

DYNAVERSITY

Custodian Farmers Network of the Gran Sasso National Park (Italy)

Case study analysis

**DYNAmic seed networks for managing European diversity:
conserving diversity *in situ* in agriculture and in the food chain**



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PART 1: DESCRIPTION

1.1 Contextualising the case

The Central Appenine area, on the border of the Lazio and Abruzzo Regions, is one of the best conserved parts of the central Italian landscape. Within these mountains, one of the largest Italian protected areas is the Gran Sasso e Monti della Laga National Park. Due to its size and breadth, it also has notable biodiversity along with its geomorphological variety and cultural richness.

The geomorphological structure of the Park determines a noteworthy climate and vegetation diversification. Consequently, there is also remarkable variety in the agricultural landscapes of the region, bearing witness to centuries-old traditions and what is also a sometimes-difficult relationship between humans and nature.

Significant in these farming traditions are the high-altitude cultivations in Santo Stefano di Sessanio, the location of production for a famous lentil variety. Vineyards are known in the Laga Mountains and the small-town of Ofena. Vegetable gardens exist along the Tirino River.

Olive groves in the Pescara's hills, due to the altitude, are naturally free from parasites. Almond groves in the Park's southern side, once linked with the almond oil economy, also still remain. Despite all of this agricultural diversity, in the last years, agriculture has been dramatically declining, and few professional farmers remain.

Some years ago (in 2008), the Park promoted a strategy and a program for the enhancement and conservation of the local activities. The first project to be financed (under the "Leader+" call), was "Cerere". It was aimed at identifying, with a more detailed analysis, the indigenous genetic resources still present in the territory, at the same time promoting the creation of a network of "custodian farmers" aware of the importance of biodiversity for themselves, the territory, and society as a whole.

Other projects, that followed the first one, were all focused on three specific goals:

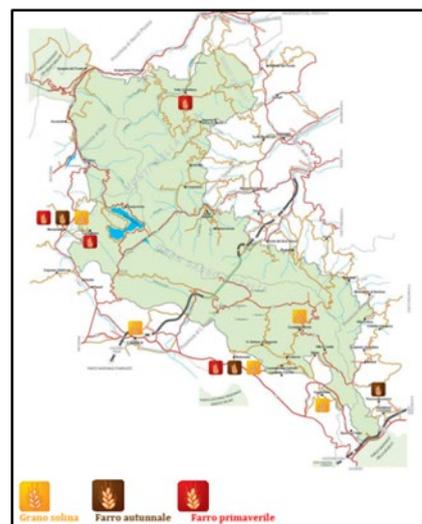
- **To Create a farmers' network** for exchanging seeds at risk of extinction and continue cultivating them;
- **To Recover, preserve, and reproduce ancient cultivars.** By storing the seeds in the germplasm bank of the Floristic Park Research Center in Barisciano and at the germplasm bank in Sulmona, and cultivating seeds at the botanical garden of the Park and at the showcase field of the Abruzzo Region, these goals are being achieved with ancient cultivars;
- To **Encourage** the recovery and **exchange** of native varieties;
- To **Support** the **marketing of products** obtained from native varieties;
- To **Promote** the initiative in order to **encourage consumption of native varieties** grown by the network of custodian farmers in the local community; and
- To **Stimulate the young generations** in the rediscovery and consolidation of the bond with the land and with their own traditions.

The National Park launched a general initiative called "Agro Biodiversità" (Agro-biodiversity) with the aim of identifying the products and the producers of old cultivars. Both were identified and lists were made of each. Furthermore, the initiative planned the creation of an atlas of local varieties in order to support and promote the local biodiversity.



After the first project, others were financed (Demetra, Persefone, and Feronia) all of which had similar goals and activities. Since the very beginning of these projects, attention was paid to all of the local products, but a strong focus was on the farmers themselves. A survey among farmers was launched with the goal of gathering information about them and their products. The results of the survey were two different but interoperable lists, one of the farmers and the other of their products. Regarding the products, the survey revealed many local cultivars and varieties, some almost unknown and with very small productions. The products were categorized into three broad groups:

1. Cereals belonging to the *Generas Triticum, Zea, Hordeum, Sorghum, and Secale*, common Italian names of which are Casorella, Farro autunnale e primaverile, Mais quarantino, Orzo majorino, Orzo marzuolo, Rosciola, Saggina, Saragolla, Segale, and Solina.
2. Beans belonging to the *Generas Cicer, Lathyrus, Phaseolus, Lens, Vicia, and Pisum*, common Italian names of which are Cece di Capitignano, Cece nero, Cece pizzuto, Cece rosso, Cicerchia, Cicerchiola, Fagiolo gialletto, Fagiolo nero, Fagiolo a olio, Fagiolo a Pisello, Fagiolo a Scafa, Fagiolovtondino, Lenticchia di S. Stefano di Sessanio, Robiglio, and Veccia.
3. Garden vegetables belonging to the *Genera Allium, Brassica, Lactuca, Pastinaca, Solanum, Apium, Crocus, and Cucurbita*, common Italian names of which are Aglio rosso del Tirino, Cavolo di Pizzoli, Cipolla del Bergamasco, Cipolla Francese, Insalata della Rivera, Pastinaca, Patata Fiocco di Neve, Pata rossa, Patata turchesa, Sedano della Rivera, Zafferano, Zucca da fiore, and Zucca da foraggio.



