

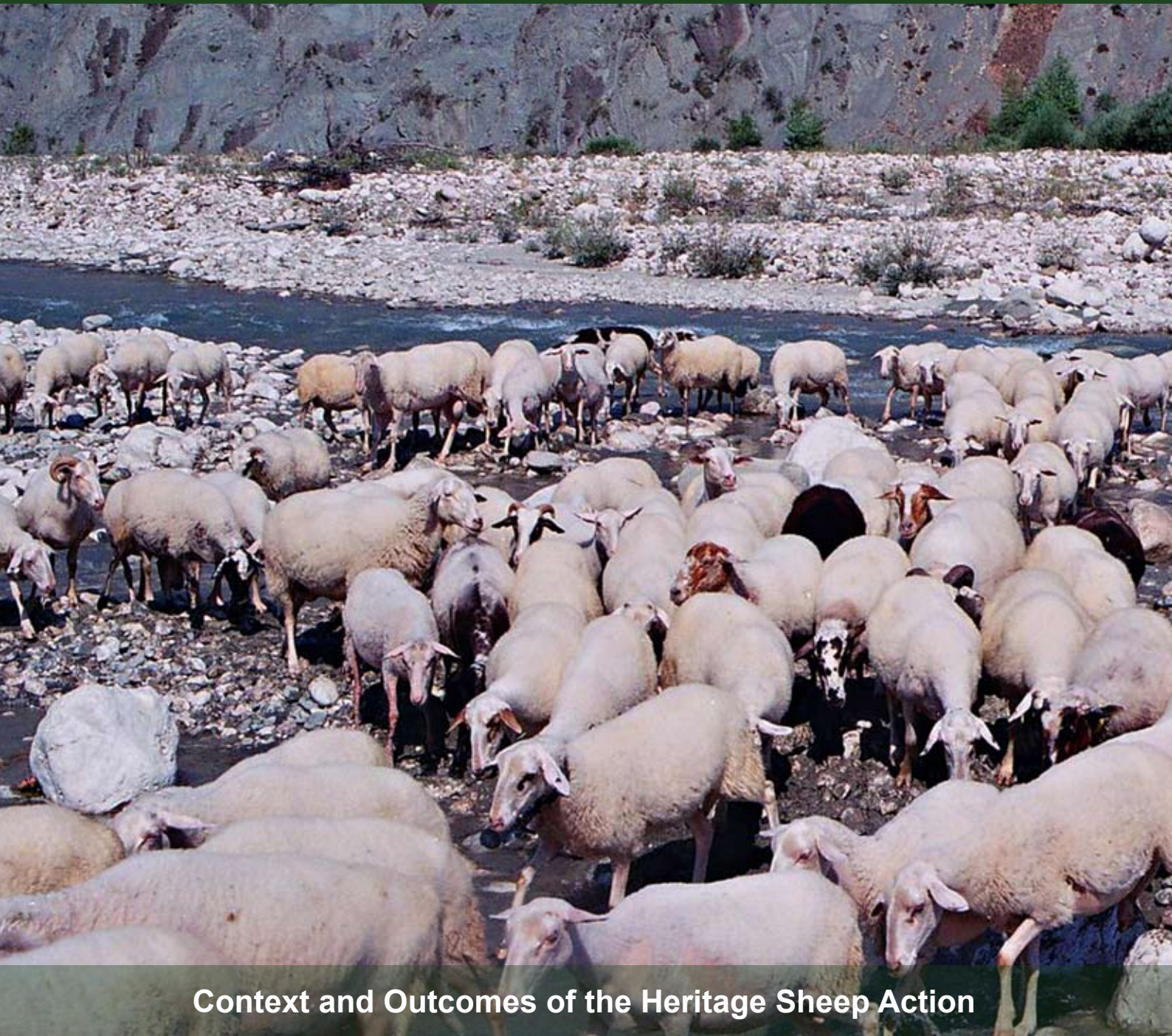
HERITAGE SHEEP

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Community action on the conservation, characterisation, collection and utilisation of genetic resources in agriculture

THE UNIVERSITY *of York*



Context and Outcomes of the Heritage Sheep Action

CONTEXT FOR THE HERITAGE SHEEP ACTION

Heritage Sheep Breeds are defined as those that are geographically concentrated in distinct and challenging regions and adapted to their environments. The breeds offer the real potential of a sustainable future for medium to low input traditional farming systems supporting local rural communities throughout Member States.



