

Supporting landowners' stewardship in cultural landscapes to benefit people and nature

Gonzalo Cortés-Capano, Tuuli Toivonen, Alvaro Soutullo, Andrés Fernández, Caterina Dimitriadis, Gustavo Garibotto-Carton, Enrico Di Minin

In many rural areas, people have been living in close relationship with nature for generations. In these cultural landscapes, rural communities play a key role in conserving nature through environmental stewardship, which involves caring for and responsibly managing the land. However, many of these places are currently under threat from land-use change and people are increasingly leaving rural areas and abandoning traditional practices. Many cultural landscapes across the world occur on private land. Hence, developing culturally appropriate policies to engage landowners in voluntary conservation is key to support both people and nature. How can we inform such policies to foster landowners' environmental stewardship in cultural landscapes?

We interviewed landowners in one of the most important areas for nature conservation in Uruguay, where traditional cattle ranching has been conducted on native grasslands for generations. Our aim was to understand landowners' relationship with nature, their perceptions of the problems affecting the area, and their main needs and vision of a desired future, in order to identify constraints and opportunities to inform voluntary conservation policies. Our results revealed that landowners in the area had a close relationship with nature and considered themselves and their neighbours as local environmental stewards. Traditional cattle ranching on native grasslands was a core element of their stewardship, underlying self-identity, social cohesion, and daily connections with nature. However, rural migration to urban areas and the reduction of grazing areas, due to uncontrolled shrubland expansion, were perceived to be the main threats to landowners' livelihoods. In order to adequately support landowners' stewardship, future policies in the area should offer a diverse set of incentives addressing local needs. These incentives should be developed in close collaboration with landowners, respecting

their needs and preferences. For example, providing access to remote education programs might help bridge the urban-rural gap in education opportunities and mitigate rural exodus. Nature conservation goals in cultural landscapes cannot be pursued in isolation from social and rural development goals. Our approach and lessons learned can provide insights to inform actionable research in other cultural landscapes globally.



Picture of the study area located in North Eastern Uruguay. "Cuchilla de Laureles y Cañas" cultural landscape. The area has been identified at the national and international level as a priority area for biodiversity, ecosystem services, and cultural heritage conservation. (Photo credit: Gonzalo Cortés Capano).