

# AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITY AND LANDSCAPE. LIVESTOCK, KEY TO THE PRESERVATION OF THE BASQUE-ATLANTIC LANDSCAPE

**Eugenio Ruiz Urrestarazu**

**Rosario Galdos Urrutia**

Departamento de Geografía, Prehistoria y Arqueología  
Universidad del País Vasco/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea UPV/EHU  
eugenio.ruiz@ehu.es, rosario.galdos@ehu.es

## I. INTRODUCTION. THE BASQUE-ATLANTIC LANDSCAPE

The purpose of this article is twofold. The first is to analyse and assess recent farming developments in the Basque country within a generalised situation of reduction and abandonment of the agricultural and livestock sector. As a result of the above analysis, the aim is to establish a connection with the results observed and the influence that these may have on the preservation or transformation of the landscape in the Basque-Atlantic area.

The starting point for this is to confirm that the rural landscape is largely a territorial manifestation of the farming itself. Both the features within the landscape as well as their organization and evolution depend, in a binding fashion, on agricultural structures, systems, types of crop and farm production. Any change made to these last factors is revealed in changes to the landscape.

The current rural landscape of the Basque-Atlantic valleys, which could rightfully be called the landscape of the Basque farmsteads, has a simple yet, at the same time, complex setup, even though this contrast may sound paradoxical. Simple, because there are only three essential elements within its landscape: The dispersion of the habitat, grasslands and conifers. Whereas its complexity comes from the particular arrangement of these self same elements, the result of several factors most notable among which being the intricate topography, small farm holdings and the prevalence of part-time work. This all results in a mosaic structure on the slopes of the valleys and where the main mosaic tiles are the plots of pine forest, meadows and, where appropriate, stands of mixed Atlantic woods. This combination is harmonious and pleasing to the eye, boasting an arrangement of shapes and colours, presided over by the different shades of green, from deep almost black reforested pines to the bright, cheerful green of the meadows. It is necessary to state that this description is a

simplification that hides local variants which stray from this general picture, variants which in turn are characterised by prominent combinations of enclosed, dark spaces, fast growing coniferous forests, grazing pastures, hay meadows and clear open spaces. The predominance of the first are associated with rural environments where abandonment of agricultural activities has resulted in forest harvesting of the land, while the latter remain wherever traditional farmhouses continue to carry out significant livestock farming. Put simply, the permanence of this priceless mosaiced landscape of meadows and forested patches, constantly presided over by the scattered white flecks of the farmsteads, crowned by the red of their roofs, is only possible if these farms retain their agricultural role and, more specifically, host livestock. Because the Basque-Atlantic landscape that we see today is a reflection, to a substantial degree although not solely, of this livestock.

The sources used for analysing the evolution of livestock are the last two agricultural censuses, 1999 and 2009, equating their data to make them comparable.

## **II. LIVESTOCK FARMING IN CLEAR DECLINE**

In the specific case of the Basque Country, from 1989 to 2009, 10,735 farms disappeared. This reduction represents a loss of 40% of farms over twenty years. In ten years, more than 100,000 head of cattle have been lost. This drop has not affected all herds, given that focus has been placed on those with a greater numerical and financial worth, namely swine, cattle and sheep. In addition to the quantitative data, other more qualitative aspects such as management systems based on the production type have been taken into account.

## **III. TERRITORIAL IMPACT: THE GRAZING LOAD**

Landscape dependence on livestock will be greater the greater the grazing load on the land. In 1999, territorial distribution exhibited a significant dichotomy between the two slopes, with the Atlantic side having a much higher grazing load than the Mediterranean side, even though the area with the highest density spilled over toward the south. Ten years later, some changes have been detected. There is almost a balance between the number of municipalities that lose livestock holdings and those which gain them, however, the area affected in the second case is much larger. The rise in livestock intensity is not due to the increased effectiveness of the herd, but rather to the decline of the Utilized Agricultural Area (UAA). Three conclusions can be drawn from this: a) Due to statistical comparison problems, numerical results should be treated with caution, b) A great deal depends on the indicator used to interpret livestock intensity calculations correctly and c) The decline seen in the number of livestock units (LU) seems to be already becoming apparent in the layout of the land through a retraction of the UAA.

