Organic Best Practices in Italian National Parks

Introduction

Organic and eco-sustainable farming is particularly suited to farms situated within parks, because it does not harm local ecosystems as it does not use pesticides and promotes biodiversity, improving biological links and creating ideal habitats for animal life. It also promotes grants that reward farmers for acting as “guardians/stewards of nature”.

An Italian project carried out by the Italian Association for Organic Farming (AIAB) for the Ministry of the Environment ([www.fao.org/3/a-al412e.pdf](http://www.fao.org/3/a-al412e.pdf)) analysed Italian experiences of organic farming in National Parks in order to draw guidelines for the development of organic farming in protected areas which could be useful for the further development of organic farming throughout the Italian Protected area system. Also best practices (organic excellences – implying a virtuous organic food production chain contributes to the environmental, social and economic sustainability of the park) are identified which integrate the process of organic production with the development of the surrounding area.

Description of the Agroecology system

**Ferme du Grand Paradis - Raising local breeds**

This 20-hectare farm in Cogne ([www.lafermedugrandparadis.it](http://www.lafermedugrandparadis.it)), Valle d’Aosta Region, is part of the Grand Paradiso national park: a mainly alpine environment. It has been organic since 2003 and raises animals belonging to local breeds, which graze freely on permanent pastures. The natural habitat that surrounds them is vast, and there are chamois, ibex and foxes that “graze” almost alongside the domestic animals.

The farm owns fifteen goats, thirty cows, ten sheeps, five pigs and one hundred fifty free range short-haired animals (turkeys, geese, ducks, chickens, etc.). The goats belong to the ‘Camosciata delle Alpi’, a cosmopolitan breed, originally from the Alps, but by now found more or less worldwide. The cows belong to two of the original breeds of the region: the Valdostana ‘Pezzata Rossa’ is a typical mountain cow which provides excellent milk on a diet of alpine pastures and forage. The Valdostana ‘Castana’ are less productive but stronger breeds meant for fighting.

The Ferme du Grand Paradis is also able to produce its own butter and both fresh and hard goat and cow milk cheese on the premises, thanks to its mini dairy processing and seasoning facilities. It sells its produce through its own farm shop and to a buying group composed of 20 families. It also supplies local restaurants and organic food shops. The farm’s dairy products have a special brand, which complies with their own self-imposed rules. The farm participates in festivals and fairs where it sells its dairy produce.

The farm is managed by the two owners (Paola Bortoli and Glarey Massimiliano) with the collaboration of five employees. On account of its commitment to organic farming, the farm pays close attention to safeguarding its own land and the environment. It uses solar panels and has an area of constructed wetlands for water purification; it also saves energy through the use of energy-saving light bulbs and insulation. Now the farm is building a new stable built entirely of wood; the roof in shingles will support photovoltaic panels. The farm adapted its buildings for agritourism. It opened on July 2014 and offers accommodation and restaurant service, where they use cheeses and meats from their own farm.

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Kraeuter Schloessl Farm – Four generations engaged on aromatic and medicinal herbs and their products

This farm is in Coldrano (http://www.kraeuterschloessl.it/welcome.html), Bolzano, at the mouth of the Martello valley, just outside the Stelvio park (Trentino-Alto Adige Region). It cultivates 6 000 square metres of aromatic and medicinal herbs, used for the production of herb teas, salts and cosmetic products. It also manages six hectares of forest which are used for harvesting wild herbs. It has been an organic farm since 1990 and pays great attention to the care and appreciation of the environment. A small amount of land is dedicated to the growth of wild plants, so as to boost natural biodiversity. The farm is a sanctuary for all those insects that cannot find their natural habitat in the surrounding apple orchards.

More than twenty different types of plant are grown: chamomile, mint, basil, lavender, calendula, elder, tarragon and many more. Cultivation is extremely labour-intensive as everything is done by hand, from the initial growth of the plants to transplanting and harvesting. As well as cultivation and the picking of wild herbs in the park, there are facilities for drying and packaging. For the drying process the plants are arranged on sieves and placed in a dedicated structure where they gradually lose their humidity in a very delicate way.

