

RZESZÓW MANIFESTO

on the Future of Traditional Farming and its Biocultural Values

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Photo: Harm Smeenge

Preamble

Traditional farming/agriculture refers to long-established, often small-scale agricultural practices that rely on traditional/indigenous knowledge, local production, and regeneration potential of land rather than external drivers, such as top-down policies, market trends, supply of artificial fertilizers, and various subsidies. Its key characteristics include a focus on subsistence, diverse crops, crop rotation, manual labour, and sustainability. Practices like inter-cropping, mixed cropping, and the use of draft animals or light universal tractors are common, reflecting a deep connection to the land and knowledge of the local environment. Traditional agriculture, depending on the specific local environmental and cultural conditions, can take on different forms. In some regions, its most distinctive characteristic is the considerable internal diversity of activities conducted within small farms, while in others, it is

animal husbandry or pastoralism, carried out over vast landscapes. What typically unites various forms of traditional agriculture is its family character and strong roots in local culture and tradition.

Small family farms in Europe are disappearing at an alarming rate. In Poland, for example, it is estimated that several dozen such farms have been vanishing daily during the last twenty years. We, the undersigned, are convinced - contrary to dominant public discourse - that small, family-based farming holds great value: economic, social, environmental, and above all, as a provider of high-quality food. It is also an important factor in shaping rural landscapes and culture. We believe that the current trend of actively acting against small and medium-sized farms and concentrating land in the hands of the largest, usually industrial, producers is detrimental for many reasons. Instead of the ongoing decline of traditional agriculture, we need a revival of small-scale family farms. This is important not only for the countryside, but also for the quality of life - and perhaps even the very existence - of urban communities. In other areas, where the revitalisation of mixed family farms is unlikely (e.g., due to poor soil quality), the introduction of extensive grazing should be considered as an irreplaceable tool for the active protection of landscape diversity, and at the same time a source of sought-after healthy food.

Background and Rationale

Until the mid-20th century, small family farms were the foundation of survival for much of humanity worldwide. While large estates sold their produce to external markets, peasant farms ensured the biological survival of countless families and secured regional food supply stability. Traditional rural systems developed and maintained cultural landscapes, dominated by a checkerboard of fields divided by balks with stone piles and flowering wild plants, enriched with groves, woods, and water bodies. Solitary trees in pastures or field margins, and old roadside trees developed features usually absent in dense forest trees, but crucial for myriad wildlife species, including rare cavity-nesting birds and bats. Therefore, traditional agricultural land use should be viewed as a major factor in enhancing biodiversity. Any conservation programme cannot replace the scale of its operation and durability.

Based solely on the exploitation of the natural productive and regenerative potential of the landscape, traditional agriculture required farmers to carefully observe the environment to develop the knowledge necessary to ensure sustainable land use. This body of knowledge, now referred to as "traditional ecological knowledge," preserved and multiplied by generations of farming families, constitutes a significant element of humanity's cultural heritage. Given its vast temporal and spatial scale, the process of accumulating ecological knowledge by farmers cannot be matched by any contemporary research project. In today's scientific terminology, it represents holistic and multidisciplinary adaptive management and learning, taking into account both the complexity of the natural environment and the socioeconomic context of the communities using it. Therefore, traditional ecological knowledge should be considered an important part of the intellectual foundation of ecologically and economically sustainable agriculture.

The global spread of the so-called "third agrarian revolution" (the Green Revolution), was the response to the false claim of traditional farming's responsibility for poverty and hunger. In 1968, the Rockefeller Foundation declared: *Traditional or subsistence agriculture worldwide*

can and must be replaced by a highly productive market-oriented system. That call is implemented worldwide through massive subsidies to industrial agriculture. Flooded by cheap, heavily subsidized food sold through international retail chains, traditional agriculture has been losing its market and becoming unprofitable. Dependence on international agribusiness (fertilizers, pesticides, patented seeds, imported animal feed, antibiotics), streams of subsidies (including fuel), and bank loans broke the link between farmers and their landscapes, which had been the basis of sustainability for generations. By accepting the yield per unit area as a universal measure of agricultural efficiency (disregarding the costs of machinery and chemicals), the importance and value of many other parameters typical of agriculture have been ignored. Thus, societies with the highest share of agricultural populations have been stigmatised as backward and inefficient. Ironically, the destruction of traditional agriculture, accelerated by 20th-century ideologically inspired socio-economic experiments, has led to unprecedented famines in many places.

