

Traditional production of salt and its culture: your region benefits from it

There are many reasons to promote salt produced in a traditional way that can be of local interest and benefit, which can be categorized as follows:

- 1.conservation of biological diversity, physical environment and landscape
- 2.preservation of cultural heritage
- 3.contribution to local development through primary production, secondary use of the salt product, creation of networks (e.g. trade), as well as development of services (e.g. tourism).

As to the first, it is a recent proposal of the Ramsar Convention that salt is considered as a wetland product, therefore a product that may contribute to the sustainable use of wetlands and protection of their diversity. This applies equally to traditional salinas and mechanized saltworks.

Second, by promoting traditional salt production, one contributes to the preservation of traditional know-how of salt-making, as well as of cultural heritage. Such elements are the salters's profession and their wooden tools and inventions, together with the extraordinary saline landscapes throughout the Mediterranean. This is because many salinas have been abandoned throughout the 20th century, whereas others have been mechanized. The few still functioning traditional salinas continue to operate below capacity in a state of generalized decline and uncertainty.



Map of salinas in southern Europe

Third, by operating traditional salinas in an area, one augments the job opportunities and diversifies the types of occupations related to salt business. This is not the case with extensive saltworks, not only because these saltworks are mechanized, but also because the product is normally sold far from the producing area without any local involvement and benefit. Traditionally produced salt, on the other hand, is a high quality product allowing high prices. Such salt may acquire labels of distinction (traditional, local, natural, ecological, manually produced) as well as the traditional salinas (for operating with only soft energy, being rather environmentally friendly, etc.). Such labels may attract the consumers' preferences such as biological products. Because salt is an absolute necessity, it can play an important role in this new market that is emerging rapidly.

Further to salt production and related business, salt producing regions may benefit from parallel activities that may develop in combination to traditional salt production. Such an activity is tourism, especially ecotourism, that may include discovering salinas and their mode of operation, observing their flora and fauna, especially bird watching, experiencing their therapeutic or cosmetic values (bittern and mud baths). Other activities can be extensive fish farming, exploitation of bittern for chemical industry, as well as culture of seaweed, glasswort, even *Artemia*, the brine shrimp.



A nature trail in the salinas of Aveiro

Traditional salt production in combination with trading and tourism are activities that need experts as well as very well organized networks. Hence, it is expected that all these activities will revitalize the areas of salt production, nowadays suffering from general abandonment.



Landscape of a salina in Figueira da Foz

Facing the competition of important industrial units, traditional and artisanal salinas can only survive if their salt is discriminated, certified and labelled as traditional, ecological, handmade, or as a product resulting from special and protected landscapes. These qualities make traditional salt be perceived beyond its mere chemical composition of sodium chloride. There are already some encouraging examples of commercial differentiation achieved by rigorous certification processes, with positive impacts on the local economies. To this aim, the efforts of all economic agents,

politicians and the public must be combined under the motto different, unique and more expensive.

We are at the gateway of new opportunities for traditional salinas, with several activities and interests at the same time. The concluding message is that, by using traditionally produced salt, one not only supports the preservation of the culture standing behind and contributes to the conservation of saline wetlands, but also sustains the local economy and efforts of development based on the traditional salinas and the salt of the region. This is why it makes still sense to rehabilitate and restore salinas, make locals and decision makers aware, and carry out safeguard actions either through land use management methods, by supporting and guiding the owners, looking for partnerships, promoting associations and diffusing information on initiatives engaged in the area.



Ceramic "salt pigs" for practical use in the kitchen



A merchant buys salt from the producers in Mani, Greece