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Pastoral systems and agro-tourism in marginal areas of Central Italy

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SUMMARY – Despite the important environmental value of mountains, the low productivity of the land and the distance from the main roads cause migration of rural populations to towns, on a global scale. The subsequent land abandonment results in further degradation of the natural resources. In Tuscany (Central Italy), pasture abandonment is present above all in mountain areas, and this is due to difficult environmental conditions (hot dry summers, cold winters, shallow soils, rough topography) and difficult social conditions (distance to the main roads, distance to services and social life). The conventional agronomic techniques can help to overcome the low productivity level caused by the climate and the soil, nonetheless they cannot increase income sufficiently so as to fix people in the rural areas. Several agronomic actions have been taken to limit these negative trends, however, rural people often do not perceive the effectiveness of these interventions and seek further rise of their incomes and improvements of their lifestyle. A new approach consists in developing links between pastoralism and agriculture and the modern economy, especially agrotourism. A survey has been conducted to investigate the number and distribution of agrotourism initiatives in Tuscany, and interviews have been made to study the needs of the communities. The results suggest maintaining agricultural techniques and, above all, further integration of the conventional agro-pastoralism and services offered in rural areas.

Keywords: Land abandonment and degradation, rural communities, diversification of local economies, integration in the modern economy.

RESUME – "Systèmes pastoraux et agri-tourisme dans les zones marginales en Italie centrale". Malgré la grande importance environnementale des montagnes, la faible productivité de la terre et la distance des routes principales entraînent la migration des personnes rurales vers les villes sur une échelle globale. L'abandon conséquent de la terre cause davantage de dégradation des ressources naturelles. En Toscane (Italie centrale), l'abandon de pâturage est présent surtout dans les secteurs de montagne, ceci étant dû aux paramètres environnementaux difficiles (étés secs et chauds, hivers froids, sols peu profonds, topographie accidentée) et aux conditions sociales difficiles (distance des routes principales, distance des services et vie sociale). Les techniques agronomiques conventionnelles peuvent aider à surmonter la productivité faible due au climat et au sol, néanmoins elles ne peuvent pas augmenter suffisamment les revenus pour maintenir les personnes dans les secteurs ruraux. Plusieurs actions agronomiques ont été faites pour limiter les tendances négatives, toutefois les personnes rurales souvent ne perçoivent pas l'efficacité des interventions faites et cherchent une nouvelle élévation de leurs revenus et des améliorations de leur style de vie. Une nouvelle approche est constituée par le développement des liens du pastoralisme et de l'agriculture avec l'économie moderne, particulièrement avec l'agri-tourisme. Une recherche a été conduite pour étudier le nombre et la distribution d'agri-tourismes en Toscane, et des entretiens ont été menés pour étudier les besoins des communautés. Les résultats suggèrent de maintenir les techniques agricoles et, surtout, davantage d'intégration de l'agro-pastoralisme conventionnel et des services offerts dans les secteurs ruraux.

Mots-clés : Abandon et dégradation de la terre, communautés rurales, diversification des économies locales, intégration dans l'économie moderne.

Introduction

Tuscany has an area of 2,299,300 ha, its agricultural and forest area is 1,383,121 ha that is 8.9 % of the equivalent Italian (Regione Toscana, 2007). The land uses are mainly annual crops (37,6%), forest (35,6 %), permanent crops (12.5%), pastures and meadows (7.1%), whilst 7.2% is not cropped arable land.

The territory is administrated by 10 provinces. Most of the land is mountainous (more than 600 m a.s.l., this is 25.1% of the land area) and hills (less than 600 m high, that is 66.5% of the area) with

large marginal areas due to climate constraints, shallow and poor soils, distance from main towns. Most farms are located in hills (62.9%) while less are in the flat industrialized land (only 15.5%) or in high mountains (21.6%). Unfortunately the rate of abandonment of farms is high especially in marginal areas.

Of course several agronomic tools are being used to maintain and increase the productivity of the land, however there are limits due to the constraints of the physical environment that cannot be overcome. Links of rural activities with modern economy are seek in both marginal and developed areas to maintain the economic convenience of enterprises, these links include farm tourism with bedding and restaurant, in-farm sale of quality foods, farmers markets in small towns, game hunting, several educational and health services offered to school children and retired people.

A research was done on the number and distribution of farms that offer such services, and interviews were carried out to know which are the proposals of rural people in order to link better the conventional agro-pastoral and forestry activities with modern services.

