

Seminar conclusions

Resilient landscapes: adapting the territory to forest fires

The seminar "Fireproof Landscapes" held on 18 November and organised jointly by the Instituto de Urbanística of the University of Valladolid and the Entretantos Foundation brought together a large multidisciplinary team of researchers and specialists in forest fires in the capital of the Pisuerga River in Spain. The meeting focused on the territorial aspects of wildfires, which is a phenomenon of growing social concern, especially after the events of the last year and the climate change scenarios foreseen in the Iberian Peninsula. As a matter of fact, landscapes cannot be fireproof, because all vegetation is prone to burning under certain conditions and fire is closely linked to many territories in the world. The landscape, however, can be shaped to increase its resilience and reduce fires. The conclusions of this seminar, summarised below, provide a starting point for adopting integrated, participatory and adaptive strategies to prevent and reduce the risk generated by forest fires, especially in the current context of climate change.

First of all, the seminar highlighted some key concurrences among different people working in forest fire research, prevention and management. There is basic agreement on what lines need to be adopted to advance towards resilient territories. Many essential strategies are shared by academic and administrative institutions as well as by social and environmental organisations: Wildfire is a structural problem that requires structural solutions at landscape level, starting with comprehensive and coordinated policies that involve local populations, breaking the continuity of vegetation and reducing fuel load. Moreover, they agree in the promotion of those activities, such as grazing, capable of building mosaic landscapes reducing the potential spread of fire. Unfortunately, this consensus is contradictory with a stationary social and political situation, with high levels of risk, a clear shortage of budgets and preventive measures, and a lack of effectiveness in dealing with rural problematics.

The adoption of a historical perspective is also a key step. The current situation comes from a long historical development in which Iberian communities have used fire and lived with it since immemorial time. Besides, fire is a global ecological agent, widespread in many parts of the world, and responsible for many landscape transformations. Recently, its negative effects have arisen due to a global change scenario (land polarisation, abandonment, climate change and land use change) that has widely complicated the interface between rural and urban environments and the forest areas, also increasing the accumulated fuel. This scenario opened the path to huge and catastrophic fires, which are very difficult to extinguish, and their associated risks. Wildfires are complex phenomena, depending on numerous factors (climatic, orographic, vegetation...) and processes (ignition, fuel, behaviour...). It is important to focus on those which can be prevented, not only on the management of already started fires.

Our country needs to develop a culture of risk, where self-protection be the norm, and prevention measures taken at different levels and by different actors in the face of risk. Protection is not only a government competence, but also an individual and collective obligation and responsibility. There is a need to know and act on the risks associated with each situation and their possible evolution. Action should be taken at the level of society, local communities (both urban and rural) and individuals, by actively participating, taking responsibility, reducing exposure to risk and vulnerabilities, where feasible, and facilitating the restoration of ecosystems.

Alongside this culture, there is also a need for an integrated land management model that changes the current paradigm. A territory that is abandoned, or not properly managed, abruptly increases risk and put in danger their most vulnerable communities, whose sustainability and livelihoods gets threatened. Therefore, there is a need for continuous and sustainable management of forest areas, supported by long-term, ambitious, and well-resourced economic, social, environmental and political policies and measures. An essential step for the adoption of these measures is the assessment of the ecosystem services and productions offered by those lands, boosting their fair consideration both in the legal and institutional background and in the production and market scenarios. Consequently, land-based productions that contribute to reducing the risk associated with fires (pastoral practices, woody crops, productive firebreaks, silvopastoral and multifunctional systems, small agro-ecological productions, etc.) must be appreciated, differentiated and enhanced, as they are our main tool for creating resilient landscapes. There are already examples of the effectiveness of this approach and several projects have achieved remarkable results on the ground.

Moreover, the current situation of abandonment of a large part of our rural inland is not only due to demographic and land use issues. The action of the competent government bodies has also been insufficient, uncoordinated and heterogeneous, contributing to this scenario. Thus, it is essential to recover a stable and continuous presence of the administration on the ground, providing technical and political assistance, as well as equitable rights and services, to the local populations in charge of caring for those landscapes, whose services benefit the whole society.

Our country has enough scientific and technical capacity to address the problem of forest fires. It also possesses a wealth of ancestral knowledge in the management of the environment. In the current situation, it is essential to adopt a knowledge co-construction strategy based on sharing data, experiences and knowledge (both academic and traditional), developing capacities, training people and incorporating this heritage into land management. New technologies can help to enhance and increase this knowledge. Moreover, it is essential to incorporate the social and human sciences in this process, because we are talking about models and cultures built by and for people, which require the adoption of truly interdisciplinary perspectives. It must not be forgotten that the management and stewardship of the territory falls mainly on the shoulders of the local people and communities. Without them there is no way to implementing sustainable management. Their direct participation in territorial decision-making is an essential step in moving towards resilient governance models at different political levels. Participatory, cross-cutting institutional processes must be generated, endowed with resources, facilitated and energised by specialised agents with enough resources and time and, above all, invested with the real capacity to decide and act.

Finally, by way of conclusion, the current scenario drives our strategy as a society to reduce risk, learn to live with fire, invest in the forest and adapt our settlements, activities, landscapes and ecosystems. Fire is present, in this scenario, but in controlled and low-risk conditions, even it is managed at our convenience, based on active and well-resourced prevention, comprehensive management and shared responsibility at all levels of our society.

In Valladolid, on 18 November 2022, the people who organised, shared experiences and wisdom and participated in the workshop "Fireproof Landscapes".