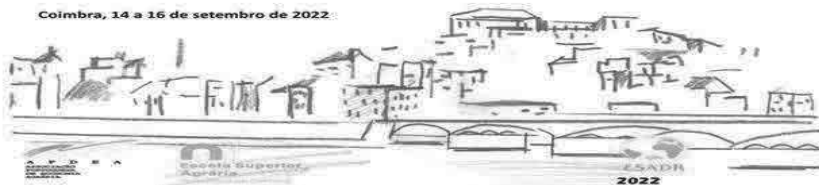


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IDENTITY AND PERCEPTION OF THE SHEPHERDS' PROFESSION

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RESUMO

Mediterranean mountain regions undergo intense land use and landscape changes, mainly due to the rural exodus and the European Union agricultural policy. The necessary evolution of pastoral systems carries an overall adaptation of their components to provide sufficient income to the farmer in appreciable working and living conditions. One of the biggest challenges for sheep farmers in Portugal is the hiring and retaining shepherds. Pastoralism is not as profitable as it used to be, nor is it considered a desirable occupation for the young. This paper aims to identify the shepherds' vision of pastoralism, their profession and their roles. Thus, a qualitative study was conducted based on personal interviews (65) with shepherds in the Trás-os-Montes region. The sample includes mainly male shepherds (80%) and ageing (34% are more than 60 years old, and 35% are between 50-59 years old); with low educational levels (more than 50% have no or primary education, and only 9% has higher education). For 55%, livestock production is the main occupation, all the interviewed have family ties to agriculture, and 72% were breeders' successors. Results identify as main motivations for the profession, namely, to enjoy working with animals (74%), the lack of better job opportunities (15%) and a source of income (9%). Most interviewed have a positive image of the profession but believe it is not socially valorised because its future is narrow, and half don't wish to be followed by their heirs. In this context, it's crucial to carry out actions to link the public perception of pastoralism with environmental and social values. This aspect of emotional attachment has proved to be an important factor in the survival of pastoral activities in other parts of Europe. Keywords: Pastoralists' identity, Social perception, Shepherding attractiveness

CHALLENGES TO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SHEEP SECTOR IN MEDITERRANEAN MOUNTAIN AREAS

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ABSTRACT

A case study from the Trás-os-Montes region is analysed to assess the local sheep sector's resilience and sustainability. Trás-os-Montes is a low-density mountain area where small ruminant production is a relevant sector of the economy and is mainly based on natural resources. A mixed methodological approach was adopted to identify the socio-economic profile of the different actors and the main obstacles and opportunities of this livestock activity. At an early stage, quantitative, descriptive and longitudinal research was carried out based on multiple official data. Afterwards, a qualitative study was conducted based on personal interviews (37) with sheep sector stakeholders and field observation. The main strength systematically highlighted by qualitative research is the intrinsic quality of the products with origin in the various indigenous sheep breeds. Even so, the marketing channels associated with this mechanism are generally limited, and its market shares are minimum. Traditionally, Trás-os-Montes lambs are sold alive at the farm gate to intermediaries, mainly destined for the markets of Porto and Spain. The sale of live animals with slaughter and processing outside the production region prevents the retention of the added value of processing in the region/country of production. On the other hand, the analysis highlights the constraints resulting from the holdings' small average size, the advanced age of most farmers and the lack of successors, the low profitability of the lamb meat, and producers' weak bargaining power. Also, wool's lack of economic interest is an economic and environmental problem for farmers.

Keywords: Sheep, Pastoralism, Sustainability, SWOT analysis