

# **Report of a Visit by a Group from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland to the Alentejo Region of Portugal**

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and Miguel Viera**

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***European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism***

## **PORTUGAL STUDY TOUR**

9th. - 14th. January 1996

Report of the visit by a group from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland  
to the Alentejo Region of Portugal

European Union  
Directorate General for the Environment  
Travel Grant Aid Programme 1995  
Management by Farmers of Important Nature Conservation Areas

*The European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism*  
Kindrochaid, Gruinart, Bridgend, Isle of Islay, Scotland PA44 7PT

## INTRODUCTION

This report describes the visit made by a group from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland to the Alentejo Region of Portugal during January 1996. The visit was organised by the European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism (EFNCP) and funded principally by the Directorate-General for the Environment (DG XI) under their Travel Grant Aid Programme.

The aim of this scheme is to allow those potentially involved in site management to travel to other parts of the EU to see how farm management for nature conservation operates in practice. The programme provides 50% funding towards the costs of travel, accommodation and food up to a maximum of ECU 375 per person. Groups of between 5 and 25 people composed of farmers, advisors, nature conservation specialists and government representatives are eligible. The scheme is administered in the UK by the Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP), London. The purpose of the scheme for DG XI relates primarily to the management of sites designated as SAC's (Special Areas of Conservation) under the EU Habitats Directive. A large proportion of these sites consist of farmland or forest and many require farm management to maintain their conservation value.

The European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism (EFNCP) is a pan European network of scientists, conservation managers and farmers, established as a charity in the UK and guided by a small executive committee and a Board of 28 members in 14 countries. The Forum holds biennial conferences, organises workshops and seminars and produces and circulates a newsletter, *La Cañada*, twice a year. Its aims are to:

\*..increase recognition of the value of low-intensity farmland to nature conservation, European biodiversity and sustainable land management.

\* ensure the availability, dissemination and exchange of supporting information, science and expertise.

\* develop and promote policy options which ensure the ecological maintenance of these cultural landscapes.

At the 1994 EFNCP conference in Trujillo, Spain the need to involve farmers more in the discussions and decisions affecting agri-environmental schemes was identified. The Board agreed to look for opportunities to develop this and accordingly reacted positively when approached to organise a study tour.

Because of the Forum's good network of contacts in Portugal and Scotland, and the pivotal role that long-established farming will play in the management of Habitat Directive sites in these countries, the EFNCP applied for grant-aid under the scheme to take a group from Scottish Highlands and Islands to the Alentejo Region of Portugal for a week in mid-January 1996.

## THE TOUR

### Planning and management

The planning and programming of the tour was arranged for the EFNCP by Eric Bignal (in Scotland) and Peter Eden and Miguel Viera (in Portugal).

The Highlands and Islands of Scotland and the Alentejo region of Portugal have a number of common issues related to rural development. Prominent amongst these is the high proportion of low intensity farmland based on livestock production with many areas of very high nature conservation value.

An objective when planning the visit was to put together a group of individuals from a range of farming and crofting situations which are of high nature conservation status (SSSI, SPA, Ramsar and SAC designations) where there are active schemes integrating farmland management with nature conservation (ESA's, management agreements and farm and croft demonstration projects).

A good geographical spread of areas was represented by the group, namely the Cairngorms (Strathspey and Deeside), Sutherland, Outer Hebrides (Lewis), Inner Hebrides (Islay) and Argyll. The 10 participants included a corresponding wide range of interests with 3 farmers, 3 crofters (including one crofters commissioner), 2 agricultural advisors, 1 rural development specialist and 1 agricultural ecologist (see appendix I for names, and affiliations).

The group met at London Heathrow airport (arriving from 4 Scottish airports) on the 9th January and flew on to Lisbon that day. Travel in Portugal was by minibus and car. The group returned from Lisbon on the 14th January.

A detailed, very full programme was prepared by Peter Eden well in advance of the visit. This included pre-booking of hotels, arranging visits to farms, processing plants, marketing initiatives etc. as well as meetings with farmers and other key individuals.

In Portugal there were evening briefings by Peter Eden for each following day and debriefings/discussions after each day in the field. The final evening together was devoted to a discussion of the main conclusions and findings and a group discussion on the main points for this report as well as ways of following up the visit both individually and as a group.

During the visits Peter Eden acted as interpreter, which was invaluable because of his close involvement with farming and wildlife management giving him an additional specialist vocabulary.

