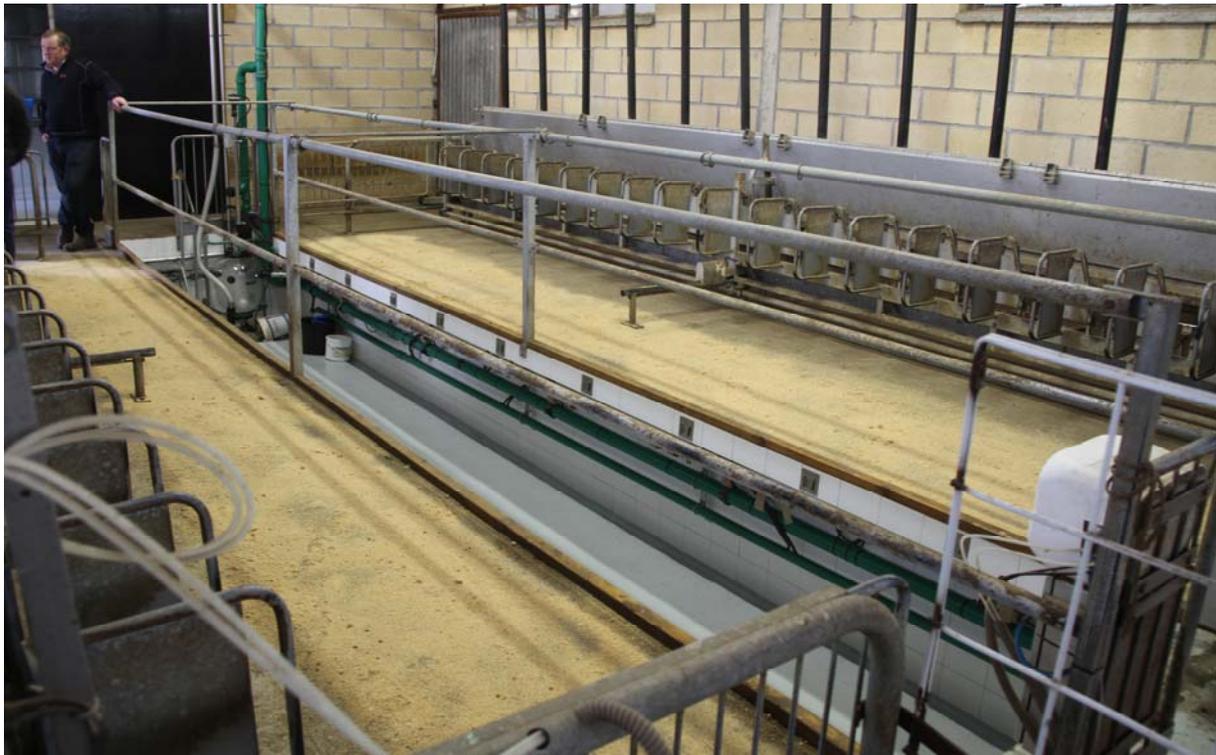
They don't use electric fencing to separate the groups of sheep as it has been found that properly fenced fields are the best way to prevent mixing.

Latxa sheep are used for the milk. The sheep kept for meat production are bred with a Rushu ram.

Milking starts in January and goes on through till the end of July. The Latxa sheep grow a long coat so are sheared twice a year, first at the end of May/beginning of June, and then again at the end November/beginning of December. Other farmers

usually only shear once a year as wool is worthless at the moment. €1:35 p/sheep to shear, so Enrique pays €2:70 p/year p/sheep to shear his sheep.

In the barn, the sheep can be trapped with their heads in the feeders so their udders can be checked etc. The sheep are most likely to get mastitis during when the lambs are suckling if the lamb is rough. Mastitis is not so much of a problem when lambs are off and the sheep are being milked. The California test for mastitis is used to check the sheep, the solution goes stringy if the sheep has mastitis. Sheep that are positive are given antibiotics. It is very difficult to do anything if the sheep does have mastitis so they tend to get put to pasture to dry out.



In the dairy, 270 sheep can be milked here in one hour

Meat prices are really bad this year at €2:85 p/K dead weight and it is the same with wool. 40 years ago €1:00 p/sheep, now about €0:10. 40 years ago a person could have bought a house in the village with one years wool clip. Now they couldn't even buy the front door! There is only one buyer of the wool, otherwise it has to go to the tip as you are not allowed to burn wool in Spain. There are problems with wolves here so the sheep are brought in at night. They have 7 large dogs that are with the sheep all of the time. They help with keeping wolves off the sheep when sheep are in a group. If a sheep wanders off away from the group they do become vulnerable to wolf attacks.

