

The Museum of Alpine Farming: guided itineraries between Italy and Switzerland

Luca Battaglini, Marzia Verona, Miriam Lando

Department of Animal Production Sciences

Torino University

44, Via Leonardo da Vinci

10095 Grugliasco, Italy

luca.battaglini@unito.it

Abstract

The project Museum of Alpine Farming (i.e. “Museo dell’Alpeggio”) is placed within the EEC project Interreg III between Italy and Switzerland, as border Countries. This initiative has met the mountain’s development and promotion need and aimed to put environment, culture, crafts and local products into value. The project, within several partnerships, has considered an assortment of actions: summer pastures farms survey, alpine dairy products characterization, drawing up of an alpine farming management guide, the creation of routes between Italian and Swiss alpine pastures (initiative called “Alpeggi senza confini” i.e. ”Alpine pastures without borders”). In parallel with these initiatives a Museum of “alpeggio” has been created, as a centre of interests and documentation upon the alpine farming systems between Italy and Swiss connected by San Giacomo pass (2313 m a.s.l). It is deemed to be both an instrument to present to a wide public the alpine farming and its activities such as important elements of the alpine cultural identity as a strategic resource for mountain economy. The Museum (Documentation centre) of alpine farming is located in the protected area of the Alpe Devero-Veglia Natural Park in the premises of the former arrival of an air cableway station and of the near buildings in the Baceno commune. The Museums’ initiatives bound to the project have didactic and research aims and includes school- and tourists- oriented museum itineraries through setting up of different features (infrastructures, route markings, leaflets and multimedia). Products from different interest fields (e.g. research

results, photographs of events and didactical material) are exhibited in the documentation center of the Museum.

Key words: Alps, cheese, alpine pasture, Museum, socio-cultural impacts, environmental impacts

Introduction

The project “Museo dell’alpeggio” is placed within the EEC project Interreg III between Switzerland and France and in detail, within the Proalp IT-CH project started with the Vallese Canton Agriculture Service, the Bern Federal Dairy Research Station and the Ticino Alpine Economy Society. The project answers the need of initiatives aimed to promote and develop mountain, for evaluating environment, culture, crafts and typical products. The museum structure is located in the protected area of Baceno – Alpe Devero (Italy).



Fig 1. Geographic information: the map

When it was born and who suggested it?

The project “Museo dell’Alpeggio” was born at the end of 2005 in order to guarantee the continuity to an action system already started by Regione Piemonte, within the EEC project Interreg III. It also included two important trans-frontier projects with France and Switzerland for promoting alpine farms and their relevant dairy products.

Aim of the project is to set up a trans-frontier cultural system which shall promote alpine farming knowledge and its cultural meaning between past, present and future, also by making reference to features linked to alpine livestock and dairy activity carried out still up-to-date.

Project partners are: Piemonte Regional Mountain Department (<http://www.regione.piemonte.it/montagna/index.htm>), Veglia Devero Natural Park (<http://www.parcovegliadevero.it>), Stea (Ticino Alpine Economy Society, <http://www.stea.ch/default.asp>), Leventina Tourism Office (<http://www.leventinaturismo.ch>), Regione Tre Valli (<http://www.regionetrevalli.ch>).

Project aims

Aim of this work is to be found in the natural vocation of mountain areas, which consists not only in the capability to breed animals, utilizing for their feeding medium and high pastures, but even in the cleverness to hand down and keep alive local traditions and milk and dairy productions too (Battaglini *et al.*, 2004).



Figure 2. Old-fashioned cheese-making tools (*Veglia-Devero Natural Park Archives*)

Besides collecting evidences and historical documentation, just as a museum is expected to do, the main idea of the project is to define the rural environment as a great space of research, in order to socially and economically evaluating the territory, getting to involve students and teachers of all ranks and those people who get close to the alpine environment, re-discovering and thus recovering the relation with nature. They will therefore better know the connection between environment and products of cultural traditions of their own region.

