

# CPR FORUM *Europe Regional Report*

## **The State of the Commons in Europe**

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During the IASCP Europe Regional Meeting in Brescia, Italy 23-25 March, the Commons of Europe received a thorough coverage by scholars from a large number of European countries. Not since the International IASCP Conference in Bodø in 1995, has such a variety of European Commons been discussed by scientists and resource managers. The conference participants could enjoy timely updates on the contemporary governing challenges for the century old grazing commons of England (Adrian Walters, John Goodacre) and for the modernizing alpine pastures (*Agrargesellschaft*) of Austria (Elisabeth Johann). In addition, the conference brought the attention to a number of new aspects of European Commons hitherto not well known to the IASCP network. These included as diverse commons as the reemerging village commons of the Vrancea Mountains of Romania (Liviu Mantescu and Monica Vasile), the deterioration of the collective irrigation systems of Bulgaria (Insa Theesfeld), the revival of the “Collective Alps” in the alpine region of Germany (Anne Gueydon) and the surviving commons of Navarra (Jose Miguel, Lana Bersain).

The big question in face of this growing complexity in the development of European Commons is whether this many-faceted picture mirrors the reality concerning commons in Europe today, or whether there are distinct directions in the contemporary development of commons. These questions were debated in a round table discussion on “The state of the Commons in Europe” on the last day of the conference. Here various conclusions to this question were presented: One was the view that in contemporary Europe overuse of a commons’ resources is not the only threat to the survival of a commons. Analytically, the underuse – and the human neglect and lack of maintenance should be viewed as an equal threat to most European commons. Another view was the more confident view that as long as the crucial institutions were in place – in the form of laws and codified rules, a commons will tend to survive – no matter what humans users or their livestock does. Nature has its own management mechanisms and thus an underused pasture commons will in most cases revert to forest and become a forest commons. If the rules have foreseen this, it is only the harvesting operation rules that have to be changed from one commons item (forage) to another (wood and timber). However, it was agreed that this is an area where more of the European Commons research should be directed in future years; of particular interest will here be the future development in the mountainous part of former communist European states.

Related to this broader issue of European Commons are two areas which will represent challenges to Commons Property researchers in the years to come. One is the larger “political commons” of Europe, the “Common Fisheries Policy” – with its Common Pond – “the Common Agricultural Policy” and the “Common Environmental Policy.” These are also basically institutional arrangements – although at a macro-scale, with the same threats survival and legitimacy as the smaller and more local commons. This they can be analyzed with the same

tools of institutional analysis. Here there were no contributions at this conference, but the issues ought to be addressed by commons researchers at future IASCP conferences.

The other area that in the future should be seen in connection with development of commons in Europe in general, are the indigenous questions of Europe, and especially those related to the High North of Europe. One paper was presented on this issue, showing how ancient indigenous nomadic pasture rights could be institutionalized in modern times as a collective local and indigenous right anchored in a new constitutional construction, to whom a state transfers its property rights (Audun Sandberg). Theoretically this is also relevant for comparisons with the development of local governing rights in particular regions in post-communist countries in Eastern and Central Europe. But it also remains a challenge for IASCP researchers to follow closely the processes of land and water claims of the Sámi of Sweden, Finland and Russia, as well as the subsequent processes for the other northern peoples of “Russia”, the Samoyeds and the Nenetsian.

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