TRANSFARM

Vocational education and training for transhumance practitioners

A transhumant herd of cattle in the Balaton Upland National Park, Hungary
(Photo: Centeri Cs. ®)

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Introduction

Hungarian tribes used to have a nomadic lifestyle when they arrived in the Carpathian Basin around the end of the 10th century A.D. At that time, they had to change this lifestyle and settle, started plant production and animal husbandry that is more connected to a certain area (settlement), therefore the nomadic lifestyle had to change. Still, animal husbandry played an important role in the Hungarian economy.

In the 14th–15th centuries it became the task of the settlements to organize the common herds of animals. They hired a common shepherd or another type, a so-called row-escorting (each day belongs to a house in a street, one person per household was escorting the herd) was used. Animal husbandry played a crucial role in the Hungarian economy for a long time. The well-known Hungarian breed, the grey cattle (Figure 1.) was used on the pastures of the Hungarian lowlands and was sold as far as at the Vienna markets. Some herds were mentioned to be sold even much further away, on the markets of Paris (France) where the cattle herds were moved over several weeks on foot.

Figure 1: The Hungarian Grey Cattle on the summer pastures of the Tápió-Hajta area, Hungary (Photo: Centeri Cs. ®, 5th of May, 2010)

In 1870 there was one head of cattle per three people, one horse per seven people and one sheep per person (based on the statistical relations between the number of animals and the population). The number of animals per person changed fast at the turn of the century. In 1931 there was one cattle per five people, one horse per 10 people and one sheep per 6 people. We can conclude that the agriculture of Hungary moved from animal husbandry to plant production. However, to place it into context, we need to know that due to the Trianon Treaty (4th of June, 1920), Hungary lost

2/3 of its territory and half of its inhabitants, so the statistics need to be analysed accordingly. This date is also important for the historical overview, as some of the statements that are said about Hungary before 1920 become the history of Slovakia, Romania and some of the former Yugoslavian states (and the latter also makes the statements complicated history-wise) and even Austria and Chechia.

Due to the Trianon Treaty, after which the country size was dramatically changed, the geography of Hungary is rather flat. There are no real mountains, and the highest point is Kékes Peak with 1014 m a.s.l. of the Baltic Sea. In the Hungarian nomenclature, the highest areas are considered medium mountain ranges (between 500 and 1000 m a.s.l.). Half of the country's territory is arable but there are even more agricultural areas, including grasslands and orchards.

In the former Hungarian areas (including the Upland (now Slovakia) and Transylvania - Romania), transhumance was more related to the change of pastures between the higher mountain and the lowland areas. Riversides were used for winter pastures as there was more forage.

Current situation of transhumance

As Hungary lost its alpine regions, transhumance is practiced on the plains (Figure 2) in the 20th and 21st centuries. However, there are smaller farms that use summer pastures in the hilly areas.

Figure 2. A typical Hungarian flatland with a farm and barns, a few kilometres away from the city of Karcag (Nagykunság area, at the border of the flatlands of the famous Hortobágy that is also a cultural World Heritage Site). There are sheep, spending most of the time on the pastures. In wintertime, they are kept in the barn and fed with hay and other forages (Photo: Centeri Cs. ®, 20th of April, 2008)

Today, most of the transhumance activities are carried out in naturally protected areas (state-owned). National park directorates keep herds to manage grasslands for nature conservation purposes, as many protected plants are growing on grasslands. However, since natural grazing

activity does not exist, it must be replaced by man-made forms, so the management of these grasslands play an inevitable role. Therefore, the most well-known transhumance activities are related to nature conservation areas nowadays.

The forests of naturally protected areas are managed by forestry (also state-owned). Using the forests as pastures is forbidden in these forests today. However, formerly wooded grasslands in these forests exist but are rarely used as pasture. The future of these areas is very much dependent on the rangers of the national park directorates. They suggest or neglect the management of these wooded grasslands.

The extent of transhumance is very little nowadays. Due to the intensification of agriculture, the vast majority of animals are held in barns, and open-air activities are very strictly connected to these barns, only nearby areas are used, and no transhumance is practiced at all. However, some of the transhumance-related activities, such as stew festivals, mainly related to sheep herds are still a living or we might say, a returning tradition (Figure 3.).