### The tour itself

Three schemes in the Alentejo formed the focus of the visit:

1. Integrated Strategic Plan for Rural Development in Moura and Barrancos.
2. Management centred on the Regional Park of Mertola and the Guadiana valley.
3. Application of 2078/92 in the Alentejo and the Zonal Programme of Castro Verde.

The itinerary of the tour is given in appendix II and details of the persons and organisations visited are in appendix III.

### ***Moura - Barrancos***

This area covers approximately 111,000 ha of which half is montado (wood pasture) or Holm oak forest on poor land with grazing cattle, sheep, goats (including 6 rare breeds) and black pigs fattened on acorns for the special hams of Barrancos. The rest is a mixture of olive groves and cereal farms with a rotation of cereals, sunflowers, melons and livestock grazing.

A strategic plan is being developed and implemented by a team supported by an initiative of the local farmers cooperative, together with the local Administration, Forestry Institute, Advisory Services, and the Farmers' Bank.

At the farm of J.C. Barros (son of Mario Barros the president of the Cooperativa Agricola Moura E Barrancos), where Alentejana cattle are grazed, a number of issues were discussed:- the ecological and economic benefits of rearing locally developed breeds, the management of the holm oak woodlands and marketing of the livestock, pasture management and stock control. Traditional and contemporary techniques were in use with the establishment of new fenced compartments, reseeding with drought resistant subterranean clover swards, and planned mechanisation to reduce the stockmen from 3 down to 1. The breed society publicise the breeds qualities (on national TV) but most stock is marketed locally through private sales.

At the farm of A. Fialho, Barrancos, another local cattle breed, the Mertolengo, was being reared. The best cattle were bred pure and others crossed with Limousin bulls to produce better confirmation F1 bullocks. The local breed of black pig was reared under the oaks feeding on the acorns and sold and processed locally, at 11 or 18 months old, to produce the prized Barrancos hams. The balance of pigs and cattle and the management of the olives, cork oaks and holm oaks produced an impressive balance between "viable" farming and nature conservation.

At the farm of J. Venancio, close to Moura, the group saw a flock of milking sheep and were shown the process of cheese making from milking through to maturing. The milking parlour held 100 sheep and was operated by two workers. The process used modern equipment and has high hygiene standards but the product is a traditional one, for instance using native wild thistle artichoke flowers to curdle the milk. Some cheeses are sold retail at a small farm shop but the main market is the wholesale trade. This soft cheese fetches a premium price in Lisbon.

Contenda estate is a 5000 ha farm belonging to the local Administration and run by the Forestry Institute. 1300 ha is farmed rearing the local breed of cattle, black Merino sheep and Serpentina goats. The sheep are now a rare breed and there is a good demand for them for breeding purposes and for wool and meat. The remainder of the Estate is a forest plantation of cork oak, stone pine and natural woodland and scrub. Plantation management has resulted in damage problems by the processionary moth. Attempts are being made to increase the breeding titmouse populations (which predate on moth larvae) by providing nesting boxes. Stone pine is used as a nurse crop to re-establish Holm oak on the impoverished soils. Part of the forest area is managed as a nature reserve with Spanish lynx, red deer, wild boar, golden eagle, Bonelli's eagle, griffon and black vulture. Some income is derived from a carefully managed hunting policy controlling red deer. A large, modern and well equipped honey extraction plant was visited. Its serves a small apiary on the estate but its objective of serving the local beekeepers has never been fully exploited by them; possibly because of a lack of consultation with them before building it.

Two processing initiatives in the area using local products were visited; the olive oil extraction plant at the Cooperativa Agricola de Moura e Barrancos and the ham and sausage processing of Barrancarnes. These provide an important function helping to maintain the demand for traditional agricultural products and keeping farm gate prices high by marketing high quality (and high price) products. They served both small and large producers and they provided seasonal work

### ***Mertola***

Mertola is a museum town on the Guadiana river with well preserved Roman and Islamic remains. It is famous for its traditional spinning, weaving and knitting of the undyed wool of the local Merino sheep.

The town is set in a landscape of steep river valleys and shallow undulating topography over schist soils, some abandoned, some still in cereal and livestock rotation. The valley of the Guadiana at Mertola has recently been declared a Natural Park.

