Sy16O03

Agroforestry systems in North-Eastern mountains of Portugal: a portrait in the transition for the XXIst century

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Abstract: The gathered results from population and agricultural census of the past decades have demonstrated a significant decrease of the inhabitants of the North-Eastern mountain regions of Portugal. This depopulation has been reflected in rural activity and particularly in extensive grazing systems. As a result of the rural areas abandonment, the previously compartmentalized landscape by mosaic agroforestry, where agricultural fields were alternated with forest, shrublands and pastures, currently appears dominated by tall shrubs or burned areas with representative dimensions. This situation leads us to ask about the current context of the agrosilvopastoral activity and what are their prospects for the future. The demand for such responses have originated a series of studies focused on those territories, to assess the constraints and motivations of shepherds who have remained here and those who have emigrated and have already come back. These approaches include interviews with shepherds and the survey/registration of traditional grazing paths, namely, in the Natura 2000 Network Sites of Alvão/Marão Mountains, Montemuro Mountain, Morais/Azibo, Montesinho/Coroa /Nogueira and Douro International. From the socioeconomic point of view, the low yields from agriculture, given the poor valorisation of its products; the low productivity of the systems; the great demand for hand labour; and the aging population, were identified as some of the factors that have contributed to that decline. However, many of the shepherds, who have come back, highlight advantages of the used traditional pastoralism, when compared with other labour activities practiced as migrants. Others, having taken advantage of new learning, have tried to implement new agrosilvopastoral models. Nowadays, the mountain grazing systems, despite its regression, seem to be renewing. They do not have a single standard, but include a diversity of situations. However, besides they are still insufficient for an adequate landscape management, it is important to know about their sustainability.

Acknowledgments

This work is supported by: European Structural and Investment Funds in the FEDER component, through the Operational Competitiveness and Internationalization Programme (COMPETE 2020) [Project No. 006971 (UID/SOC/04011)]; and national funds, through the FCT – Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology under the project UID/SOC/04011/2013.