



Cooperation in forestry between the northern and southern Mediterranean

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Regional efforts to achieve sustainable forest management in the Mediterranean basin

[Reforestation of hillside terraces In Cyprus](#)

Although the destruction of tropical forests has drawn world interest in recent years, the condition of Mediterranean forests has scarcely attracted any attention at all. Nevertheless, FAO assessments show that, while tropical forests were disappearing at a rate of 0.8 percent per year, the forests in the southern and eastern Mediterranean Basin were vanishing at a rate of 1.2 percent per year.

A clear distinction exists between the forest situation in northern Mediterranean and that found in southern Mediterranean countries. Urbanization and a decline in farming in northern Mediterranean countries has left the countryside in an abandoned state, more or less unmanaged by landowners who tend to be unaware of good land management practices. Combustible woody materials are left to accumulate, which combine with the region's dry summer weather and strong winds to heighten the risk of fire.

The dense rural populations along the southern and eastern coastal regions do more to maintain the balance of nature. Poverty and the needs of survival, however, result in the clearing of forests and woodlands to extend farmland and, above all, in the over exploitation of natural resources for fuelwood and forage, leading to a gradual, insidious and virtually irreversible degradation of forests and woodlands.

Afforestation in these mountain areas will regularize water resources and reduce any risks of floods downstream. The foresters in these poor regions are responsible for providing all government services in these areas. Despite significant emigration to richer countries in the northern Mediterranean, these populations have a very high birth rate and, consequently, continue to grow. An improvement in their conditions and standards of living would help reduce the birth rate and would allow rural populations to remain on their land and manage it more sustainably.

[Olive plantations in Morocco](#)

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF FORESTRY COOPERATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

For many years now common interest has prompted various Mediterranean countries to forge cooperative relationships to address specific forestry issues: for example France and the countries of the Maghreb; Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and Bulgaria; Italy, Albania and Tunisia; Spain and Morocco; Germany and Turkey; and the United Kingdom and Jordan, Malta and Cyprus have worked together in recent years. The creation, historical background and activities of *Silva Mediterranea*, the only international forum dedicated to Mediterranean forest issues, is discussed in the article by Riccardo Morandini (p. 49).

The Mediterranean: home to a diversity of civilizations

A great number of civilizations have risen, flourished and vanished in the Mediterranean area, a region marked by constant trade and migration for many thousands of years. The Mediterranean continues to be a very active commercial zone, with major population movements from the southern and eastern regions (which are under heavy demographic pressure) to the rich countries in the northern Mediterranean and on the Arabian Peninsula.

Farming and domesticated animals first appeared in the Near East in about 10 000 BC, spreading to Greece and Crete in roughly 6000 BC and reaching the western basin of the Mediterranean in about 5000 BC. Mediterranean forests have sustained substantial damage, which may be attributed to rural life, with additional detriment resulting from the development of towns and shipping.

Lacking forests to any great extent, the Egyptians became dependent on their neighbours -notably the Phoenicians- to find the timber needed for building temples and ships. This shortage could account, at least in part, for the Egyptians failure to dominate the Mediterranean world, despite their brilliant civilization. This was not the case with the Cretans, Phoenicians, Carthaginians or Greeks, who in turn dominated the Mediterranean through their powerful naval and commercial fleets built from timber found in their own countries -where it would never be found today. The Romans were only able to master the Mediterranean world after building a large merchant and naval fleet-using timber from Italian forests-and destroying the maritime power of Carthage. To visualize more clearly the importance of timber resources to military power, one has only to consider the siege of Constantinople in 717, when the Muslim caliphate engaged a fleet of 1 800 vessels. Later, Mediterranean maritime power shifted to the Iberian Peninsula where, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Spain and Portugal established immense colonial empires through the fleets constructed with timber from their forests.

Urban construction has also used up vast quantities of timber. While only stone ruins survive today, the numerous fires in Rome and large ancient towns such as Alexandria remind us that ancient cities were built primarily of wood. The firing of bricks, the manufacture of the lime used in mortar, ceramics, metallurgy and glass production added their enormous consumption of fuelwood to that used for heating public baths, baking, cooking and domestic heating.

