



Na draio
per vioure

ENG



ENGLISH



© ECOMUSEO DELLA PASTORIZIA, 2016
Fraz. PONTEBERNARDO - 12010 PIETRAPORZIO
All rights reserved.

For the Development and Enhancement of an Alpine Valley

The “Ecomuseo della Pastorizia” (Pastoralism Eco-Museum) was officially opened in 2000 in conjunction with the inauguration of the exhibition “La Routo – Transhumance Paths Between the Alps and the Sea.” However, the actual beginning of this cultural, economic and social reality dates back to many years ago, when the Stura Valley Mountain Community embarked on a journey of both cultural renaissance and economic revitalization of sheep farming and its context.

The Eco-Museum developed on two fronts: the recovery of the Sambucana breed of sheep, native to the valley, that in the 1980s was in danger of extinction; and on the other hand the rediscovery of the cultural heritage linked to the pastoral world of the Valley.

The Stura Valley is a mountainous area par excellence, rooted in its own history, tradition, culture and language, custodian of a heritage that is a treasure trove for the future. It is therefore in this context that we find the Pastoralism Eco-Museum, established by the Piedmont regional authorities following Regional Law 31 of 14 March 1995. The Eco-Museum is a journey – “draio” in Occitan – that the local community is marking out by digging into the roots of its history. It starts from this loss, at the base of the abandonment of the mountain villages.

The Eco-Museum, however, is not proposing a return to an idyllic past: it suggests a journey into herding, which today, thanks to the work of recovering the Sambucana sheep, is still alive. This journey aims to show herding as an important economic resource and enhance the knowledge related to this activity. What is suggested is a ‘draio’ that not easy to navigate, which collides with the processes of modernization and globalization that have made traditional activities more marginal.

The goal is to help build a future for our community - more balanced, more respectful of nature and of the quality of life - starting right from its marginality. The Eco-Museum is a tool that aims to raise awareness of the value of the work of farmers, their way of life, their traditions and the culture of the mountain area that is their home.

In recent years the Eco-Museum, with the collaboration of the local community, the “l’Escaroun” Consortium, “Lou Barmaset” agricultural cooperative, farmers, many scholars and the ‘friends of the Eco-Museum’, has undertaken numerous initiatives.

The result that is perhaps the most encouraging among those obtained is that the herding has become a source of pride for today’s farmers and it is no longer a secondary activity, as it was from the 1960s onwards.

The History

100

100

The History of Pastoralism

11,000 years ago in the Fertile Crescent area between Iraq, Iran, Syria and Palestine man invented animal farming. The practice of transhumance, closely linked to it, was developed over the years throughout the Mediterranean.

From Portugal to Turkey, from Europe to the Maghreb, transhumance is a complementarity seasonal pattern between the mountain and the plain. Beyond conflicts and differences, it is a reason for exchange and recognition among peoples, religions and cultures.

For centuries, farmers have had to talk, in a more or less peaceful manner, with other communities for land management.

Based on how the pastoral economy developed, each time the partners in this delicate interplay of powers and interests could be families or entire communities both in the plains and in the mountains.



The history of man's presence in the Cuneo valleys is closely linked to the great phenomena of the geological modelling of the Alps during the Quaternary period. In some cases, like that of the Stura Valley, glacial fluctuations contributed to the formation of a broad valley that can be easily travelled through, with handy steps and areas suitable anthropogenic occupation.

One of these areas, near today's village of Aisone, is among the oldest Neolithic sites in the mountain environment. In the mid-twentieth century, archaeological remains belonging to a northern Italian culture called "Culture of the vessel with a square mouth" were found in some rock shelters.

The Neolithic men of Aisone who frequented this area from the fifth millennium BC, probably occupied the natural cavities of the middle valley on a seasonal basis. With a more pastoral vocation than an agricultural one, they used the water and pastures for the animals and the stone to manufacture chipped and polished tools. The environment, characterised mainly by pines and oaks, was populated by ibex, chamois, deer but also bears.

The thousands of bronze age graffiti (between the second and first millennium BC) found in the nearby **Valle delle Meraviglie** (Valley of Marvels) testify the use of pastures even at high altitudes (2000-2300 metres above sea level).

Furthermore, at the end of the Bronze Age we proceed with a thinning of the forest, a sign of the increase of human expansion into the Western Alps.

Between the 12th-5th century BC many areas experience neoglacial phenomena. Nevertheless, in the province of Cuneo the agro-pastoral communities continue to exploit the same mountain sites until the Romanisation of the territories.

The Roman Era

With the Roman domination the Cuneo valleys, from 14 BC, become part of the province of Alpes Maritimae, that includes both sides of the Alps, from the Po River to the North and the Pesio to the South. From Pedona - where Borgo San Dalmazzo is now located, which served as a customs post for the collection of the Quadragesima Galliarum - you could go up to the current Colle della Maddalena.

In the high areas of Valle Grana in Castelmagno, where the homonymous sanctuary now stands, there is a votive inscription dedicated to the god Mars who, besides being the warlord, is considered the protector of animals. Again, in the high Stura Valley area, in Bersezio, there is a stone shrine of white marble, now walled up into

the parish church, with Hercules and Mars holding an auction together painted on it. The Greco-Roman hero Hercules, depicted wielding a cudgel, was the protector of travellers. In Roman times, the Alps were considered the home of the gods, “theatre of the most extraordinary events of nature and place of necessary endeavours for men and heroes”. With this in mind, Hercules, hero of human progress, was given the task of opening a path through the Alps, battling monstrous beings, transfigurations of the most feared aspects of nature.

The Roman age testimonies, therefore, reported the use of the valleys as a place of passage for commerce, but also as a place where people lived, with men, fields and flocks to protect. In the Crau over 200 Roman sheep pens have been found, evidence of the intense activity of the time.

The Middle Ages

In the middle ages the use of alpine meadows is a privilege.

This constraint was caused by the climatic limits of the Alpine environment: the pastures are not usable for at least six months of the year. In this historic period transhumance is the only way to make the alpine meadows productive, integrating their use with the flat areas. In the year 1100 it is above all the monastic institutions that implement transhumance. From 1200s the alpine communities, thanks to emerging family groups, win their land back again. In confirmation of their bargaining power, the many communities of the Stura and Maira valleys and of the County of Tenda, have statutes which confirm their strength.