The consequence of the “Green Revolution” is rapid, uncontrolled transformations of rural landscapes, making the very definition of the countryside questionable. Wherever agricultural intensification and land consolidation are impossible or unprofitable (e.g., on poorer soils or in a hilly/mountainous terrain), cultivated fields, meadows, and pastures turn to wastelands, overgrown by shrubby vegetation. The commodification of rural land leads to the sprawl of summer houses, or - especially in proximity to urban areas - new housing estates. Replacing small farms with vast monocultures erases the complex structure, destroying countless wildlife habitats created and maintained by traditional agriculture. Although the consequence is a large-scale loss of biodiversity, this problem is often overlooked by conservationists, who are usually focused on the “best preserved” or “most endangered” relics of undisturbed nature. As a result, a non-intervention policy, leading to “wilderness” restoration, is promoted as an optimal, the most efficient way of biodiversity protection. Given the fact that over the last millennia, most of Europe’s biodiversity has been associated with extensive land use, not with an untouched wilderness, this is a completely misguided approach. In addition, the global concern about climate change does not usually translate into actions fostering the protection of rural landscapes. Expressed through top-down, global policies, it often leads to solutions detrimental to the landscape diversity, such as reckless mass afforestation campaigns.

Traditional agriculture defines the living space of rural communities rooted in traditional values. While postmodern urban societies marvel at the wisdom of “indigenous peoples,” their systems of customs, values, and beliefs, traditional rural communities in Europe, stigmatized as backward, are subjected to internal cultural colonization. Yet the deep bond of traditional rural communities with their landscape and local nature—rooted in a respect for the sacred—is the primary source of the richness of folk culture, without which there would be no Chopin, Dvořák, or Bartók. Without which, civilization as we know it would not exist.

Under the impact of the above-described pressures, we are increasingly experiencing the effects of a cultural severance with the landscape and its nature. The loss of farming organically and culturally embedded in “working landscapes” cuts off the intergenerational transfer of uncodified ecological knowledge, which we are irretrievably losing with the death of the last traditional farmers.

The presented trends are particularly acute in countries and regions with a rich tradition of peasant agriculture, such as vast segments of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. Much of the “Western world” has long since lost its traditional rural systems with self-sufficient, mixed farms. Due to alarming evidence of the negative impacts of industrial agriculture on the environment and human health, alternative approaches to farming, including organic or regenerative agriculture, are increasingly gaining popularity. We welcome and support this trend, contributing to the development of a more sustainable alternative to industrial farming. However, while traditional agriculture, due to its indispensable adaptation to local natural conditions, must be both ecological and regenerative, obtaining an organic farm certificate depends on formal adherence to top-down production rules. Unfortunately, the present deal made by the European Commission and the South American Mercosur community proves that the political and economic EU-ruling forces are ready to sacrifice any form of European agriculture to pursue their own goals.

We welcome the growing popularity of urban agriculture, which reconnects consumers with food production. However, due to the very nature of urban life, it will remain a relatively narrow niche, necessary to enrich the urban environment and remind us of the close connection between food, nature, and human work.

General Proposals

We do not pretend to imply that traditional farming must or should replace all intensive, large-scale agriculture, which should evolve through an increasing market-driven demand for organic food as well as policies prioritising regenerative agriculture.

Traditional agriculture - whether smallholder, mixed or pastoralism - nested in the landscape and tradition, should be protected and revitalised as an indispensable contribution to food security and ecological resilience. Globally, despite the rapid growth of industrial agriculture, the role of small farms worldwide remains significant. For example, 35% of food is produced by farms of less than 2 hectares, even though they occupy only 12% of agricultural land. However, small farm owners often live in poverty, increasingly deprived of their markets, powerless against the heavily subsidised Big Farm-Big Food “coalition.

Therefore, given the monopoly of interconnected agribusiness, banking, and retail chains, established over recent decades, restoring the smallholder farm sustainability requires more than simply abandoning discriminating practices (e.g., imposed environmental, sanitary, or animal “welfare” standards). This requires the active involvement of public authorities and the establishment of the necessary legal and economic framework that can restore the economic, social, and cultural sovereignty of rural communities that have been denied them for decades.