Having 2 dogs with a flock of sheep appears to keep the wolves away; one dog doesn't stop the wolves. Being opportunistic wolves don't like the problems that two dogs would cause for them.

40 sheep are milked at a time. It takes 6 minutes to milk a sheep. The cluster, clasps, should only be on the ewe for 2 minutes. It takes 1 hour to milk 270 sheep. 1 cluster is used for two sheep so only milking 10 sheep at a time. 1 person does 10 sheep at a time.

Haylage is fed to the sheep; the sheep don't like the wet haylage/silage so only get given the drier haylage. Rations for feeding cost, at present, an average of €0:30 p/Kg, a similar price as in the UK at present. The sheep are fed a higher quality ration when milking. In 1974 the old sheep sold for €37:00, now almost 40 years later they are only selling at €30:00.

197 litres are milked from 1 sheep over 120 days. The milk all goes to make cheese and it is all done on same site. It is a PDO - Product of Origin. The cheese is called IDIAZABAL. No milk can be bought in and used. The cheese is called Shepherds Cheese; they are part of an association of cheese makers. They can only be part of the association if cheese is made on same farm that the milk is from. It used to be allowed to buy in up to 30% of the milk but this was stopped in order to keep the quality of the product high. It keeps the process on the farm so they know the exact quality of the product. The market is difficult but this cheese is more valuable as the high quality is provable. Within this association they do cell counts in milk to ensure quality.



One of the awards won at this dairy for the cheese produced. Also on show are some of the other products they sell

On the calendar in the above picture there is a picture of a farmer and oxen. In the old days when they used oxen they used to put a fleece over the ox's head to protect them from the rain.

How they make their cheese:

Water in walls of metal tub to maintain temperature. Heat to 36C while mixing. Put cutter in (lots of thin wires) let cool - solidify, cut curd in to size of grain. Heat up to 36C again, separate curd and whey - whey goes to cows and pigs. Press curd for 10-15 minutes, put in mould lined with muslin so the holes in the mould don't clog up. Press into moulds. Each cheese has an id on it showing batch - each cheese has its own number.

The cheese ends up smaller than the mould it is put in and it takes 7 litres of milk to make 1Kg of cheese. €16:00 per Kg of cheese. €400-450:00 produced per sheep per lactation. The members of the association pay €0:20 per Kilo for licence to sell cheese. There is about a 50% profit.

The farmer doesn't milk twice a year as it is more expensive to produce cheese in the winter. This also allows for a winter break.

When the cheese is pressed, after two hours it is turned over. They make sure the muslin is flat so there are no creases in the cheese.

Put 33K of salt in 100litres of water

Put the cheese in for 1 hour for every 100K.

The cheese ends up in the salt water for about 14 hours.

Salt water is cooled and circulated to make sure the salt doesn't settle in the water.

The cheese then goes to another store to dry out and get its rind. It is here for 8-10 days where it dries and gets its rind.

Goes in fridge for 60 days to get its mould, penicillin.

The cheese stays there until ready for sale.

The mould is cleaned off and the cheese is packaged



Enrique explaining how his cheese is made

The farmer here has started to put cows milk into old sheep cheese to make it spreadable so that it can be sold as a cheese spread. 1 pot sells for €4:00. Truffles are €400:00 / K. The truffles are finely chopped and added to the cheese spread, a pot of this can be sold at €6-7:00. He also sells honey which they whip, this keeps a spreadable consistency and stops the honey from going hard or runny.

Visit to sheep and cattle farm with direct beef marketing

The cows are separated from heifers and space is also provided for calving cows. The muck in the sheds is scraped out with tractor. The shed has been up for four years. The sheep are brought in in January when the weather gets bad, this is when they start lambing.



In the barn of a small farm

The farmer here has 20 ha own land and 25 ha common land. The calves have an area they can go for food on their own so they always have food available to them. The cows are kept on straw and ad lib hay. They sell at about €8:00/Kilo, sell to



Example of the label that follows the meat from carcass to package

public at about €12:00/Kilo. To keep the quality of meat up they must have at least 2 points of fat on their backs. The calves are out with their mother till 4-5 months old then they are kept in to fatten. They are fed on straw so they get more concentrate. The older calves are put with the young stock to train to eat. The muck is composted and turned over a few times before it is taken out. A blind has been put in to stop the snow getting on muck.