The Association for the protection of the heritage of Mertola is coordinating a range of initiatives (archaeological, agricultural, cultural and educational) utilising local government funding as well as LEADER II and CADISPA. These aim to prevent further rural depopulation and agricultural abandonment (and conversion to hunting estates) as well as inappropriate developments such as waste disposal in copper mines, planting of eucalyptus and establishing military training areas. Reviving, demonstrating and marketing the local weaving and wool products is being done in conjunction with the museum.

A presentation to the group was given by the Director of the Association, Dr Jorge Revez, which was followed by a discussion and then a tour of the projects in the town.

### ***Castro Verde***

The cereal and grassland steppes of Castro Verde provided a third landscape, that of extensive cereal rotations with pastures to support flocks of milking sheep. The steppes are of international nature conservation importance as the habitat of great bustard, little bustard, stone curlew, Montague harrier and several species of lark. They are the wintering areas for migratory cranes from northern Europe.

The Zonal Programme of Castro Verde is the first in Portugal, covers 65,000 ha of farmland forming the main area of steppe utilised by the important migratory and breeding birds. The area has a traditional farming rotation of cereal, grassland (for hay and pasture), fallow and bare fallow.

Discussions following a presentation from the local farmers' association and Ministry of Agriculture Advisory Service revealed some differences between the management of this scheme and similar schemes in northern Europe. Here the whole scheme is managed from the "bottom" up. Farmers play a key role in management and the farmer's association employs the ESA officer. During site visits in Castro Verde there were several sightings of Great Bustard and Little Bustard.

## **DISCUSSION and CONCLUSIONS**

1. The apparent wide level of agreement between the various interest groups was impressive. There did not seem to be the lack of understanding that there often is between nature conservationists and farmers in Scotland. This may have reflected the fact that much of the management was not trying to reinstate farming practices but to maintain surviving ones. This perhaps reflects the fact that conservationists working in Scotland often do not have a clear idea of what they want from the farming systems (rather than the farm operations).

2. The ESA and other 2078 schemes supported systems on a large scale rather than being preoccupied with minutiae. This reflected a funding policy, in the areas visited, with fewer internal conflicts and farmers being aware of the objectives of the scheme in farming terms.

3. An impression was received of schemes which were designed to reward farmers for the beneficial management they did, rather than to compensate them for not farming intensively. The good initial rate of uptake in the Castro Verde ESA was notably different to a similar scheme in the Spanish steppes where only 3% of farmers entered initially. There was clearly a particularly good relationship between the farmer's association and IDREGA.

4. The implementation of 2078/92-IIc (maintaining local breeds) was playing an important role in maintaining appropriate grazing pressures in habitats of high biodiversity. The value placed on locally adapted breeds, producing high quality meat and wool and the cooperation to promote and market these was impressive. From a habitat management viewpoint the value placed on the products of the traditionally managed montado and the cereal steppes gave important tangible (economic) support to the case for their conservation.

5. The farmers in the group were impressed by the local market appreciation of these products in comparison to what they perceived to be the situation in Scotland. There products of environmentally sensitive farming and sites of high nature conservation value, are not especially valued and do not currently demand a premium either locally or elsewhere.

6. Developing integrated land-use policies, seemed central to the success of the schemes in the areas visited. This contrasted markedly with some Scottish situations where agreement is arrived at as a compromise rather than the product of an integrated policy. An emotional link with the land and a credible status for part-time farming (such as in the crofting counties of Scotland) was an important starting point for developing an integrated land-use policy.

7. Schemes developed with and without input from local communities were visited. The success of the former and the failure of the latter was quite revealing. The success of the ESA in Castro Verde hinged a lot on the input and management by farmers and farmer's groups. The "ownership" of ideas helps to maintain interest and support. An impression was obtained of the development of a rural community which encompassed both agricultural and conservation interests.

8. It was clear that many achievements were through personal, community and group initiatives. The flexible structure of the schemes and the large size of the rural communities provided the environment for these initiatives to develop. Some rural areas in Scotland have rural populations close to the minimum size for these kinds of initiatives to occur.

9. There was an impression of wildlife management schemes which truly recognised the value of farming in sustaining areas of high nature conservation value. Developing support for environmentally sensitive agriculture seemed to have also given it a direction and a mission. In Scotland there is a much less positive attitude - along the lines of "having to stop being a farmer and become a park-keeper". This difference in attitude we interpreted as a reflection of the very heavy "top down" way of instigating site management in Scotland. Apparently some of the older Natural Parks in Portugal have exactly this problem but changes are anticipated, partly as a result of the lessons of these new schemes.

