

# BEST PRACTICES

## “Establishment of a network of expensive farmers for the recovery of ancient cultivated varieties”

### Institutional information

Gran Sasso and Laga Mountains National Park

Italy, Abruzzo

[www.gransassolagapark.it](http://www.gransassolagapark.it)

### Summary

#### Explain your case in one or two sentences

Genetic erosion and the dramatic decrease in the biodiversity of cultivated species is a phenomenon that is alarming both the scientific and agricultural worlds. It is necessary to find ways to ensure the in situ conservation of these species and make them economically and/or amateurishly interesting. In other words, there must be an awareness of the importance of this unrecognised heritage and a widespread desire to preserve and enhance it. Through the census, classification and multiplication of ancient crop varieties or varieties of local spread it is possible to maintain this genetic heritage. The farmers will form the basis for creating a network of "Custodian Farmers", whose main objective is the conservation and reproduction of plants.

#### Background information: How was the situation previous to your actions?

The loss of biodiversity also affects the agricultural sector. Especially in mountainous and disadvantaged areas, this trend is compounded by land depopulation and the ageing of farmers. The abandonment of agricultural activities therefore leads to the abandonment of the seeds of ancient varieties which, over time, lose their germinability and can no longer be recovered.

In this context, preliminary investigations have noted the disappearance of certain local varieties of agricultural interest whose historical memory could only be preserved.

#### What were the needs you identified?

One of the aims of the National Park is to stop, improve and increase biodiversity. This concept is also valid for the biodiversity resulting from traditional agricultural practices carried out for hundreds of years. The loss of locally grown varieties means the loss of the rural culture that produced them. The main objective was therefore to survey the varieties present and describe their characteristics. Subsequently, attempts were made to multiply them and keep them under cultivation by the custodian farmers.

#### What solution you found to cover those needs?

Through an information campaign and a dense network of relationships on the territory, many companies and small agricultural realities have been visited. Through a specific call for tenders, an

economic contribution was guaranteed to farmers who possessed the ancient crop varieties and showed they wanted to continue their cultivation. In addition, the guardian farmers committed themselves every year to exchange the self-produced seeds with other farmers in a specific event organized by the Park.

### **What actions did you take to reach the solution?**

The project followed several steps:

- to identify the autochthonous germplasm of the ancient varieties of fruit trees and cereal crops referring to the area corresponding to the two mountain communities on the L'Aquila side of the Gran Sasso-Laga National Park;
- create a garden of arboreal archaeology
- to create a centre for the reproduction of the native plants of the identified area, to guarantee the authenticity of the historical link with the territory;
- encourage the organic cultivation and conservation of native fruit-bearing and herbaceous varieties through the creation of a network of guardian farmers;
- encourage cultural and training actions in the field of organic farming and biodiversity;
- to undertake actions aimed at the enhancement and cultural recovery of ethnobotanical traditions.

### **If any, which partners or other organisations did you involve during the process?**

The project has been carried out in collaboration with the Local Action Group ARCA Abruzzo in the framework of the Infraterritorial and Transnational Cooperation of Axis II of the LEADER+ PROGRAMME - ABRUZZO 2000-2006.

In addition, there was the collaboration of the Trade Associations present in the territory for research and contact with the farmers present in the protected area.

### **What were the main problems or difficulties you had to face?**

The main difficulties encountered were linked to the particular complexity of the mountain territory and the difficulties of moving around the territory.

There were further difficulties in the drastic reduction of the number of farmers present in the territory, now reduced to a few dozen and quite old.

From the point of view of characterisation, the main problems arose from the difficulty of recognising the varieties found.

Some problems were subsequently encountered in the multiplication phase due to the poor germinability of several seeds.

### **What is the situation now, after your actions?**

Farmers represent the basis of the network of "Custodian Farmers", whose main objective is the conservation and reproduction of plants. Thanks to their contribution, it has also been possible to create a collection of ancient local varieties. At the Botanical Garden specific sectors have been created for the reconstruction of the ancient agricultural landscapes in which they are planted, both for ex situ conservation and for educational purposes as well as for the first experimentation on cultivation techniques, the crop varieties covered by the project.

**Main lessons learned along the way?**

Mountain areas and disadvantaged territories, thanks to their particular geographical layout and the isolation to which they have been subjected for centuries, represent a treasure chest of biodiversity that must be preserved as it could guard the solutions for our future.

Maintaining this memory and these varieties is a duty that everyone should help to respect.

**Annex:**

ImaA.1

ImaA.2

ImaA.3