Restoration Cases Flagship Collection

Case #18: Using regenerative agriculture to restore the Spanish Altiplano landscape

The Altiplano Estepario landscape, AlVelAl territory. Photo credit: Robin Chazdon

Author: Sarah Jane Wilson, Sophie McCallum, Robin L. Chazdon, Forestoration International

Contributors: Elvira Marín Irigaray, Laura Nuñes Álvarez, and Fernando Bautista Expósito, Asociación AlVelAl

©2023

www.Forestorationinternational.org

RESTOR   ETHzürich || CROWTHER LAB   FORESTORATION INTERNATIONAL

In brief

Overview

The Altiplano Estepario in Southeastern Spain was once home to vast dry Mediterranean forests. Farmed for thousands of years, its thin soils became degraded with the introduction of modern farming techniques. Despite having the world's largest area of rainfed almonds and a culture of local food and farming, unemployment was high and many farmers migrated to the city. In this context, the non-profit Commonland initiated a pilot project in 2014 to show the potential of using regenerative agriculture to restore landscapes. They initially worked with 21 innovative farmers and other stakeholders to initiate a landscape restoration process, forming the AlVelAl Association in 2015. AlVelAl promoted reforestation and regenerative agricultural practices to enhance soil, water resources, and biodiversity, focusing on a critical 25,000 ha biodiversity corridor that would connect protected areas and allow iconic species such as the Iberian Lynx to travel across the landscape. By 2022, membership had expanded to more than 450 people, regenerative agriculture was practiced on 10,500 ha of land, and more than 400 ha of trees and forests had returned to farms and public lands through planting and natural regeneration.

Exemplary practices

This initiative used a range of restorative activities in collaboration with farmers over a large spatial scale. Engaging an innovative, motivated group of farmers was key to starting the association, and early adopters demonstrated the positive impacts to other farmers. Commonland and AlVelAl created the economic case for regenerative farming, developing businesses to process and market regenerative goods and connecting farms with consumers willing to pay a premium. The restorative approach also focused on promoting landscape and watershed connectivity between the mountain ranges flanking the region rather than on "wall to wall" restoration., making the intervention feasible over a larger area and spreading benefits widely.

Key lessons learned

◊ *Regenerative agriculture can fit well as part of integrated landscape restoration or Forest and Landscape Restoration.*

◊ *There is no "one size fits all" for regenerative agriculture.*

◊ *Farmers listen and learn from other farmers.*

◊ *Assisted natural regeneration (ANR) can be harder to fund than tree planting.*

◊ *Making the economic case and creating market demand for regenerative products is key.*

◊   *Regenerative, future-looking farming practices can elevate the cultural status of farmers and draw younger people back to rural areas.*