



High nature value mountain farming systems in Europe: Case studies from the Atlantic Pyrenees, France and the Kerry Uplands, Ireland



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ABSTRACT

The term high nature value (HNV) farming, acknowledges that the conservation of a large proportion of European biodiversity and important semi-natural habitats are dependent on low-input, mainly extensive farming practices. HNV has become a focus for nature conservation and countryside management in Europe. This paper critically analyses the drivers of change and the challenges facing two European HNV upland pastoralist systems, one in the French Atlantic Pyrenees and the other in the Irish uplands. The detailed case studies highlight the traditional linkages between the landscape, grazing management, locally adapted animal breeds and social capital, all of which are currently under threat from globalised markets and policy orientation. The research findings indicate that the European multifunctional model of agriculture and its support for farm diversification including the provision of environmental goods and services has not been successful in targeting and rewarding HNV systems. In the search for economic viability (and social acceptance) many are left with the stark choice of intensification or abandonment; ultimately meeting neither market demands nor ecosystem services. We conclude with a recommendation for more targeted, evidence based support for HNV farmland, along with better integration in the wider rural economy, if these farming practices are to survive into the future and if the EU is to meet its 2020 biodiversity targets.

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1. Introduction

The term High Nature Value (HNV) farming is used to describe broad types of farming that because of their characteristics are inherently high in biodiversity and landscape value (EFNCP, 2010). They have been described as the ecological backbone of European cultural landscapes (Krautzer et al., 2011). It is increasingly recognises that European biodiversity goals cannot be met solely by designating nature conservation sites, but by targeting the farming practices that maintain and enhance the richness and diversity of landscapes, habitats and species (Beaufoy, 2008). Typically HNV farmlands are characterised by low intensive use of fertiliser, pesticides, machinery and the presence of semi-natural vegetation. They are dependent on regular use and are often associated with pastoralism and extensive livestock grazing, generally managed in a traditional way (Beaufoy, 2008; Oppermann et al., 2012; Beaufoy and Cooper, 2009; Bignal and McCracken, 1996, 2000; Bignal,

1998; Baldock et al., 1996). They evolved as low-input, low-output sustainable systems of high biodiversity value. They are usually found on poorer land, often with natural handicaps, such as elevation and poor soil. They are not equivalent to, but there is strong overlap with Less Favoured Areas and Natura, 2000 sites. The European Environmental Agency (EEA) estimate that over 30% (75 million ha) of EU farmland is HNV (EEA, 2010, 2004; Paracchini et al., 2008; see Fig. 1). It is also estimated that 50% of all species in Europe and 63 out of 231 habitat types of European conservation interest (Halada et al., 2011), depend on agricultural habitats and practices especially those associated with HNV farming systems (EEA, 2010; MEA, 2005). The HNV farming concept has become a focus for conservation and the provision of public goods and ecosystem services. It goes beyond the classic opposition between agricultural production and ecological richness, and recognises the interdependence of nature and society (Folke et al., 2010; Plieninger and Bieling, 2013).

Despite their social-ecological significance HNV farmlands tend to be marginal in terms of their agronomic production capacity and to be outside of market oriented policy interests. They are increasingly classified as what Navarro and Pereira (2012: 903)

