

Annex 6

Synthesis WP2

Development and evaluation of strategies for in situ conservation

This study aims to collect information to define, from a detailed analysis of breeding programmes across Europe, what technical, economical and social means are necessary to achieve a successful development programme for the “Heritage Sheep Breeds”.

The breeds that were studied as test cases were:

- in France: Basco Béarnaise, Manech Tête Noire, Manech Tête Rouse and Causses du Lot
- in UK : Herdwick and Shetland
- in the Netherlands : Kempen Heath Sheep and Milkshopeep (Friesian & Zeeland)
- in Greece: Frizarta and Katsika
- in Slovenia: Bela Krajina Pramenka and Bovec Sheep

Several common criteria seem to be important in order to have a successful development program for these breeds.

Rusticity of heritage sheep breeds

One of the major characteristics of these breeds is their rusticity and their capacity to live in harsh environments. Indeed, all of these breeds are living in difficult areas where other species or other breeds of sheep are not as adapted. It can be in mountainous region or with adverse climate, and in these conditions the Heritage sheep breeds can valorise their qualities and by not being in competition with mainstream breeds (which are not as productive in these environments). Furthermore, their positive impact on the landscape is most of the time well known. Grazing is notably efficient for preventing fire risk in sensible areas. But it is rarely translated into a specific subsidy to encourage the maintenance of sheep production in these regions.

- ⇒ A better acknowledgement of their important role in the maintenance of such harsh areas could help them. For example, a subsidy to compensate their difficult way of production and valorise their function of management of landscape. A subsidy should be specific to these heritage sheep breeds, as they are mainly adapted to that type of area, could be a way of acknowledgment. It can encourage new breeders to choose these breeds.

Support from European, regional or local level

The support from European level (agri-environmental measures for the endangered breeds) to heritage sheep breeds with small numbers is limited and not even implemented in all countries.

- ⇒ It might be interesting to encourage new countries to implement this subsidy to recognise the importance of heritage sheep breeds at a European level.

Support from local and/or regional level to heritage sheep breeds is most of the time strong. It is not necessarily by means of special subsidies for the breed but through the support of the local sheep industry in general or a support to the breed society. That kind of help at a local level is essential. Actions of an efficient breed society for example are indispensable to the maintenance and promotion of the heritage sheep breeds.

- ⇒ It is important to help the local structure, particularly breed societies, to conduct projects through financial and technical assistance.

Specific breed products

Some breeds have specific products, even sometimes a Protected Designation of Origin. In our example, it is difficult to see the real impact of such a quality label: however it is quite likely that without such a protection, the Heritage sheep breeds numbers would have dropped since they would have been replaced by a more productive breed. But in most cases, there is no marketed product associated with the breed. In this case, the main thing is to find a niche product to be able to sell the production through sale on the farm or on local markets. Sale on the farm linked to agro-tourism could be a good solution when the breed is situated in a touristic area. But in attractive region, installation of new breeder is often difficult because of land pressure particularly, and sometimes it is even more difficult for an original project with heritage sheep breeds. Communication to indicate the importance of these heritage sheep breeds and to help breeders to sell their products is a solution.

Breeders' interest

One of the major successful factors is that breeders are taking an interest in their own breed. They are very attached to the phenotypic conformation traits. They are also conscious of the qualities and abilities of their breeds, and the challenge is to take advantage of them through an adapted farming system. A good zootechnical knowledge of the capacity of breeds is important to help new breeders to find the right system of management. In most cases, low input system is the solution: the Heritage sheep breeds do not produce as much as other selected breeds, but they are the one who can take advantage of their environment the best, and thanks to the adaptation and the hardiness of these breeds all the breeding associated costs are kept very low (sanitary products, feedstuff...) which maintain the farmers incomes.

- ⇒ It is primordial to encourage breeders that chose heritage sheep breeds to keep them with a kind of acknowledgement and also financial compensation, and to promote these breeds among new breeders.