

# Early civilizations nurtured nature and its bounties

**They domesticated plants and animals,** developed new varieties and breeds, established harmonious agricultural systems and crafted beautiful land-scapes. Through trial and error, they continuously adjusted the ways in which they fished, grew crops and herded animals, while protecting their environment and sharing the benefits. For 12 000 years, from one generation to the next, this agricultural heritage has been transmitted and improved as ecosystems, communities and cultures evolved together.

Traditional agriculture systems are still providing food for some two billion people today. They also sustain biodiversity, livelihoods, practical knowledge and culture. This global agricultural heritage needs to be recognized, and supported in ways that allow it to continue evolving – and providing for future generations.



**Rice terraces** cascading down the slopes of Ifugao, Philippines present a dramatic vista. They represent the collective efforts of countless generations of farmers who have developed an ingenious irrigation system that has allowed them to share water and develop rice varieties that survive at over 1000 metres.



**Farmers in the high Andes of Peru** dig trenches around their fields. Water fills the trenches and is warmed by sunlight. When temperatures drop at night, the water gives off warm steam that serves as frost protection for several varieties of potato – all locally developed and conserved. It is an agricultural system perfected over centuries, ideally suited to the severe conditions at 4 000 meters.





FAO/J. Bedel

**A green island** flourishing in an extreme climate, Tunisia's Gafsa oasis is home to a diversified and highly productive system with its roots in the Mesolithic era. Dominated by the date palm, intertwined with a diversity of trees and crops and supported by sophisticated irrigation architectures, this ancient system produces a surprising variety of fruits and vegetables.



FAO/D. Boerma

**A Chinese clay plate** dating to the Han Dynasty 2 000 years ago shows a fish swimming from its pond into a rice field. In the combination rice-fish systems of Zhejiang Province, fish not only provide food, they also eat larvae and weeds in the flooded fields, reducing the cost and labour needed for fertilizing and insect control.



FAO/K. Wiedenhofer

**The renowned landscapes** of Italy's *costiera sorrentina* are a remarkable example of human ingenuity. Lemon pergolas, chestnut windbreaks, stone walls and narrow footpaths have been built and preserved over centuries. Lemon varieties were exchanged for gold on Mediterranean ships in the sixteenth century, when their healing properties against scurvy were discovered. Today their unique flavour is appreciated worldwide.





**The Earth** is dotted with a myriad of home-grown agricultural systems that are humanity's common heritage. These systems provide essential ecosystem goods and services and food security for millions of local community members and indigenous peoples, well beyond their borders.

With support from the Global Environment Facility and in partnership with UNDP, UNESCO and other partners, FAO has initiated a programme that recognizes the global importance of agricultural heritage systems and the people and communities who created them. The programme's objective is to define, identify and support these unique systems. It promotes a "dynamic conservation" approach that:

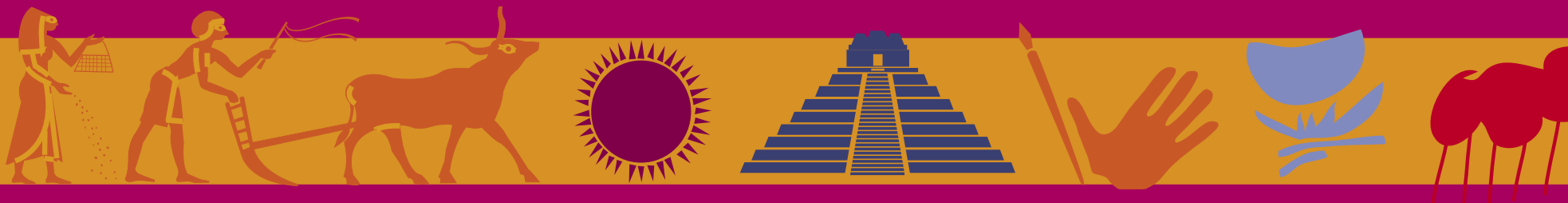
- allows farmers to nurture and adapt the systems and biodiversity they have developed while still earning a living;
- supports protective government policies and incentives while working for *In situ* conservation of biodiversity and traditional knowledge;
- recognizes cultural diversity and the achievements of local community members and indigenous peoples.

To learn more about the agricultural heritage systems programme at FAO:

Sustainable Development Department  
Food and Agriculture Organization  
of the United Nations  
Viale delle Terme di Caracalla  
00100 Rome, Italy  
email: GIAHS-Secretariat@fao.org  
[www.fao.org/sd](http://www.fao.org/sd)

AD/I/A0125E/10.05/3000





# Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS)

