

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION AND AGRICULTURAL EXPLOITATION: THE CASE OF THE LOS CARRIZALES AGRICULTURAL NATURAL PARK (ELCHE, ALICANTE)

José Antonio Segrelles Serrano

Departamento de Geografía Humana. Universidad de Alicante
ja.segrelles@ua.es

Since the drafting of the Brundtland Report (1987) and its distribution at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (1992), it has been repeatedly argued that the environment is of fundamental value to human life, and that sustainable development involves the simultaneous implementation of three types of solidarity: within one's own community, with the other inhabitants of the planet, and with future generations. This veneer of solidarity makes the concepts of ecology and sustainable development attractive to the media and to society as a whole, as they accommodate ideas that are acceptable to all socio-economic, political, cultural, religious and environmental agents. These concepts have been magnified due to ulterior motives, whilst becoming engrained in the well-oiled machinery of marketing and advertising. As a result, it has therefore become fashionable among committed, sensitive and progressive citizens to talk about the environment, sustainable development, rural development, endogenous rural development and environmental resources at the slightest opportunity, with no consideration given to whether these concepts involve an insuperable contradiction with the very essence of the capitalist mode of production, as the latter generates antagonisms which make it untenable.

A system that is based on the private ownership of wealth achieved through the work of all concerned, the maximization of profits with the minimum investment, the accumulation of profits in the shortest possible time, an eagerness to turn everything into merchandise, the introduction of competition by everyone against everyone, and the consecration of the market as the main mechanism for structuring the processes of production, distribution and consumption can be neither sustainable nor based on solidarity. The capitalist mode of production is riddled with insurmountable limitations as it will never cease to exploit the labour force or misuse natural resources as long as it aims to continue to be recognized as such. This fact places the viability of ecosystems under constant threat, and leads to

growth that is anything but sustainable. The imperatives to accumulate and to make fast, large and constant profits «force» it to systematically resort to the conquest of new sources of production and consumption, which leads to a massive and irrational use of natural resources and a deterioration of the environment which is often impossible to remedy.

At the same time, the ideological philosophy that has become known as conservationism or deep ecology has become increasingly influential in recent decades. This is an ecological philosophy that does not take the existence of humankind into consideration, but instead aims to preserve the environment without the presence of human beings. The proponents of this movement believe that human communities and wildlife are simply incompatible, as both human beings and their activities are by definition destroyers of nature. In many developing countries, an implementation of this conservationist ideology would lead to the explicit displacement of peasant and indigenous populations who have settled in territories blessed with abundant natural resources, to make way for the rich and for landowners to move in and busy themselves with ecology and preserving nature in its purest form, leaving it accessible only to a privileged few who can afford it and therefore enjoy it. By contrast, in the developed world, such as Europe, where cultural landscapes predominate over natural ones, it is impossible to implement conservationism and deep ecology in such an explicit manner by uprooting the communities that live there. Instead, attempts are made to prevent, or at least to restrict, the economic activities in the areas that are to be protected. These restrictions, which make sense in the case of industry or mining, are often also extended to agriculture, fishing and forestry. In some areas this has led to protests by farmers and livestock breeders living in the natural environment concerned.

In any event, both sustainability and conservationism are two sides of the same coin, as both models or paradigms are determined by the imperatives of the capitalist mode of production. These demands have a direct dialectical relationship to farming and to the socio-economic and cultural life of the rural communities that live in or near the natural areas to be protected and preserved, and engage in production there. Nevertheless, it is true that the capitalist system has some cracks or fissures that can be exploited in order to alter this state of affairs. There are some examples where the economic viability of agriculture and livestock farming is not at odds with environmental integrity, the preservation of ecosystems and the conservation of biodiversity. In these cases, a firm commitment has been made to economic diversification in rural areas, and to taking advantage of all opportunities the environment offers to generate additional income. Farming and the preservation of natural areas often constitute a binomial that generates debates and conflicts, as was apparent at the *Jornada de Reflexió sobre l'Activitat Agrària i la Seua Implicació en la Preservació del Espais Naturals* (Seminar on Farming and its Implications for the Preservation of Natural Spaces), which was organized by the Agroterritori Foundation and the University of Girona, and held in Girona in October 2011.