Figure 3. Sheep stew festival in Karcag city (Photo: Centeri Cs. ®, 28th of June, 2014). The sheep cooking in the Kunság area was reintroduced in 1999 and was listed on the national list of intagible cultural heritage (https://www.programturizmus.hu/ajanlat-karcag-birkafozo-fesztival.html)

The exact number of animals involved in transhumance is not known as of today. What is certain is that every national park directorate has 100-200 animals. The rest is belonging to local villages or farmers. All together I would guess that the total number is not more than 20 000 heads, but, again, there is no central collection of information available.

Kind of animals used in transhumance activities

The most well-known and most often mentioned animals are sheep (Figure 4.).

Figure 4. A sheep herd on the summer pasture, Hungary
(Photo: Centeri Cs. ®, 30th of May, 2008)

The second largest group is cattle, and, also due to nature conservation activities related to genetic conservation, the third group is horses (Figure 5.).

Figure 5. The hucul herd of the Aggtelek National Park
(Photo: Szelényi G. ®, 19th of June, 2004)

There are some goats, water buffalos and donkeys but their number is very few.

Number of transhumance practitioners

The number of transhumance practitioners is more than 100 but less than 500, a more precise guess would be really difficult. Some of the practitioners are the farmers themselves, while the other group is the one of hired people. There are also two groups of hired people: one group is local and they intend to do transhumance while the other group is less interested, ready to give up the job any time if they receive a better chance elsewhere. I would call them opportunists. It is very annoying for the owners when they need to hire these "practitioners" because they never know when they leave.

Type of transhumance

There are various types of transhumances. The "classic" transhumance when a considerable herd is moving a long distance between the winter barn and the summer pasture belongs to the national park directorates. However, there is at least one, well-known company, that is practicing transhumance and ecological farming with grey cattle and also produces related products, e.g. salami. The company is a professional, private, business-oriented company, but the owner is also considered a farmer who cares about the landscape and also, about nature conservation. All other farmers are rather a small-scale farmer, at least compared with the Mediterranean situation where more than 1000 animals are moving on a transhumance route at a time.

Small-scale farmers are rather profit-oriented, regardless of their attitude towards landscape protection/maintenance and nature conservation. In 2022, with the recent situation of the increasing price of energy, agricultural production and building materials, profit is more important than ever and makes animal husbandry difficult, especially for those, who cannot produce winter forage for their stock. Having the summer pasture is a necessary but not sufficient condition for livestock keeping. Having only the minimum amount of forage for a certain number of animals makes the production very vulnerable.

Available knowledge about transhumance

There are a lot of people interested in animal husbandry and related cultural issues. This led to a collection of information about pastures, traditional animals and related knowledge, and also about transhumance. Several books and articles are dealing with pastoralism, and transhumance is part of the pastoral activities.

There are well-known authors, who dedicated their life and research to animal husbandry-related issues, e.g.:

1. Paládi-Kovács A. (1964, 1965, 1983, 1988, 1993a, b, 1997, 1999)
2. Petercsák V. (1977, 1979, 1982-1983, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1987a, b, 1988a, b, 1992, 1994, 1995-1996, 1997, 1999)

Awareness about transhumance

People who have any relation to agriculture (especially those who have pastures, grasslands, or animal husbandry) and/or are somehow connected to the countryside, are aware of the fact that animals are moved from the barn or from the inner pastures, close to the settlements to the summer/outer pastures. Moving to the summer pasture is on Saint George's Day (24th of April),

while moving to the winter pasture (closer to the settlements or a barn) is on the 22nd of October on Saint Michael's day.

News online about the animals moving in from the summer pastures:

https://dehir.hu/hajdu-bihar/gyonyoru-arcat-mutatta-a-hortobagy-a-vilagnak-fotokkal/2021/10/25/

https://www.haon.hu/hajdunanas-hirei/2018/10/behajtottak-a-joszagokat-a-legelokrol

There is an ever-increasing number of festivals in Hungary (Figure 6.). Thanks to the motivation of some local people and also to some members of national park directorates. There are also festivals for these events when animals are going out to or coming in from the summer pastures.