Smallholder, traditional self-sufficient farms, by nature, provide a broad spectrum of ecosystem services. They supply healthy food, create and maintain biodiversity-supporting habitats, recycle nutrients, sustain fertile soils; they provide meaningful work and preserve the unique character of the landscape – an essential factor in the sense of identity and belonging. They are also an effective school of practical “reading of nature,” which cannot be replaced by formal, theory-dominated education. Therefore, it is necessary to create conditions conducive to the transfer of natural and ecological knowledge from the farm to the wider society.

In some areas, due to the advanced process of depopulation and the associated loss of infrastructure and equipment essential for running mixed farms, as well as potentially very high labour and resource investment required to restore the farmland's former shape and productivity, the revitalisation of agriculture in its original structure may be unrealistic. In such situations, one should consider the promotion of pastoralism as a low-investment form of rural economics and a proven factor of landscape richness and stability. Farmers – breeders and herders – who choose this form of rural landscapes' management should be allowed to rationally shape and utilize trees and stands growing in pastures – outside forest areas. Existing prohibitions, limiting the commercial use of trees to forests, force the farmers to remove young trees before they reach the size that is subject to the absurd "bureaucratic protection."

Examples of Specific Recommendations

Adjusting the Economic Sphere

- Establish city zones off-limits to supermarket chains, reserved for local food and crafts (not just fairs, but permanent centres and shops).
- Require large retail chains to allocate space for local products, under rules set in fair collaboration with local producer groups.
- Require/incentivise public institutions (schools, hospitals) to procure food from local farmers.
- Establish government and regional/local government cooperatives to support local, small-scale family farms to provide technical support (e.g., a network of cooperative machine parks, service and repair points, and workshops, etc.), services (including mills, distilleries, vet services, local slaughterhouses, milk collection points, delivery to sale places), launch a network of cooperative stores.
- Give farmers – herders, breeders – programmes where they can restore grasslands and improve soil quality on pastures (for example, by overseeding with a legume-rich, native wildflower seed mix).
- Create legal and economic frameworks conducive to both the purchase of land for the purpose of establishing new farms and long-term leases for agricultural purposes.
- Create conditions in rural municipalities conducive to the establishment of family food processing businesses, such as bakeries, cheese dairies, or butcher shops.
- Promote community-supported agriculture as a mechanism for revitalizing the rural economy on the outskirts of urban agglomerations.

Adjusting the Social and Cultural Sphere

- Preparing and performing a professional, honest educational campaign aimed at urban populations to raise awareness of the value of family farming and respect for farmers as stewards of biodiversity and tradition.
- Active participation of agriculture in the formal education system, from kindergarten to university. The current education system in many countries suffers from a severe lack of practical classes. Such classes are particularly necessary for the study of

nature, biology, and ecology. Education should also include raising awareness of the links between food production and the biocultural values of rural areas.

- Developing a network of demonstration farms, conducting educational activities and collaborating with schools, local governments, parishes, and non-governmental organizations. With appropriate preparation of farmers, such farms could also provide space for implementing therapeutic and rehabilitation programs.
- Develop attractive university programs, summer schools, and fieldwork, sparking fascination with nature and sustainable farming, embedded in its biocultural context.

Conclusion

Considering the enormous importance of traditional agriculture for the natural and cultural wealth of individual nations and peoples, for food security, for the beauty of landscapes, and the civilizational heritage of humanity, we express our appreciation and gratitude to all farmers, peasants, pastoralists, and their entire families who, making the best use of the land, provide and sustain these irreplaceable values.

Based on the above-provided premises, supported by the wide evidence of environmental, biological, historical, economic, and social sciences, we appeal to policy makers, national and international authorities, conservationists, and, in particular, all food consumers to recognise the importance of traditional farming.

We call for concerted efforts to build a just economic and social environment that provides appropriate conditions for the functioning and development of rural communities, in line with traditional methods of sustainable agriculture. This cannot be achieved through the further development of subsidy systems, as their logic is profoundly inconsistent with the nature of subsistence agriculture, based on the symbiosis of humans and nature. This requires building public awareness, recognition, and appreciation of the role of traditional agriculture as a unique provider of a wide range of biocultural benefits. This awareness should be reflected in an appropriate legal and economic framework that provides traditional agriculture with the necessary autonomy and freedom from bureaucratic constraints.