The HeritageSheep Action has addressed conservation of the genetic resources of these breeds across the EU to minimise current and future threats to their existence, and develop new and profitable uses and markets for their products. The outcome is intended to provide assurance for policy review and awareness of opportunities.

Contribution to regional development

Each Member State of the European Union has Heritage Sheep Breeds, the defining feature of these breeds is their concentration in specific localised regions. For example, the Herdwick is a breed concentrated in the Lake District region of the UK, the Boutsiko is found in the mountains of Epirus and West Macedonia in Greece, and the French Manech are milking sheep of the Pyrenees.



In these regions the breeds are commercially farmed and support the economic sustainability of the region through the sale of their meat or milk and cheese products as well as their use in breeding. Often, the special characteristics of the breeds are recognised as part of the unique nature of the landscape and national parks, in shaping that environment and contributing to the development of tourism.



Contribution to environmental stewardship

Heritage Sheep Breeds are strongly adapted to their environments having thrived and evolved in a specific geographical region for many hundreds of years. This means that they are important stewards of their environments and through appropriate management contribute to the maintenance and improvement of regional biodiversity, whether this is, for example, moorland, sea shores or mountain areas. The use of local, native sheep breeds adapted to their environments is the most cost effective and efficient means of maintaining a successful, low input farming system.



Contribution to food security

Securing a sustainable food supply for expanding cities and a rising global population is essential for all Member States. The ability of Heritage Sheep Breeds to produce high quality food products from low input farming systems enables them to make a major contribution to EU food security now and in the future.





OUTCOMES OF THE HERITAGE SHEEP ACTION – POLICY ISSUES

Heritage Sheep Breeds are Breeds at Risk

Geographical concentration urgently needs to be recognised as a major risk factor particularly when disease outbreaks occur. Policy recognition of this risk is essential in order that the economic and environmental opportunities presented by Heritage Sheep Breeds are protected now and in the future. Adequate measures are needed to address the vulnerability of Heritage Sheep Breeds as much as those of other vulnerable categories such as numerical scarcity.



The opportunity for regional development

Milk and meat products from Heritage Sheep Breeds are already marketed but the supply chains are not developed and the farmer-based initiatives are fragmented. More efforts are needed, private and public, to develop and underpin marketing schemes in view of establishing viable integrated supply chains.

The opportunity for sustainable farming

Sustainability of agricultural production and the need to achieve food security are key issues facing the European Union and Member States. Heritage Sheep Breeds offer robust low input farming systems, particularly in the uplands, that have already proven their worth over many generations. There is a continuing need to promote these systems given the wide range of benefits they deliver to local communities and help in achieving the strategic objectives of sustainable farming.



Conservation of genetic resources

The HeritageSheep action encompassed the breeds of five Member States of the European Union. A framework has been established by the success of this action that can now be applied to the breeds of other Member States. The European Regional Focal Point of farm animal genetic resources study has demonstrated that all Member States have their own characteristic and important Heritage Sheep Breeds. We now have the tools to precisely geographically map these breeds throughout the European Union and define the diverse benefits they provide for each of their regions [www.heritagesheep.eu; Livestock Science (2009) 123, 288-299]. It is essential to realise that Heritage Sheep Breeds contribute to and shape their ecosystem - without the breeds, these environments will be lost forever and farming activities will disappear. Given the threats to their existence in these challenging regions, more efforts are needed to ensure the conservation of their genetic resources for future generations.



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