

Exploring farmer's knowledge as a source of information on past and present cultural landscapes A case study from NW Spain

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Abstract

The primary goal of this research was to explore the potential of farmer's knowledge as a source of information on the past and present cultural landscapes, focusing on the land-use system, the cultural heritage, and the farmer's perception of landscape changes, from the 1950s to the present day. For this purpose, 42 semi-structured interviews were conducted from a random sample of 10% of the villages in an area of the Northern Mountains of Galicia (NW Spain). As shown in farmers' reports, the main crops in the 1950s were wheat or rye, potatoes or maize (only near the coast) and turnips. Scrubland areas were an essential resource for pasture, litter, temporary crops and charcoal, whereas deciduous forest was mainly used as a source of wood for carpentry, firewood and litter. Agriculture was the main economic activity, whereas crafts and other activities in the fisheries or forestry industry were secondary. Granaries, watermills and stone laundry basins were the most frequent elements of built heritage that was mentioned in the interviews. Farmers were also comprehensively aware of the broad changes that occurred in the landscape. The results indicate that farmer's knowledge is a valuable source of information for documenting past and present land-use practices, local cultural heritage and changes in the landscape, all of which are helpful for the design of landscape-orientated policies. Moreover, observed ancestral cultural practices, such as extensive grazing in scrubland areas, may be promoted as strategies for helping the sustainability of cultural landscapes in the study area and in other areas with similar characteristics.

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1. Introduction

Cultural landscapes are the result of the interaction between humans and nature (Stanner and Bourdeau, 1995; UNESCO, 1997; Council of Europe, 2000), bearing witness to past and present relationships between human beings and their environment. Landscapes are part of the European cultural heritage and key components of local, regional and national identities, as recognized by the European Landscape Convention (Council of Europe, 2000). The rural landscapes of Europe constitute the immediate daily surroundings of many people and directly or indirectly affect the quality of life of all Europeans. Besides, traditional rural landscapes are vital for the conservation of bio-

diversity (Fjellstad and Dramstad, 1999; Antrop, 2004), and a source of information concerning the application of sustainable management techniques (Stanner and Bourdeau, 1995; Antrop, 2004).

Increasingly, however, their ecological, aesthetic and cultural values are threatened by processes of a rapid, large-scale nature, such as sweeping changes in agricultural practices, the decline of agricultural activity in some regions, urban sprawl, the development of road and rail networks, as well as the pressure of tourism and leisure activities (Meeus et al., 1990; Meeus, 1995; Stanner and Bourdeau, 1995; Palang et al., 1998; Vos and Meekes, 1999; Jongman, 2002; Van Eetvelde and Antrop, 2004). Given this situation, strategies for conservation and management must be developed in order to ensure that these values are not needlessly lost.

This research was carried out in *bocage* landscape of the Northern Mountains of Galicia (NW Spain). Our primary aim

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