

Lowland Common Pastures – economic, social and environmental values

Laura SUTCLIFFE

Plant Ecology and Ecosystem Research, University of Göttingen, Untere Karspüle 2, 37073 Göttingen, Germany

Fundatia ADEPT Transilvania, Str. Principală nr. 166, Saschiz, jud. Mureș 547510, Romania

Common pastures in the lowlands of Transylvania are large-scale, species-rich grasslands that are not only economically central to many rural communities, but also at the heart of important local social institutions. The practice of common grazing stretches back many centuries in Transylvania, and is an important way of rationalizing labour, both in the lowlands and - even more so - in the difficult terrains of mountainous regions. As grazing areas for livestock in the summer, they form the vital counterbalance to hay meadows in extensive, biodiversity-friendly farming systems.

Although they are an institution with a long history, common pastures face two major challenges in Romania today. One is the trend of increasing farmland intensification and abandonment from a myriad of drivers linked to Romania's accession to the EU. This is likely to affect common pastures largely at the landscape scale, whereby changes in the landscape context can alter the ecological processes maintaining species-richness within the pasture area. The second is the widespread malfunctioning of the local institutions responsible for commons governance, affecting the management of the commons at the local scale. This not only can lead to inappropriate management for biodiversity, but also affects the distribution of social and economic benefits from the common pasture within the community.

This talk will focus on the challenges above, using the findings of an interdisciplinary study on social and ecological aspects of common pastures in the Târnavă Mare region of Southern Transylvania. It found a significant influence of composition of the surrounding landscape on plant and insect communities within common grasslands, suggesting that meadow or pasture conservation shouldn't stop at the grassland edge, but needs to think about drivers affecting the whole landscape. Furthermore, such grasslands cannot be considered in isolation of the local communities that manage them, and social approaches such as improving the functioning of the local grazing committee can be the most important way to sustain the biodiversity and ecosystem services these grasslands provide.