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Protecting Local Food Production

Preserve in Spain Offers Farmers, Urban Community Benefits

by LYNSEY GROSSFIELD

The Parc Agrari del Baix Llobregat (the Lower Llobregat Agricultural Park) is a Catalanian agricultural preserve of nearly 3,000 hectares (7,413 acres) situated in an unlikely location. Sandwiched between the El Prat airport and the city limits of Barcelona, this strip of transit-connected river delta land is hedged by 14 municipalities housing a combined population of more than 730,000 people.

Traditionally, this area has been the food supplier to Barcelona and the surrounding metropolitan areas. The fertile delta soil has been farmed in some capacity for the last 6,000 years, but it is only in the past 200 years or so that production became more intensive, and irrigation canals built during the 1800s still crisscross the landscape serving their original purpose.

With urban sprawl looming on all sides, the approximately 500 privately owned farms that make up the park — only six of which are more than 20 hectares (about 50 acres) — have their interests protected by the agricultural park consortium, a managing body. Far from being a bureaucratic governing body, the consortium is comprised of experts in all facets of agronomics and agriculture. They provide consultation for the farmers while enforcing

big-picture goals for the conservation of the area as an agroecological preserve.

The consortium, with funding from the Catalanian government, takes responsibility for services such as roads, irrigation, water treatment, plastics collection, recycling and security against the ever-present threat of vandalism. They also work with a management and land use plan to maintain the integrity of the original vision for the land, while keeping pace with development.

Though only officially created in 1998, the roots of the consortium hearken back to farmers' unions in

“A Pometum-type germplasm bank on site holds 62 cultivars of heirloom and heritage economically important Mediterranean tree crops like olives, figs, apples, plums, peaches and lemons.”

the 1970s and a comprehensive urban plan for the Barcelona Metropolitan area that was enacted in 1976 by the Catalanian government.

I visited Parc Agrari in February, which is a slow season for tourism in Spain, but the right time to visit for anyone wanting to see fields of harvest-ready artichokes, which account for 10 percent of the landscape in the park. I had the chance to meet with Gemma Frances, a park technician with a Ph.D. in economics and Raimon Roda, an agronomist and the manager of the park, to get the scoop on how an agricultural preserve functions.

Though they were adamant that the park is an economic zone, and decidedly not a tourist destination, it has its share of visitors like me. Agricultural experts from around the world — especially from Japan, China and South Korea — come to learn about the complicated balance of interests that makes the continued existence of this peri-urban agrarian space possible.

The only other agrarian park of its kind is Parco Agricolo Sud Milano (Rural Park South Milan), outside of Milan.

For all the buzzword-y chatter about managed “rurban” hybrid landscapes like these, in the offices of the Parc Agrari consortium they don’t like to use the word “peri-urban” if they

can help it. Frances seems to think it conjures up some kind of relationship to urban farming, which is decidedly not what is underway in this area.

Nonetheless, the delta's immediate proximity to several metropolitan areas and urban infrastructure like public transit fits the designation of a hybrid rural-urban landscape.

Though there is no one standard philosophy as to how the crops within the park are to be cultivated, production in Parc Agrari is, according to Roda, "somewhere between organic and conventional."

Agronomists on staff with the consortium work hard to provide expert advice and guidance to farmers to foster sustainable agroecology measures that support innovative farming techniques and commercial-scale productivity.

Agrobiodiversity is a priority for the park. Horticulture takes up about 63 percent of the land, while fruiticulture or pomology takes up 26 percent. The other 11 percent of the land is devoted to diverse purposes – for example, there are 17,000 head of landrace sheep scattered in flocks throughout the area.

A pometum-type germplasm bank on site holds 62 cultivars of heirloom and heritage economically important Mediterranean tree crops like olives, figs, apples, plums, peaches and lemons. Just outside the consortium office are loquats and persimmons.

Parc Agrari even has their own landrace fowl – the "Prat" chicken named for the region – has a registered EU trademark. Many farmers in Parc Agrari are producing sustainable, diverse products, both new and old crop varieties that are only sold to local markets, but they don't have the resources or motivation to seek EU certification as "organic."

"They are doing things sustainably, but certification doesn't make sense in terms of the bottom line," said Roda.

The in-house "Produkte FRESC" label – a promotional project piloted by the consortium in which about 100 farmers are participating – provides enough cachet for marketing produce to local consumers who are more concerned with food miles, diverse offerings, terroir and freshness.

Collective branding is a major part of what the consortium provides for farmers. Projects to promote Parc Agrari products to nearby farmers' markets and wholesalers are numerous. Labels like "Carxofa Prat" (Prat Artichokes) identify locavore produce at the point of sale, and there are partnerships with 42 local restaurants that advertise the origin of the produce being served.

Unlike many farmers in the EU, Parc Agrari landholders are not raking in EU subsidies. Production is economically stable in no small part due to the work of the consortium, however, three crops a year, a mild climate and abundant water and sunshine don't hurt.

For all the benefits farmers receive under the regime of the consortium and its land use plan, there are disagreements. The landowners are essentially entrepreneurs whose privately owned land is zoned for agrarian activities, and not every landowner wants to continue living a life of cultivation. Speculation on property values for non-agricultural purposes is unfortunately a common occurrence.

Five years ago, there was some tension as a plan for a Las Vegas-esque attraction park and a plan for

"Eurovilla" holiday rental properties within the boundary of the preserve was proposed. If not for the consortium, the farmers' interests likely would not have been protected, and the delta land would have been paved over and put to the service of tourism. "Farmers' interests won, as did local, sustainable food production," said Frances.

With development underway at the fringes of the park, however, its future is uncertain. Certainly a growing interest in local food will help with the park's public relations strategy, but the zoning of the land is always subject to the whims of metropolitan planners who may not see the value in a local agroecological preserve.

If one thing can be taken from the example of Parc Agrari, however, it is that farmers within a given region deciding to band together certainly have a better chance at preserving peri-urban agriculture than any one landholder. The consortium allows for farmers to focus on what they are best at: farming.

Roda puts it into no uncertain terms: "The farmer is the protagonist of the land." Here's hoping the story remains the same for many years to come.

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