Syrup is produced using fresh plants and flowers while dried ones are used for herb teas, salts and cosmetic products. There are about 200 different products in all, including bee-keeping and the production of honey. Even though the farm is quite small, it requires the work of all seven family members, spanning four generations, each of whom have different tasks. Products are sold in the farm’s shop, at fairs or in herbalists’ shops. Cosmetic herbs are dried and sent to a special centre in Padua.

Teaching workshops on the organic farming and processing of medicinal herbs have been created. About 300-400 people attend every year. The owners are extremely enterprising, and are well known in and outside Val Venosta. They have appeared in various TV shows.

Various brands are used to promote the farm’s products and also they have their own brand. The farm is part of the Unione Coltivatori Alternativi (UCA: Union of Alternative Farmers) (www.biosuedtirol.it). It is a regional group, made up of a small handful of farmers who do not use any chemical substances at all for farming, not even sulphur or copper which are generally allowed for organic farming. In order to continue to guarantee the organic quality of the products, the fields had to be covered in tunnels to avoid pesticide-drift from neighbouring conventional farms.

Rinascita ’78 Cooperative – Giving life to unused lands

The Rinascita ’78 cooperative, in Accumoli, Rieti, has been an organic farm since it was created in 1979. The ten-member cooperative, because of its history and attachment to the land, is an example of organic excellence in the field of animal husbandry. Its members have participated in specialized training courses and, thanks to its rigour, this cooperative played a major part in the foundation of the Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga Park (Lazio Region).

Three hundred hectares within the park, partly owned and partly rented, are used by the cooperative for raising sheep, pigs and cattle. All the animals are semi-wild and are taken to mountain pastures for the summer. All the breeds raised are native Italian, well acclimatized to local conditions and therefore well suited to living in the wild: 900 Sardinian sheep, 120 Romagnola cattle and 80 mixed race Romagnola pigs.

The cooperative has reclaimed land that had long been unused, restored an old building now used as a farm shop, and built some water-troughs for when the animals are in the mountains. A small amount of land, about half a hectare, is used for growing local varieties of beans (Regina and Mughetto ecotypes) and potatoes (Turchesa ecotype). Manure is composted and used as fertilizer, as is organic waste from the cooperative’s kitchen.
There is an on-site dairy which produces ricotta and hard cheeses, and organizes a workshop for meat processing and the preparation of meat products (salami, pork loin, Accumoli mortadella, ham). Produce is sold through a short supply chain (direct sales, buying clubs and the cooperative’s agritourist visitors), whilst lambs and pigs are sent to a large organic firm in Rome for finishing.

The farm also provides picnic and rest areas in the mountains. The cooperative also organizes ecotourism and food and wine tourism activities within the park’s territory. It is very active as a school farm, with frequent visits from the students of Rieti’s Agricultural College. The cooperative also organizes a sheep festival and takes part in other local fairs. In 2016 the area suffered from earthquakes that destroyed part of the buildings. The farmers are determined to rebuild them and maintain all their activities.

**Ugo Sergi’s “Il Bergamotto” Farm – Safeguarding biodiversity and protecting nature**

Dominated by the ruins of the Norman Amendolea castle, in Calabria region, “Il Bergamotto” owes its name to the citrus fruit grown here alongside olives trees. The management of this 20 hectare farm, inside the Aspromonte Park, is very much influenced by its location, in an area which was once the ethnically Greek part of Calabria, and it’s closely linked to local traditions and culture. Its revenue is based on sales of Bergamot essential oils and the farm’s agritourism activity, which also organizes hiking trips in the park.

Ugo Sergi’s farm, organic since its inception in 1996, is particularly dedicated to safeguarding biodiversity and protecting nature. It has not only made organic farming a way of life, it also tries to grow traditional varieties of apple and pear, such as the “bambinuzzu” and “brutta e bedda” varieties. The farm is also trying to increase the number of endangered “Martina Franca” donkeys it raises and has for a long time used renewable energy sources to power its buildings. It also recycles and composts waste.

The farm buildings have been restored with a careful eye to the surroundings and local construction materials. Traditional building methods using stone, mortar, reeds, wood and old tiles were preferred. The same criteria were followed for fixing up the interiors, where, for example, wool and broom covers are used. To make broom fibre, its stalks are left to soak in a river and are then beaten and spun: the result is a very soft material similar to rough cotton. Many items of furniture are old traditional items, such as the wicker baskets for gathering bergamot, used as bedside tables.