Many alpine fairs dedicated to livestock trading confirm the importance of pastoralism in the valleys, such as the **Acceglio fair (Maira Valley)** or that of **Bersezio (Stura Valley)**. These centres are key hubs for trade between the Italian Riviera, Nice and Provence. Transversal paths to the valleys provide a network that, through its hubs, connects the various valleys among themselves and with the rest of Europe. In the 1420s the balance changed: the privatization of the high plain of Cuneo began along with irrigation works. The common lands - fundamental for transhumance - begin to shrink. It triggers a conflict between the valleys and plains. The alpine communities are forced to invent strategies to maximize the exploitation of the pastures, limiting transhumance practices.

One response, implemented in Val Maira, aimed at increasing the local production of forage, resulting in the introduction of livestock housing, a practice that had

probably been used very little previously. In other cases the families became protagonists in the process of establishing small farms in the plain. In other cases there was a harsh and violent confrontation with the ruling class of Cuneo.

The Gesso and Vermenagna valleys attempted, unsuccessfully, to make themselves independent from the city.

In addition, in the 1400s, numerous French breeders – from Provence – began to cross the Colle della Maddalena: from 50,000 to 60,000 French sheep lived in the mountains of Southern Piedmont.

Modern Era

104

At the beginning of the sixteenth century the consumption of livestock products diminished. In the mountains in south western Piedmont there was a gradual decrease in land devoted to growing hay in favour of cereal crops.

The Grana, Varaita, Maira and Po valleys experience a profound economic crisis, exacerbated by the progressive increase of the influence of Savoy on the marquisate of Saluzzo. The Alpine communities no longer have families that are able to negotiate with the central power. In sixteenth century many local alpine pastures are used by farmers from Provence. We can read their names in some notarial deeds drawn up in Provence: les Blanchas, Roburent, Oserot, Pouriac and Colombart (Argentera, Stura Valley), Vallone di Rio Freddo, Vallone dell'Ischiator, Tesina, Corborant and Orgials (Vinadio, Stura Valley), Valletta and Palla (Aisone, Stura Valley) and Resplendin (Acceglio, in Valle Maira). Often there were agreements with local farmers, who sublet the pastures to their Provençal colleagues. In some cases, however, the mountain communities take the livestock farming under their own management. An example is Entracque that - despite of its own large pastures, which may can hold 14,000 sheep in the summer months - extended its resources to colonise many pastures in nearby valleys (Stura, Roya and Maira). To balance this it was necessary to find vast spaces for wintering in the plain of Piedmont. The Entracquesi monopolise the production of wool. Between the 17th and 18th centuries they commissioned several votive offerings that highlight their economic success.

In the mid-18th century, the Intendant of the Province of Cuneo complained that he did not know the exact number of the inhabitants of Entracque: many families resided in the community for only 2 or 3 days during the year.

Far la route

200

Transhumance

Trans + humus = across ground.

Transhumance is a journey in which men lead herds beyond the territory of origin.

The entire Mediterranean is criss-crossed by transhumance paths. In southern Italy they are called tratturi; in France drailles; in Spain cañadas.

Transhumance is a slow journey continuously looking for new grass. Along the road the flock is an organised society. At the head are the donkeys, with the saddle pack on their back; the bags with the farmers' belongings hang down their sides.

The head shepherd, whip in hand, adjusts the pace of the flock: from 2.5 to 3 km/h, no more than that. Behind them the goats push forward, with the best bells round their necks: their deep ringing brings a rhythm to the march.

The dogs keep the flock in line. The wagon, which in the fall will be laden with newborn lambs, closes the procession.

Twenty-five, thirty kilometres a day, along ancient paths, along dusty roads, from village to village, even entering the city.

Slowly the herd moves towards the Alps.



20 days

The number of days to bring the flocks from France.

50.000

The sheep that every year, until the mid-twentieth century, were crossed the Colle della Maddalena.

2.800m

The highest peak of the Stura Valley.

The children running through the streets of Pontebernardo stop suddenly...

«Listen, listen... the bells; the bell clappers are beating hard. The “rego” are coming, they have done the “routo”... are they the ones of Prit de Marò or Tounin of Jan Besoun?»

«Are they coming from San Martin de Crau, from Salon de Provence or from Saint-Remi?»

«It is Tounin that is going to Staou. He has two donkeys and a nice mare.»

«We must be quick and tell our parents that the flock is here... We must help them to climb up to the mountain pasture!»

The herd moves along the valley path, the sheep bleat... they have recognised the road, the grass is fresh and tender, the Gias Staou is near! The children jump and dance. They are more than happy, they know that a few days from now Tounin will come down into the village and they will have a chance to hear all the news of “routo” in the square, of fellow villagers living in the Craou or in Camargue. They know everything by heart and know Provence like the back of their hands, as if they had already been there... but there is always something new to learn: “Lou floucà” in France is the ram that leads the flock behind the shepherd, while in Stura Valley “La floucà” is the most beautiful sheep of the flock.

«If Uncle Tounin will give us a “rego” before leaving for the plains... at Christmas we will make it a floucà.»

The Great Provençal Transhumance

The transhumance system in south-eastern France was based on a complementary and geographical relationship between Provence and the Alps. Managed by transhumance farmers of Alpine origin, the flocks spent the summer in the Dauphiné region, in the low Provence Alps and in nearby Piedmont.

This system was based on the thriving wool trade, which is essential for the large fabric manufacturing centres, particularly in Piedmont.

Every spring transhumance set several hundred thousand sheep in motion.

In the Bouches-du-Rhône area, the flocks migrated on foot until the 1960s. At the end of the summer, when the grass had dried in the heat, they were transferred to the Alpine pastures.

The Provençal-alpine transhumance ran the risk of disappearing after the Second World War. An unthinkable end for Provençal farmers (mostly of Alpine origin) for whom the transhumance was part of their identity.

Transferring to the High Cuneo Plain

Until the 1960s the inhabitants of the upper Stura Valley area - in autumn and spring, when there was little grass - led the herds to the high Cuneo plain.

