



MOVING
MOUNTAIN VALORISATION THROUGH
INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND GREEN GROWTH

Policy Brief

SIERRA MORENA | Iberian Ham PDO – Los Pedroches



Photo credit: Guillermo Palacios Rodríguez



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Sierra Morena: Iberian Ham PDO – Los Pedroches

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Summary

Iberian pig breeding has historically characterised the social-ecological system of dehesa in Sierra Morena. Dehesa is a representation of a domesticated Mediterranean forest, providing pastures and acorns for pigs and other types of livestock. Dehesa also supports other value chains, like livestock rearing, cork extraction and, more recently, sky observation by astronomical tourists. In addition, dehesa produces other ecosystem services such as recreation, water harvesting and climate change mitigation, not highly valued yet. The cultural, social, and ecological values of the region highly depend on these landscapes that are firmly embedded in the daily life of the villages and towns of the territory.

A more in-depth study is needed for the analysis of the threats faced by this sector that will have a decisive impact on the sustainability of the socio-ecosystem.

Know more about the Sierra Morena Reference Region, its selected value chain and the regional multi-actor platform (MAP), [here](#).

Key policy messages

- Dehesa is a unique socio-ecological landscape shaped by centuries of human intervention in the Mediterranean forest that needs to be protected.
- The uniqueness of the dehesa, which combines pasture and forest, must be adequately recognised by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).
- Limited access to land makes difficult the generational renewal and prevents young farmers' installations.
- The transfer of valuable local traditional knowledge is hampered by the low generational renewal.
- Science, society and policy need to join forces to share and co-create knowledge and professional skills.

1. The Mountain Reference Region (MRR)

The Mountain Reference Region (MRR) of Sierra Morena is located in the south of Spain and separates the central plateau from the Guadalquivir valley. It extends through four Andalusian



provinces, giving them a specific landscape identity. *Dehesa* represents one of the main bio-cultural landscapes of Sierra Morena. The *dehesa/montado* of Spain/Portugal is a savannah-like pasture that is the result of prolonged human action that creates a multi-functional agrosilvopastoral system where agriculture, forestry and grazing are combined in a sustainable manner (Bélair et al., 2010). The main tree components are oaks, usually holm and cork.

Dehesa represents the connection between the cultural, natural, and social dimensions of the social-ecological system. From a cultural perspective, *dehesa* preserves different types of traditional knowledge and practices associated with cattle, sheep and pig grazing, fresh and cured meat, dairy and honey productions, cork extraction, and other products such as mushrooms or aromatic herbs. Additionally, other novel and innovative value chains, such as astronomical tourism, takes place in these locations. The area has been declared as a Starlight Reserve due to the absence of light pollution.

The cultural impact of the *dehesa* goes far further. It shapes the daily lives of the people of the area, and it fosters community cohesion through *dehesa* related linguistic expressions, cooking recipes, and local and regional festivities. Considering all these unique socio-cultural and biophysical interrelationships, we believe that the *dehesa* of Sierra Morena can work as a fundamental element to support resilience, socio-economic development, and sustainability of the territory.

2. Iberian Ham, the taste of *dehesa*

Our selected value chain (VC) to be analysed in-depth is Iberian ham. Iberian ham from acorn-fed pigs is one of the profitable products of the *dehesa* system. Due to its healthy and organoleptic properties, and its national and international recognition, this value chain produces considerable economic benefits that influence the resilience of the social-ecological system where it is produced.

In Los Pedroches region, a cooperative with more than 60 years of tradition brings together producers, entrepreneurs, researchers, and processors. In addition to the Iberian pig products, this cooperative also supplies other animal products, making it a key point of confluence for several stakeholders in the region. *Dehesa* has positive connotations, being associated with animal welfare, a scenic landscape, sustainability, and collective identity. So, several products of the *dehesa* (including the Iberian ham) use this element as a marketing strategy to promote the quality of the product. Iberian PDO certification ensures a series of features related to the livestock loads on the farms and the pig's genetic breed. For the ham to be of optimum quality, it is also necessary for the pigs to be fed mainly on acorns and pasture during the winter season (before being slaughtered), while freely moving and exercising in the *dehesa*. If all these conditions are met, the product will be premium, and the ecosystem balance will also be maintained. However, *dehesa* faces problems related to its sustainability and the exploitation of



its resources. Many of these problems have to do with the grazing intensity and other factors related to climate change (droughts, diseases, increased temperatures, etc.)

3. Value chain contribution to sustainability and resilience of the Mountain Reference Region (MRR): barriers and opportunities

Iberian ham production in the *dehesa* is a traditional activity, which has been developed over millennia. It has established a sustainable relationship between the conservation of the Mediterranean forest and the exploitation of its natural resources, through a specific cultural practice rooted in the territory. It has fostered a collective identification with the environment from generation to generation. Iberian ham has so far played a key role in the resilience and sustainability of the *dehesa*. Its profitability has been key in keeping alive the related traditional practices and in grounding the population to the territory. However, at the same time, the profitability of Iberian ham has led to an increased grazing intensity in the region, which is now one of the key factors affecting the sustainability of this landscape.

Beside the overexploitation of the resources, *dehesa* is currently facing additional problems such as climate change, poor regeneration of its typical vegetation, and the lack of generational replacement. Moreover, a significant part of the Iberian ham production is still traditionally developed in family businesses with limited skills or resources to implement innovative approaches in the management and processing of the hams. On one hand, this aspect contributes to the maintenance of the traditional practices; and on the other hand, it hinders the application of novel measures. Finally, the sector struggles to differentiate itself in the market and to compete in the same market niche with other industrialised products, and this blurs its specific characteristics regarding its sustainable production (Sanz-Pagés et al., 2021). Considering the great importance of Iberian ham in the resilience of the region, it is worth analysing the future of this value chain, the key drivers that may affect it, and the policy recommendations that can guarantee a resilience and sustainable future for the region.

4. Policy relevant considerations

- The uniqueness of the *dehesa* landscape is not recognised by European policies, especially Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).
- Limited incentives for generational replacement.
- Better regulation of the carrying capacity of farms to avoid land degradation and quality loss of the products.
- Family businesses have difficulties when modernising and innovating.
- Local traditional production with problems to be industrialised.
- Remote areas with lack of connectivity that prevent digitalization of the processes and procedures.



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References

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