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Socio-ecological resilience of the commons.

A case of pastoral community in the Mountains of North-Eastern Andalusia (Spain)

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Introduction

This research aims to observe and describe how a community adapts its governance system to a changing socioecological context, particularly implying the transformation of economical conceptions as well as linkages between culture and territory. We study this under the approach of Territories and Areas Conserved by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2014), considering that pastoralist communities (among other ecosystem-based economies and cultures) have governed, managed, and conserved territories through constant readaptation over time and in front of multiple pressures and drivers of global change (Kothari et al., 2012). The case study is located in the mountain region of the Sierra de Segura (Fig.1a and 1b), being pastoralism a traditional and well adapted lifestyle to particular climatic and geographic conditions (cold winter, hot dry-summer, dry limestone soils, etc.). Even if shepherds do not own the land, they have the right to use it pastorally, through tradition-based but constantly re-updated governance institutions, exercising an historical right over the Sierra, recognized by medieval ordinances (De la Cruz, 1980). Also, community-territory relation is not restricted to this area, since approximately 50% of them practice transhumance to wintering areas (50-150km away), so their decisions and activities go beyond the Sierra (use of livestock trails and movement organization). Considering this, we hypothesize that the community of shepherds still has strong identity characteristics with close ties to the territory, traditional knowledge and mutual support that allow the exercise of socio-environmental governance, at both formal levels and informal, even if strong changes are undergoing.



Santiago-Pontones common grassland management		
Territory	≈ 30.000 ha. of grasslands between 1.400 and 1.900m.	
Community	90 shepherds	70 from Santiago group 20 from Pontones group
Activity	Livestock, mostly sheep's, but also some goats and cows	

Fig1.a. (left) Location of study case, in Sierra de Segura, south-east of Spain; Fig1.b. (right) The grassland area managed by shepherds' governance systems (orange) within the municipality of Santiago-Pontones (red line).

Methods

Participant observation

6 months with shepherds in their daily practices in grasslands, villages and livestock movements.

Data:

Field notes

In-depth interviews (N=20)

To shepherds from Pontones (8) and Santiago (9), half transhumants and half non-transhumants, elders (2) and a woman (all shepherds are males).

- Institution of Governance
- Identity
- Kinship
- Pastoral practices
- Rangelands knowledge
- Ecosystems and climatology
- Change perception and challenges
- Technologies and tools
- Relations with animals and territory
- Religious aspects

Grounded Theory Analysis of all collected data



Results

Different types of governance systems

There is a formal regulation of distribution concerning grassland area and dates of access, but also improvement of infrastructures and other non-formal organization for animals exchange between shepherds, transhumance timings and herd movements.

Two independent governance institutions, one single group

There are two independent governance institutions: Pontones and Santiago. The division responds to geographic and historical processes. Shepherds exchange knowledge and support between them, so in fact works as a single group.

Less sense of community, but still a strong pastoralist identity

There is a perception of a loss of community bonds and that shepherds are losing knowledge and good practices. Despite that, Sierra's inhabitants recognize the value of livestock and their benefits to territory and cultural heritage.

Adaptive management

There has been changes in the practices and knowledge related to the extensive livestock activity, due to changes in land use, migration and globalization. Shepherds have been able to incorporate new tools and technologies to their management. The whole activity is affected by global agricultural policies, but shepherds and their governance systems have adapted to carry on existing.

Conclusion

This first approach shows that Santiago-Pontones shepherd's community represents a case of traditional uses strongly influenced by processes of globalization, especially at economic but also cultural level. This seems to weaken the territory-community relation, becoming increasingly global-dependent and decreasingly local. This brings in problems to the resilience and sustainability of local socio-ecological systems. In any case, the results show that the governance's institutions and whole shepherds community has been able to assimilate sociocultural changes and incorporate into their decisions and management system these new elements, in order to prevail and continue existing as an agro-pastoral society, which is much more lively than most others in similar rural mountain contexts in Spain.

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