The study of territory, business, crafts which have characterized it in the past, and of its economic and social evolution, has a great importance especially in the present historic situation, during which industrialization and progress are more and more quickly expanding themselves.

The link between morphology and environmental features of a place, the interaction with local population, the collection of written and oral sources, the reading of historical, literary, photographic documents, the research and cataloguing of antiques related to alpine business and crafts, constitute essential elements for understanding and recognizing traditions' value.



Figure 3. Cheese-making in alpine farm
(*Veglia Devero Natural Park and M. Bernardini Archives*)

Aim of the initiative “Museo dell’alpeggio” is to promote and put mountain agriculture into value, making strong the link between rural development and territory safeguard and encouraging the multifunctional features of alpine farming and husbandry, helping to obtain high quality agro-food productions compatible with the environment (Battaglini *et al.*, 2004).

The main impacts foreseen by the project are listed in the following points:

- Creation of a trans-frontier cultural system for promoting alpine farming and pastures;

- Implementation of a museum net with trans-frontier links for the knowledge of the alpine environment natural patrimony (analogies between Italy and Switzerland);
- Cultural and touristic alpine farming promotion factors, cultural identity, professionalism, women and young people role, improvement of social relations and opportunities;
- Impact upon tourists, granting allowances – not just economic – to alpine farming actors (promotion of positive socio-cultural interactions for renewing personal prestige of alpine farming actors);
- Fall-out of positive effects upon University didactical purposes (stages and researches on alpine farming themes).

What is Alpine farming?

The alpine farm is the place where, from late spring up to the beginning of autumn, the alpine farming actors take cattle, first at low altitudes then higher ones so that animals can feed themselves with grass particularly rich in nutrients (e.g. Polyunsaturated Fatty Acids as CLA) and aromas (e.g. terpenes) (Bianchi *et al.*, 2002a; Bianchi *et al.*, 2003a & 2003b).

During staying in alpine farms, farmers business aims to produce milk to be transformed into cheeses, cottage cheese and any other dairy products (from dairy cows), or simply to make animals grow utilizing pastures forage (heifers and young categories).



Figure 4. Brown dairy cows at pasture in Devero (*M. Verona Archives*)

Both in Ossola and in the near Swiss cantons' valleys, alpine farms areas are generally used by cattle herds from the second half of June for a 60-110 days period. There's a first pasture cycle of "tramuti" or "corti" at low altitudes (where end-summer re-growth is usually exploited), then high altitudes areas are utilized as season goes on (end of July – half August).



Figure 5. Original “Bruna alpina” cattle breed on Alpe Veglia
(Veglia-Devero Natural Park Archives)

In the past, alpine farming period was preceded by middle mountain pastures staying, locally called “mountains” (Battaglini, 2004).

These places represented a strong source of forage productions which was consumed by cattle from April until beginning of June. Cattle herds, transferred from bottom of valley stables, stayed on middle-mountain grasslands until high altitude pastures vegetal growth (after snow melting).

During this period they consumed hay produced in the preceding year. In Autumn, when cattle left alpine farming areas, stopped a second time on these grasslands, where pasture was exploited before returning to the valley bottom stables.

Middle-mountain pastures and grass-lands were generally provided with buildings for cattle and farmers, since they constituted independent units of the farming business, due to the transport and communication difficulties.

During last years, many of these grass-lands have been partially abandoned so that in some areas the wood is gradually gaining round. The “tramuti” or “corti” used by animals from the different alpine farms are today usually equipped both for milking and for milk transformation. Cattle stables are – on the contrary – rare, since animals spend the night in the open air.

In these alpine valleys, it is possible to single out three main forms of pastures propriety: communal, private and union-type.

Often, in alpine farms stays the whole family with its cattle along with animals from other farms (Verona, 2006).

Alpine farming role, between past and present

The project and the study are within the viewpoint of the integrated and sustainable promotion of economy in alpine areas, considering a multipurpose valorization (botanical biodiversity, landscape value and recreational opportunities) as the only way to find a balance between products quality, profitability and environmental sustainability.



