



Public perceptions and values associated with permanent grassland landscapes in Europe

What is the challenge?

Permanent grasslands are an important agricultural and cultural landscape in Europe. They represent 34% of the agricultural area, and constitute land used to grow grass continuously for more than five years. Permanent grasslands need to be managed sustainably to ensure a balanced delivery of benefits (ecosystem services). European permanent grasslands are increasingly under threat from competing social and environmental challenges that lead to difficult trade-offs.

Pressures result from a growing demand for food, changing market prices, changing climatic conditions, fluctuating financial

incentives for farmers, and increasing policy requirements.

Public perceptions about, and values associated with, different ecosystem services, landscapes, and management practices can help influence more optimal land management. Previous agricultural and environmental policies relevant for grassland management have not fully taken the public demand for ecosystem services into consideration.

As more holistic agricultural policies are implemented, including linking financial incentives for farmers to production of public goods, citizens' interests need to be better reflected in policymaking.



Image: Jantine Van Midlekoop

What is this research?

The SUPER-G project (2018-2023) is funded by the European Union Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme. It works across 14 European countries to co-develop sustainable permanent grassland systems and policies with farmers and policymakers that will be effective in optimising productivity, whilst supporting biodiversity, and delivering a number of other ecosystem services. Research is ongoing and will ultimately contribute to the identification of future policy and practice recommendations for the sustainable management of permanent grasslands across Europe.

This brief reports results from 15 qualitative online focus groups conducted in 2020, with 104 citizens from five countries (UK, Spain, Czech Republic, Switzerland and Sweden).



What are the key findings?

Citizens generally perceive and experience grasslands positively, but differently.

- Grassland was valued for its diversity, beauty and opportunity to access fresh air and green space. It was often associated with positive feelings of relaxation, happiness, calm and freedom.
- Many participants described 'layers' of benefits from grassland. Across all five countries, rural dwellers recognised the importance of a larger range of benefits than urban dwellers (including agricultural production, varied forms of environmental regulation, and cultural benefits). This may be because their wellbeing, lives and livelihoods are more closely related to these ecosystem services.
- Urban dwellers focused on fewer benefits, tending to mention food provision most often, alongside biodiversity and recreation.
- The perception of grasslands was different in each country due to the geographical and cultural differences (e.g. characteristics of local grasslands, patterns of recreation, accessibility of grassland, the wider landscape setting, collective understandings of nature/agriculture).

Citizens hold a 'plurality of values' about grassland landscapes

- Relational value (human-nature connection) was expressed most often. Grasslands were valued for health benefits, quality of life, and a sense of local identity. Cultural heritage of grassland was important in some countries, and contributed to feelings of pride in, and love for, the landscape. Grasslands were seen to provide inspiration and facilitate spiritual and emotional connections.
- Intrinsic value (the inherent worth of nature) was expressed in relation to the support grasslands provide for biodiversity, including wildlife and livestock.
- Instrumental value (the importance of nature for humans) related to farmers making a living from grassland, the production of food, animal feed and other products, as well as the tourism industry. Citizens particularly valued the provision of ('local') meat and dairy products from grassland.

Many grassland ecosystem services are perceived to be at risk from conversion, degradation or abandonment.

- Participants in different countries expressed differences in concerns (e.g. UK and Switzerland, grassland conversion to urban land use; Spain, a lack of knowledge by land managers; Sweden, abandonment of grassland; and Czech Republic, overgrazing and pollution).

- Citizens expressed sadness at past and potential loss of grassland, particularly focusing on the loss of connection to the landscape through memories, culture and activities.
- Citizens linked threats to grassland to wider political, economic and social drivers, including international policy issues, economic incentives for farmers, (un)profitability of grassland products, market changes, demand for housing, succession of farmers, and land ownership.

Citizens across different countries perceive that education of consumers about the value of grasslands is important for grassland improvement.

- Citizens recognised the need to build place attachment and nature connectedness (through education via schooling, local events and experiences, and information communicated about the local area and wildlife) to potentially influence a more deep-rooted cultural shift towards pro-environmental behaviour, including consumer choices.
- Citizens in all five countries mentioned that farming could focus more on nature and biodiversity to improve grassland management. Training for farmers was seen as important for building knowledge of appropriate management practices.



Image: João Miguel Catarino

What are the implications for policy and practice?

- In contested agricultural landscapes, a better understanding of citizen perceptions and values may lead to a better conceptualisation of how to manage ecosystem service trade-offs.
- Recognition of the embedded attachment citizens have to grassland landscapes, and people's interconnected identities as citizens and consumers, could lead to the development of soft policy instruments to support better delivery of multiple benefits from grasslands.
- Agreed understandings of the wider socio-economic system could be incorporated into decision-making processes about permanent grassland management, to aid communication between stakeholder groups, and promote mutual understanding across urban-rural divides.

UK and EU policies

- In the UK, in a post- EU-exit setting where 'public money for public goods' is embedded in agricultural subsidies, new payment schemes (including Environmental Land Management Schemes in England, Sustainable Farming Scheme in Wales, and relevant schemes in Scotland and Northern Ireland) could consider the prioritisation of payment options and monitoring of progress for permanent grassland management based on public demand for ecosystem services, while drawing on citizen perceptions of grassland landscapes and shared values for farming.
- Across EU countries, opportunities may arise within reviews of national Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plans for EU Member States to tailor regional priorities and services, including eco-schemes available for farmers. These could benefit from information on the demand for ecosystem services from citizens in relation to grassland to help achieve Green Deal targets under the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies, and more successfully support the Carbon Farming initiative.
- Options within payment schemes could be offered that support farmers willing to communicate and offer education to the public to build stronger appreciation of, and connection to, grasslands and grassland products.
- In order to implement new approaches, such as sustainable land management, more consideration could be given to public perceptions of grassland (and the regional variations), as representative of the cultural and social values and local traditions that shape land management.



Image: Valentin Klaus

Project team

Sophie Tindale¹, Victoria Vicario-Modroño², Rosa Gallardo-Cobos², Erik Hunter³, Simona Miškolci⁴, Mercy Ojo¹, Paul Newell Price⁵, Pedro Sánchez-Zamora², Martijn Sonneveld⁶, and Lynn J. Frewer¹

¹Newcastle University, ²University of Cordoba, ³Swedish University of Agriculture, ⁴Mendel University, Brno,

⁵ADAS UK, ⁶ETH Zurich

For more information about the SUPER-G project and research visit <https://www.super-g.eu/>

This note was written by Sophie Tindale (Centre for Rural Economy), contact sophie.tindale@ncl.ac.uk