“Per lou pastre se la barbo de soun paire fuoguese d’erbo les i fario manjar”

“If his father’s beard was made of grass, the shepherd would let the sheep eat it.”

This saying in Occitan, well known in the Stura Valley, shows that the search for fresh grass for the sheep was a big concern for the shepherds in the upper valley.

After the sheep came down from the Alps they grazed more marginal land that belonged to the local authorities first before going to the fields that had already been used by the cattle.

In the autumn and spring the sheep were brought down to the Cuneo plain: the transhumance - lasting two days - was done on foot along the state highway. The flocks came down from Argentera, Ferrere, Bersezio, Prinardo, Pontebernardo, Pietraporzio, Castello, Sambuco, Bagni and Vinadio. There was a scheduled stop around half way. They remained in the plains for several months a year: in autumn from early November until Christmas, or the arrival of a heavy snowfall; in spring, from early April until mid-May.

Those who could not do the transhumance entrusted some of their livestock to their neighbour.

The herd was led by two shepherds and some dogs.

The destination was the farmsteads in some areas of Cuneo, Boves and Peveragno. Usually between the shepherds and the host farming family a deep friendship was born. This is why many generations went back to the same farmstead.

The country fair

203

In the Arles or Salon de Provence fairs, being or claiming to be from Piedmont allowed you to quickly find a job... The professional specialization ended up confused with the origins. In Provence, the representation of the Piedmont worker could be summarized, for the employers, in certain well-defined traits: brave, serious, reserved.

«We went to Arles to the Bar du Marché, or to Salon to the Novelty. Were the shepherds' bars! It didn't take long to find a job: a quick shake of the sycamore tree, and down fell two or three employers! In Arles it was a Saturday, it was the Market Day.»

«We met up on the morning of the fair and then at noon we ate together. We were always with people from the Stura Valley, with the Balbos, Cressis from Camargues, the cousins from Crau, Jean Fossati... My mother prepared the ravioles.»

*«A flock marching is like a river:
it seems as though nothing could stop
it, but once it has stopped, it seems
as though nothing could ever get it
moving again»*

Lou pastre

300

The Shepherd

Sheep farming has always been - and still is - for the people of the Stura Valley, an important source of income. Wool, milk and meat are the products that sheep offer.

For the shepherd the relationship with the sheep is not only an economic issue: it is a deep emotional bond created by a long tradition that involves and has involved entire generations.

The life of the shepherd, the sheep and the dog is marked by the slow rhythm of the seasons: the winter in the stables, going out in the spring, the summer pasture, the autumn descent.

In the plains, along the road, in the mountains, the shepherd is always very busy.

All year round, at each stage of the pastoral cycle, the long days are dotted with a thousand tasks, a

thousand thoughts, a thousand worries.

It is the shepherd who helps sheep deliver the lambs, who castrates the rams, who takes care of foot rot and mange, who monitors the sheepfold cleaning, who methodically organises the pasture management.

It is he who makes the collars of the bells, cuts the firewood, patiently sculpts his stick. And he even knows how to sew and cook...

Jealous of his freedom, he is not only a keeper of sheep: the shepherd needs to know how to do many things. The complex knowledge acquired since childhood - in contact with the family herd, with the mountains and with the knowledge passed on by the older generation - constitutes an authentic culture of work.



A good shepherd is said to “have the eye”.

«My uncle Simone never lost sight of the flock.

He stayed like this, standing, his hands crossed on the stick.

Watching.

If an animal did not eat he spotted it: it meant that it was sick and that he had to treat it. This is why we say he had the eye!»

Often isolated, especially when in the mountains, the shepherd must be able to cope with all kinds of problems. To take care of the animals he must know some simple and effective remedies.

A shepherd has to be a jack-of-all-trades. It must be a veterinarian, a butcher, and even a little cunning, to guess what the weather will be like, if there will be a storm or if it will snow.

12 months, 4 seasons

Winter - In the Stable

301

There is no specific date for closing the sheep in the stable: a particularly heavy snowfall in December makes grazing impossible.

Proverbs about stabling

“Es lou temp que coumando, nouzàoutres coumanden pa d’aquel cant, couro toumbo neou les char butar delin.”

“It is the weather that is in control, we do not command that side of things, you have to bring them in when it snows.”

“Per Santo Catalino ou nivou ou seren la fea vouol de fen, per Sant’Andriou nivou ou seren lou tardoun vouol de fen”

“On Santa Caterina’s day whether cloudy or clear, the sheep wants hay, on Sant’Andrea’s day whether cloudy or clear, the lamb wants hay”

“Per Santa Catalina, la fea vòuol de sina, nivou ou seren, dounali de fen”

“On Santa Caterina’s day the sheep wants eat, cloudy or clear, give it some hay”

In the stables the animal is placed within an enclosure: the adult sheep are separated from six-month-old lambs and the one-month-old ones.

Since the animal is closed in the stable it must be fed with hay twice a day, early in the morning and in the mid-afternoon. The shepherd faithfully sticks to these hours; only in rare cases are there exceptions.

The hay is placed in the manger, where the sheep can eat from both sides. The lambs, on the other hand, are fed from a smaller manger with hay obtained from the second harvest. In the manger the hay it is compressed with a rack, to prevent it from falling to the ground and going to waste.

Water is placed in a corner of the enclosure. In the past it was placed in wooden buckets but in modern stables is placed in troughs with flowing water.

Salt, an important supplement, is administered approximately every two days. It can be placed directly on the hay in the manger, or placed inside a dug-out trunk of wood.

Interesting facts

It is usually administered when the sheep has already eaten.

The bed can be prepared with leaves, with short-chopped straw, with leftover hay or with hay that has been cut too mature and which is therefore not suitable for feeding to the sheep.

More...

Shearing - see 307

Spring - The First Outing

At the end of April or early May, when the grass is long enough, the animals are taken to pasture.

The first day some precautions are taken: the route to reach the field should be short, they graze in the steep pastures near the town and during this time there is the second period of the birth of lambs that will be lead to the alpine pastures.