Figure 6. Alpine pasture in Ossola (*M. Verona Archives*)

Tourism in alpine farming may represent a way to compare cultures and old-fashioned learning with visitors' modernity. Technological, social and cultural transformations of the last decades have deeply modified the sector of primary production and – consequently – the relation of mankind with food.

As a matter of fact, it is more and more difficult to know the way the food does before reaching our table and to know who and how produces it. On one side, being tourism fed by people who care natural values and local traditions, has the merit to recognize to alpine farms workers a social function and a professional dignity.

Environmental safeguarding in the present historical moment has the important task to “transmit” to future generations a natural and environmental patrimony – integral as much as possible.

It is therefore necessary to kindle a sensitivity in all citizens and tourists of any age so that they adopt behaviours and life-styles compatible with nature so that each of us be responsible and aware of any action he does (Corti, 2003).

When present and future generations develop their public spirit, better life conditions can be guaranteed.

Made these preliminary statements, characteristics of alpine farming structures in Ossola valley (Italy) and the border Ticino valley (Switzerland) will be described in the following paragraphs, along with the aims of the project “Museo d’Alpeggio” with the relevant objectives to be achieved through educational proposals.



Figure 7. Vallesana breed goats on Buscagna “alp”
(I. Denegri - Veglia-Devero Natural Park Archives)

The project starting point is the alpine farm, which can be considered as a place, almost a “lab”, where the tourist interacts with typical environment, culture and tradition. It may represent a possible example of rural education - at the same time a structure and a resource for summer holidays. Alpine farming activities include “live” demonstrations of cheese-making, popular transhumance festivals (e.g. herd ascent/descent to/from alpine pastures), etc. Most important, alpine pastures represent places where animals - through grazing activity - contribute to the maintenance of botanical biodiversity.

Where Project is located

The project works on a territory still alive, where already other recent initiatives aimed to know alpine farming structures and their productions, such as Bettelmat cheese (registered mark) and Ossolano cheese, whose production areas and technologies have been widely studied in a project where Turin University was a partner (Bianchi *et al.*, 2002b).



Figure 8. Bettelmat in the seasoning cellar and the project “logo”
(M. Bernardini - Veglia-Devero Natural Park Archives)

The “Museo dell’Alpeggio” and other initiatives linked to it, originate within a Protected area deemed to protect Veglia and Devero alpine farming structures in western Lepontine Alps.

In parallel, on Swiss side there is the Gottardo dairy factory with its productions (students can visit it and assist to guided cheese-making demonstrations) and the “Route of Alps” in Bedretto Valley, a pathway at a high altitude which joins the main alpine farming structures of the area.

This project, besides having a physical seat in the “Museo dell’Alpeggio” has above all planned an itinerary called “Alpeggi senza Confini” (“Alpine pasture without borders”) which connects the Alpe Veglia and the Gottardo dairy factory, passing through the Alpe Devero (physical seat of documentation centre), the San Giacomo Pass (a former important exchange connection with Switzerland) and continuing, on the Swiss region, as a part of the Helvetic “Strada degli Alpi”.



Figure 9. Alpe Valleggia, Switzerland (STEA Archives)

The itineraries allow tourists to visit Italian and Swiss alpine farms and pastures so giving the possibility of politely and respectfully experiencing the way of life of different actors by observing their activities, animals and pastures, actively participating to local festivals and traditions too. In this way alpine farm becomes a place where:

- the alpine breeder gets more income;
- new job opportunities for young people are possible;
- alpine communities are supported, even socially;
- on-site rural education is made;
- traditions and customs are cared;
- a sustainable tourism allows a global mountain valorization.

On the other hand the Museum, represents – through present and historical tools and pictures, multimedia, etc. - both a real and virtual place which can be visited all the year long.



Figure 10. Grazing herd at Bettelmat pasture, Italy (*L. Battaglini Archives*)

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