

Transylvania: traditional agricultural practices, pressures and concerns regarding local tradition and biodiversity.

By Catherine Laverick, 2011

Traditional Agricultural Practices

Traditional agricultural practices that take place across Transylvania have remained the same for 100's years. The daily routine for many rural dwellers within the Saxon villages represents a harmonic rhythm between people and the landscape. Haymaking is one such technique and is explored below.

Haymaking

Each summer, local people head to the fields to make hay. Haymaking is still carried out by hand and as a communal activity across many areas of Transylvania, such as Ghimes in eastern Transylvania. This activity is a large part of the community's lives and annual routine and relies heavily on the dedication of the village community. Scything is the usual grass cutting hand technique and is efficiently carried out in strips.

The grass is left to dry out to become hay and then gathered into piles. Photo 1 below shows a typical landscape across Transylvania post hay collection.



Photo 1: Typical agricultural landscape, Transylvania.

The piles are all collected and transported back to the farm base and barns by horse and cart (see photo 2 below).



Photo 2: Horse and cart carrying hay.

Rich meadows full of a great variety of wildflowers are a common feature across Transylvania and are a product of the low intensive nature of the agricultural practices and regimes (Photo 3).



Photo 3: Typical meadow with a rich diversity of flowers and grasses.

These meadows are full of butterflies, bees and other invertebrates and are therefore an extremely valuable source of biodiversity (photo 4).



Photo 4: Two blue butterflies mating on a clover.

Pressures and threats

One threat to the diversity of these meadows is abandonment, where meadows have not been cut for 2 to 3 years.

Abandonment of meadows allows ecological succession to step in, eventually losing their agricultural value and biodiversity. Initially pioneer grasses appear along with a great diversity and abundance of wildflowers. However, this is followed by scrub and eventually woodland which is the natural climax vegetation in Transylvania, mainly evident only at the tops of hills and on the steepest slopes. Prior to

Saxon arrival woodlands containing oak, hornbeam and beech existed across much of Transylvania only to be cleared to make way for the agricultural regimes. These forested areas are slowly creeping back down to the valleys as a result of the abandonment of meadow management.

Abandonment can be caused for a variety of reasons. A main reason is depopulation of the rural villages where understandably many of the young people seek employment in the towns and cities where pay is higher and quality of life is better. This leaves the older members of the community to carry out the arduous task of scything and collecting the hay, which at some point will become impossible leading to abandonment. Another reason is the costs involved in adhering to the EU policies for agricultural products and gaining an organic certification. The local people are therefore unable to sell their products at market, making it an unviable money making option. Modernisation and intensification of agricultural practices are increased threats to many regions therefore literally abandoning the meadows for other forms of agricultural methods or through loss of agricultural productivity. There are of course several other reasons why these meadows are abandoned, some relating to the political regimes and land divisions raising questions as to who owns the land.

Way Forward

Ensuring protection of the local agricultural practices and resultant biodiversity may seem like a lost cause with such big influences such as misused EU policies and national politics at play, however there are several positive influences from projects and charities which are making differences at the local up to the European scales.

One community, such as that in Ghimes, have started to run a haymaking festival where people from other countries and cultures can experience the haymaking customs whilst helping the local people in protecting their livelihood through cutting and collecting the hay therefore helping to restore the rich biodiversity that once existed. The haymaking festival also focuses on meadows that have been abandoned by their owners, with the aim of returning the land in good biological and agricultural condition to the owners or pass it the land onto suitable farmers.

Projects, such as that run by Barbara Knowles and Rodics Gergely who have worked closely in collaboration with local ecologists and specialists, in addition to their support of the European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism, have had an influence of Romanian and EU agricultural policy.

Additionally, the ADEPT charitable foundation was set up to protect the fragile biodiversity in Transylvania and use to benefit local communities. ADEPT currently focuses its efforts within the Târnava Mare region, helping local farmers produce organic foods that can be sold. Based in Saschiz, a Saxon village, a food kitchen is let out in order to help farmers produce and market the foods within acceptable EU policy and standards.

It is becoming increasingly difficult for the EU not to listen and see what the benefits are not only at a local level but globally. However there is still a long way to go before ensuring an effective balance is met in keeping the traditional agricultural methods whilst embracing positive modern agricultural changes which will encourage the youth of the communities to stay and continue the fantastic work of their elderly members.

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