

# Herds in the woods: giving a new sense to livestock farming to protect our woods

by Eduard BALSELLS

***Our friends from Catalonia have brought us testimony with a two-fold interest: first, that in the province of Tarragona they are becoming aware that ruminants have their place inside Mediterranean forests and that they have a role to play in the environment there. And furthermore, indeed above all, they have realized that techniques that have long been successful in the Mediterranean areas of France -to the extent of establishing real silvo-pastoral agriculture now regarded and assessed as such- have been hard to transpose to a region that is in fact very near. It is one of the functions of the Mediterranean Forest Week to facilitate and accelerate such transfers.***

Livestock farming and shepherds have always existed. Many have been practicing transhumance for a long time, seeking high mountain pastures in summer and coming back down to the valley in winter. However, the rural exodus towards the cities, as well as industrialization and globalization have affected meat production. This situation has forced the shepherds to abandon their jobs and thereby their herds. Nowadays, most of the shepherds who remain are able to do so thanks to the European subsidies from the Common Agricultural Policy because they own extensive agricultural land and big herds (more than 400 animals/herds). Given this situation, none of the shepherds is willing to work with small herds, without land or external subsidies.

Unfortunately, this abandonment of pasture and farmland accounts for the uncontrolled spread of undergrowth and the accumulation of fuel in the forests and woodlands. Thus, a situation has been created favorable for forest fires where weather conditions can make it even worse.

The Gaiata Association was set up in Catalonia in 2009 in order to answer the needs of the livestock farming sector and to foster rural development opportunities. The “Herds in the Woods” project was conceived on the basis of a first experiment carried out in the province of Tarragona, in the Alt Camp. The acquisition of a goat herd made possible the management of forest margins with low forest fire exposure within a forest massif in the region. This was possible thanks to an



agreement signed with the Generalitat, the Catalan Regional Government.

“Herds in the Woods” is a silvopastoralism initiative whose aim is to make herds of sheep (native breeds such as *ripollesa*, *xisqueta* or the *Rasquera* goat) and goats graze in strategic zones and in this way maintain the flammable undergrowth at a limited level, thereby reducing the capacity of fire to spread. All in all, this project is about offering an environmental service. In theory, forests are not made for pastures as there are no real plant species suitable for animals. However, it is possible to enhance the conditions for making food available for livestock. This can be achieved thanks to prior clearing: the purpose of this measure is to

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transform flammable vegetation into livestock products which can then be sold (meat, milk, skin, manure...). In addition, according to the experience of the shepherds themselves, the extensively-grazed zones are likely to become better pasture. However, such impact cannot be observed immediately, contrary to the results obtained with the clearing work. In 2011, the municipality of Sant Boi in Catalonia backed silvopastoralism through the Gaiata Association in order to implement an alternative strategy to the use of machines as well as a sustainable way to secure the margins around the urban core and its housing, as stipulated by the law on forest fire prevention. In total, 75 goats (*Rasquera* race) grazed 25 hectares of peripheral and abandoned building lands. Currently, this collaboration continues, but this time with a 150-ewe herd (*ripollesa* breed). It also offers activities aimed at making schools and families more aware of the shepherd's work through the initiative “Let's go to the pastures”. Other municipalities of the region have shown interest in the project.

Thus, “Herds in the Woods” is an opportunity to recover the value of, and recognition for, the shepherds' work and, in addition, to provide a local and sustainable source of food. But the project also provides a crucial environmental service in the fight against forest fires which are still too frequent in Mediterranean regions and. Furthermore, it contributes to creating well-paid jobs in rural areas. Silvopastoralism is an alternative which gives support to sustainable forest management, the latter being necessary for reducing forest fires. This initiative is about raising people's awareness of the importance of local products, thereby enabling projects such as “Herds in the Woods” to be replicated. There is still a lot of work to be done regarding dissemination and raising awareness both among the general public as well as in government services.

**E.B.**