In the fifth century BC, Plato deplored the excessive deforestation of Attica. Julius Caesar was surprised, 400 years later, by the immensity of the forests in Gaul. Yet these, with the exception of a number of large stands, had already been extensively cleared for farming and grazing. This surprise reflected above all the already excessive state of deforestation in the Roman world, i.e. the Mediterranean basin.

Attention needs to be drawn to the particular importance of forests in the Mediterranean area. Just as they do everywhere else, forests contribute to the production of resources that are the backbone of a great deal of economic activity. Yet here timber plays a less dominant role and many different products, such as fruit, bark (cork), rubber, resins and fodder, contribute towards a diversified economy. Apart from their ecological functions of protecting ecosystems and storing biodiversity. Mediterranean forests and woodlands, more than any others, also serve an important role for tourism and leisure activities. Nonetheless, protection of the soil and its fertility, protection of crops against the wind, and the regulation of surface water flow through forests and woodlands are forest functions that are of crucial importance in the Mediterranean region.

FAO's Mediterranean Development Project, launched in 1959 as a result of a *Silva Mediterranea* recommendation (Nice, 1956), was the first concrete manifestation of the need for coordinated, integrated and lasting action in forestry development. Under the aegis of the

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), seven southern European countries established the International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies in 1962; they were subsequently joined by the coastal countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean. Among other things, the centre's institute in Khaniá, Crete, founded in 1983, develops cooperative research and advanced training activities in integrated rural development as well as Mediterranean forestry.

The Action Plan for the Mediterranean adopted in 1975 at the Barcelona International Conference was initially intended to address pollution control in the Mediterranean and its shores. However, the need quickly arose to extend this concern to endangered and degraded continental ecosystems. The socio-economic component of the Action Plan for the Mediterranean is expressed in the Blue Plan, which in part deals with the conservation of continental ecosystems and their fauna, flora and genetic resources. It also includes possible scenarios for the individual Mediterranean countries, as well as natural open areas and forests. These studies conclude that a continuation of current trends would result in severe damage to forested areas in the southern and eastern Mediterranean.

[Land reclamation in Egypt](#)

The Action Plan supports a strategy of integrated rural land and resource management in a manner that reconciles economic growth with environmental protection and involves the rural populations concerned.

THE MEDITERRANEAN FORESTRY ACTION PROGRAMME

Despite all the scientific, technical and financial efforts made in the past, degradation of forest and natural plant cover continues at an alarming rate. In response, FAO's Near East Forestry Commission (Tunis, 1987), *Silva Mediterranea* (Athens, 1989 and Faro, 1992) and the 10th World Forestry Congress (Paris, 1991) recommended the implementation of a Mediterranean Forestry Action Programme (MED-FAP). This initiative was given additional impetus by the recommendations of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), which appealed to all countries to establish and implement national forestry action plans or programmes for the improvement, conservation and lasting development of their forests. This international forestry action programme must, among other things, serve as a framework for formulating and executing national plans.

Approved at the 1992 meeting of the *Silva Mediterranea* Committee, MED-FAP constitutes a conceptual framework for facilitating the review of forestry planning and policy, and also for harmonizing and strengthening international cooperation in the conservation and development of Mediterranean forests. Since responsibility for the management, conservation and viable exploitation of the forests is apportioned among various levels of administration in many states, it is up to each country, in accordance with its constitution and legislation, to have the forestry plans drawn up and applied at the appropriate administrative levels.

[A forest nursery in the Syrian Arab Republic](#)

CONCLUSION

The Mediterranean forestry sector receives just 5 percent (US\$77.5 million) of world forestry development aid, not enough in light of the current condition of forests and woodlands in the area. Countries all around the Mediterranean should work together to secure increased public funding, because it is only by contributing to the durability of development through forest conservation and afforestation activities that lasting rural and agricultural development in those countries will be possible.

