

Press Release

Challenging Times Ahead for the Verdon Catchment

Study suggests adaptation scenarios to cope with climate change in the Verdon catchment.

In a collaborative study, a team of social and natural scientists found water and land use in the Verdon would be severely affected by climate change. Using the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and IPCC scenarios, the study assessed the future of the region for three of its most important sectors- agriculture, tourism and nature conservation. The research, released in September 2009, suggests vital inputs to stakeholders and policy makers in shaping appropriate adaptation strategies to provide and sustain ecosystem services for all users.

The catchment of the Verdon is a veritable hotspot for biodiversity and houses fragile ecosystems. The current state of resources in the region indicates that agriculture, tourism and nature conservation are facing conflicting pressures detrimental to their health as socio-biological systems. There are conflicts over water availability and land use as forest density is increasing and agriculture is being abandoned as it is no longer economically viable. The catchment is also an important tourist destination sustaining more than 3500 people.

Water availability in the region is set to decrease with lower precipitation, putting pressure on irrigation services. Increasing forest cover will pose fire hazard in dry conditions and will be detrimental to agriculture. Tourism in the region is dependent on the lakes that attract large number of people from all over Europe. With decreased rainfall, regulation of water for hydroelectricity and irrigation, amount of water in the lakes will decrease affecting tourism. Decrease in precipitation will also adversely affect the vegetation in the area. If the state of affairs is allowed to continue it will have serious consequences for people's livelihoods and well-being.

Policy suggestions

Over the years, farming took over only to be abandoned some decades later due to competition from global markets and increasing urbanisation. Forest re-claimed these abandoned areas resulting in reduction of area for sheep farms. Farmers want more areas to be re-opened for farming and pastoralism. Nature conservation groups advocate controlled change in forest cover requiring various sectors to work together. Tourism sector implies an increase in the infrastructure posing problems for natural and cultural habitat provision and diversity of landscapes.

Current trends suggest a multi-stakeholder dialogue would help bring out the synergies and conflicts in the region. A participatory approach involving the various sectors in the decision-making process will also go a long way in resolving potential conflicts. Stakeholder dialogue and research suggest that the process of reforestation should be restricted through providing subsidies for increasing small but spatially distributed sheep farms. Subsidies or payments for ecosystem services could be another way to encourage local capture and storage of water. There is need to strengthen cooperation between agriculture and tourism and promote a shift to low input or organic agriculture.

Regardless of what the future holds, adaptation strategies that are aligned with current policies and underpinned by the principles of sustainable development are an important first step to prepare the region for future global change.

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