

ACCENTING THE 'CULTURE' IN AGRICULTURE

WORKING FOR communities that maintain traditional agricultural systems

WORKING TO conserve and increase the viability of agricultural heritage systems

WORKING WITH governments, NGOs and CSOs

WORKING THANKS TO GEF, Germany, IFAD and other resource partners



It has been some 12 000 years since humans gave up their hunter-gatherer ways. They grasped the idea of saving and planting seeds from season to season, which meant that instead of constantly foraging for food, they could stay in one place. They were able to concentrate on building their communities and, at the same time, develop agricultural systems adapted to local climates that allowed them to survive and even flourish in the lands where they settled. With each generation improving upon the previous, these ingenious systems have brought with them the indigenous knowledge of the centuries.

Today, ingenious agricultural systems that hark back to earlier centuries can be found across all the world's continents. Far from being trapped in the past, though, these Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) have contributions to make to today's agricultural world. Although similar to UNESCO World Heritage Sites, the difference is that such sites are monuments meant to be preserved, while GIAHS

Imagine a food basket filled with cereals from a Saharan oasis, potatoes from 4 000 metres up the Peruvian Andes or from a remote Chilean archipelago, and rice from steep terraced hillsides in China or the Philippines. All these foods come from Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS). These are food systems that have evolved over millennia in harsh and remote landscapes – and in extreme climates – thanks to the knowledge of indigenous people. FAO has identified some 200 of these systems around the world, hailing them for their contributions over the millennia and supporting them to make sure this knowledge is passed on to future generations. These special food systems contribute to local food security, natural resource management and the conservation of genetic diversity. Unfortunately, their survival is at risk as a result of modernization. By designating them as GIAHS, FAO raises their visibility, confers greater respect and helps ensure their survival.

are living systems that will continue to evolve to meet the needs and demands of those who maintain them – the smallholders, family farmers and indigenous peoples who are often the poorest of the poor.

A LEGACY FOR THE FUTURE

FAO estimates that about 500 million hectares around the world are dedicated to agricultural heritage systems that still maintain their unique traditions with a combination



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of social, cultural, ecological and economic services that benefit humanity. Philippine farmers developed hillside irrigation systems that allow them to share water from field to field. Peruvian Andean potato farmers learned to dig trenches around their fields, then fill them with water that is warmed by sunlight during the day and then gives off warm steam that protects crops from frost at night. Farmers in the desert oases of Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Morocco and Tunisia developed sophisticated irrigation architectures and multilayer gardens that capture the shade of date palms to grow the fruits, vegetables and cereals that feed their populations.

These traditional systems, found in both developed and developing countries, are both efficient and ingenious. Otherwise, they would not have survived and supported so many generations with only the most rudimentary of tools. Yet often today they are not recognized for what they have to offer. As with many agricultural systems, they are up against rapid development, globalization, urbanization, natural disasters and the effects of climate change. They also must fight the concept that traditional is not compatible with efficient modern agricultural production.

FAO has recognized 19 GIAHS sites in 14 countries since the partnership began in 2004, under a process through which the countries themselves request such status. Requests are evaluated by a scientific committee and endorsed through an international steering committee established by FAO.

GIAHS OFFER DYNAMIC CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS

GIAHS designation goes beyond merely identifying interesting agricultural systems and turning them into attractive snapshots. It also celebrates heritage, and local people take pride when the system they inherited from their ancestors and that they continue to nurture is singled out as a GIAHS.

In China's rice-fish site, with GIAHS recognition, farmers increased income from marketing their products, and tourism increased from 2 000 visitors in 2004 to 25 000 in 2010. The local government is so appreciative of its GIAHS designation that it built a marble fish monument at a village entrance. In Algeria, work opportunities created by the project have brought young farmers back to the oases systems. Youth working and investing in the oases increased from 2 to 23 percent.

But in addition to boosting income, the farmers who maintain GIAHS can leverage this increased recognition to safeguard their way of life, their landscapes, agricultural biodiversity and knowledge systems. FAO provides additional support at government level by promoting policies and incentives that support conservation.

Work with GIAHS is referred to as "dynamic conservation". Rather than preserving the sites as museums honouring the past, their evolution and change continue, encompassing a holistic vision of "agri-culture". Local communities and institutions can capitalize on GIAHS' ancient traditions and uniqueness by promoting, marketing and adding value to the goods and services they produce. But at the same time, the people who inherited these systems can continue to nurture them, improve them and pass them on to future generations.