From these results, a list of local producers was prepared as well. This list includes 80 farmers distributed in more than 30 different municipalities, numbers that are still increasing (<http://www.gransassolagapark.it/pdf/Custodi.GranSassoLaga.pdf>).

1.2 « Doing »

1.2.1 Properties WITHIN the initiative (closure)

The members of the Custodian Farmers network are committed to:

- Participate in conservation programs of local agricultural varieties through the development of (seed) exchanges with other farmers of the Network;
- Preserve and pass-on the seeds entrusted to them, through cultivation (*in situ* conservation) and reproduction;
- Contribute to the preservation of natural, historical, and anthropological knowledge concerning local crops

Seeds are multiplied by farmers and exchanged with the aim of preserving and spreading them. Events organised with this purpose in mind, such as the “Semi in Libertà” (Freedom Seeds) Fair, which takes place every year in one of the involved municipalities. Some images below depict that event and its poster from the year 2016.



The quality of seeds is controlled and assured, on a regular basis, by the supervision of the Central Apennines Seed Bank – (CASB). This facility, founded in 2003 by the Centre for Floristic Research of the Apennines (CRFA), in the middle of the National Park of Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga, is managed in collaboration with the University of Camerino. CRFA is located in San Colombo in Barisciano (L'Aquila province, Abruzzo region). CASB does work with flora, conserving plants of Abruzzo and the central Apennines. With CASB, *ex situ* conservation of native plant species and ancient agronomic cultivars is assured. Its main activities are: collection and conservation of seeds; seed reproduction for cultivation in the Botanic Garden of CRFA (and in other specialised facilities in agreement with CRFA); monitoring and protection, *in situ*, of the rarest plants of the Gran Sasso e Monti della Laga National Park.

1.2.2 Properties BEYOND the initiative (outreach)

Seeds or other products derived from these, are circulated locally in markets and are sold all year long in many of the area's municipalities. Products are promoted in a local restaurant network called “Ristoranti Custodi” (Custodian

Restaurants). These restaurants are identified by the following logos that printed on their menus (*image on the left*):



Importantly, some of these products are also recognized as Slow Food Presidia, the Paganica Beans (Fagiolo di Paganica), the Turquoise Potato (Patata Turchesa) and the Santo Stefano di Sessanio Lentil (*above, right*), among them. With the support of local producers, restaurants, and municipalities, the national park has carried out an initiative for the promotion of food and wine itineraries.

1.2.3 Transformative effects beyond the initiative

The first and most important support was provided by official National Park projects and their skilled and dedicated staff (at least 3 agronomists are among the park employees and have been engaged in the different projects). Later on, municipalities and local institutions (e.g. Administrative Regional Offices) started getting involved as well. Today, the networks are self-functioning and the National Park no longer organizes meetings among farmers on a regular basis.

1.3 « Organizing »

1.3.1 Properties WITHIN the initiative (closure)

Every member of the "Agricoltori Custodi" network is officially committed to the National Park and has signed an agreement that stipulates that every member must declare the cultivars that he/she is in charge of maintaining and preserving. The Central Apennines Seed Bank controls and guarantees the quality of the seeds, sources, and exchanges.

1.3.2 Properties BEYOND the initiative (outreach)

The structure and the strategy for the promotion of local products is designed and supported by the Park and by all other public institutions and private enterprises, including the Slow Food Foundation. Together they promote awareness and commercialization of products beyond the local network.

1.3.3 Transformative effects beyond the initiative

The National Park entrusts the members of the network and assigns them exclusive permission of the use of the Park label, thus also giving them the chance to develop their product in its natural geographical conditions. In 2005, the Park Administration issued a specific regulation for the use of the park's "trademark" (*Regolamento per la concessione d'uso del nome e del logo per i prodotti agroalimentari del Parco Nazionale del Gran Sasso e Monti della Laga*, <http://www.gransassolagapark.it/pagina.php?id=306>).