Interesting facts

The sheep are in fact no longer used to moving and risk suffering from “fatigue” pains. They therefore need to be exercised. Initially the flock is left out for a short time, the sheep must eat little grass and when you return to the barn, for about a week, they continue to receive hay. Before they go out it is a good idea to trim the hoof, which has grown during the winter, to prevent the sheep from hobbling.

In the past, the herds had at their disposal only the so communal lands, the public lands that are rich in broom and wild thyme.

The private lands were used for hay or for grazing cattle.

The tardoun is the lamb that was born in the spring and is lead to the alpine pastures with the herd. While the males are sold in the autumn, the females are kept for breeding.

Summer - The Alpine Pasture

303

The day of the departure for the alpine pastures it is nigh. "Lou trop" is formed by joining together the flocks of several owners, including those from different towns. Until a few decades ago the flock was left to its own devices: the shepherd went to the mountain pastures a couple times a week, to make sure everything was in order and to bring them salt. Only in some cases did he spend the summer in the mountain pastures with the sheep.

In late September the sheep that are due to give birth are separated from the flock and led down to the town.

Traditionally the flock stays in alpine pastures until All Saints, or the first big snowfall.

More...

Branding - see 308

The bells - see 309

Autumn - The Pasture

304

When the shepherd brings the flock back to the town, the first land that is grazed is that exposed at midnight.

With the first cold days they must avoid grazing in the areas that are not exposed to the sun: the frost can cause miscarriages.

Between October and November there are the greatest number of births. Once the lambs followed the mothers to pasture, but today they are kept in the stables.

The first heavy snowfall forces the flock back to the stable.

The Wolf

The wolf (*Canis lupus*) is a highly adaptable species.

About 11,000 years ago it had spread throughout Europe and North America.

Wherever there were wild ungulates to hunt, there was the wolf.

Subsequently, the competition with human communities has led to a considerable decrease in the extent of its range. In medieval times a negative image of the wolf was created as it was considered a harmful species.

With the modern age all animals deemed dangerous to humans, such as the wolf, were persecuted throughout Europe.

In the Stura Valley, until the nineteenth century, the various communities paid so-called 'lupari' to hunt the wolves.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century the last wolves living in the Alps were killed. At European level, they reach the minimum population level between the 1930s and 1960s.

Some isolated groups nevertheless survived both in Europe and in Italy.

Since the 1970s some national and international rules consider the wolf a non-huntable species and of high conservation interest.

As a result the population of wolves that survived in Italy increased, as did their area of distribution. By the early 1990s, new packs were present in the Western Alps. There is reliable data of the species' presence in France since 1992.

Therefore, since the 1990s, sheep farmers across the Alps began to complain of attacks on their herds by wolves. From year to year the damage became ever more significant.

In the Stura Valley the first attacks on flocks occurred in the summer of 1995.

As a result many farmers have been forced to abandon the traditional practice of free grazing.

The Sheep Dog

There are dogs and then there are dogs. Your use of guard dogs - large animals weighing approximately 50 kg - dates back to the ancient times of the first pastoral civilizations. Shepherds still use them to protect their flocks against predators (dogs, wolves, bears, jackals) in Asia but also in the Mediterranean.

The guard dog must protect the flock.

However, the sheep dog - small and quick - directs the flock under the orders of his master, the shepherd. Its use is more recent. There are a great variety of breeds.

The shepherd often owns 2, 3 or even 4 sheep dogs that take turns.

A good dog is not aggressive with the sheep of the flock: it can nip at them a bit to earn their respect, but without hurting them.

The quality of a dog depends on the shepherd's ability to train it, which requires patience and firmness.

Jean Soldà's dog (Provençal shepherd, originally from the Stura Valley) gently pushed the lambs that had gone beyond the limit that it had to enforce with the tip of its muzzle.

More...

Anti-wolf collar - see 310

Shearing

307

In the Stura Valley one of the first operations carried out when the sheep is stabled is shearing, which normally takes place after Christmas and with the old moon.

The sheep lies on a towel and its legs and belly are sheared first. It is then immobilized by tying its legs together and it is sheared starting from the neck. At one time big scissors were used, while today it is done with electric trimmers.

The sheared wool, rich in lanolin, is collected in a bag, where it is preserved until spring, when it is washed or sold.

Branding

308

Branding is an activity that takes place around the middle of June, before the ascent up to the alpine pastures. Made up of a combination of the owner's initials or of symbols (heart, clover, star, etc.), these red, blue or green marks are branded onto the fleece using paint.

In this way it is possible, in one big herd, to locate the sheep of several owners.

There is also the practice of putting an indelible mark on young leaders, 2-6 months old: the ear is pierced. Again every breeder has a personal brand, recognised by the other shepherds.

The branding indicates that it is almost time to depart to the alpine pastures for the summer.

Interesting facts

The use of pitch mixed with red ochre, as was done in the past, has been abandoned, as it stained the wool.

In the Crau, when it is said that a herd has “a nice brand”, it means that the animals are fine specimens and that the breeder is recognised for his expertise as a shepherd.

309

The bells

The bells, often adorned with decorations and carvings, are a source of pride and the shepherds put them around the necks of the most beautiful beasts of the flock. There are a variety of bells, each with its own name in the Occitan: pico, plato, piatelo, lou chouquin, quiavelà, lou roudoun, piqueto, lou roundounet, lou cairel.

A good bell must have the bone clapper, so that the noise can travel further.

“Tu troubares mai na bestio mourduò da na vipero que a na sounaio aou couol”

“You will never find a sheep bitten by a viper that has a bell around his neck”

310

Anti-wolf collar

This collar, with sharp points protruding outward, was previously worn by the dog in charge of defending the flock from predators, particularly the wolf.

The wolf, in fact, tends to attack at the neck and the dog, with this collar, had extra protection!

Nowadays, the shepherd implements new strategies to defend the flock from predators: the herd is closed in at night with electric fences; there are once again the dogs who defend the flock, living with it day and night.

Ever more often, on the alpine pastures guarded by these dogs, there are the signs that warn hikers and tourists of their presence, as they can be aggressive in general with anyone who approaches the flock.