Round bales cost about €11-12:00 to make, or this is what a contractor charges. It cost €150,000:00 to put shed up and about €60-70,000:00 of this came from subsidies, about 40% of the cost of the shed. Here they get 16-17% subsidies on machinery. They have 35 cows and 250 sheep on this farm.

In the dairy they can milk 150 sheep in 1 hour with two people operating milker. They get about 180 litres p/sheep over the lactation period in one year. The milk is then sold for cheese production. 25,000 litres of milk sold from here over the 5 month lactating period. They get €1:00 p/litre of milk. The unimproved sheep give less than 1 L of milk; improved sheep give 1.5 L of milk during one milking session. The lamb has 3 weeks with mother before taken at 10-11 K live-weight.

This corroborates with last farmer so the details should be accurate.

On the meat side of the business the animals are taken to an abattoir where they have to hang for 7 days. Back at the farm they process and label, all information is put on the label. The information goes with the carcass through till the meat is packaged. The label signifies a premium product. Lambs are slaughtered between 3 & 5 weeks at 10-11 Kg live weight. The meat with a label fetches around €25:00, equivalent Irish meat would only get €17:00.

On this farm it is the wife that runs the farm which was her parents farm. The farm doesn't make enough to support two people so the husband goes off to work elsewhere.



The final product with the label showing that this is a high quality product

Day 4

Visit to Kobata Commons

Kobata Commons has been designated a Special Protected Area (SPA).



The mountains in the back ground of this picture are in the autonomous region of Castille de Leon

They have a Leader group in this area which has been divided into 14 districts. Each district has a leader rep then an overall rep sits at the table with the Government, District government and local government. This set up works well for getting EU money. The leader group helps negotiate prices and keep improved quality to keep prices high for farmers.

At night some of the locals make wolf calls to find out if there are wolves in the local area, but the wolves have learnt not to call so it tends to only be the pups that will call back. A mother won't call back to her pups if they do call. It appears the wolves are adapting in order to out smart people so they don't get caught or killed.

The statue on top of the shrine in the picture to the right is of St. Vitores. He was a preacher who had his head chopped off but carried on preaching, he is the Shepherds Saint in this region.



A shrine to the Shepherds' Saint, St. Vitores

There is 1,000ha of common land between two different provinces; the Basque Country and Cast y Leon so there is cross grazing between provinces. This situation makes things complicated here. There are mainly sheep farmers but they do have cattle as well. There are three shepherds villages of which we visited the main one.

The shepherds stay up more because of the wolves and they must bring the sheep into enclosures in the shepherds village at night.

The sheep are Latxa (Latcha) sheep. Sheep numbers have gone from 7,000 to 5,000, cattle and horse numbers have gone up and there are some goats as well. The number changes have been due to the wolves.

There is good pasture here, not to much scrub encroachment. The sheep are mainly for meat production.



The community hall in a shepherds village in the Basque Country, this is the largest building in the village

The government is supporting in the way of providing water troughs and roads. The shepherds try to spread water troughs out to encourage the animals on to under-grazed areas in order to stop scrub encroachment. The government is also helping by providing better accommodation in the shepherds' villages by way of electricity from solar.



With the Shepherds of Kobata Commons

Some of the sheep are milked in the valley then get brought up the mountain in July when they've dried out. The yearlings come up in May. The sheep are kept in the mountains for maintenance purposes. Wolves attack the sheep here but not the cattle, hence why the increase in cattle. Wolves remained in NW Spain and are spreading outwards from here, they are now also spreading out from the Alps. In 1997 there was the first birth of a wolf pup in the area, now there are several breeding pairs. Shepherds stay up with sheep for 5-7 months, replacement sheep come up in May. The dry sheep then come up July/August. The guard dogs used here are called the Mastiff. The sheep are brought down November/December, time dependent on weather. The shepherds stay up every night. They're up between May until all the sheep go down. It is mainly grandparents that are shepherds as it is difficult to come up if families have children.



The fencing is more to warn people about the cliff edge

Vultures are starting to take animals and injured animals. This is due to vulture numbers increasing and the shepherds not being allowed to leave dead stock on the hills. Conservation practices are increasing numbers of dangerous wildlife and making it harder to farm the uplands.

Every decade losing 6/7 farmers/shepherds, there are not going to be any left soon. They believe this way of life will die out in

5-10 years. They hope that if there is less production, fewer animals, then their product will fetch a higher price.