PART 2: ANALYSIS

2.1 Knowing

2.1.1 Properties WITHIN the initiative (closure)

The collaboration among the Central Apennines Seed Bank (CASB), the Center for Floristic Research of the Apennines (CRFA), the National Park of the Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga, the University of Camerino, and farmers, increases and preserves the knowledge on seeds, cultivation techniques, and new cultivars. This approach guarantees a constant quality level throughout all of the production chain and commercialization process as well. Furthermore, training courses are organized on specific aspects of the cultivation or processing of local products, such as on pruning, fertilization, and the conservation of various products. Throughout all of these measures, all of the knowledge types and stakeholders are involved in the processes of the Park and its operations.

2.1.2 Properties BEYOND the initiative (outreach)

Knowledge is legitimated mainly by the Park label on products and sustained by the Slow Food presidia. Restaurants, markets, and local networks help promoting the cultural values of the Park on a wider scale. In all of these contexts, however, the producers are presented as the key players at the base of all these processes.

2.1.3 Transformative effects beyond the initiative

A wide, well established, and continuously growing set of activities are in place, managed by the National Park and other institutions that promote the diffusion, reinforcement and capitalization of the knowledge and local traditions regarding agricultural (including also all the local typical breeds and their products, such as cheese, wool, meat, and cured meats).

2.2 Framing

2.2.1 Properties WITHIN the initiative (closure)

The initiative was established with the aim of giving local farmers the possibility to keep producing and living in these marginal geographical contexts. The initiative has sustained their livelihoods through the maintenance of local cultivars, products and seeds, and by conserving and promoting any form of local knowledge linked with the traditional agricultural practices which have existed for generations. In a relatively recent initiative, under a call of interest promoted by the park, willing young people from local municipalities are paid for the cultivation of endangered bean varieties.

Through this initiative, young farmers are trained and followed by older, more experienced ones. The aim of the project is not only to recover these nearly lost varieties, but also to create a bridge between generational knowledge gaps in the knowledge of these varieties and how to care for them.

2.2.2 Properties BEYOND the initiative (outreach)

Products are promoted by many public (e.g. park, region, municipality, tourism agencies, etc.) and private institutions (e.g. Slow Food, Tour Operators, Restaurants, Shop keepers, and farmers themselves), achieving a wide dissemination of the role and the activities of the “Agricoltori Custodi” network beyond the local scale and to regional, national and international levels.

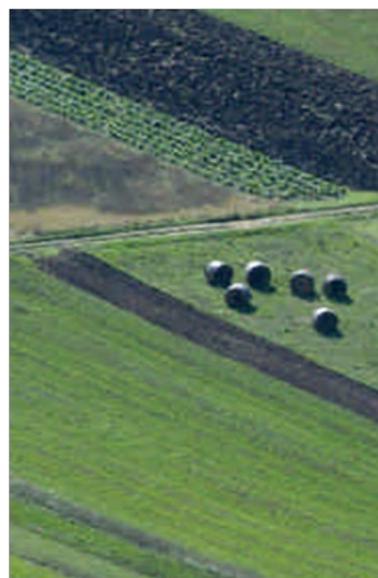
2.2.3 Transformative effects beyond the initiative

The strategy increased the number and the scope of the activities, leveraging these actions to have a larger and broader impact as well. At the beginning of the network, there was much work on old cereals and “resisting” farmers. Day by day the numbers and categories of plants increased (i.e. beans, vegetables, fruits, wild species) through this work, and the interest from local young generations has been growing ever since. Today, the whole set of projects and experiences from this network has allowed a renaissance of a local culture that is renewed and reinterpreted, while remaining rooted in the ways and traditions of the local inhabitants of the past.

2.3 Networking

The National Park has been the key player in the process of network creation, and thanks to the professionalism and skills of its staff, many activities have been planned and many projects financed. After more than 15 years of continuous work and with the enthusiasm shown by local farmers that are becoming younger and younger each year, we can consider the network to be well established. In terms of network trust, the scientific partners of the network (Central Appennines Seed Bank (CASB), Centre for Floristic Research of the Apennines (CRFA), and University of Camerino) are responsible for ensuring product quality and hence play a fundamental role in the production process. Furthermore, the farmer certification system and the product labelling procedures are both key methods to maintain a high level of interest from local actors from different markets to sell the products.

PART 3: SUMMARY



Good will is the main quality needed in these kinds of initiatives. At the beginning, it is important to overcome the distrust and discouragement of people who know, for personal experiences, that life in the mountains is difficult and full of sacrifices. When farmers can understand that tradition can still co-exist, and sometimes prosper, with new approaches, models, and contexts, both in production and in the market, then the real challenge becomes avoiding unjustified expectations and keeping high the trust. In this transformation, young people play a crucial role of custodians of our past as they carry it forward into the future.