An outstanding case of symbiotic balance between farming and environmental preservation and biodiversity can be found in the «Los Carrizales» Agrarian Natural Park, run by the Carrizales Irrigators Association. Located in the town of Elche in the province of Alicante, the Park straddles two protected natural areas: El Hondo and Las Salinas de Santa Pola. This natural park, where farming and fishing take place, is a model of harmony in which agriculture not only does not destroy the landscape or the region, but is in fact an

economic activity that is essential to maintaining the area's ecosystem and biodiversity. It should be noted that the agricultural landscape is not an end in itself, but a consequence of the dynamism of a means of agricultural production that produces highly valuable cultural landscapes, the vast majority of which are the result of agricultural land use. This cultural dimension is a key feature of its identity and its socio-economic functions, as is the case in most of Europe.

In recent decades, agricultural incomes have become increasingly dependent on commercial relationships with other economic sectors, and agriculture has gradually been caught in a pincer movement of prices that is difficult to avoid: the prices that agriculture must pay agroindustries when purchasing the supplies it needs to produce, and those it is forced to accept when selling its products to agri-food companies. However, in recent years, the entire agribusiness chain has been controlled by large-scale organized distributors, which have made vast profits at the expense of the two weakest links: the farmers and livestock farmers, and the consumers. Their strategic position gives them total control when negotiating prices with producers, while the concentration of purchasing groups, which are also heavily influenced by the distribution firms, means that they can agree on pricing policies for customers. At the same time, the large-scale food and agriculture distributors prefer to select their suppliers and for these suppliers to be limited, highly capitalized and able to offer their products in large quantities, with strict and standardized quality standards and characteristics and the lowest possible prices. In other words, what suits them best is to establish relationships with agribusiness. Family farming cannot adapt to these strict demands and is thus prevented from accessing consumers, despite its sustainable production and respect for the ecosystem and biodiversity of the environment.

On this basis, it is easy to see the difficulties faced by the family farmers with lands in the «Los Carrizales» Agrarian Natural Park in terms of selling their products and making a decent living from their work. This environmentally-integrated farming creates jobs in rural areas and generates life in the villages, as well as providing high-quality nutritional products. It is also in need of a marketing model that differs from large-scale food distribution, but instead involves the model used by the local markets and short trade circuits in which the consumer is a person with a face, opinions, and the ability to choose. This has led to the range of production and marketing strategies adopted by the Carrizales Irrigation Community. The creation of a hallmark or seal of quality for its products, the reassessment of the characteristics of the landscape, the area's environmental and cultural features and a clear commitment to transforming their production so that farmers do not lose control of the added value are all steps in this direction.

The villagers of Carrizales are fully aware that to deprive the rural world of farming is to take away its very essence. Agriculture is the socio-economic backbone of rural communities. It guarantees the preservation of the environment, forms the basis of our culture and is a common heritage with which people identify. However, they also know that today it is no longer possible to think in terms of agriculture without considering the economic and functional diversification required in rural areas. This idea is the cornerstone of their initiatives for the empowerment of rural multifunctionality, i.e. the use of all the opportunities offered by the environment. It is therefore important to create new sources of income that supplement but do not replace agricultural income. It is not a question of

promoting rural tourism as a rural monoculture, as is sometimes maintained mistakenly or for ulterior motives. The issue instead is one of achieving decent and attractive living and working conditions for the farmers, using investments and imagination to foster a type of agriculture that is both feasible and sustainable, and which will help both to preserve the environment and the essential roles of rural areas. Indeed, much of its potential is the result of respect for the environment and conservation of nature.

In their approach and their work, the farmers of the «Los Carrizales» Agrarian Natural Park associate the concepts of the *professional farmer* and *multifunctionality* and bring together the three basic roles that they consider farmers should fulfil: the role of agricultural production, the territorial role of occupation of space and environmental conservation, and the social role of maintaining employment in rural areas. This is the only way that it will be possible to discuss the feasibility of agriculture and consequently of rural development and environmental conservation.

Protection of the environment and the integrity of ecosystems need not necessarily exclude efficient and profitable agriculture that generates high added value. This contradicts the ideology of conservationism and deep ecology that advocates maintaining natural areas free of the presence of humans and their production. In this case, agricultural and livestock farming in the area becomes an essential territorial, environmental and cultural factor, as agriculture is becoming an economic activity that is necessary to preserve the area's biodiversity and ecosystem, as well as the expression of a cultural landscape of great historical value that is a distinguishing characteristic of its people.