



Silva Mediterranea - 50 years of cooperation in Mediterranean forestry

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A historical overview of the work done by FAO's statutory body for Mediterranean forests.

THE UNIQUE CHARACTER OF MEDITERRANEAN FORESTS

Soon after its establishment in 1945, FAO recognized that the problems of soil conservation, forest improvement and reforestation in the Mediterranean zone deserved special attention, mainly because of the region's particular climatic, historical and socio-economical conditions. It was therefore decided to entrust discussion of their conservation and use to a specific body, capable of interpreting the multifaceted aspects of that environment.

An FAO statutory body, the Sub-Commission on Mediterranean Forest Problems, was established, under the sponsorship of the Regional Forestry Commission for Europe. This Sub-Commission started its activities with a meeting in Rome in 1948, just 50 years ago. Its purpose is to examine trends in forest and land use in the region, identify priorities for forestry research in the region and identify and implement studies and surveys in collaboration with member countries.

The idea of creating a special body concerned with Mediterranean forest problems was not new, however. Almost 40 years earlier, at the 1911 International Congress of Agriculture and Silviculture in Madrid, Robert Hickel, a French forester with a long experience in Algeria and other Mediterranean countries, presented a report entitled *The problem of reforestation in the Mediterranean basin*.

Hickel pointed out that all the efforts to apply the management and silvicultural methods traditionally followed in Central Europe to Mediterranean forests had resulted in total failure. He stressed the need to develop, test and promote new techniques, based on experiences and studies carried out *within the Mediterranean region* by *Mediterranean foresters*. He concluded his report by stating: "there is a need to create *Sylva Méditerranée* - to link Mediterranean foresters, regardless of nationality. I believe this link can be achieved by the creation of an international association, and by the creation of a body that meets regularly to study all the questions that affect Mediterranean forests."

Hickel's appeal was accepted with enthusiasm by many Mediterranean foresters. In 1922, the *Sylva Méditerranée*, Mediterranean Forest League was established, with the participation of

scientists and officers of forest services from many countries around the Mediterranean. The league's main aims were clearly defined in its statutes:

- "The association will study all forestry issues relevant to the Mediterranean basin, and particularly the most promising local and exotic species, management methods, reforestation techniques, control and restoration of grazing lands, fire control, etc." (art. 2).
- "The Association will study and disseminate information with the aim of modifying in a positive way the concept of forests for local populations... [it] will encourage the formation of local chapters... for reforestation, improvement of pastures, forest-grazing associations." (art. 3)

The league was very active: regular meetings were held and a *Silva Mediterranea* bulletin was published, as were a series of reports that are still of interest today.

Towards the end of the 1930s, the increasingly difficult political climate led to a drastic reduction and eventually to the complete halt of the Mediterranean Forest League's activities.

The establishment of the FAO Sub-Commission on Mediterranean Forest Problems in 1948 gathered several members of the old *Silva Méditerranée*, together with officers from the forest services of all the countries from the Atlantic to the Caspian and from the Sahara to the European Alps. The Sub-Commission, first established within the framework of the European Forestry Commission, was later put under the joint sponsorship of the Forest Commissions for Europe, Near East and Africa. At the 1956 meeting in Nice, the old name *Silva Mediterranea* was officially adopted for the Sub-Commission.

The Sub-Commission met every second year in one of the member countries through 1970 but, thereafter, owing to financial constraints, its activity was drastically reduced. In 1985, however, following numerous requests from member countries, *Silva Mediterranea*, reorganized as the FAO Committee for Mediterranean Forestry Questions, resumed intensive activity. The most recent meeting was held in 1997, in Antalya, Turkey, on the occasion of the 11th World Forestry Congress.

Land utilization, soil conservation, reforestation and wood production are the main themes dealt with in the general framework of forest policy-oriented activities, which are aimed at promoting an integrated approach that always involves local people.

