TRADITIONAL SALT MAKING AREAS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: POLES FOR SOUND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT AND NATURE CONSERVATION

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Traditional salt making areas in the Mediterranean region have long since ceased to be profitable and now are succumbing under urban sprawl pressure or disappearing due to land abandonment. So are their associated cultural and natural values. However, some salt making areas are reviving thanks to the co-operative efforts of salters, open-minded local authorities and environmental and cultural NGOs. The revival of traditional salt making areas, if taken seriously, not only may preserve their values and transform them into interesting tourist attractions, but it may also create opportunities for local socioeconomic development, both via direct and indirect employment creation, as strengthening the sense of cultural identity among salters and other local population. Besides, the sound use of the natural resources of such an area preserves its environmental goods and services. An in-depth understanding of salinas' recovery case studies is required in order to set up new initiatives of sound local development and conservation based on the recovery of traditional salt making sites. This paper will discuss two local development scenarios for such an initiative focusing on two salinas in the Mediterranean region.

Key words: salinas, nature conservation, local development, recovery, Mediterranean

1. THE PAST

Salt used to be called "white gold" for a good reason. Salt is life, as we need it for survival; but is was more so in the past. Without refrigerators, salt was essential to preserve food. In the past, the production of salt took mainly place by evaporation, either by sun and wind, or with fire. The climate of the Mediterranean region made it a privileged area for salt making: Sea, sun and wind were the ingredients for good and plenty of salt. At least over 120 coastal salinas and 167 inland salinas existed in the Mediterranean region during the 20th century [1,2]. It should be noted here that solar evaporation salinas in Europe are only found in the Iberian Peninsula. The rich history related to salt has left important vestiges in the landscape: Castles, fortified cities, towers, cathedrals, noble houses, etc. dot the countryside in those areas where salt was produced or commercialised. Wars were fought over this resource and taxes were drawn from its trade (i.e. the *gabelle* in France or *diezmos* in Spain) [3,4,5,6].

2. THE PRESENT

Salt has become an industrial commodity. It is no longer used as much in food preservation but a whole range of industrial and chemical processes require salt. However, the productivity of solar evaporation salinas is in general not as efficient as vacuum plants or other salt mining processes. Solar evaporation plants, whether coastal or continental, require a relatively high manpower per produced tonne and are need to rely on favourable weather conditions to produce salt. The improvement of the transportation networks all over the world have made it very cheap to import or transport salt from far but profitable salt mines or vacuum plants. Mediterranean coastal salinas suffer also high pressure from urban sprawl. Middle sized salinas are not profitable for salt production, but offer very attractive, vast expanses of flat ground close to or at the coast, for urban developers, as there is little space left for new residential or leisure resorts. In the case of inland salinas, their profitability is even lower than that of coastal ones, as their period of productivity is much shorter (usually 2-3 months) and are generally smaller in size. Also, in the second half of the 20th century there has been a generalised land abandonment in rural areas of the Iberian Peninsula: in 1900, 50% of the population of Spain lived in the countryside, whereas in 2001, only 25% live in rural areas [7]. Most of the rural inhabitants desired to improve their quality of life, searching for white collar jobs in cities and abandoning traditional agricultural practices. The combination of these two factors (low profitability, land abandonment) have caused an almost complete halt of inland salt making in Spain. However, the fact that the land has been abandoned, means that the remains of salt making sites in inland areas may still be found in relatively good state, once the brush has been cleared and the hydrological devices have been cleaned. In this case, the degree of deterioration depends on the date of abandonment, rather than invasion from other competing uses of the ground. However, in both cases, the loss of salinas means the loss of their associated cultural and natural values, what can be called “saltscape” [8]. The question is, whether this loss is permanent or it can still be reversed.

3. THE FUTURE

Traditional salinas offer a range of opportunities for local development that may justify their recovery. In figure 1, four pillars of salinas’ development are proposed. The first pillar, “salt making”, is the obvious goal of any salina, that is what it has been made for. The recovery of a salina should therefore aim at making salt again. These type of facilites, especially when they are in function, are also an excellent ground for (environmental) “education” in natural and cultural heritage conservation and values for all kinds of public. Of course, making a salina work again means that it is preserved, that it is a healthy, productive wetland. A sound use of it means also that the wetland still produces its good and services for the environment. It therfore contributes to the “conservation” of its natural and cultural values. Finally, “tourism” is an important economic activity that may support the salina in production, and together offer direct and indirect job opportunities in the area. Visitors will get the chance to see salt being produced (“salt making”), learn about the values of a salina (education) and contribute to preserving it by, i.e., buying salt (conservation). All four pillars are in fact connected to each other, and the combination of the four contribute to a sound management of a traditional salina.