La noùostro tèro

4000

400

Our Land

The Stura Valley of Demonte - located in the south western part of Piedmont - connects Italy with France across the Colle della Maddalena and Colle della Lombarda hills. To the north it borders with the Maira and Grana Valleys, to the south with the Gesso and Tinée Valleys.

It is one of the most extensive and long valleys of south-western Piedmont, with a length of about sixty kilometres from Colle della Maddalena up to the Cuneo high plains.

Its axis forms the border between the Maritime Alps and the Cottian Alps. It is divided into 2 different altitude zones: the upper part of the valley is narrow and high, with steep slopes; the bottom one is wide and low.

The contrast between the two sides of the mountain is clear and determines the settlements, crops and

vegetation: the übac, in the shade, is generally steep and covered with a thick blanket of trees; the adrech, exposed to the sun, is fertile and best used for human settlement.

The climate is influenced by several factors, such as the rocky body of the Cottian and Maritime Alps and the proximity of the Po Valley and the Mediterranean.

Therefore it is difficult to classify climatically the Stura Valley, which is defined by French geographer Blanchard as a type of bâtard compared to the rest of the Alpine valleys.

Rainfall is fairly abundant; the snowfall in early autumn and late spring are characteristic. The temperatures undergo strong fluctuations between day and night and between the winter and the summer seasons.



Mountains, hills, woods, lakes and rivers are a rich heritage, made up of thousands of species of plants, birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles and fish.

The Maritime Alps are one of the regions richest in plant biodiversity, with many species of plants, often found only in that territory.

The area, during the ice ages, was partially affected by glaciers, preserving various plant species. Furthermore, in just a few hundred metres, there are calcareous and siliceous soils, which guarantee the coexistence of different botanical species. Rocks and debris provide an ideal habitat for species that would otherwise be overwhelmed by other more aggressive ones.

This has meant that numerous animal and plant species have evolved, specialized and been preserved. The rock ptarmigan, for example, with its white camouflage, it is virtually invisible to high altitude visitors.

Isolation and specialization have made the survival of a large number of endemic species possible.

Algae, lichens and mosses colonize even the vertical surfaces. Many birds - such as ptarmigans, eagles and rock partridges - find their ideal environment here.

Invertebrates are the best represented and specialized group. The scarcity of water, or at least its non-accumulation, preclude the presence of amphibians with the exception of the Alpine salamander.

Chamois and ibex can often be seen on the stony ground, as well as marmots in the alpine meadows.

Human Settlement of the Stura Valley

The Stura Valley presents optimal conditions for the exploitation by man.

Inhabited since prehistoric times, nevertheless it is around the year 1000 that there was a massive process of colonization of the settlements, oriented towards a more intensive use of the Alpine valleys in general.

Many woodlands were converted into land suitable for grazing or crops.

Many of the temporary summer settlements became permanent, thereby allowing the exploitation of pastures in higher areas.

The population defended their customary rights to the last: the communities managed the expansion of the settlements by themselves. In most cases the houses sheltered each other. In this period there are records of several villages in

the upper valley: Vinadio is mentioned in 1150, while Aisone and Pietraporzio are mentioned in a 1163 document by the Marquis of Saluzzo.

In 1388 the upper Stura Valley came under the control of the Savoy: the valley followed the fortunes of the family, with increasing restrictions and loss of the rights acquired in previous years.

403

Use of the Mountain Area

Traditionally in the Alpine areas a so-called agro-pastoral economy prevailed that combined the **cultivation of crops with grazing**, allowing all the areas of the mountain environment to be exploited with maximum effectiveness. For the Piedmont mountain areas sheep farming is historically an important socio-economic factor.

The pastoral systems used today, although partially modified by more rational forms of management, still have traditional features, due to the specific nature of the area and the apparent inability of sheep farming to identify more advanced and competitive management techniques.

But these aspects are actually what makes sheep farming so strong: it allows the maintenance of social and cultural traditions linked to the rural world; and allows the exploitation of areas otherwise not usable, thus ensuring the preservation of the ecosystem.

The breeding of Sambucana sheep, which increased in the 1980s in Stura Valley, is a rare example of the species maintained by such activities in the Piedmont mountains. In this area the environmental conditions mean that the herds tend to be of hardy breeds, which allow the use of meat, milk and wool.

Rearing techniques include stabling in the winter and feeding with dry fodder. From the second half of June until the end of October the herds go up to the alpine pastures, where they can make use of the large summer meadows.

404

The Seasonal Cycle of the Valley

In a mountain environment the productive land, as well as being influenced by climatic and soil factors and those related being at a high altitude, tends to be scarce.

Throughout the entire alpine area it is estimated that:

- A quarter is totally barren, as it is occupied by glaciers, rocks and lakes;
- Half is occupied by high altitude pastures or mountain pastures;

Therefore only a quarter of the territory is accessible from the agricultural point of view.

The products of the land, although fundamental in the past for the livelihood of many Alpine communities, are not sufficient on their own. For this reason, alongside agriculture there is pastoralism. Sheep and goats are particularly suitable as they can graze in the higher or otherwise inaccessible areas.

In the upper middle area of the Stura Valley, until the mid-twentieth century, the families generally owned two or three cows, while the number of sheep ranged from a few heads up to forty or fifty.

With the melting of snow in the spring most of the activities start up again.

The animals are gradually re-accustomed to grazing. The meadows and fields are cleared for planting potatoes. Wheat and rye are sown in the autumn.

In June, the cows of the community come together again to form the vachaira (cow herd), entrusted to a boy who leads them to pasture every day. The sheep, however, grouped together in the "trop", are taken to the alpine pasture. In this way the majority of people remain in the community in the summer to work in the fields, harvest of potatoes and cereals and gather the hay.

The fields and meadows of each family group were divided and placed at different altitudes, with different exposures to the sun and wind. In this way there the agricultural products and the hay mature at different times, resulting in a more uniform distribution of the work.

