

FOREST ECOSYSTEMS

600 000 hectares of woodland go up in flames every year

Almost ten thousand years of increasingly intense human presence have radically changed the landscape around the Mediterranean. Man has progressively transformed it into a wide variety of lands including gardens, fields, vineyards, olive groves and other fruit orchards, grazing areas, semi-natural forests, scrubland and garrigue, and dry meadows... Man's constant and active presence has played a great part in the development of the diversity of the Mediterranean environment.

- ✓ To the North, woodland comprises 37% of the land
- ✓ Woodland accounts for 14% of the land in the South and 5% in the East
- ✓ The region is home to 10% of the world's flowering plants on less than 2% of the earth's surface
- ✓ The region ranks second in the world for plant and flower wealth with over 13,000 endemic species
- ✓ 5000 species of Mediterranean plants (17% of the total flora) are threatened
- ✓ More than 290 tree species comprise the Mediterranean forests, and 200 are exclusive to them
- ✓ The number of fires has doubled since the 1970s
- ✓ Fire-fighting costs over a billion euros each year

In the Mediterranean, trees and wooded areas are essential to the operation of eco-systems. As the expression of a particularly rich biodiversity, they play their part in preserving, renewing and conserving essential resources such as water, wood and non-wood forest products, soil and the Mediterranean landscape. Even today they still provide effective or potential resources for fields as varied as agriculture, breeding, industry, craft, town planning and recreation. They also provide the scope for multiple activities and jobs in the rural environment and help in the fight against poverty.

To the South and East of the Mediterranean, the rural communities make up almost half the population, with some still growing. Consequently the woodlands, which were always an integral part of agro-pastoral systems, are nowadays all too often over-exploited (over-grazing of pastureland, increased consumption of firewood by the local populations). The constant increase in these needs further exacerbates the imbalance and the degradation spirals (ever-increasing demands on increasingly fragile and therefore less productive environments).

Moreover, the proliferation of fires has become a serious cause of decline for the wooded eco-systems. Over 95% of forest fires are of human origin, carelessness and the ill-controlled use of fire being some of the main causes. Despite the efforts being put into combating forest fires, more than 600 000 hectares are destroyed each year.

The forests also have a role to play in preserving water by increasing the soil's capacity to store rainwater whilst limiting erosion and the silting up of reservoirs.

These trends could be reversed through better integrating forest policy into the block of other land planning policies.

The major sustainable development stakes for the Mediterranean region now faced by the forestry sector and for which it is called upon to make a decisive contribution essentially involve:

- The management of natural resources, risk management and planning the living environment (biodiversity, landscape quality, preserving water resources, combating erosion, desertification and fires),
- Combating poverty and bringing about the socio-economic development of the rural areas,
- Food security for the local populations (grazing areas, non-wood forestry products, bio-energy, construction timber).

In the face of all these challenges, the multiple functions carried out by the woodlands provide precious advantages for combining the environment and development. Improving the forestry sector's contribution to sustainable development and the fight against poverty is therefore one of the major objectives for the countries in the region.