

REGIONAL BEAT: Europe

Sustainable Agriculture and Biodiversity: The Case of the White Carpathians

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This short paper is about sustainable land management in marginal mountain and foot hill areas, which are often protected for their landscape and biodiversity values. Historically, low intensity farming on poor soil maintained the richness of the wildlife and the diversity of the landscape. Collectivisation in the 1950s and the intensification of agriculture threatened the areas' natural values. To curb some of these adverse effects, Protected Landscape Areas were established in the 1970s and 1980s.

The overthrow of Communism in 1989 and the subsequent political and economic changes have led to both a sharp economic decline and major structural adjustments in agriculture. Whilst these changes have resulted in reduced pressures on the natural environment, they have also led to the extensive withdrawal of land management practices that are essential to the maintenance of landscape and biodiversity. The available nature protection policy measures and approaches, however, were not appropriate to these new threats, being rather blunt controls over the intensity of production.

A case study was conducted in the White Carpathians, a mountainous area in east Moravia on the border with Slovakia. The case study has wider relevance beyond the White Carpathians. Land abandonment or neglect poses a threat to the maintenance of biodiversity and landscapes in marginal areas across many parts of Central and Eastern Europe.

Decollectivisation and land restitution have left a dual farming structure. A few large farms over 500 ha occupy almost half of the agricultural land; while 99 per cent of farms are under 10 ha and together account for about a third of the agricultural area. Survey evidence suggests that smaller farms, often producing only for direct consumption, are deeply committed to the landscape. The large commercial farms, in contrast, are very profit oriented.

Environmental and Agricultural Governance

In Protected Landscape Areas, all land as well as all activities affecting nature are subject to legal control operated by the local administration of the Protected Landscape Area (LA PLA). The legislation allows for both direct regulation and contracting conservation activities. The instruments are specified in the Management Plan which the LA PLA is obliged to elaborate.

The original legislation did not provide for compensation for the restrictions imposed in PLAs. However, following the problems that have arisen with the idling and abandonment of land in PLAs, subsequent agricultural legislation allows for compensation for regulatory restrictions imposed in PLAs.

More extensively, the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) subsidises the protection of landscape and biodiversity. The actual implementation is closer to a direct income support with cross compliance than to a management contract. Payments from MoA are coupled to cattle and sheep production. The effect of this is to favour the larger operators over the smaller owners.

In principle the policies of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Environment (MoE, which oversees the LA PLA) for protected areas are complementary. MoA support is based on mandatory flat rate payments, while the MoE sets restrictions and offers management contracts targeted to particular conservation objectives. However, a number of factors frustrate practical integration. The LA PLA find it difficult to take into account agricultural support programs because these change almost annually and they are not specifically tailored to the Management Plan of the PLA. Farmers cannot receive both MoA compensatory payments and MoE contracts, and because the former are automatic and are allocated earlier in the year, farmers tend to go for them even though the MoE contracts are more rewarding (but uncertain). This generally reflects a lack of coordination between the two ministries. The consequence is to reduce the capacity of the LA PLA to coordinate targeted actions (site specific treatments) with common grassland maintenance.

In the funding uncertainty and lack of coordination between Ministries a lot depends upon the efforts of LA PLA staff to keep the farmers' trust and to overcome gaps in policy coordination. This would not have been achievable without the mediating role of NGOs. Of particular significance in the White Carpathians has been the Information Centre of Moravke Kopenice (ICMK). Although conservation concerns are in the accord with these of the LA PLA, the approaches differ in the sense that ICMK wants first to make farming possible and sustainable in the area. ICMK sees the future sustainability of local agriculture in internalizing high natural values in "food and fibre" products. This is not without problems, ICMK has found it difficult to identify the target group of consumers. Underdeveloped tourism and lack of loyalty from local consumers have caused that ICMK as well as farmers look to far away urban markets, but without sufficient knowledge or experience of how to penetrate those markets.

Attitudes toward Conservation

Each coordinating actor concentrates on a particular issue in the sustainable development. The LA PLA focusses natural values for global society, while ignoring local inhabitants. The MoA emphasizes maintaining farmers in the region, which requires a compromise between economic and conservation interests. Local mayors emphasize the rights of the local community to nature and the landscape, arguing for a structure encouraging and rewarding the small local land users and owners for their contribution to conservation. In general, commercial farmers have exhibited their willingness to provide landscape and biodiversity, subject to their need to make a minimal living. Obviously, a round table is needed.