Place Names

405

In Piedmont, as in Haute-Provence, the place names bear the mark of sheep farming: there are many places that refer to the presence of flocks and shepherds. Thus there is Colle dell'Agnello (Lamb Hill) in Varaita Valley, and the Aver hill, mountain and lake in Stura Valley (in the Middle Ages aver meant a flock of sheep). Not to mention the many place names in the upper Stura Valley that refer to the pastoral mountains: Arpet, lu jas de Staou, Queo, couostos di jas, lou couart'r d'oust, Establas, lou parc. Furthermore there is Testa Mouton (Sheep Top) and a lake Mongioie (the montjoies were the piles of stones that shepherds often erected on the mountains).

La feo sambucano

500

The Sambucana Sheep

The sheep Sambucana, native to the Stura Valley, is a great producer of milk, lambs and wool.

In particular, it is especially known for the production of quality meat with a delicate flavour determined by the genetic characteristics as well as the natural diet.

The lambs are small boned with a well-developed muscle mass, compact and free from stringy fat streaks. This product, guaranteed by the "Agnello Sambucano Escaroun" brand and certificate of origin, it is part of the menu of the best restaurants, and not only the local ones, and acts as a major tourist attraction for those who are particularly

interested in traditional cuisine and genuine products.

Today some breeders transform the excess milk into a typical cheese called "la toumo", suitable for eating either fresh or matured. The wool, which used to be worked by hand, is of good quality. The yarn is lightweight and shiny, and considerably resistant.

« As strong as the mountain »



Characteristics and reinstatement of the Sambucana breed

501

The Sambucana sheep breed provides high quality products: meat, wool and milk. It is a hardy animal that can live on steep and bare rocky pastures, is suitable for high altitudes and withstands cold temperatures.

Hardiness and adaptation to the environment - From spring to late autumn, the Sambucana sheep live on the high altitude pastures, which are often rocky, bare, stony and steep, with low temperatures at night during the spring and autumn months. In the winter they spend five months in the stable, with a diet of locally produced hay. These living conditions, over the centuries, have made it hardy and suitable for life in the valley.

Agility - Agility allows the sheep to travel along steep gullies and slopes, crossing cliffs following the 'dràios' (paths), to reach the highest peaks and graze the tastier grass, not yet trampled by other animals.

Fertility and precocity - The Sambucana sheep gives birth at a young age and it has a long reproductive life. The lambing seasons are usually in autumn and spring, three or four every two years. There is a high percentage of twin births.

Risk of Extinction and Reinstatement

Despite the valuable characteristics of the Sambucana breed of sheep, from the 1970s, it has undergone a considerable decrease. In the 1980s in the Stura Valley there were no more than 80 pure bred sheep, spread over three farms out of a total of over 5000 heads of sheep. The cause of the decline is the cross breeding of the Sambucana sheep with rams of other races to get a bigger lamb. There are various disadvantages to this: the loss of genetic and morphological characteristics; a lower yield in meat; a net decline in wool quality; an increase in food needs; a less hardy and therefore less suitable for the environment. Since 1985, the Stura Valley Mountain Community and the Piedmont Regional Authorities, with the creation of the Consortium for the promotion of the Sambucana sheep breed, "l'Escaroun", have advocated a plan aimed at the reinstatement and enhancement of this sheep breed, to transform it into an economical resource for the farmers of the Valley.

The Traditional All Saints Fair

502

The initiative, launched in 1986, is aimed at the reinstatement of the traditional All

Saints Fair in Vinadio - once the opportunity to trade in sheep from the mountain pastures - and is a stimulus, for farmers, to improve their sheep. In a just few years it has achieved good results. Currently the Vinadio Fair is one of the most important events in the Stura Valley and the province.

The Exhibition of Sambucana sheep breed, included as part of the Fair, is useful to farmers for comparing livestock and as an evaluation of the selection reached. The exhibition brings together more than 30 farmers, with more than 300 heads of sheep on display. The owners of the best sheep receive the coveted bells with traditional wooden collar.

The event - which takes place in the majestic Forte Albertino - attracts thousands of visitors, even from neighbouring France. The good public participation promotes sales, in local butchers, of Sambucano lamb meat (tardoun).

The Quality Mark



The creation of the quality mark was one of the most important stages in the marketing of the Sambucana lamb meat, because it allows the consumer to know that the product purchased is of good quality.

The "l'Escaroun" Consortium of Breeders

The first initiative aimed at the reinstatement of the breed was the involvement of about ten farmers who were strongly interested in and willing to work with the breed experts and technicians of the Mountain Community in a programme of reinstatement and promotion of Sambucana sheep.

In 1985 these farmers have created the "l'Escaroun" Consortium which in Occitan means little flock. Subsequently many farmers in the valley have joined the Consortium, which currently has 50 members.

Among the many activities of the Consortium, the most important are the study of racial characteristics, the creation of a ram sorting centre, the revival of the ancient All Saints Fair of Vinadio with the Sambucana sheep exhibition and the organisation of product marketing. Equally important is the support and socialization promoted by the Consortium through meetings, convivial moments and refresher courses.

The "l'Escaroun" Consortium pays particular attention to the rearing of the lambs: it ensures that the sheep bred by its members and sold in stores that display the

Sambucano lamb brand are fed with the milk of sheep fed exclusively on hay produced on-site or with fresh grass from the alpine pastures.

The Sorting Centre

The Centre provides housing, in the winter, for 60 rams, which are then distributed to individual companies as studs in the spring-autumn period.

Compared to individual breeding, this initiative allows for more comprehensive and timely assessments, and a quick comparison between the subjects based on their morphological appearance. Future rams, chosen at birth in individual farms by the Breed Committee, after weaning, are purchased by the Consortium and introduced into the Centre. Here they are subjected to health checks and are, as they say in technical jargon, “tested”

The “Lou Barmaset” Agricultural Cooperative

Another equally important initiative for the enhancement of the Sambucana sheep was the sale of the lamb’s meat through an association with the creation of the “Lou Barmaset” cooperative that, at the moment, sells more than 2,000 lambs from local companies.

The Reinstatement of Sambucana Sheep Wool, Milk and Meat Products

The l’Escaroun Consortium and the Eco-Museum are committed to promoting the wool products, carrying out product processing experiments in collaboration with the wool mill “Lanificio Piacenza” in Biella and the Agenzia Lane Italia (Italian Wool Agency), thus determining the quality of the Sambucana sheep’s wool.