Over the years, a comprehensive Project of Mediterranean Development was drafted in cooperation with OECD (1960) and, in the 1980s, a Mediterranean Forest Action Plan (MED-FAP) was elaborated and officially adopted in order to highlight and enhance forestry planning in the different Mediterranean countries. This action plan is in harmony with the "Blue Plan for the Mediterranean", which is being promoted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), FAO and other interested organizations.

[**A stand of *Cedrus atlantica* in Morocco**](#)

ISSUES EVOLVING WITH THE CHANGING TIMES

Land use involves a large span of social, economic, political and technical aspects. In the Mediterranean zone, the evolution of agriculture, animal husbandry and forestry through the centuries have been shaped by the progressive increase of human pressure on the forest, leading to degradation and destruction of large areas. In the worst cases, soil erosion has led to desertification.

In the 1960s, on the northern shore of the Mediterranean, a rural exodus and urbanization

reduced human pressure on the forest and even led to its abandonment. This has produced new challenges, particularly related to forest fire. On the southern side of the Mediterranean, the pressure on forests is still increasing and the present rate of deforestation exceeds 1 percent each year.

The different aspects and problems and their evolution have been discussed throughout the decades by *Silva Mediterranea*. Issues of general character, mainly regarding forest policy, economics and organization are dealt with in the main sessions; special themes, namely concerning scientific and technical questions, were entrusted to specific working groups. For example, a group on ecology, active since 1948, elaborated a map on the boundaries of the Mediterranean and transition countries. This was further developed into a bioclimatic map of the Mediterranean zone (FAO-UNESCO, 1962). The groups focus on the problems of cork and cork oak; reforestation techniques (dealing with soil preparation and its mechanization, nursery techniques, species choice, etc.).

The working group on eucalyptus merits special mention. It has helped coordinate a comprehensive series of ecological and biological studies and introduction trials as well as reviewing and exchanging information on tree improvement and plantation and forest management activities. The work of this group led to the International Conferences on Eucalypts in Rome (1956), and in Sao Paulo (1961), and later to the publication of the basic book, *Eucalypts for planting* (FAO, 1979).

In response to the need for more advanced and coordinated research, a Committee for the coordination of Mediterranean forest research was established in close cooperation with the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO).

A series of research networks were launched covering the influence of forest cover on water regime, the role of shelterbelts, selection of seed stands of Mediterranean conifers, and the introduction of exotic tree species for reforestation (especially eucalyptus) and pasture improvement. Additional networks were established later to cover topics related to forest fires, silviculture of stone pine (*Pinus pinea*) and of *Cedrus* spp., multipurpose tree and shrub species and cork oak (*Quercus suber*). Networks on non-wood forest products and on the commercialization of Mediterranean wood material are currently under consideration.

CONCLUSION

Throughout *Silva Mediterranea's* history, its activities have been multifaceted. During the first decade, technical and scientific aspects received priority attention in order to prepare a sound basis for practical implementation. Since the 1960s, as a consequence of the Mediterranean Development Project, more attention has been given to institutional challenges, such as legislation, administration, and financing, as well as the need for coordination and cooperation in research.

During the committee's most recent meeting in Antalya the role and future of *Silva Mediterranea* were the object of intensive debate, with some participants even questioning the need for it at all. In the end, however, it was generally recognized (as it had been at the 10th World Forest Congress in Paris, 1990), that Mediterranean countries require a forum where the region's forest-related problems can receive specific attention.

After a break during the 1970s, the main policy issues are again being considered in a new light and according to a comprehensive approach that recognizes the need for improvement in general welfare.

The positive cooperation established between FAO and IUFRO in relation to forestry research activities has been paralleled by collaboration with other agencies or organizations interested in Mediterranean issues, including UNESCO, the United Nations Environment Programme

(UNEP), International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM) and, recently, with Forêt Méditerranéenne.

The good work carried out over half a century, ensuring a balance among policy, science and technology, should serve as a foundation for continued work towards achievement of the main goals of the Committee: the conservation and the restoration of Mediterranean forests.

Bibliography

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