10. In discussion the idea that (in many EC and national funding packages) activities are "project driven rather than needs driven" was a recurring theme. In other words, actions on the ground were developed to fit the funding criteria rather than the real biological, cultural, social or agricultural needs.

## OUTCOMES

### 1. *For the Group*

The tour provided an opportunity for a group of people experiencing similar rural, farming and nature conservation problems in Scotland to meet and exchange views in a way that would not otherwise have been possible. The opportunity to travel as a group to other areas of the EU, and whilst there to reflect on the problems at home, was of considerable value in itself. In addition seeing how rural problems familiar in Scotland (and the UK) have been tackled in Portugal widened the possibilities for approaching these in the future. The composition of the group was important, particularly the high proportion of farmers and crofters with practical experience. At the final meeting a desire was expressed that the group should maintain contact and perhaps meet again to develop some of the ideas in more detail. The full personal and group benefits will only emerge over time and will depend in part on opportunities. The participants are now primed to respond to opportunities and needs and are well placed to disseminate their experiences. However, there is also a need for reflection before attempting to transfer what has been learnt into some tangible actions at home.

Due to the diversity of participants in the group disseminating the findings of the tour to a wide audience in Scotland will be possible. Articles are planned for the newsletter of the Forum, *La Cañada*, and in the magazines of the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (*The Farming and Conservation Magazine*), the Crofters Commission (*The Crofter*) and Rural Forum (*Rural Forum News*). Article will also be offered to national farming magazines and to the Scottish Gaelic European current affairs television programme *Eorpa*. Members of the group have already been asked to give talks to groups from the Scottish Farmers Union, FWAG, Crofters Union and Local Enterprise Companies.

### 2. *For the Commission*

The group felt that there is an important and simple message to give to DG XI; that the tour and the meetings had a great catalytic effect in focusing attention on issues affecting successful management of sites of high nature conservation value on farmland. But the groups conclusion was that rural development issues, the integration of rural policies and actions, and the involvement of local communities (especially at the planning stage) were the key issues as the context for management prescriptions of schemes to promote management by farmers of important nature conservation areas. There was great value in the visit, to the participants from Scotland and those in Portugal, and the group encourage DG XI to continue to provide the opportunity for this sort of thing to happen.

This kind of trans-national collaboration should be developed more because it helps to place local actions in a European context and builds confidence amongst participants.

The group also concluded that there was much to learn from the south of Europe. Although there are fewer management schemes than in the northern countries a greater value appeared to be placed on the contribution farmers can make both in terms of scheme management as well as practically.

This might be important if schemes in northern Europe are to be successful in the long term. Regarding the management of Habitats Directive sites it is invaluable to see these in the context of an extensive landscape of high natural value and to appreciate the wider role of long established farming practices.

The value of the tour in stimulating discussion within the group should not be underestimated. In this respect the careful selection of group members helped to maximise the potential longer term benefits.

### ***3. For the Forum***

The composition of the group and the well planned itinerary reflect the Forum's wide range of contacts. The logistic success of the trip (which was quite ambitious in its objectives in the time available) will encourage the Forum to repeat this if funding is available; especially as the Forum's own network was strengthened with new farming contacts. There were also benefits in obtaining extra insights into the agricultural and nature conservation issues provided by the tour, and the Forum anticipates disseminating these across its networks.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix I: Group details

