MOVING
MOuntain Valorisation through INterconnectedness and Green growth

Policy Brief

SIERRA MORENA | Iberico Ham "Los Pedroches" PDO

Photo credit: Guillermo Palacios Rodríguez

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MOUNTAIN VALORISATION THROUGH INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND GREEN GROWTH

Sierra Morena: Iberico Ham "Los Pedroches" PDO

Authors: *María del Mar DELGADO-SERRANO, Verena ARNDT, Cristina RENTERIA-GARITA*

Summary

Los Pedroches PDO Iberico Ham Value Chain has been analysed in Sierra Morena Mountain Region. Iberico ham is produced with Iberico breed pigs raised in dehesas and fed with acorns and natural products during the fall season. Feeding and exercising derive into (unsaturated) fat marbling, providing a delicious and healthy product that reaches a very high price in the market, being considered a luxury product consumed during special occasions (Christmas, weddings) and fine restaurants. The sustainability of the Dehesa ecosystem and ham production depends on consumers' willingness to pay a premium price. Climate change (affecting acorn production), generational renewal, and lack of skilled workers might impact the future of this value chain and, consequently, the dehesa ecosystem. Policies must recognise dehesa's singularities and subsidise it accordingly, ensure fair PDO labelling, prevent fraud, raise consumer awareness of the unique ham characteristics and enhance the attractiveness and wellbeing of these mountain areas.

1. Iberico Ham: Taste the Flavor, Sustain the Dehesa

Sierra Morena is a medium-high altitude mountain range located in the South of Spain. **Dehesa** is one of its most distinctive landscapes, forming unique savannah-like pastures as a result of a long history of traditional management practices. This multifunctional agrosilvopastoral system, with holm and cork oaks as the main tree species, can combine agriculture, forestry, and grazing sustainably (Bélair et al., 2010) and is considered a High Nature Value (HNV) farming system (Pinto-Correia et al. 2018).

Figure 1: Iberico pigs in Sierra Morena Dehesas (Source: Javier Moreno)

Key Policy Messages

- ☞ Flexible policies
- ☞ Recognition of the uniqueness of the landscape and product
- ☞ Willingness to pay premium prices
- ☞ Transparent labelling and fraud control
- ☞ Recognition of the public goods and services provided

Iberico ham is produced in these dehesas from Iberico-breed, acorn-fed pigs. This high-quality product value chain is the most profitable dehesa product, being nationally and internationally recognised for its health benefits and exceptional taste.

MOVING has analysed the value chain of PDO Los Pedroches Iberico ham in depth. Iberico PDO certification ensures the product's territorial identity and specific standards related to sustainable livestock density on land and the pigs' genetic breed. For the ham to achieve premium quality, it is essential that the pigs are primarily fed on acorns and pasture during the fall season while freely roaming in the Dehesa. Meeting these conditions ensures a top-quality product and maintains the ecosystem's balance.

To be labelled PDO Los Pedroches, the pigs must be 100% Iberico breed and

extensively graze in the Dehesa. The highest quality is the black label (100% pure breeding, 1 pig per hectare and 2-3 months feeding in Dehesas). The final product's quality depends on the pigs' wellbeing and the landscape's sustainable management. Dehesas and Iberico ham production is associated with animal welfare, scenic landscapes, sustainability and collective identity.

2. Value chain contribution to resilience and sustainability

Los Pedroches PDO Iberico ham is a very regulated sector. The production is organised in small farms, small-scale ham drying plants, and a big cooperative that also owns the slaughterhouse. This social fabric is essential to maintaining social sustainability. The PDO regulation limits the number of pigs per hectare, ensuring environmental sustainability of dehesas. The premium price maintains economic sustainability by providing jobs and incomes, supporting traditional practices, and anchoring the population to the land.

Traditional cultural practices deeply rooted in the territory across generations created a sustainable relationship between the product and ecosystem conservation. Given the long history of co-development with the HNV system and the unique socio-cultural and biophysical interconnections, the Iberico ham value chain is essential for dehesa sustainability and socioeconomic development, generating significant economic benefits for the region.

However, future resilience is affected by several factors. Iberian breeds are less productive than other breeds, dehesa is a very special ecosystem that cannot be reproduced anywhere, and an extensive rearing system means a low carrying capacity by hectare. In addition, quality hams need a long curing process (up to 4 years), meaning long turnover time and high risks of the drying and maturation of a natural product. Other threats derive from climate change effects (droughts, rising temperatures and diseases affecting tree health, density, and acorn production); overgrazing in non-PDO farms; and social problems such as a lack of generational replacement, difficulties for newcomers to entering the business, and a heavy burden of bureaucracy and regulations. Moreover, family businesses often have limited resources or skills to implement innovative management and processing approaches.

3. Policy experiences

PDO regulations protect the product and support premium prices. However, powerful external industrial interests push to make these regulations laxer and permit different products, not following all the traditional rules of Iberico ham production, to be marketed as such.

European policies, such as the CAP, do not recognise Dehesa's uniqueness. Agriculture policies subsidise pastures, and environmental policies protect trees. Hence, the Dehesa ecosystem is fragmented by public policies, and farmers receive lower subsidies.

Generational replacement incentives are not attractive enough for young people.

Territorial service provision policies for rural areas are based on the number of inhabitants, leaving unpopulated areas poorly serviced. Limited access to connectivity and digitalisation worsens the situation.

4. Recommendation for future policies

Flexible policies: Policies such as the CAP, forestry policies and Iberico ham regulations should be adaptable to the unique characteristics of the Dehesa landscape, recognising it as a distinct hybrid ecosystem with both productive and anthropized forest qualities.

Remuneration for ecosystem services: Ecosystem services provided by the dehesa, such as carbon sequestration and biodiversity preservation, should be recognised and remunerated.

CAP eco-schemes should offer payments for the maintenance of these areas and encourage sustainable practices.

Clear control and labelling standards: The quality standard for Iberico ham should closely align with traditional production practices. Clear product categories must be defined to provide consumers with transparency and combat fraud in product marketing.

Adequate management of genetic resources: The genetic book of the Iberico pig breed requires adequate management and control to protect the rights of small producers and facilitate the protection and genetic improvement of pure breeding.

Support for local products and services: Public institutions should actively support and promote the consumption of local products, strengthening territorial identification and added value.

Access to basic services such as healthcare, communication, education, and culture is vital for rural settlement and generational renewal.

Digitalisation: Rural areas require improved digital infrastructures and support for the ageing population to access and use digital technologies. Digitalisation can enhance traceability and quality assurance in Iberian ham production by using remote sensors for animal monitoring and infrared systems for product origin verification. It supports dehesa sustainability through early pest and disease detection and acorn harvest forecasting. Interconnectivity of digital systems to manage livestock is also necessary.

Research and knowledge transfer: Increased research and knowledge sharing on the management of dehesa is crucial. Sharing local and academic knowledge is necessary for advancing towards a more sustainable, resilient, and valued Sierra Morena territory.

Inclusive and long-term policies: Policies that impact mountain areas should be long-term policies that involve various territorial actors and promote practices to enhance sustainability and resilience in the Sierra Morena landscape.

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Reference

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Authors

María del Mar Delgado Serrano
mmdelgado@uco.es

Verena Arndt
g12ararv@uco.es

Cristina Rentería Garita
c.renteria@uco.es