

19th EGF Symposium, Alghero, Sardinia (Italy), 7-10 May 2017

Overview of the symposium by *Alan Hopkins* (United Kingdom)

1) The symposium has highlighted the enormous variation within the terms of marginal farming in extensive areas - not only in vegetation and landscape, but also in environmental limitations, farm enterprises, challenges and cultural differences. This variation often presents problems for policy makers and bureaucrats, as marginal lands may not always fit the definitions of 'land in agricultural condition'. Mainstream farmers in less-challenged areas may also not fully appreciate the role of farmers in extensive marginal lands in maintaining landscapes and providing other ecosystem services. This highlights the need for policy innovations, and for researchers to develop technical and marketing innovations and to improve communications.

2) Marginal lands provide much more than food, and many papers have highlighted the provision of ecosystem services from marginal grassland and, conversely, the low extent of 'environmental disservices'. But even when regionally specific food products are of higher market value than basic commodity produce, the system is often viewed as agriculturally inefficient. The sustainability of many farms requires additional financial inputs if a reasonable livelihood is to be maintained. Payments, however, need to be related to provision of ecosystem services, rather than as simple subsidies. But ecosystem services often come in 'bundles' and this can present challenges for their valuation.

3) Food quality has been a recurring theme and many papers have presented results that reinforce the knowledge on the links between biodiversity, place of production and the valorization of produce, its chemical composition and potential benefits for human health and nutrition. Recognition of this multi-functional role of marginal lands is of pivotal importance in future research and policy development.

4) The range of research studies and outcomes reported in the symposium has highlighted the need for researchers to think outside their own specialisms and comfort zones. We have seen many examples of unconventional forage resources like shrubs, including N-fixing species, trees as forage in wood pastures and grasses commonly regarded as weeds being investigated for potential value in marginal situations, and for alternative purposes like phytoremediation, restoration and bioenergy. The extraordinary high biodiversity of the Mediterranean zones holds many potential opportunities and strengths connected to their multifunctional character.

5) We have seen many examples of work presented here based on the outcomes of collaboration, not just between researchers, but also between regions, countries and disciplines. This underlines one of the great strengths of EGF and its working groups, and from other arrangements including EIP-AGRI focus groups and other more informal arrangements. Future challenges require collaboration across boundaries, national and academic, and need to consider holistic approaches involving farmers and other stakeholders, and to develop the links between research and practice.