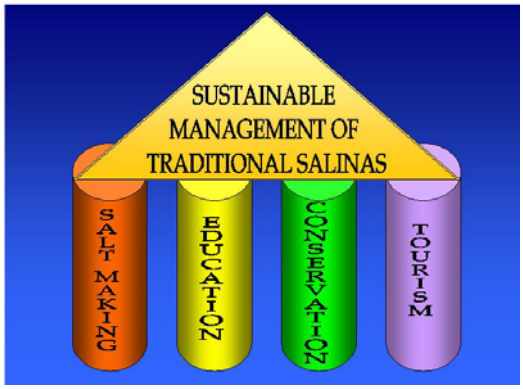

Figure 1: The four pillars of sustainable management of traditional salinas

Here, two case studies in the Mediterranean region are shown, in which the four pillars of development are being applied succesfully: Marais salants de Guérande, in France, and Salinas de Añana, in Spain. The two sites have very different backgrounds, from historical, cultural and natural points of view and so differ their saltscapes. Table 1 gives an overview of the most relevant features of each salt making site, within the context of this paper.

Table 1: Main features of the two case studies:
Marais salants de Guérande (France) and Salinas de Añana (Spain)

Feature	Marais salants de Guérande	Salinas de Añana
Type of salina	Coastal salina	Inland salina
Main threat in the past	Urban sprawl	Land abandonment
Main value	Mainly natural	Mainly cultural
Previous ownership	Individual salters	Individual salters
Present ownership	Cooperative	Private company
Initiative to recover	Salters, public	Local government, now also owners
Source of financing	Public funds, salters	Public funds

Nevertheless, both sites share their philosophy of local socioeconomic development associated to their main resource: the salina. The two case studies show how important it is that any proposal for local development arising from a salt making site will require a deep knowledge of its historical, socio-economic, cultural and natural background. The elaboration of a Master Plan (as is the case in Añana) requires time and resources, but proves to be an effective tool for sound development [9,10].

4. CASE STUDIES

4.1 The Guérande salt marshes (Marais salants de Guérande, NW France)

Halfway the 20th century, industrial salt seemed to have won the battle against artisanal salt, arguing its worse quality and appearance. Thus, the salt marshes of Guérande, in which salt was obtained by hand, agonised. Their location in the western coast of France made them very attractive for the creation of residential and tourist areas. However, in the mid 70s, a group of French citizens demanded a return to traditions, the production of local food, the recovery of cultural landscapes. The salt marshes of Guérande offered all of these. Some old salters, together with young people willing to learn the profession, started to produce artisanal salt again. These pioneer salters gradually became organised: A cooperative was founded and commercialisation strategies were designed

for the upper quality and bio products markets. Also, a school for professional salters was created.

The grey clay found in these marshes give the salt a peculiar ashen shade that used to be an argument of bad quality. Today, this color is the label of a traditional, high quality salt. The *sel gris de Guérande* has in the meantime obtained several quality certificates in and outside France (Label Rouge, Slow Food, Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée). Today, the salt marshes produce 9.000 tones of salt per year and invoice 12 million Euro a year. The cooperative hosts 250 salt makers with an average age of 38 years. Every year, 10 to 20 new salters graduate from their professional school. Today, the salt marshes of Guérande are so productive, that some voices start to doubt whether their salt is still to be considered artisanal.

4.2 Salinas de Añana (Basque Country, Spain)

At the end of the 90s, the village of Salinas de Añana saw their salinas agonise, after eleven centuries of operation, and in spite of having been declared a protected monument in 1984. Its five thousand crystalisation basins, that covered about twelve hectares of the Salado Valley, had been built on stilts in order to negotiate the steeps slopes of the valley but were then collapsing. Little could be done by the less than 200 inhabitants of the village, a quarter of its population in 1900. The profitability of the salina was almost nihil and its abandonment halted virtually all activity in the valley. The relatively short distance to the region's capital, Vitoria, only accelerated this migration process. The salinas had yet another difficulty, as they were owned by over 80 salt makers, who did not do any coordinated effort to save them. In the year 2000, however, the provincial authority proposed to prepare the Master Plan of the salinas, in order to recover the monument. To this end, the owners needed one spokesperson to deal with the authority. Thus was the company Gatzagak created. By means of a contract of surrender of property, the provincial authority started restoring the monument and recovering part of the basins for salt production. The timeframe for the full recovery of the monument is 20 years, with a budget of about 20 million euro.

The Master Plan includes also the creation of a vistors' centre and guided tours, the celebration of open-air cultural shows and the production of solar energy. Some of these activities are already taking place successfully. The salt produced in Añana (so far just 50 tonnes a year) is being demanded in Basque restaurants. Every year, the Salt Fair is being held, with the participation of thousands of visitors, and guided tours are being done even without having finished the restoration works. Salinas de Añana is also participating in international projects, such as Interreg III B "SAL", which focuses on the training of salters and tourist guides, as well as the improvement of the quality of the salt produced. The partners of this project, among which is also Guérande, also aim at creating salt routes for visitors.

Although the achievements of Salinas de Añana are yet a far cry from those of Guérande, the road towards a sustainable management of the monument is built and the will of all stakeholders involved to recover their valley and its activity is firm. It's just a matter of time.

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