The farm has a system for reusing waste waters, which are piped to an area in the garden where they are filtered naturally by a reed grove and then used for irrigation purposes. Hot water is provided, from June to September, by an outdoor tank which is painted black and warms up in the sun, reaching temperatures close to boiling point.

Together with other tour operators who form part of the “Naturaliter” association, the farm organizes hiking trips within the park and throughout the Greek area of Calabria, offering food and accommodation in typical Calabrian buildings. It also offers tourists the chance to learn about the processing of bergamot and bread-making through educational and illustrative workshops. The farm takes part in various ‘social agriculture’ projects. In collaboration with two rehabilitation centres in Reggio Calabria, it runs donkey therapy projects for disabled people. Then donkeys are also used on the hiking trips.

Bergamot essence is sold to specialist cosmetics companies, whereas the farm's other products such as oil, flour and vegetables, are used in the agritourism business and sold in the farm shop. In total three people are employed full time by the farm along with four people on a seasonal contract. The owner, a member of the Bio-assoberg cooperative, is particularly interested in training and takes part in various national and international fairs to promote bergamot oil. He has appeared on various television programmes, and has also featured in news reports run by cosmetics companies.
Outcomes of the practices

In Italy, protected areas comprise a land area of 3.1 million hectares, representing 10.5% of the national territory. Half, about 1.5 million hectares, correspond to the 24 national parks, where more than 200,000 farms reside. Although organic farming is clearly a viable option in protected areas, it is still not widespread as it is in the rest of the country. The Italian law (394/1991) identified organic farming as a means of production for protected areas, but it is very little implemented by the authorities.

The project to promote organic farming in protected areas had the aim to develop tools and to showcase best practices (“bio excellences”) that could help park’s authorities and other operators to draw policies and initiatives to support farmers to develop virtuous organic food production chains, that could generate income and employment, stability and social cohesion and preserve and increase landscape, biological diversity and ecosystem services. The project started in March 2007 and was completed in October 2008. For the first time more than 500 organic farms within the 24 Italian National Parks were interviewed by means of a questionnaire. The authorities of the National Parks were also interviewed.

The methodology used in the Italian study, as well as the guidelines for the development of organic farming in protected areas produced as a result of it, could be well used in other countries. Just as in Italy, in many parts of the world the main inhabitants of protected areas and the corridors of connection between them are farmers, herders and indigenous peoples. Protected areas occupy today some 10 percent of the Earth’s surface, in a landscape dominated by the agricultural sector. More importantly, connections between protected areas run through croplands, pastures and forests - which globally occupy over 60 percent. Relationships with the inhabitants of these areas are fundamental for their management.

The examples of organic excellence given here demonstrate that organic farming can be a valid way to reconcile the need to protect nature with the production of food and services, and thus income, for farmers. An interesting aspect is the possible protection of breeds on the verge of extinction or ancient cultivars, as well as natural green areas within the farm’s territory, which is a concrete way to support biodiversity. Most of these enterprises were made possible thanks to the tenacity and dedication of organic farmers and breeders, with limited relationship with the Park authorities.

Specific training, support for conversion to organic methods and subsequent marketing, promotion of production should all supported by authorities. Ideally, they should be committed to creating virtuous circuits at a local level, involving food processing businesses, shopkeepers, restaurant owners, consumer buying groups, organising markets and visits to organic farms. Multi-functionality is also extremely important as it makes it possible to fully exploit the opportunities offered by nature in protected areas, as can be seen from the case studies such as ecotourism or education activities.

The recommendations in the guidelines are fundamental for agencies which plan to promote organic farming and agro-biodiversity in protected areas. As has been noted, the involvement and participation of farmers is of paramount importance. This is something which has frequently been overlooked; the parks tend to emphasise nature conservation, creating quite a few problems between park authorities and those who live in the area.

Message from farmer to farmers

“Agroecology practices together with an organic value chain allow farmers to remain in areas otherwise abandoned.”

— Message from Cristina Grandi, AIAB and IFOAM Organics International