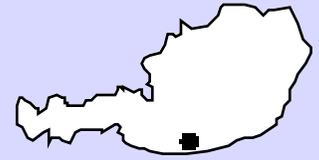


CARNICA-ROSENTAL (Carinthia, Austria)

Reintroduction and development of a lost ovine race: the “bespectacled sheep”



The action

The Carnica-Rosental local action group, whose area borders Slovenia, is supporting an association that has reintroduced a local ovine race that has all but disappeared: the “Brillenschaf” (bespectacled sheep). Although no more than 17 specimens could be counted in 1986, there were more than 600 in 1997. The association, which represents around 60 breeders, is coordinating a reproduction programme and has in particular established a quality label for meat. It has also concluded contracts with 10 restaurants. In the production area, a discovery route, accompanied with culinary snacks, has been created to make consumers aware while encouraging visitors to prolong their stay.

Key elements

- > Reintroduction and economic development of a local ovine race in the process of extinction.
- > Labelling of meat and direct sale of specialities to consumers and restaurants.
- > Redevelopment of the area on the theme of 'endangered local breeds' and wild flora thanks to a discovery path including farms, restaurants and hostels.
- > Cross-border cooperation between Austria and Slovenia around a common identity element.

Context

Farming has, for a long time, favoured a decrease in production costs and sales prices, often to the detriment of quality and specificity. The development of an undifferentiated mass market has reduced the number of domestic breeds and species, which in the past were very diversified. Whether in the animal or vegetable kingdom, the least productive species have been eliminated. Therefore, breeds of sheep with a thick coat have gradually been removed from the market and have progressively disappeared in favour of strong breeds with fine wool specialised in meat production (like the “mountain sheep”). This is the case of the Brillenschaf, characterised by a black circular patch around the eyes (hence the name “bespectacled sheep”). This rustic and versatile average-sized breed used to be widespread in an area which stretched from the Frioul in Italy to the Slovenian Alps and Southern Austria. The symbol of a common identity in three border regions where Latin, Germanic and Slavic cultures crossed paths, this breed of sheep had all but disappeared. It owes its survival solely to the intervention of two associations for the protection of endangered local breeds which kept a few specimens, one operating in Austria and the other in Slovenia.

In some cases, the preservation of these local breeds can represent an important economic development potential for their region of origin: market trends are evolving and certain characteristics may be appreciated by consumers if they correspond to quality criteria and are developed by a judicious promotion policy. The Brillenschaf breed lent itself well to this operation because of the particular taste of its meat.

In order to do this, it was nevertheless necessary for the local actors to be prepared for the operation. A fairly extensive awareness campaign as well as a number of still well-rooted ancestral practices were necessary. The area of Rosental, in the south of Austria, met these conditions: experiments to reproduce local animal species had already been practised, in particular the attempt to reproduce the Carnica bee.

Starting point

When the LEADER group contacted the association of Brillenschaf sheep-farmers, things were already well under way. One part-time farmer living on the Slovenian border had been interested in this breed for almost 15 years and devoted a good part of his time to it. He reached an agreement with the Austrian association for the preservation of endangered domestic species. He subsequently bought the remaining flock of bespectacled sheep in 1986 and, along with a small group of breeders, began regenerating the species thanks to 17 females and a small number of males of certified origin. They then founded an association of “Brillenschaf” sheep-farmers whose aim was to reintroduce and develop the breed scientifically and economically. Gradually, the association saw the number of farmers involved in the operation increase.

Shortly afterwards, the same process was put in place in Slovenia: an association of bespectacled sheep farmers was formed and the first exchanges between the two associations - Austrian and Slovenian - began.

Implementation

On the Austrian side, everything is organised to develop the breed: its identity and cultural characteristics are highlighted, as well as the quality of the meat.

On a genetic level, breeders are selected by a committee of breeders and experts the composition of which is renewed each year in order to integrate the greatest number of producers according to their speciality. Selection is made at auctions.

An expert working for the Austrian Association for the Protection of Endangered Species is responsible for the scientific monitoring. Media cooperation has been obtained and a video produced in order to show the links that exist between the breeding of this sheep, the cultural heritage and the restructuring of a tradition in this bilingual area (German and Slovenian) in the south of Carinthia.

In order to inform producers, the association is organising seminars, excursions and discussions. Furthermore, relations with Slovenian partners are intensifying.

At the level of commercial outlets, special recipes of dishes based on Brillenschaf are being supplied to restaurants and are promoted at fairs and markets. Furthermore, a label was created in 1997 and ten restaurants from the area joined (menus and dishes prepared using Brillenschaf meat).

As far as promoting it to the general public is concerned, a half-yearly market known as the "special sheep and goat's market" is organised in the market town of Ferlach. Attracting several thousand people, it combines the sale of meat from Brillenschaf with meats from other domestic species in the process of disappearing.

Efforts are also made to guarantee the operation's integration into tourism: an excursion itinerary at the foot of the Karawanken has been transformed into discovery routes for breeds of threatened domestic animals. The route includes the discovery of protected flora from the area. An educational tourism project has also been set up thanks to students: created in 1996 in the form of a hiking week, it is today integrated into a one-month programme entitled "The Noah's Ark of Carinthia".

Budget and sources of funding

The cost of the project has been spread out in annual payments throughout the duration of the LEADER II programme, whose only intervention is in the form of technical monitoring. Material expenses (ECU 30 000 per year) are 63% covered by Objective 5b.

Innovative elements for the area

Activities and employment

The Brillenschaf breed, which had all but disappeared ten years ago, is today the most widespread breed in Carinthia. In 1998, out of the 64 farmers who practised this type of farming, 12 were involved with it on a full-time basis, in an area where 80% of farmers work only part-time.

Mobilising the community and social cohesion

The project has mobilised a number of public and private actors. The public authorities are important partners, in particular the Chamber of Agriculture which provides logistical support in order to manage the breeding programme. Among the breeders are many professionals from different backgrounds, which strengthens the synergies between them.

The association has furthermore begun a cross-border project with Slovenian farmers. This initiative is extremely important for this area where, historically, community integration has always posed a problem. The development of a common breed has gradually led to the two regions becoming closer around a similar identity reference and around joint development models (tourism, cuisine).

CARNICA-ROSENTAL

Bordered by Slovenia, the Carnica-Rosental LEADER area is the most eastern part of Austria. It has a varied landscape from the Drau Valley (460 m high) to the alpine massif of the Karawanken (peak: 2 237 m) which separates the two countries. The area covers 500 km² and has 28 000 inhabitants living in small scattered villages. The land is mainly forest, with farmland covering only a fifth of the area. The proximity of relatively important urban areas (Klagenfurt and Villach) make it a dormitory area with limited economic activity.

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