

SESSION 3 : DAIRY LAND, SUSTAINABLE LAND?

Presided by Bernard Faye

Elevage laitier et paysages

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Our aim is to examine the relations between landscape and breeding activities. What impact do breeding activities have on the landscape? What symbolic ties do they help to shape between the landscape “supply” and “demand”? What social and political tradeoffs can be made to match these up?

The notion of landscape is a broad one: first, landscape perception operates on a physical, tangible reality, a space that offers perspectives, an arrangement of form and color, an articulation of various scales, etc.; furthermore, landscape perception is informed by individual and societal values that derive from memories, emotions and symbolic representations that vary according to both social and cultural belonging and individual trajectories.

In Switzerland, since the new law on Agriculture in 1996, maintenance of the rural landscape and decentralized use of the land are officially recognized functions of agriculture enshrined in the federal Constitution. These functions operate in rural areas in the plains, periurban areas or in the vicinity of tourist centers, but especially in the mountainous regions that make up 70% of the Swiss territory. These regions happen to be mainly devoted to dairy farming.

Switzerland counts **over 620,000 dairy cows, or 8 for 100 inhabitants** (2008 figures), making it comparable to the Netherlands (9), but giving it a higher proportion than France (6) or Italy (3). The number of cows declined, however, by 13% between 1998 and 2008, whereas the number of cattle owners dropped by 24%. Grazing area was slightly less than 60% of the Usable Agricultural Area (2008 figures), or 15% of the Swiss territory. As regards **summer pasturing area**, it occupies 5,400 km², or 13% of the Swiss territory, according to the latest surface area statistics (1992/97). It decreased by 3.2% between 1979/85 and 1992/97. **When abandoned, it usually becomes overgrown with brush or forest.**

Thus, the mountain landscape, partly shaped by breeding activities, is subject to a strong evolutionary dynamic. Economic pressure and technological evolutions lead to **gradually eroding the profitability of farming methods based on free-range grazing** of animals in favor of confining animals in buildings with outdoor access limited to small spaces. Mountainous areas are losing their appeal for agricultural producers who are gradually deserting them. Some favorable surface areas are intensified, but they are also stakes in major land development efforts (building, tourist development, etc.). On the other hand, many areas are converted to extensive use (extensive meat production, sheep, etc.) or abandoned. The third national forest inventory (2004-2007) noted **a 9.1% increase of mountainous forest area** (about 59,500 hectares) in the past ten years.

Does this evolution correspond to the population's expectations? One aspect of the PASTO research project conducted jointly by several Swiss research and development institutions has done a precise evaluation of these expectations. The **type of landscape that meets with the greatest positive assessments is an open landscape** dotted by landscape elements such as hedgerows, copses, trees and streams that don't look too abandoned yet not overly groomed. The landscape should be legible, welcoming and alive. A landscape in the early stages of overgrowth is thus often valued, first and foremost by a population that has little grasp of vegetation dynamics. The intermediary stage of vegetation requires intervention if it is not to turn into forest, a stage that is perceived negatively on the whole.

Breeding practices are at the heart of this landscape issue. What practices should be encouraged? How? For what landscape results?

There are two avenues to explore to curb the abandonment of pastoral mountain areas: one is to aim for **better promotion of the farm products from these areas**; the other is the **remuneration of landscape services through public policy measures.**

As regards promotion of farm products, scientific research conducted not only in Switzerland, but also in France and other countries has shown the **link between certain nutritional and taste qualities of dairy products and fodder supply practices**, for instance grazing in mountainous areas. For many centuries, Swiss cheese has been the flagship of Swiss food production on export markets. The search for quality and the task of promoting it result in higher milk prices for milk producers, particularly through protected designation of origin (PDO) labels. This positive promotion helps to slow the trend



of abandoning mountain areas. In addition to their intrinsic qualities, products from mountain dairy farming have strong symbolic ties with the consumer, relayed through a whole range of imagery surrounding the alpine identity: in alpes, des alpes, the battle of the queens, etc. are all events that reactivate these ties. Advertising has made use of and continues to use the link between quality dairy products and emblematic alpine and pastoral landscapes (illustrations).

The second avenue is political. Remuneration of products is no longer enough for the Swiss producer to have reason to farm mountain areas in the long term. Public policy measures must therefore be set up that can offset the drawbacks of the mountain. Direct payments are a step in this direction but are not enough. The [political debate on the evolution of direct farm payments](#) tends to better promote (and remunerate) agricultural landscape services.

At the local level, the current evolution tending toward the reforestation of mountain agricultural areas does not necessarily meet the population's expectations. In addition to nationwide agricultural policy instruments, new instruments must be found so that landscape supply and demand converge. The [role of local level governance](#) is central in this arbitrage. At relevant landscape scales, compromises have been found through dialogue and negotiation involving not only public actors – communes, cantons – but also private actors – associations, parks, representatives of residents, farmers, etc. In future, direct farm payments could also encourage participative processes to weigh landscape expectations among the various population groups.

To conclude, the landscape does not have an absolute value but remains [a value of compromise](#) negotiated among territorial actors. Dairy farming, due to its impact on the material aspect of the landscape and the symbolic and identitarian links it has with the population, is at the heart of the mediation between landscape supply and demand.

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