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Stakeholders' requirements and expectations with respect to multi-functionality of grasslands in Europe

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Abstract

The European project Multisward aims to increase reliance on grasslands and on multi-species swards for competitive and sustainable ruminant production systems. This contributes to food security and enhanced environmental goods. As part of Multisward, an inventory was made of requirements and expectations of stakeholders with respect to the multi-functionality of grasslands in EU countries. The traditional foursome of primary producer, policy maker, research and advice were identified as the most important stakeholders, followed by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (nature, environment), education and industry. A first international stakeholder consultation revealed the appreciation of current and future functions of grasslands in Europe. In general the economic functions of grasslands, mainly feed for herbivores, were considered the most important. Stakeholders expected this to remain unchanged in future. Environmental functions of grasslands were placed second: water quality and quantity, adaptation to climate change, mitigation and biodiversity. Finally, social services were mentioned.

Keywords: economic function, grassland, multi-functionality, stakeholders

Introduction

During the last 40 years the European grassland area has significantly reduced, by 15 M ha in favour of the production of fodder maize and other annual crops (FAOSTAT, 2011). Even marginal grasslands tend to be abandoned, particularly in mountainous and Mediterranean areas, where they are of crucial importance for preserving biodiversity, protecting soils against erosion and maintaining the local population density.

The increasing global demand for meat and milk, environmental concerns about the sustainability of intensive production systems and concerns about food quality and safety favour an increasing role for grassland-based ruminant production systems in the future. These systems are likely to be more environmentally sound, economically viable, productive and efficient with respect to scarce inputs. Grasslands, with their multifunctional roles, provide a good basis for developing more sustainable production systems in the long term (Peyraud *et al.*, 2010).

The FP7-funded European project Multisward (www.multisward.eu) aims to increase reliance on grasslands and on multi-species swards for increased sustainability and competitiveness of ruminant production systems, increased food security and enhanced environmental goods. In this project, stakeholder participation is being used to improve the scope for anchoring new developments in grasslands use, creating a joint learning environment and ensuring that the developments are based on a better understanding of the perspective of stakeholders on grasslands (Woodhill *et al.*, 2009). Thus far, the requirements and expectations of stakeholders with respect to multi-functionality of grasslands in Europe are not fully known. The aim of this study, which is part of the Multisward project, is to determine these requirements and expectations.

Materials and methods

Stakeholders' requirements and expectations were studied by an international team of researchers from the Netherlands, Ireland, France, Poland and Italy. Firstly, a stakeholder analysis was undertaken to identify the people or institutions having a clear stake in the multi-functional use of grasslands, or being in the position to play an important role in the development and implementation of newly found management options for multi-species swards. Results have been obtained from nine countries throughout Europe: Norway, Ireland, United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Poland and Italy.

Secondly, 25 representatives of important stakeholder groups across Europe, as defined in the stakeholder analysis, were individually invited to an international stakeholder meeting with an interactive program. They represented the most important grassland stakeholders in Europe. The aim of the meeting was to determine the appreciation of current and future functions of grasslands in Europe. This was achieved using workshops in small groups and general discussions summarising the results. The meeting followed the 23th General Meeting of the European Grassland Federation in Kiel in 2010.

Results and discussion

The stakeholder analysis revealed that the most important stakeholders were the traditional foursome of primary producer, policy maker, research and advice (Pinxterhuis, 2011). Following these most important stakeholders, there were stakeholders of intermediate importance, including nature conservation non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and for environmental protection NGOs, processing and seed industries, education and consumers. The stakeholders identified as being of lesser importance included tourism, recreation and animal welfare NGOs, feed, fertilizer and machinery industries, media, retail and water agencies.

The attendants of the first international stakeholder meeting came from six stakeholder groups (advice, education, farming, industry, policy and research) and five European regions (Atlantic, Continental, Mediterranean, Mountainous and Nordic).

The international stakeholder consultation revealed the appreciation of the current and future functions of grasslands in Europe (Pinxterhuis, 2011). In general the economic functions of grasslands, mainly feed for herbivores, were considered the most important. It was expected that this will remain unchanged in the future. The economic functions entail providing feed for herbivores for the production of meat, milk or wool, and feed for bees for honey production. Next to this, there are more recent economic functions such as providing plant fibre, raw material for bio-energy production, or offering attractive landscapes for tourism or recreation. In some cases participants linked the economic functions to aspects such as 'providing labour', 'keeping people in rural areas', 'maintaining standard of living', all referring to maintaining populations in marginal areas.

Environmental functions of grasslands were generally placed second. Water quality and quantity were mentioned first. How water quantity is interpreted depends on region: in some regions sufficient supply and protection of soil from erosion is important, while in other regions providing flood plains is relevant. In general, grasslands were seen as a potential tool to adapt to climate change. Mitigation of climate change was also frequently mentioned: permanent grasslands provide carbon sequestration, although forestry was seen as a strong competitor for this function. The third environmental function mentioned was biodiversity. In many European areas, grasslands provide unique ecosystems. Preserving these aids the global challenge to maintain biodiversity.

The social services of grasslands were also recognized. Apart from providing livelihood (lifestyle, labour, income; mentioned under economic functions), grasslands and their management are often part of the local culture. Amenities such as landscape for tourism and space for recreation and sports were also mentioned.

Even though only a relatively small group of stakeholders attended the meeting, the obtained results are valuable, since they represent the opinion of important stakeholders throughout Europe. Furthermore, results have been used to develop a questionnaire, which is currently open for responses at www.multisward.eu. Also, national stakeholder meetings have been and will be held in 2011 and 2012 in the Netherlands, Ireland, France, Poland and Italy. Detailed results of these meetings and the questionnaire will become available in 2013.

Conclusions

International stakeholders with a clear stake in the multi-functional use of grasslands considered the economic functions of grasslands, mainly feed for herbivores, as the most important functions of grassland in Europe. They expected this to remain unchanged in the future. Environmental functions of grasslands such as water quality and quantity, adaptation to climate change, mitigation and biodiversity were placed second. Finally, social services were mentioned.

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