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Agriculture and Rural Development: EEA report highlights abandonment and intensification threats to mountain areas

Summary: A new report released by the European Environment Agency (EEA) on mountain ecosystems in Europe highlights the importance of these areas for biodiversity and lists agricultural intensification and abandonment as key threats. The report highlights the role low intensity farming plays in maintaining mountain biodiversity and stresses the need for the integration of management strategies to help combat the negative trends in biodiversity seen in mountain ecosystems.

A new report by the European Environment Agency (EEA) on mountain ecosystems in Europe highlights the importance of the regions for biodiversity, and lists agricultural intensification and abandonment as key threats to these areas. The report, entitled 'Mountain Ecosystems'¹ is eighth in the EEA's series of '10 messages for 2010'. Published on 28 July it follows June's publication on agricultural ecosystems² (see IEEP Analysis Briefing: 9 July 2010).

Covering 29 per cent of the EU, the mountainous landscapes and ecosystems of Europe provide valuable ecosystem services such as climate and water cycle regulation while supporting a wide variety of plant and animal species. The EEA however, recognised four key pressures that increasingly endanger these mountain ecosystems. Alongside agricultural intensification and abandonment, climate change, infrastructure development and the unsustainable exploitation of resources were all identified as threats to the functioning of mountain ecosystems.

Low intensity farms support biodiversity

The report highlights the important role that low intensity farming plays in maintaining mountain biodiversity. Livestock rearing and traditional cultivation in particular are identified as farming practices which maintain semi natural habitats such as species rich grasslands, hay meadows and grazed wetlands. Over 50 per cent of all farmland identified as High Nature Value (HNV) is situated in mountainous regions, and the report draws attention to the links that exist between the biodiversity these farms support and the associated cultural heritage.

Agricultural intensification and abandonment identified as key threats

Mountain grasslands are particularly vulnerable to agricultural land abandonment in mountain regions, according the EEA, as they require labour intensive management.

In a comparison between Western and Eastern Europe, the report states that grassland abandonment is an issue in both areas, often due to unprofitable conditions such as steep slopes or poor soils. However, grasslands in Eastern Europe are often affected to a greater degree as a result of complex political factors. For example, many Eastern European countries have to contend with land reform strategies following the collapse of Communism, which complicate the social and economic dynamics of the sector.

Policy as an important tool

Aside from the recognition mountain regions receive in international conventions such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Alpine Convention, the report also highlights the role the EU plays in supporting mountain areas. The report notes that 92 per cent of EU mountain regions have been designated as Less Favoured Area (LFA). In addition to this, 43 per cent of Natura 2000 sites, and 51 per cent of HNV farmland can be found in Europe's mountainous areas. Given this, the report stresses the need for improved integration of management strategies for mountain ecosystems to help combat the negative trends in biodiversity, highlighting the importance of measures which have the potential to increase ecological connectivity (although the report does not make clear how this could be achieved in an ecologically meaningful way). Although not mentioned within the report however, within the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) the LFA, agri-environment and Natura 2000 Measures can play an important role in this regard. A key conclusion of the report is the need for continued monitoring of the success of regional and local biodiversity actions for each major ecosystem type in mountain areas as well as the need for more applied research to be carried out.

References

1. EEA (2010) 10 Messages for 2010 - Mountain Ecosystems, 28/07/2010
<http://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/10-messages-for-2010-mountain-ecosystems>
2. EEA (2010) 10 Messages for 2010 – Agricultural Ecosystems, 30/06/2010
<http://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/10-messages-for-2010-agricultural-ecosystems>

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