

Grasslands in Europe of High Nature Value

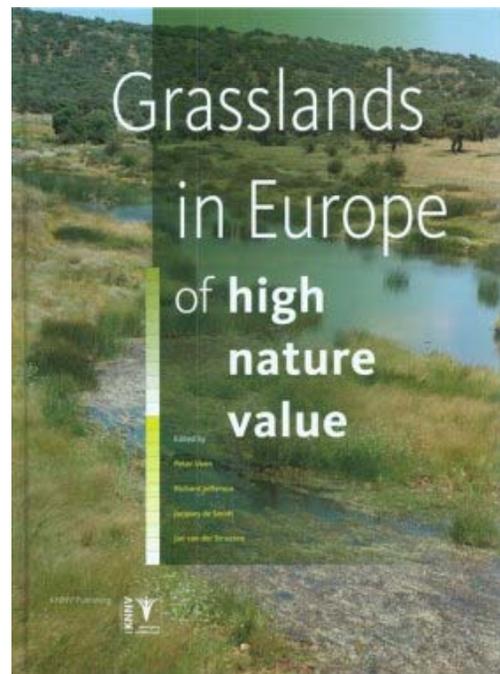
Peter Veen, Richard Jefferson, Jacques de Smidt and Jan van der Straaten (editors) (2009)

KNNV Publishing, the Netherlands

320 Pages
Hardbound

Price: €69.95

ISBN: 978-9-05011-316-8



This book spans the full range of semi-natural grasslands in Europe from the Irish Burren to the highland grasslands of the Ukraine, show-casing their diversity whilst emphasising their unity in terms of the threats they face. It uses 24 case studies to illustrate the variety of grassland types and many of the descriptions are so seductive that they could be read as travel-brochure articles promoting ecotourism, rather than a treatise to engender discussions around how to conserve these habitats. The production qualities of the volume are very high and it is lavishly illustrated with beautiful photographs.

The concept of “High Nature Value” in the title is not explicitly defined within the text; instead the individual contributors to this edited volume are given freedom to interpret the term. This engenders some variation between chapters in terms of the stance individual authors take with regard to “value”; sometimes they highlight the biodiversity of a system, sometimes its traditional husbandry and occasionally they unashamedly trumpet the aesthetic appeal of the landscapes involved. The rural idyll of centuries past is an unspoken theme to the book and is perhaps itself a uniquely European concept. The case studies, in spite of their variety, serve to illustrate how pervasive this concept of rustic life is throughout the continent.

The volume sandwiches the diversity of grassland types between opening and closing chapters that explore common themes, such as the historical biogeography of Europe, the plasticity of

grassland systems in response to management and the impact of policy instruments in their conservation and development. An underlying thread throughout is the idea that grasslands, through their interaction with climate and management past and present, can endow a region with a sense of place and constitute living documents of the locality’s history. The consistency of management over decades, or even centuries, has allowed astonishingly high levels of alpha-diversity to develop within the swards. Although local inhabitants are rarely able to name the constituent species, it seems that grasslands, perhaps more than any other habitat, capture the public’s imagination; perhaps as a result of some distant association with grassland in the collective memory inherited from our nomadic ancestors.

The text is written for a quite general audience without undue emphasis on the scientific names or processes involved. The reader is assumed, however, to have some familiarity with the Braun-Blanquet style of phytosociology, which may limit its accessibility to a UK audience in particular, but this is not a major impediment to the overall enjoyment of the volume.

In summary, the book offers a wide-ranging and interdisciplinary approach to an appealing subject that makes the volume worthy of a place on library shelves, the desks of policy makers and in the bookcases of grassland enthusiasts. The style in which it draws on case studies to discuss both scientific and socio-economic topics makes it a

useful basis for on-going discussion, which is the editors' stated aim. The concluding chapter places the grassland habitat in the context of European agri-environmental policy so that, given the pace of change in that arena, the text will soon date! The conclusions reached are that payments from the public purse to support the conservation of these systems should be based on outcomes (pay by results) rather than on following prescriptions. This inference will chime with all sectors involved in environmental policy over the past 25 years. It remains to be seen what comes out of the forthcoming review of the Common Agricultural Policy that will set the agri-environment agenda through to 2020. The recommendations for the future are well made and the hope is expressed that examples of good practice will be made community-

wide in the near future. These sentiments represent the best hope for the sustained conservation of species-rich grassland in Europe.

*David Gowing
Department of Biological Sciences
Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA, UK*

*Joe Morris
School of Applied Sciences
Cranfield University
Bedfordshire, MK43 0AL
England, UK
19 April 2011*