

EAT MUTTON, WEAR WOOL, HEAT WITH WOOD: TRADITIONAL WAYS TO STOP WILDFIRES

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Locals, forestry experts, farmers, and ecologists all agreed that the principal problem is bad forest

management, which is best countered by a return of rural life and its traditional activities, particularly extensive cattle farming. But it's easier said than done.

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For the tiny town of Tábara, Spain, the summer of 2022 will go down in historic infamy. In mid-July a record breaking 30,000 hectares burned around it in one of Europe's worst fires of an inflamed summer.

[Forest fires](#) have raged across the continent from Romania to Portugal. No country has been harder hit than Spain, and within Spain, no area has been more affected than the northwest, including the province of Zamora where Tábara is located. Just miles from Tábara, in the bioserve of the Sierra de la Culebra, another fire had already burned an additional 30,000 hectares in June and killed a firefighter and a local farmer. Both fires were started by lightning.

Now the flames are out, thankfully, but locals are demanding action to prevent future fires. They have held protests, and the [Confederación Sindical de Comisiones Obreras](#) (national federation of worker's unions) has brought a [lawsuit](#) against the provincial government for not activating more wildfire prevention resources earlier, as the national meteorological agency had warned of a high forest fire risk in June.

The people want more from the government than conveniently scapegoating 'global warming,' as [Spanish President Pedro Sanchez](#) has done. Locals, forestry experts, farmers, and ecologists are calling not only for more state resources dedicated to forest management, but also for a return of traditional rural activities that had prevented

uncontrollable forest fires for centuries, particularly extensive cattle grazing.

In extensive cattle farming, cows, goats, and sheep eat from low to high pastures through the seasons, including in forests, their appetites doing the heavy lifting of ridding the forest floor of excessive vegetation that otherwise dies, dries out, and becomes fuel for fires. It was practised for centuries in Spain.

“We need extensive cattle farming,” Antonio Juarez Nuñez, the mayor of Tábara (where a local farmer was severely burned attempting to cut a fire break), told the *European Conservative*. “I don’t know why, but the truth is that it’s disappearing.”

His lament echoes that of La Unión de Pequeños Agricultores (the union of small farmers, UPA), and a coalition of premier ecological associations, including the World Wildlife Federation and Greenpeace, who have all called on the government to promote extensive cattle grazing and other practices once common in villages. Francisco Castañares, president of the Asociación Extremeña de Empresas Forestales y de Medio Ambiente (the Extremaduran association of forestry companies and the environment) explained to the *European Conservative* that while the patterns of hotter, drier weather of recent years help create longer fire seasons, the key element determining how long and hot a particular forest fire will burn is the amount of fuel available to keep it going. Modern forest science has calculated the tonnage per hectare of dry vegetation a forest can contain, before extinguishing fire can be nearly impossible, even with modern means. According to Castañares, many Spanish forests, particularly in northwest Spain, have ten times the amount of biomass sitting them than is manageable. In a cascading effect, the more vegetation the soil must support, the more quickly vegetation dies and dries up. Hotter, drier weather only further accelerates the process.

“The change has been fast,” comments Mario Cabello Martinez, a career firefighter who now runs the office of environmental management, also responsible for forestry, in Astorga, Spain, just east of Zamora.

When he started his career in 1996, a forest fire of 1,000 hectares was considered large. Now it might not even make the national evening news.

How the change happened

Spain has some of the greatest extensions of forest in Europe, partly due to rural depopulation that has allowed formerly cultivated land to regrow forests, whether through neglect or intentional reforestation. Just sixty to seventy years ago, Castañares explains, he grew up on a goat farm in one of Spain's hottest, driest regions. Yet, the land surrounding the villages was a mosaic of vineyards, vegetable gardens, cereal fields, and patches of forests kept tidy by rural activities from cattle grazing to wood collection, to controlled burns done to prepare the forest floor to grow spring greens for cattle. While the goats grazed openly, his mother cooked the family's three meals a day by burning wood collected from the forest in a traditional stove.

Now that way of life is gone. During the 1960s and 70s, Spaniards migrated en masse from country to city, flipping the weight of Spain's population from rural to urban areas. Since then, agriculture, too, has either switched to modern, intensive methods or disappeared almost completely, and the top down policies of modern bureaucracy started to overshadow traditional local governance. Spain still has millions of farm animals, but most are now raised on megafarms, kept close to the barns where they are fattened up more efficiently at troughs of imported soybeans than by grazing on natural vegetation. Traditional rights such as communal lands and privileges to use them for grazing and wood collection are largely in place, but overlaid with modern bureaucratic technocracy. The few people left in villages, sometimes mostly elderly, no longer rely on wood for energy and heat.