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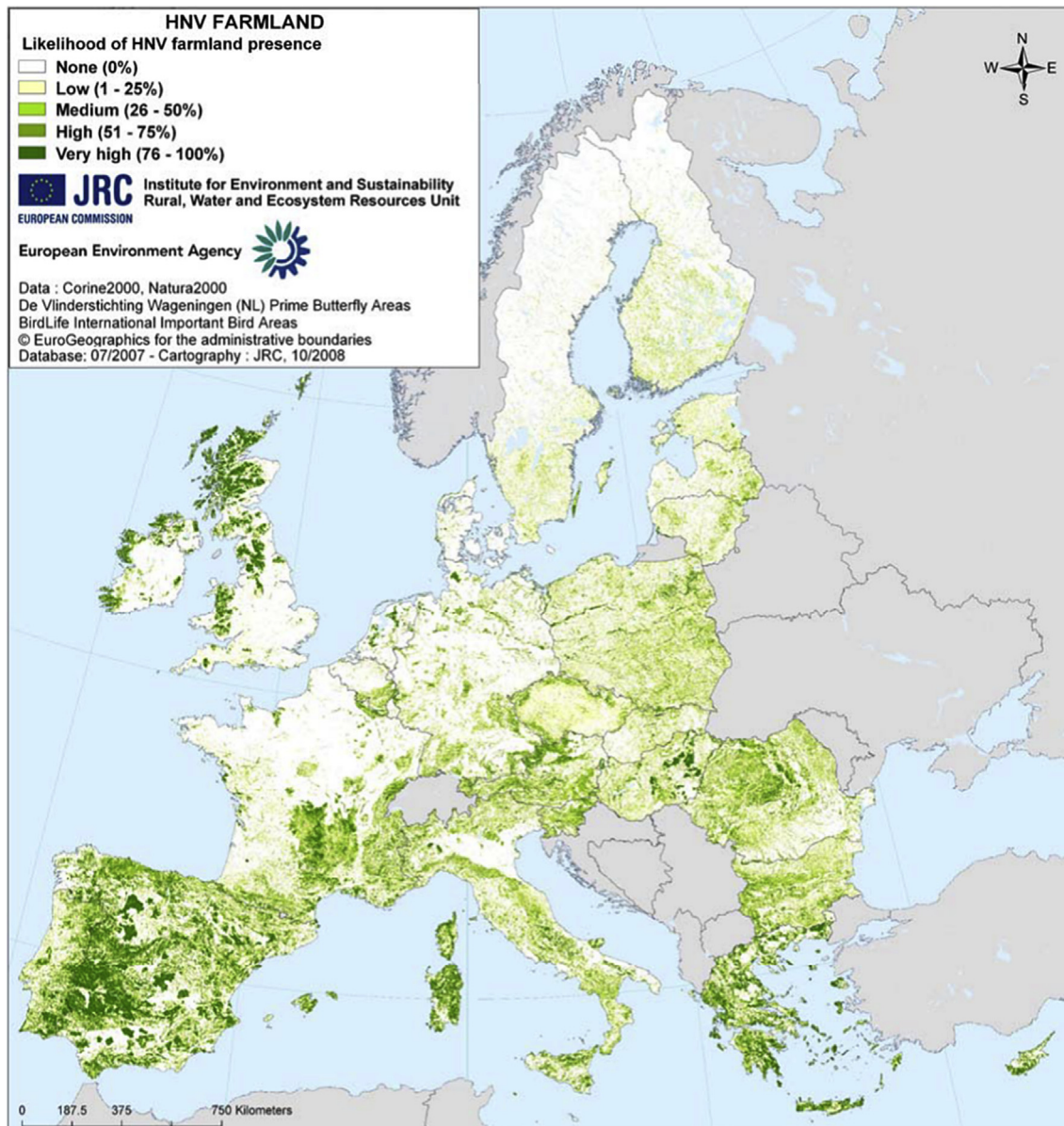


Fig. 1. Potential HNV Farmland in Europe based on Corine Land cover (Source: European Environmental Agency (EEA) (2010) (www.eea.europa)).

refer to as 'poverty traps', where households suffer low returns on what is often a high labour investment, along with social disadvantage, population decline and poor access to services. Many are facing the stark choice of either abandonment or intensification, with both paths being detrimental to their natural values (O'Rourke et al., 2012). Recent model projections suggest that areas most at risk of farmland abandonment in Europe over the next twenty to thirty years are low-intensity livestock grazing systems, including large areas of semi-natural habitats of high conservation value (Keenleyside and Tucker, 2010; Paracchini et al., 2008; Renwick et al., 2013; Verburg et al., 2010). The future of such areas is seen to hang in the balance between substantial public support for environmental goods and services provision or various forms of abandonment, re-wilding and afforestation.

The current European Union policy response to disadvantaged but high nature value farming systems is to promote multiuse (multi-functionalism) and subsidy support, notably from the Second Pillar of the CAP, in the form of natural handicap payments,

agri-environment subsidies and other rural development programmes (Van Huylenbroeck et al., 2007; Evans et al., 2002; EC, 2009; Mansfield, 2011). Since 2005 High Nature Value farmland (HNVF) was selected as an agro-environmental indicator for the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF) of the European Rural Development Programmes (RDP) (Krautzer et al., 2011). Consequently it has gained importance at a European policy level, despite the fact that definitions, mapping and indicators of HNVF remain problematic (JRC/EEA, 2006).

The aim of this paper is firstly, to analyse the drivers of change and the challenges facing HNV farming systems in two European upland case study areas, one in the French Pyrenees and the other in the Irish uplands. The Pyrenean site is oriented towards sheep milk production and its transformation into AOC (*Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée*) cheese. The Irish case study is centred on sheep meat production, and together both case studies are typical of contemporary HNV hill sheep farming systems in Europe. Secondly, using the case study material we briefly review farm diversification

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