Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS)
Early civilizations nurtured nature and its bounties

They domesticated plants and animals, developed new varieties and breeds, established harmonious agricultural systems and crafted beautiful landscapes. 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.

Ifugao Rice Terraces
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 1,000 metres.

Andean Agriculture
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.

Rice Fish Culture
A Chinese clay plate dating back to the Han Dynasty 2,000 years ago shows a fish swimming from its pond into a rice field. In the rice-fish system combination of the 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.
Maasai pastoral system
The Maasai pastoral system in Tanzania occupies Northern Tanzania and Southern Kenya. It is a pastoral system and culture of over 1000 years old and it continues to strike a social and environmental balance in a fragile environment through the Maasai’s indigenous knowledge system and cultural institutions, which are critical in regulating natural resource uses, maintaining grazing cycles and promoting conservation values. Maasai pastoralism maintains landscapes and habitats which are critical for the conservation of Africa’s wildlife and represents one of Africa’s most iconic cultures.

Chiloé Agriculture
The Archipelago of Chiloé, in the south of Chile, is one of the centres of origin of potatoes and is an extraordinary biodiversity reserve: its temperate rainforests hold a wide range of endangered plant and animal species. The Chilotes –Huilliche indigenous populations and the Mestize– still cultivate about 200 varieties of native potatoes, following ancestral practices transmitted orally by generations of farmers, mostly women.

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.

Oases of the Maghreb
A green island flourishing in an extreme climate of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, the Oases of the Maghreb are 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.
A Global Partnership Initiative

In response to the global trends that undermine family agriculture and traditional agricultural systems, in 2002, during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD, Johannesburg, South Africa), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations launched a Global Partnership Initiative on conservation and adaptive management of “Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems”. The overall goal of the partnership is to identify and safeguard Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems and their associated landscapes, agricultural biodiversity and knowledge systems through catalyzing and establishing a long-term programme to support such systems and enhance global, national and local benefits derived through their “dynamic conservation”, sustainable management and enhanced viability.

With support from the Global Environment Facility (GEF), German Federal Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection (BMELV), International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) and in partnership with UNU, UNDP, UNESCO, government organizations and other partners, FAO GIAHS Initiative promotes a “dynamic conservation” approach that:

- allows farmers and pastoralists 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;
- supports active and informed participation of indigenous and local communities in biodiversity management decision-making.
- recognises cultural diversity and the achievements of local community members and indigenous peoples;
- crystallizes the need for approaches that integrate the in situ conservation of genetic resources with related traditional knowledge and local technologies as a means to ensure continuous co-adaptation to changing environments and human pressures by maintaining the evolutionary dynamics of agricultural species in the human and agro-ecological sites in which they have evolved.

To learn more about the GIAHS Initiative at FAO:

Land and Water Division (NRL)
Natural Resources Management and Environment Department
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Viale delle Terme di Caracalla
00153 Rome, Italy
email: GIAHS-Secretariat@fao.org
www.fao.org/nr/giahs