Materials and methods

A preliminary investigation on the number and distribution of farms and agro-tourism farms in Tuscany has been based on regional surveys available. Farms were defined on the base of the European Council Regulation (EEC 571/88), that is: "all farms with an agricultural area above 1 ha or that produce considerable amounts for sale".

After this, provinces have been grouped in three classes according to the number of such enterprises that offer services related to tourism (agro-tourisms): 0-250 (Massa-Carrara, Lucca, Pistoia, Prato, Livorno), 250-500 (Pisa, Arezzo), above 500 (Firenze, Siena, Grosseto).

Finally 20 farms with tourist services have been chosen in each group of provinces and a total number of 60 farmers interviewed, to know which would be their requests in order to remain on their land and do not move to towns.

Results and discussion

Distribution of farms and agro-tourism farms on the territory

The number of farms that offer tourist services in Tuscany (Table 1) is 3799 that is 4.2% of the total number of farms, however their distribution is not homogeneous on the territory.

Table 1. Number of farms (calculated on the base of the Censimento Generale Agricoltura, ISTAT 2000, and reported to the number in 2006), number of agro-tourisms per province (Agrisole, 2007) and their percentage on the total number of farms

Provinces in Tuscany	Number of farms (2006)	Number of Agro-tourism (2006)	Agro-tourisms % on total farms
Massa-Carrara	6,184	99	1.61
Lucca	10,749	180	1.67
Pistoia	10,434	140	1.34
Firenze	10,935	563	5.15
Prato	1,543	27	1.75
Livorno	3,882	200	5.15
Pisa	10,230	341	3.33
Arezzo	14,685	414	2.82
Siena	9,532	1,010	10.60
Grosseto	11,556	825	7.14
Tuscany	89,728	3,799	4.23

The proportion of agro-tourism farms is inversely related to the presence of mountains, actually the provinces with less proportion of mountains (Livorno, Pisa, Grosseto) have more such farms (Fig. 1). The same result has been found also considering the proportion of mountains+hills (data not shown). The reason of this distribution is the quicker development that flat areas had in past periods in comparison to mountains. Ancient and important towns developed in easily accessible land parts and they are nowadays well known destinations for tourists, whilst slow economic development took place in mountains. At present agro-tourism farms are more common near to important towns, especially Siena and Florence (town tourism) and Grosseto (seaside tourism), than in small countryside villages. Moreover, the areas near to main towns benefit of art and sea attraction and agro-tourisms are just bed places to add at hotels availability, on the contrary, mountain farms offer higher variability of services, including restaurant, guided trekking, horseback riding, cooking classes, education for school children. Availability of swimming pool is very requested by foreign customers. This result matches with Belletti e Marescotti (2003) that found more availability of services in mountain farms than in developed areas, because in marginal areas there is more need to integrate the incomes deriving from limited agricultural productivity with new incomes deriving from services.

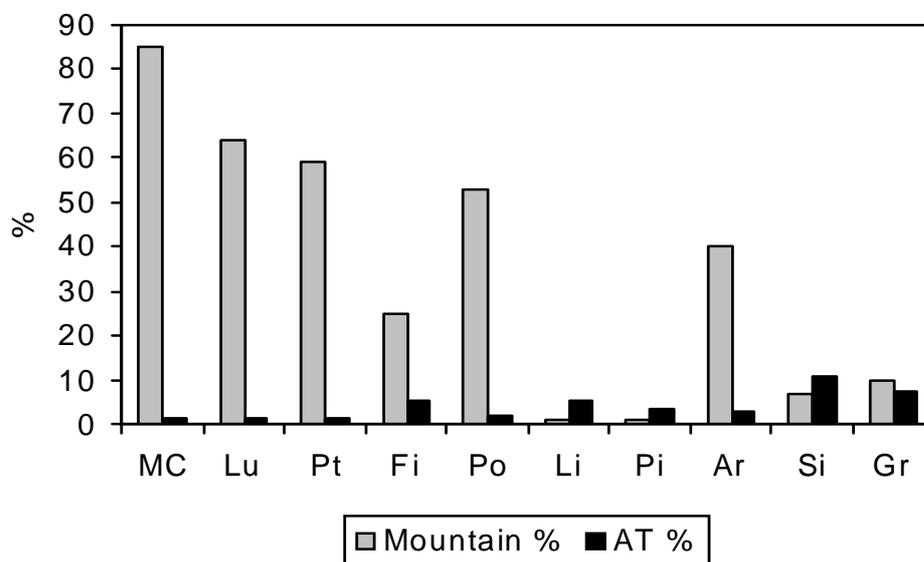


Fig. 1. Percentage of mountain area and percentage of agro-tourism farms (AT) in the 10 provinces of Tuscany.