On the premises that originally housed the Selection Centre, a small dairy for processing the Sambucana sheep’s milk has been active since 2005. It is designed with glass walls, to allow visitors to enter and observe the processing of the product in full compliance with current health standards. Today the dairy is used by a family of farmers involved in the project. The result is an excellent sheep’s cheese called “la toumo dell’Ecomuseo”.

The latest of the Eco-Museum’s projects is the laboratory for processing sheep’s meat, which employs a young person who prepares the various products: salami, cured meat, mocetta and smoked leg meat. This cured meat laboratory is an important tool for the promotion of local produce, in particular those proposed by the Eco-Museum’s tasting sessions, run by a cooperative of young people. In this way, young local families have been given jobs and the chance to continue living in an alpine village.

La mountainho

600

600

The Alpine Pastures

The alpine pastures, the mountains, the fresh grass! In the alpine pasture the shepherd is king.

« I live in the mountains, I like the summer, when I'm up there with the herd! I feel at home! »

Up at dawn, the shepherd directs the flock.

He has already decided which part of the mountain will be put to pasture: grass management is a central issue.

« You have to lead the herd well. When you reach the end of September, you must have been everywhere and there still has to be grass left. You must also think about preserving grass for the autumn, in case of bad weather »

« Once when the animals were eating well and there was grass, I started singing because I was happy. I shook the mountains ... They even heard me down in the village! »

The shepherd must accompany the flock in all weathers; he particularly fears storms and early snowfall. In autumn snow can, in fact, arrive suddenly, blocking the flock at high altitude.

« I fear lightening. Once it tore the umbrella from my hands and the knife from my pocket! A storm pushes the flock over the precipice »

A further concern has been added in recent years with the proliferation of attacks by stray dogs and wolves in the Alps.



With the return of the wolf to the Western Alps the methods for managing the Alpine pastures have changed radically.

In the late 1990s the Piedmont Region and the Stura Valley Mountain Community made some important changes to the territory of the Valley.

For example, in 1998 the pastures managed by the farmers of the l'Escaroun Consortium have been equipped with electric fences with 11 wires, powered by a battery recharged by solar panels. The flock must be placed in such anti-wolf enclosure every night.

Also 15 refuges in the Stura Valley were restructured or built from scratch.

The Piedmont Region also ensures a small contribution to farmers who manage the pasture with certain criteria, such as the use of anti-wolf enclosures and constant supervision of the flock.

These important measures have meant that, in the Stura Valley, wolf attacks on sheep - nowadays - are almost non-existent.

However, there are some negative consequences: smaller mountain pastures, which could accommodate a small flock, were deserted by the late 1990s, resulting in the environment and landscape being reclaimed by nature.

The formation of large herds, consisting of sheep of different owners for the summer pasture, also implies a greater chance of diseases spreading. The pace and rhythms of the flock - the time at which they graze, the choice of grass and where they sleep at night - are now set by the shepherd and not the sheep. This has a negative impact on the growth of the lambs in the pasture, which has been reduced by 20%.

The cabano

In the mountains, during the summer, the shepherds live in small stone buildings often near the water sources.

The furniture is minimal: a wooden table, a few chairs, a bed, some shelves filled with items - plates, glasses, cups and, above all, supplies, such as canned foods, pasta, polenta, olive oil, wine, etc.

In one corner there is a fireplace or a large stove and, in front of the door, one block for cutting firewood. The dogs sleep in niches outside.

Today, without a doubt, the shepherds are less isolated than in the past. Roads were built to facilitate access to gias. Cars and helicopters have replaced the donkey with which, every week, they went down to the village for supplies. Yet there are still difficult-to-access alpine pastures where the shepherds do not see anyone during the summer.

Meadows and Pastures in the Eighteenth Century

The community's pastures were divided into free pastures, sections and alpine pastures.

Free pastures or Coumunals were used in the spring and autumn by sheep and goats; during the summer they were left to those in the community who were not able to go to the pasture, and only for goats.

The Coumunals have poor soil, usually next to private land. On them the grazing activities can be carried out freely by any Community individual (civic use). The local authorities only prohibit grazing on these grounds in exceptional circumstances to protect the environment.

The sections are small pastures, almost always bordering on the larger Alpine pastures, but less easily accessed, more rocky and, in some cases, with little water. Reserved to the inhabitants of the local community, they were auctioned in the same way as the Alpine pastures.

In the mid-eighteenth century the inhabitants of Vinadio ask that the Sections be rented for 8 years, guaranteeing free passage over them for Provençal shepherds. Finally, **the Alpine pastures** are the best areas for grazing.

In the first decades of the eighteenth century, those in the upper valley were rented by Provençal farmers. The Vinadio pastures - during this period - accommodated about 11,000 head of sheep.

Whoever won a pasture at auction had to comply with precise regulations: the rent was paid in two instalments, one by 20 June, the other on 29 August. The mountains were deemed free and grazed eight days after St. Michael's day. In this way the villagers could graze their flocks freely. The gias manure was free for everyone.

Today, the Alpine pastures are owned by the municipality.

The eighteenth century civic uses are still in place so that land is given to the local people who rent it. The first auction is therefore reserved for residents. The unused pastures are then made available to those outside the Community and in most cases are people who come from the plains of the province of Cuneo.

The l'Escaroun Consortium has also set up, in recent years, an agreement with a number of municipalities in the Stura Valley, so that some of the Valley pastures are given to breeders of the Sambucana sheep.

The pastures are rented for several consecutive years by the same farmer.

Interesting facts

The quality of alpine landscapes is due to the activity that has shaped them over thousands of years: animal farming. For millennia the grazing flocks created, maintained, improved and shaped the landscapes, favouring both vegetable and animal biodiversity.

In the mountains, grazing promotes the recreational use of the area, both during the summer and during the winter, limiting the risk of avalanches.

The high altitude areas are rich in traces of the old agro-pastoral civilization.

Despite the slow re-conquest - by the grass, shrubs and woods - the signs of human activity are still evident in the area despite the depopulation of the mountain environments. The stone piles - clapiers - at the corners of each plot, mark out the official boundaries. They are the result of meticulous work, where every stone was removed by hand. The irrigation channels draw a thick and durable network, where great care was taken to follow the contour lines. Finally, the remains of the granges reflect the use of hay at high altitude.