Figure 6. The other cultural values of pastoralism as shown during the sheep stew festival in Karcag, Hungary (Photo: Centeri Cs. ®, 28th of June, 2014)

Legal and funding situation

There is no specific funding for transhumance. It is considered part of animal husbandry and also part of the pastoralism in general.

History of transhumance in Hungary

Transhumance activity was first mentioned in 1363. Transhumance took place between Transylvania and Valachia (or Vlach Land, or Muntenia in its old name). Transhumance was introduced by the Vlachs who migrated from the Balkans. Their moving into the north was

fastened in the 14th century. However, the transhumance form of pastoralism did not get widespread for a long time.

Transhumance activities concentrated in the southern Transylvanian areas during its flowering 2-3 centuries. Only the men were escorting the sheep herds, the rest of the family had to stay in the settlements, and there was a partial or total ban for ladies to visit their men on the so-called "estena" (summer pasture).

Transhumance boomed in the 17th century. The Eastern Carpathian Mountains were used as summer pastures. The winter pastures were in Banat, along the rivers of Moldova or rarely in the Hungarian lowlands.

After 1718 the main target areas of winter pastures for shepherds became Dobrogea, the Bărăgan Lowland, the Valley of Prut and Seret where they hired pastures. In the second half of the 18th century half of the sheep herds of Transylvania spent the winter east or south of the Carpathians.

In the 19th century, transhumance activity became very difficult due to the change of ownership of the Trans-Carpathian areas, the growing number of settlements and later, in 1864 with the Romanian agricultural reform, the regulation of the River Danube, and the cereal boom of Valachia. Shepherds had to look for former, well-known areas for winter pastures, such as the Balcan Mountains or the Krim Peninsula and Rodope. In 1884 there were still 615 000 sheep grazing in the Carpathians. The Austrian-Hungarian-Romanian customs war put an end to the transhumance of the people of Transylvania in the Regats (today: east of Transylvania) (Dunăre 1964, Magyar Néprajzi Lexikon V, Paládi-Kovács 1993).

In the Hungarian lowlands, there were farmers with larger areas, and they also had more animals than they could handle themselves, so they hired shepherds. Originally shepherds had the right to use the milk on Sundays. Some of these shepherds became very wealthy. On the one hand, they could get higher in the societal rank, on the other hand, some of them were limited by the number of animals (only have 20-25) they could have in addition to the herd of the other farmers. In some areas shepherds had to take care of 5-6 000 sheep. For this reason, they could have 250-300 own sheep. They could not only have them on the summer pastures without paying any fee for the grass but the winter forage of these sheep was also paid by the owners of the big herd.

Winter pastures disappeared until the beginning of the 20th century, due to river regulations and the subdividing of the fields. The herd had to go into or nearby the settlements/farm buildings.

The summer pastures existed between 1880 and 1960 (Paládi-Kovács 1965).

Values and meaning of transhumance in Hungary

The main values of transhumance historically are related to food production. The age of hunger for more arable fields, partly due to the increasing population and also, due to the lack of fertilizers, made all types of animal husbandry extremely valuable, especially in regions where arable agriculture had smaller chances due to inappropriate soil conditions and/or geography (e.g. too steep slopes).

Today, transhumance is having very little attention from this historical point of view. Food production is mainly related to industrial forms. Furthermore, due to the ownership of the fields, and the much higher density of transportation routes (highways, roads, train lines, etc.) it is not easy to do transhumance. Related cultural values are still valued (Figure 6.).

Challenges to face

The challenges are mainly related to the present lifestyle of the majority of the city-dwelling population. Most of them are not familiar with the majority of agricultural production. There should be considerable efforts made to bring people closer to nature, including agriculture and animal husbandry.

Conclusions

The classic form of transhumance ceased in Hungary. The present transhumance activities are practiced in national parks or other nature conservation areas. The other half of transhumance activities are related to farmers who have a barn for winter and a pasture for summer but nowadays these two areas are in closer range, normally animals also visit the barn during the day in summertime, have some extra forage, water and rest during the hot period of the day and then they go back again to the pasture.

Due to the ownership structure of the agricultural lands, the dense road networks and EU subsidies for arable farming, the situation is not favorable for transhumance.

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