Interviews to farmers

When farmers were interviewed on which would be their requests in order to remain in mountains, almost all of them expressed interest to increase incomes (Fig. 2), with very few exceptions of some old people nearly retired. However not many farmers (only 35%) would expect to have higher incomes from higher agricultural productivity, in fact most farmers have been on their land all life, they tested many available agronomic advances with insufficient results and they know already that the limits to primary productivity are set by environmental constraints very difficult to overcome.

On the other hand, more farmers (65%) would consider possible to increase incomes by the added values that quality foods get on markets. Many farmers produce certified organic or biodynamic foods. Unfortunately there is a problem of farms dispersion on the territory and little size of productions that make difficult the delivery of produce to town markets, this limits the actual added values. Supermarket chains would include a farmer in their list of producers only if these can guarantee a continuous supply of produce, which is not possible for small farms and where there is enhanced seasonality of production.

Most farmers (98%) that have already started agro-tourism services would like to develop this sector and they think they would benefit of overcoming the law restrictions to the development of this sectors (at present they must prove that agriculture is the main activity in terms of incomes or working hours). Most farmers would subscribe a compulsory re-investment of incomes in agriculture and land management better than the present limit to the expansion of their enterprises in this new economic sector. All farmers (100%) would enjoy to have periods off. Especially those that bred animals can never go on holiday and they have to work even when sick. All the interviewed farmers would like to operate in a better organized system that allows days off, still they do not see a solution for this problem as farms are too small to employ full time workers and organize a rotation of duties, moreover there are many difficulties to associate in cooperatives especially because farms are dispersed on the territory and they must work on diversified produce because local markets are very small and rapidly saturated for each produce.

Finally many farmers (67%) would prefer to remain on their land if the local services were improved but, again, they are aware that dispersion on the territory and distance from towns and villages would make this improvement very slow and improbable in their lifetime.

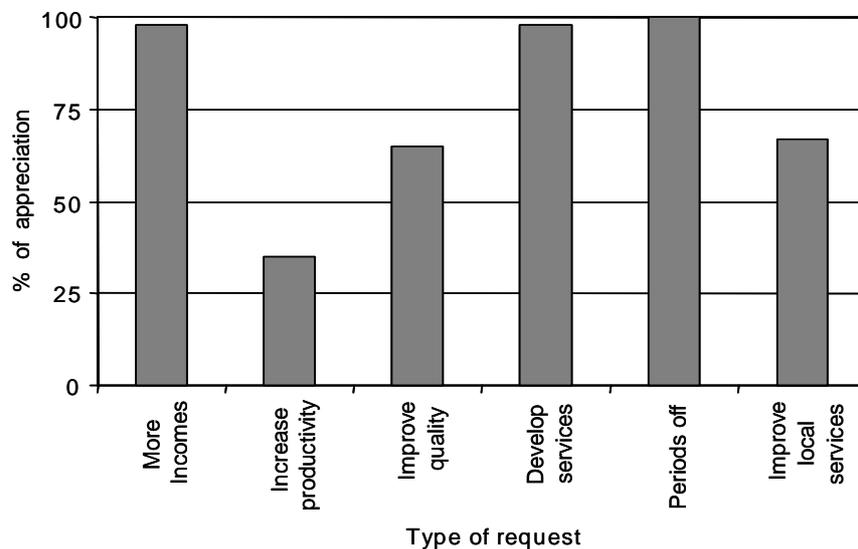


Fig. 2. Requests of farmers in order to remain on their land.

Conclusions

We consider important to keep on assisting farmers in introducing new agronomic techniques, nonetheless positive effects of agronomic advance will take long time to rise incomes of marginal areas to an appreciable level. Farmers of marginal areas consider that any agronomic tool would not increase much the natural productivity, moreover new technologies will require investments that many old farmers would not take into consideration. On the other hand farmers requests are mainly to have some periods off, to have higher incomes, to get better services near to where they live.

The development of in-farm services related to tourism is considered a very effective action to be introduced beside new agronomic practices. A development of rural activities can be based also on farm services and the higher incomes derived can be partially destined to reinvestment in agriculture and land management. Some changes in farm management can match agricultural modernization with the development of in-farm services if based on crop diversification and organization of complex and integrated agro-forestry systems (Pardini, 2005). Complex systems are useful to conserve good ecological conditions, to avoid saturation of small local markets with some produces, and to attract more tourists.

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