The term 'the shepherd's hut' indicates the buildings, ancient or modern, that are used for housing. They are used during the three or four summer months when the shepherd stays with the sheep in the mountain pastures. Traditionally, the huts were simple dry-stone buildings, with a light structure, covered with sheeting or covers.

Designed to last, the shepherd's hut is an element of the landscape offered by our Alps.

Timeless wealth

700

700

The Wool

For centuries the sheep was above all exploited for its wool, essential for the production of items to sell.

From the Middle Ages until the mid-twentieth century wool was the main livestock product.

Even in the 1950s and 1960s this precious material was collected, shearing sheep with scissors identical to those that the shepherds used during the Iron Age.

Wool processing, unlike the shearing, was a typically female activity in the Stura Valley and it allowed a good profit margin. The presence of several women in the same family meant a greater production of yarn, some of which was sold to those in the Community did not have the time or the expertise to spin, or to lowland traders.

Cheese-making

When the lamb is weaned, the shepherd continues milking the sheep. The milk obtained, even if it is a small quantity, has a high concentration of fat.

Traditionally the cream was separated from the milk with a wooden spoon and was shaken make butter.

Today, the method for making cheese has not changed.

Rennet is added to the heated milk. The curd thus obtained is then broken up by hand and left to drain for one night. The next day it is kneaded and placed in the traditional perforated mould, which was once wooden and now is made of steel. The curd is then pressed with a weight; the whey comes out through the holes in the mould. After a few days the cheese is extracted from the mould and is left to season.

The whey collected is heated to high temperatures and, with the addition of citric acid, ricotta is made.



Wool Processing

Wool... along the threads of history

701

Since 1300 “the transhumance system” has been organised around the thriving wool trade. The main product of sheep farming, wool is essential for the development and prosperity of the centres of cloth production in Piedmont.

With the spread of the fulling mill, making wool became an industrial process. In the first quarter of the fourteenth century the production and trade of wool was booming. To cope with increasing demand, the herds in Piedmont and Provence increased considerably.

They needed new pastures: the Provençal farmers began to transfer their animals to the pastures of the Stura and Maira valleys, forging bonds which endure to this day.

Wool Processing Phases

702

Once sheared, the sheep's wool, rich in lanolin, is collected and pressed in a bag, where it is kept until spring, when it is washed or sold.

With the arrival of spring, the wool was pulled out of the bags, put to soak overnight and then washed on stones from the rivers or in the village's wash room. During washing the wool was beaten, to remove all the dirt. Later, after the water was drained by placing it in some baskets, the wool was stretched out to dry.

Interesting facts

In the past the shorter wool was used to stuff mattresses, the longest and most beautiful was spun.

The wool was then processed in the stable during the early afternoon or in the evening during the vigil. This ensured that the wool maintained at the right level of humidity and softness, allowing it to be worked better.

Carding was the first operation to be performed on the washed wool. It was done using a combing card attached to a bench: it is a particularly important step, in which the wool has to become soft and lose all its impurities, but without being torn. Once carded, the wool can be spun.

The ball of wool was wrapped around the distaff.

For spinning they could use a variety of tools: the most archaic is the spindle; later

horizontal spinning was introduced; and finally vertical spinning.

The yarn thus obtained is collected in order on the spindle and worked with other yarns, to create a ball, that is subsequently twisted using the spinning wheel in the opposite directions.

With the wool they produced all their clothing: socks, men's underwear, vests, blankets, etc...

703

The Vigil

The hens have been on their perch for a while. A oil light illuminates as best as it can, placed on the ledge of the stone column, near the arch, or hanging from a beam in the middle of the stable: when the flame gets low, someone goes to turn up the wick.

The stable is pretty warm. At about seven in the evening, or earlier, the vigil begins. Each woman comes with its own spindle under one arm and with the distaff under the other. They sit in the middle of the open space to spin. When the talk dies down for a moment in the stables, you can hear the cows ruminate, the mule pawing and the occasional grunt of the pig... It is nice listening to the elderly and young people alike.

The vigil is the time for the stories of Masche and Servan; it is time for the stories of those who have been away from the village and returned, carrying messages from friends and even distant relatives; it is the description of places that maybe few people in the Community have seen but that everyone knows by heart; it is the time to listen to news from the village or the Valley.

It is time for socializing.

When someone begins to yawn, it is the end of the vigil. The women put their big reels in their apron, take the spindle under their arm and say goodbye, heading for home with their husbands. The boys accompany their girlfriends. Before long the night takes over the village.

704

Coloured Wools

Among the wool processing stages there is the dyeing. Traditionally, the dyes used were of plant origin. They could be dissolved in water directly or obtained by

extracting the colourant with alkaline baths in wooden vats and then allowing it to dry. In Stura Valley hazelnuts and chestnuts have been used for dyeing wool. Not all the women, however, took part in the wool dyeing.

Another “trick” to get coloured wool was to mix the white and black wool together. Based on the quantities mixed, during carding or the formation of the ball of yarn, it is possible to get different shades between white and black. This is why, among other things, all the flocks of the valley always have some sheep with black fleece.

Interesting facts

In the eighteenth century in the Pietraporzio Community, a controversy against a figure called Manuel Tintore (Dyer) from Barcelonette arose.

This entrepreneur opened a dye-works in Pietraporzio and used local wood to dye cloths for the upper Stura Valley, the Maira Valley and neighbouring France. The local population, on the other hand, had to use scrap wood to cook or for heating.

Cheese-making

Ancient and modern cheese-making

705

Some farmers add cow's milk to the sheep's milk to the cheese, traditionally called “Toumo”, more flavour.

It was aged for several months in the cellars - the ‘selier’, from the Latin cellarius. Today, cheese-making is a combination of traditional methods that have been in use for centuries, and modern technologies. The high-quality productions and their marketing have contributed to a fair number of farmers in the Stura Valley being able to make a living.

The Occitan proverb, “Calo pan que la toumo es jo daran”, recalls traditional importance of the cheese made from cow's and sheep's milk in the diet of the people living in the mountains.