## **IV. CATTLE FARMING**

Beef cattle, managed more extensively, appears to be more linked to the farm's own resources than that of dairy cattle, so the influence it has on territorial changes depends on the production system. A highly marked change has been detected in many farms, changing

over from dairy to beef production. Underlying this trend is the widespread option leading to a decline in livestock farming as a whole, represented by income generated from other non-agricultural production sectors. In parallel to this, the phenomenon of concentrating more livestock on better sized farms has been observed, marginalizing the smaller farms and leaving them to be associated more with recreational rather than industrial farming. Finally, the decline in cattle headage is widespread from a territorial point of view.

## **V. A SHEEP POPULATION MORE RESISTANT TO ABANDONMENT**

Sheep farms and populations have also declined, however, at a far less alarming rate than that of cattle. In principle, the upkeep of the grazing land for this livestock, essentially the Latxa variety of mountain sheep whose milk is suitable for the manufacture of cheeses, is guaranteed so long as the decline does not become more pronounced. New sheep farms have been created on reduced acreage, however, once again the effect of concentrating heads of livestock has been observed. The consequences of this move away from sheep farming, although not very sharp at present, affects most of the Basque territory, regardless of its geo-ecological environment.

## **VI. FINAL ASSESSMENT**

There has been a decline in the number of farms as well as a decrease in headage. The main losses in both cases generally correspond to holdings with a smaller UAA, in the meantime a process of concentrating livestock on farms with larger acreage has been confirmed. This intensive restructuring of the livestock sector should have an impact on the uses of the land and the landscape. Despite the increase of forage crops, which would seem to indicate a recent trend of a rise in livestock feed, the total balance of the land used for this purpose has, according to census data, experienced a considerable regression. However, these data should be taken with caution. The significant fall in the area of permanent pasture need not necessarily be interpreted as a change of land use, but rather as these spaces losing their function within livestock farming and which, for now, retain their herbaceous vegetation, having reduced the amount of cattle.

Yet it seems clear that the decline in livestock farming has failed, for the time being, to radically transform the landscape of the Basque-Atlantic countryside, although it is noticeable. If this is so, then it is worth asking the following question: Is it possible to have a cattle farming landscape without cattle farmers? In the first place, it should be noted that many of the remaining livestock farmers make more extensive use of the land, even at the expense of some areas devoted to livestock feed remaining underutilised. This extensification is related to the increased resistance of sheep farming and to the conversion of a significant portion of dairy cattle to beef farming. Although, as already explained previously, in many instances this concept of extensification hides semi-abandonment or a reduced use of resources.

On the other hand, the very small acreage of the traditional Basque farmhouse does not allow for large variations in its internal organization. However, this is where other factors, not directly related with farming structures or farming itself, come into play, such as economic activity. It has been shown how many livestock farms continue to exist in spite

of scant financial returns, within what has been labelled as recreational farming. Numerous small holdings, whose basic income comes from other sectors outside farming, have designed a strategy for managing the space linked to their potential as future developable areas. This means that owners of many private plots give the plots a potential financial value linked to possible urban development schemes. In order for this meadowland to retain its potential value it is advisable to keep it clean and cared for, so the owner raises a few head of livestock on it essentially for this purpose. Its afforestation would represent a mid to long-term outlay which would not pay for itself whenever the price of fast growing softwoods fell. This behaviour is also influenced by the professional aspirations of those smallholders who still have a natural bent for farming and who take pride in good care of the land. This same strategy also applies to old farms where work has been abandoned and where the farm has ceased to be used as such, but rather the dwelling is converted into prime housing in a rural setting. These traditional farms, often completely refurbished or newly built, are surrounded by ancient farmland, long since given over to meadowlands. The owners are interested in ensuring that this environment is maintained, which would not otherwise happen if it were subjected to repopulation, where housing would “eat it up”. To achieve this other tactics are used, such as unwritten verbal agreements allowing remaining farmers who need more space to make use of the pastures, however, this is a precarious practice and never definitive. What does seem clear is that an essential part of the factors that guide the evolution of farms and the strategies of their managers are going to come from outside the industry itself.