Cabello, who grew up in a village of 100 people in the same area where he now works, and now works in the modern forestry bureaucracy, recognizes that though traditional activities are still allowed, doing them often requires getting a permit from his office. Still,

he considers himself at the service of rural populations, and keeps the bureaucratic hoops to a minimum. He finds the main problem is that too few people can or want to do traditional activities.

He and his forest rangers regularly gather and chop dried wood on public lands and let villagers know it's available for the taking, but most of it remains uncollected, he said, and his office doesn't have the resources to bring it out of the forest. They also do controlled burns at the request of farmers to create pastures, but there are fewer farmers and farm animals than in previous decades.

"The cows are what they are," he said, "and 100 don't eat as much as a 1,000."

"Why extensive cattle farming is disappearing is a good question," Diego Juste Conesa, spokesperson for UPA, told the EC. "It's being replaced by an industrial model that is more profitable and easier to manage."

He considers the change part of the wider trend of a globalised economic model, a system of production and profit developed outside rural areas and without their needs in mind. Just as Cabello Martinez has noticed the acceleration of forest fires within his lifetime, so Juste Conesa cites an example of how the global-industrial economy continues demolishing the remnants of traditional agriculture and industry.

"Spain has lost 10 million sheep in the last ten years," he said. "Wool isn't worth anything. It's a problem for sheep farmers."

Sheep were once Spain's superstar extensive grazing animals. For centuries, flocks of them covered the countryside, led by their shepherds from valley to mountain in transhumance journeys that could span hundreds of kilometres. Until the mid-twentieth century, wool was used ubiquitously for common household items from mattresses to blankets, clothing, and dishcloths. Mutton and lamb formed a staple of the household diet. Since the 1950s synthetic materials and cotton, which is not produced in Spain, have

become the predominant textiles and production has been outsourced, principally to Asia. Australia now has the global corner on wool, which, in clothing, is mostly a speciality fabric for haute couture. At the table, the modern household diet favours chicken, pork, and beef—often raised on industrialised megafarms—over mutton and lamb.

Filling the generation gap

Despite a romanticization of rural life and the rhetorical hand wringing at its loss, a small return-to-the-village movement, promises from campaigning politicians, and millions of EU funds dedicated to rural development still find that replicating the ways of the past is nearly impossible. Few young people want to go into agriculture, Ajuste notes.

Tradition has been broken, in both the forest ecosystem and the human one. In the rupture of traditional rural life, the deep forestry knowledge of accumulated generations ceased to be handed down, while simultaneously the forests themselves changed. According to Castañares, the times call for greater oversight and involvement by modern forestry experts such as Carbello Martinez.

Castañares also advocates for reducing bureaucracy and introducing a regulation model that emphasises education and instruction, over prohibition and permission granting.

But for real change to occur, both Madrid and Brussels need to deeply reconsider their forestry policies. Monoculture reforestation is problematic, for example, though it has often been practised in Spain. Castañares cites another more recent irony, as well: reforestation projects, sponsored by polluting industries as carbon-offsetting measures, that end up neither beneficially exploited nor properly managed, but simply abandoned.

Additionally, Castañares and Cabello Martinez agree that forestry needs to be able to pay for itself, as it did in decades past because local communities benefited directly from caring for the forests. When and where logging proves profitable, forests contain less

flammable biomass, Cabello Martinez notes, but various economic factors can mean companies just don't harvest the wood they could. Castañares advocates for developing biomass energy projects as an alternative means of incentivizing clearing out dead wood and vegetation. Unfortunately, he also recognizes that biomass energy, which works best for local energy consumption, is incompatible with the current speculative, big business model of energy production.

Whatever it takes, the urbanite approach to forest management needs to be curtailed in rural areas.

"We have to stop the urban tyranny," he says. "We need to design forests like our ancestors did. It was these people who preserved them so that we have the national parks and nature reserves we do today."

Residents of rural northwest of Spain share his sentiments. In Astorga, locals have long complained about the ubiquitous monoculture pine plantations that have altered much of the natural landscape. On Saturday, July 30th, approximately a hundred people gathered in Astorga for a round table discussion on rural depopulation and again spoke out, inevitably addressing forestry among the topics. Panellists denounced top-down technocratic bureaucracy for usurping traditional local control and forestry practice. When the floor was opened to the audience, the public lamented the low prices farmers were paid for their products, the exodus of the last generation of youth—often sent off to university by their parents never to return to the village—and an economic system that continues to push youth to big cities—all factors which create empty villages and dry brush-filled forests.

One way or another Spain's forests will be cleared. If not by helpful human activity, then by the large forest fires that will continue if nothing changes.