

A MUNICIPAL GOAT FLOCK IN SPAIN

GOAT FLOCK MANAGEMENT IN SIERRA DE GUADARRAMA

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1. Introduction

El Boalo, a village in the Guadarrama mountains north of Madrid, used to have more than 2,000 head of sheep and goats. This was a region of good shepherds, goatherds and cattle breeders. The village is connected with others in the area, including Cerceda and Mataelpino, by a dense network of *Vías Pecuárias*: a complex system of drove roads formerly used by local farmers for the seasonal north-south migration of transhumant flocks of Merino sheep in search of greener pastures (Grande and Botin, 2012). In the traditional husbandry system, shepherds always accompanied their flocks and used Spanish Mastiff dogs to protect them from wolf attacks.

The wolf disappeared due to hunting and the modernization and social transformation of rural Spain after 1960 meant that most farmers switched from sheep and goats to dairy cattle, mainly Friesians, with a more intensive production system. Later, in the 1990s, many farms closed due to a fall in milk prices and remaining farmers turned to production of veal from Avileña and its crossbreeds. Their products are currently marketed with the Guadarrama protected geographical indication label (www.carneguadarrama.com), being pro-

duced on farms of communal fenced pastures. Along with pressure from tourism and growing sport and leisure activities such as mountain biking and running, this situation has led to decreasing use of the *Vías Pecuárias* by shepherds and livestock.

To this we must add the recent reappearance of wolves, that have managed to re-colonize Guadarrama after an absence of almost 70 years (MAAMA, 2015), and the creation in 2013 of Guadarrama National Park. This generated great uncertainty among farmers, as they had to face a new problem and a new legal framework regulating agricultural and grazing practices within the park, forcing them to change their routines and jeopardizing the economic feasibility of their farms.

In the midst of this complex scenario, in October 2016 the municipality of El Boalo initiated a project to recover traditional grazing and extensive husbandry, founded on the principles of sustainability and agroecology. This project was based on the formation of a municipal flock of Guadarrameña goats: an autochthonous and protected breed, well adapted to conditions in Spanish mountains.

2. Objectives

The first objective of the municipal flock was to reconnect people with the countryside and traditional husbandry, as this is a necessary element to achieve conservation of the local mountain ecosystem. The second objective was to reduce organic waste by feeding it to the goats and producing compost on the municipal farm. Third was the search for synergies to attract entrepreneurship related to transformation of the basic products from the flock, namely meat and milk, into artisanal products to be consumed locally within a circular economy. The fourth objective was prevention of forest fires in the peri-urban areas of the municipality. The last goal of this singular project is to improve coexistence of extensive livestock grazing and wolves in the national park by promoting the use of preventive measures such as livestock guarding dogs and by providing farmers affected by wolf attacks with replacement animals.

3. Development

The project began with 75 goats, the goal being to reach 150 breeding purebred Guadarrameña females. There are currently 130 breeding individuals and 60 yearling goats, along with 15 bucks and 30 wethers. Two farmers affected by wolf attacks have bought breeding males from the municipal flock for their own herds. The municipal flock is part of the Guadarrameña Goat Breeders Association that carries out selection and genetic improvement programmes.

The flock participates in the fire prevention programme of the Madrid Community firefighters, being assigned several hectares to graze during the year.



Fig. 1 Spanish Mastiff with goat kids in a corral (*majada*).

(Photo: Javier de los Nietos Miguel)

To improve management, the flock is divided into three groups: males, lactating females and young animals. This splitting of the flock allows diversifying into grazing and clearing areas, as well as meeting requests from other municipalities to take advantage of the services provided by the municipal flock to clear vegetation on farms and along roads. The villages of Navarrevisca, Guadarrama and Miraflores de la Sierra are good examples of this. Thanks to this initiative, which is framed in a local circular economy programme, the municipality of El Boalo was recognised by Zero Waste Europe (www.zerowasteurope.eu) and the Ministry of Ecological Transition.



Fig. 2 Spanish Mastiff with goat kids in a corral (*majada*). Guadarrama National Park is visible in the background.

(Photo: Javier de los Nietos Miguel)

The flock is protected by four Spanish Mastiffs that were donated by another farmer. They are neutered and kept with the goats in corrals (*majadas*) to protect them from predators and thieves (Figs. 1 and 2). During the day they accompany the grazing flock. Due to frequent visitors, the Mastiffs are used to the presence of large groups of people and families. They are effective guardians around the corrals, are not too aggressive with other dogs and do not display overt aggression towards people. While the flock is grazing they sometimes wander away to search for food from visitors in nearby picnic areas. Interactions with tourists, who treat working dogs as if they were pets, are the trickiest issue to manage.

A year after establishing the flock, young entrepreneurs assist by caring for and milking the goats and guiding visitors. Milk is collected by an artisanal cheese factory (Alimentos de Miraflores), which produces both pasteurised and unpasteurised cheeses. The price for one litre of milk in 2018 ranged



Fig. 3 Transhumance with a group of young people taking part in an environmental education activity, passing Santillana reservoir, Manzanares el Real. (Photo: Javier de los Nietos Miguel)

from 0.51 to 0.82 euros, which was still below the 0.90–1.00 euro needed to cover all production costs. Goat kids can be bought for consumption at public auctions and the annual Guadarrameña Goat Fair brings locals and visitors together to savour products from the flock.

The herd is also used as a didactic resource to educate and raise awareness among young people and families. This is done through workshops with schoolchildren, guided tours and herding the flock (Fig. 3) as well as promotional campaigns on television. Visitors to the flock are accompanied by an environmental education guide. Guides can be hired through the sustainable tourism portals of Guadarrama National Park. People can also help by volunteering (Fig. 4). Information is disseminated through the



Fig. 4 Volunteers with Spanish Mastiffs that protect the flock. (Photo: Javier de los Nietos Miguel)

flock website (www.cabrasbcmblog.wordpress.com), which has already received 8,000 visits from 60 different countries in two years. There is a blog with news about daily activities and events organized within the project, but also focused on relevant issues about goat breeding.

4. Final considerations

The commitment of El Boalo to recover traditional husbandry by creating a municipal flock has been a model of disruptive innovation in a sector that needed to find new proposals and solutions to modern day challenges. There is growing collaboration and support for the project, which is the subject of study by university students¹. As a result, different stakeholders, from livestock breeders to administrators and conservation groups, are following this innovative project to assess whether it is transferable to other regions. Replication in other parts of Spain should be possible, as long as the specific local context and characteristics are taken into account.

References

- Grande JC, Botin P (coord.) (2012) La Trashumancia en España, Libro Blanco. RED Rural Nacional. Ministerio de Agricultura, Alimentación y Medio Ambiente, Madrid, 137 p.
- MAAMA (2015) Censo 2012–2014 de lobo ibérico (*Canis lupus*, Linnaeus, 1758) en España, Ministerio de Agricultura, Alimentación y Medio Ambiente, Madrid, 8 p.

¹ Several theses have focused on the project with topics related to agroecological initiatives and conflicts between wolves and extensive livestock breeding in the Sierra de Guadarrama.