

Summary of Excursion to Plateau Valensole: 6th Sept 2007

The Plateau Valensole and surrounding hills are important agricultural areas in the Provence and, like many parts of the Alps, have a long cultural history. Agriculture has changed a great deal over time in the region, however, particularly on the plateau, a large flat piece of land in the middle of the French Alps. Today lavender, olives and truffles are the three main crops on the plateau. These are cash crops that bring good return for the farmers, particularly in combination with the tourism that they also attract.

This is in contrast with agriculture on the nearby slopes and valley, where agriculture is carried out at a much smaller scale and is more dependent on subsidies.

The participants and tutors from the ALTERnet summer school 2007 spent a morning on the plateau and heard about the challenges and opportunities facing farmers and land management in this region from two local people, one of which is a social scientist interested in natural resource management.

*History of landscape and management*

Before industrial times the valley adjacent to the Plateau Valensole was famous for plum trees; domestic-scale agriculture supported small communities despite the dry conditions. From 1850 onwards, there was a sudden and rapid decline in rural population with 30 out of 200 villages in the region being abandoned. Around the same time a major reforestation scheme was implemented by the French Forestry Commission. The reasons for this and its possible connection to the rural exodus is still controversial in the area. The farming community argue reforestation caused decline of farming in the valley but the Forestry commission argue it was carried out to reduce soil erosion for the good of agricultural sustainability. The planting of trees brought employment for local people initially but in the end reduced overall land availability for agriculture. There was not the infrastructure in the area to support a sustainable forestry industry.

Other changes also contributed to the rural to urban shift of the population in the region: development in the education sector attracted young people of the area to move to cities for schooling and for the opportunities that were lacking in their home villages.

On the plateau, agriculture has been more stable. Almond production was the dominant form of agriculture from the 16th to 19th century but was grown in a mixed plantation with lime, oak and wheat. This quite closed and heterogeneous landscape changed dramatically at the end of the 19th century when lavender became the dominant crop. Today the lavender farms are 150-200 hectares in size and owned by wealthy farmers who have significant political and social influence locally.

Agriculture can be described as favourable on the plateau. This is reflected in farmers' risk-taking behaviour. They appear to be able to switch between non-subsidised crops such as olives and lavender and to make long-term investments in truffle-inoculated oak plantations. They do this by rotating lavender crops with cereals and herbs and some by combining agriculture with tourism. Tourists visit the area in relatively large numbers to see the lavender fields and processing plants, allowing farmers to add value to this crop. Most lavender grown is not made into the tourist products like soap etc. The hybrid *lavendin* variety grown by most farmers is mainly sold for use in detergents. This is a cultivar that is less susceptible to disease and drought and therefore a more reliable crop for farmers than the traditional '*Lavender officinalis*.' This is still grown at more domestic scales in the valley and can provide a decent income if sold directly to customers in farmers' markets etc, where it can be sold for up to 500 euros a litre.

Growing of lavender requires a relatively low level of labour; it does not need many sprays (if any) and is rarely irrigated. Harvesting and processing the crop is an intensive period for the lavender farmers however as it is important to do this in a short time-frame when all the flowers are ready. The most modern and efficient method is called 'green' distillation and involves the freshly-cut lavender being distilled in large industrial-sized tanks. Here the essential oil is extracted by a process that uses water vapour. Many of the farmers use the more traditional 'dry' distillation process as tourists will pay a good price to see this so the farmers can get extra money by carrying out demonstrations of this. The plants are cut and left to dry in the field before being taken to a distillery where the dry part of the plants is used to fuel a fire, which heats a large vessel containing water and the flowers. This activity allows farmers to make extra money and build up a client base of tourists who visit the area time and time again. Farmers can now apply for subsidies that allow them to delay harvest so they can run these kind of tourist demonstration events. Niche markets for the more wild lavender (*Lavender officinalis*) are also growing; for example organic and medicinal markets but this is being more difficult to make viable where large losses are increasingly suffered as a result of disease and also climate-change attributed drought.

To reduce the financial risks and increase soil fertility, lavender is grown in rotation with cereals and herbs such as sage, rosemary and thyme.

The option of growing the more resistant hybrid lavender and this range of other crops as well as the fragile *Lavender officinalis* allows lavender farmers to make a good living so they are not too concerned about the threat posed by disease and climate change. Beekeepers in the area are more concerned because they are more reliant on the lavender for their lavender honey, a product that the plateau Valensole is also famous for.

Sheep farming is also carried out in the mountains around the plateau and is a form of agriculture that has perhaps the longest association with the Alps. Extensive forms of sheep-grazing traditionally maintained the cultural landscape in the Alps but today it is causing degradation and soil erosion and is increasingly unviable for farmers. The same number of sheep are kept as they were in the 1800s but there are fewer shepherds so grazing is carried out more intensively in smaller patches. This has not only resulted in land degradation but also reforestation and loss of the habitat diversity important for Alpine biodiversity. There have been some Government re-opening programmes but not enough to reduce the environmental damage caused by modern grazing regimes. Sheep farmers are suffering financially due to competition from meat imports and often have to rely on subsidies to survive. They therefore don't have the money to cut down scrub or improve land management and have little influence in town councils and local farmers' unions due to their low financial stake. The sheep herd is grazed on mountain grasslands for spring and summer and is brought down to the plateau in October every year for the winter. Their wool is not sold as it does not reach high enough prices; instead they are kept for their meat.

Truffle production is becoming an increasingly popular long-term investment among some of the wealthier farmers on the plateau as truffles reach a high price and are also a way of attracting tourist trade to the area. Recent advances in agricultural research mean that now oak seedlings are bought in and have already been inoculated with the black truffle spores, giving a more reliable crop. They are planted in mixed plantations of white oak, green oak and hazelnut but truffles do not appear until 15 years later when dogs or pigs are used to hunt for them. The truffle market is a relatively stable one so this is a good long-term investment for farmers who have the means to buy into it, as is olive-growing. The Plateau Valensole is fairly unusual in this way as agricultural incomes are far more secure than in most other regions of the Alps, where vulnerability is high due to climate change, demographic changes and market forces.