Habitats are grazed and need it so the shepherds are supported. The role of the grazer is recognised so the government and conservationists want to aid farmers to graze. The farmers don't have subsidies or grants but are in a contract to provide

conservation services, a similar scheme to Glastir. Under the agreement they have to put a minimum of 40 sheep and they must be up there for at least 4 months.



A lapwing with a native pony grazing near by. The area needs to be managed through grazing to help protect the local habitats and wildlife.

There are fewer attacks from wolves where they manage the sheep like in this village where they bring the sheep in every night. Where

they aren't managing the sheep so well many more sheep are killed, these people complain and get compensation, even though the wolves are coming from the west and passing the well managed area to get to the badly managed area where sheep are easy pickings. The shepherds here are going to the administration and trying to explain that by paying compensation for sheep deaths through wolves is paying for bad management.



Here the dogs that protect the sheep flocks are known as the 'Mastiff', wolves tend to stay away when there are at least two of the dogs guarding a flock

The administration/ecological conservationists want the shepherds to decrease cattle and increase sheep as the cows are eating too much here. The farmers and conservationists want the wolves to be attacking the deer and other wildlife to regulate wildlife numbers, rather than killing the sheep.

There always seems to be something upsetting the balance here; the increase in wolf numbers mean people graze more with ponies and cows so there are less sheep now and too many cows.

Un Guino (Un Gino in Basque) is the name of the last flock of sheep we looked at - 1,500 sheep - usually 2,000, largest flock on the common - had at least 3 guard dogs with the flock. The goats on the common are for meat but not minded as much as the sheep.



The spur of rock is know as Un Guino. The last flock we visited grazed on Un Guino. The sheep grazed right up to the edge of the cliff where there were many vultures.

Conclusion

The study tour to the Asturias and Basque Country regions of Northern Spain proved to be extremely informative and interesting. We learnt a great deal as well as seeing how Europe's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is being implemented elsewhere in Europe. The Spanish shared many of the struggles that we have in Wales and it highlighted how parts of CAP are simply not compatible with upland agriculture in both Wales and Spain. For example, the removal of dead-stock from the hills and mountains serves more as a hindrance to the dynamics of the natural processes in the countryside.

The summer farms are a way of life that died out nearly 100 years ago in the UK and perhaps saw the start of the decline in upland farming in Britain. In the areas we visited it was felt that this way of life would die out over the next 10 years. However, in these regions there was a genuine recognition of the importance of the shepherds in the role they played in preserving significant upland habitats. It was acknowledged that without them many of the habitats would be lost and are being lost. With the rapidly decreasing stock numbers on the hills there have been increasing problems with wildfires that are progressively increasing in size as the mountains become rank with uncontrolled vegetation. As in Spain, Wildfire has become an increasing problem on Abergwesyn Commons as stock numbers have decreased dramatically and there is no balance in vegetation created through mixed grazing.

It should be considered that there may not be too many of one particular animal on the hills, cattle in Spain, sheep in Wales, but perhaps not enough of other grazing animals to graze along side what is already there. Balanced grazing would help open up more grazing and help create a more diverse habitat. Unfortunately there are mechanisms that have led to the imbalance of grazing, wolves in Spain, logistics in Wales, both being just part of the problem in their respective countries. These issues need to be addressed in a practical way. In Spain they are addressing the problems through supporting close shepherding on summer farms but with this way of life appearing to be dying out it will be interesting to see what they do in the future. At least there is real recognition of the importance of these shepherds for maintaining the uplands of Spain for the positive conservation of habitats and wildlife.



Leaving Antonio's summer farm on Cangas de Onis' Common



Outside the cheese cave. From left to right – Jessica Tyler, Gwyn Protheroe, Tracey Protheroe, Billy Davies, Viv Lewis, David Davies, Helen Barnes and our guide to the caves

Jessica Tyler	Abergwesyn Commons Project Officer
Gwyn Protheroe	Llanafan Hill Commons Secretary and farmer
Tracey Protheroe	Farmer
Billy Davies	Abergwesyn Hill Common Secretary and farmer
David Davies	Llanafan Hill Common Chairman and farmer
Helen Barnes	Local FWAG officer and linked to Llanwrthwl Common
Viv Lewis	Translator and guide from EFNCP
Concha Salguero	Translator and guide from EFNCP
(not in picture)	



A pair of local clogs, designed to keep trousers out of the mud