1. Dr. Eric Bignal  
Kindrochaid, Gruinart, Bridgend, Isle of Islay, Argyll, Scotland PA44 7PT.  
*EFPNC, agricultural ecologist and farmer.*
2. Mrs. Agnes Rennie,  
25 South Galson  
Isle of Lewis, Western Isles, Scotland.  
*Crofter, Crofters Commission, Chairman Western Isle Enterprise (LEC).*
3. Mr. Robin Callander  
Haughend,  
Finzean, by Banchory, Aberdeenshire AB31 3PP  
*Land use policy advisor, Rural Forum, former advisor to House of Commons Agriculture Select Committee*
4. Mr. Gwyn Jones.  
SAC Office,  
Glencruitten Road, Oban, Argyll. PA34 4DW.  
*Argyll Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group advisor.*
5. Mr. John Clarke, Ivy Cottage,  
Lower Kemmerton, Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire. GL20 7HY  
*Farming conservation advisor and consultant*
6. Mrs. Sue Bignal, Kindrochaid,  
Gruinart, Bridgend, Isle of Islay, Argyll Scotland PA44 7PT  
*Owner-occupier farmer and wildlife manager.*
7. Dr. Charles Berry,  
Coille, Gruinart, Bridgend, Isle of Islay, Argyll, Scotland PA44  
*Owner-occupier farmer, National Farmers Union of Scotland, croftland owner.*
8. Mr. William Telfor,  
Achnabat, Skerray, by Thurso, Sutherland, Scotland KW14 7TH,  
*Crofter*
9. Mr. David Bowes,  
The Old Schoolhouse,  
Skerray, by Thurso, Sutherland, Scotland.  
*Crofter, Scottish Crofters Union.*
10. Mr. William Hamilton,  
Lower Tullochgriban,  
Dulnan Bridge, Grantown-on-Spey, Badenoch and Strathspey, Scotland  
*Tenant farmer, National Farmers Union of Scotland.*

## **Appendix II: Itinerary**

Tuesday January 9th: Scotland via London to Lisbon. Travel by minibus to hotel in Evora.

Wednesday January 10th: First full day. South from Evora to Safara and to Moura area. Hotel in Moura

Thursday January 11th: Contenda Estate, Barrancos. and Moura area. Hotel in Moura.

Friday January 12th: Moura to Mertola via Serpa. From Mertola to Castro Verde.

Saturday January 13th. From Castro Verde to Evora and then to Lisbon.

Sunday January 14th. Lisbon to Heathrow and connections to Scotland.

## **Appendix III: List of organisations and individuals met by the group.**

Eng. Joao Carlos Barros. Farmer, Moura.(son of Mario Barros, president of the Coop.Agr. Moura and Barrancos).Alentejana cows at his farm in Moura

Eng. Manuel Fialho Manager of Cooperativa Agricola de Moura e Barrancos, Moura Olive oil extraction, processing and marketing.

Eng. Canudo Sena and Eng. Jorge Dias Forestry Institute, Moura Forest and environmental management, beekeeping and honey extraction and bottling, Black Merino sheep, Serpentina goats at the Contenda Estate and Herdade da Contenda, Barrancos.

Eng. Antonio Fialho Farmer, Barrancos. Mertolengo cows (pure and first cross with Limousin) and Alentejeno black pigs.

Barrancarnes, Barrancos. Factory curing hams and sausages.

Eng. Jose Venancio Farmer , Moura. Milking sheep, cheese making and marketing.

Dr. Jorge Revez Association for the protection of the heritage of Mertola.  
National park of the Guadiana valley at Mertola, LEADER II, CADISPA.

Eng. Jose da Luz Farmer  
President of the Association of Farmers of Campo Branco, Casro Verde

Eng. Miguel Sales Zonal Programme (ESA) Officer, Campo Branco, Castro Verde.

Eng. Carlos Contreiras Farmer, Entradas, Castro Verde. Farmhouse visit.

#### **Appendix IV: Initial Distribution of Report**

1. Institute for European Environmental Policy / Directorate General for the Environment (DG XI) of the European Commission. 2 copies
2. European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism. 2 copies
3. Participants from Scotland. 10 copies
4. Scottish Natural Heritage. 2 copies (via R Dennis and S. Allen)
5. National Farmers Union of Scotland. 2 copies (via C. Berry and W. Hamilton)
6. Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group. 2 copies (via G. Jones)
7. Crofters Commission. 1 copy (via A. Rennie).
8. Scottish Office Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department. 1 copy
9. Scottish Crofters Union. 2 copies (via D. Bowes)
10. Rural Forum. 1 copy (via R. Callander)
11. CADISPA. 1 copy (via W. Telfor)
12. World Wide Fund for Nature. 2 copies (Scottish WWF via R. Callander)
13. Plantlife. 1 copy (via J. Clarke)
14. North Coast Community Enterprise Ltd. 1 copy (via D Bowes)
15. Western Isles Enterprise. 1 copy (via A. Rennie)
16. Scenes. 1 copy.
17. Scottish Agricultural College. 1 copy (D. McCracken, Auchincruive)
18. Cairngorms Partnership. 1 copy (via W. Hamilton).

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