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Report

FACILITATING GRASSROOTS ANALYSES AND THE PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT OF A PHOTO STORY ON THREATS TO "SANTIAGO DE COVELO NEIGHBOUR WOODLAND" ICCA AND ITS COMMUNITY RESPONSES



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Facilitating grassroots analyses and the participatory development of a photo story on threats to “Santiago de Covelo Neighbour Woodland” ICCA and its community responses

1. MVMCs and the Santiago de Covelo MVMC

Neighbour Woodlands’ known in Galician as *Monte Veciñal en Man Común*, MVMC- are very old land tenure systems typical from Galicia, northwest Spain. The ancient origin of “Neighbour Woodlands” is closely related to Germanic law, while the typical “Communal Woodlands” is a different land tenure system originally based in Roman law, something that explain many of their differences. The MVMC are a common phenomenon in Galicia, there are 2,835 MVMCs existing in the region, covering 608,728 ha aproximating to 30% of the total forest surface of Galicia.

Although traditionally MVMCs were based on customary rules, with the return of democracy



Map 1: Situation of the Santiago de Covelo Neighbour Woodland in Spain

to Spain in the 1970s, both common property and MVMCs became fully recognised at legal and administrative level. This recognition was due to the organization and collective mobilization from the commoners fuelled by their will to recover their management and governace rights, previously denied by the administration during Franco’s dictatorship.



Covelo landscape. Photo: Sergio Couto

This field study is based on the Santiago de Covelo Neighbour Woodland, situated in Pontevedra province, Galicia, in the municipality of Covelo -see map 1. The original habitats of the area are mountainous Atlantic forests with wet shrubs and bogs, although currently, pastures, patched crops and pinus forest plantations are also present. The Santiago de Covelo MVMC (hereto "Covelo MVMC") covers a surface of 700 ha, ranging from 860 to 400 m.a.s.l. The Santiago de Covelo MVMC has several outstanding endangered habitats, including several kinds of bogs and wet atlantic shrub habitats. It is also home of species as the Iberian wolf (*Canis lupus signatus*) and the Pyrenean desman (*Galemys pyrenaicus*), and several peninsular-endemic amphibians, reptiles and plants.



Photo: Sergio Couto

On the cultural heritage outstands an Iron Age village archaeological site, several prehistoric megalithic monuments and petroglyphs, as well as several traditional grain waterwheels, along with several ancient irrigation structures.

The governance system of Covelo MVMC was greatly improved eight years ago with

the election of a new Steering Committee comprised of predominantly younger community members. This new Steering Committee found some kind of abandonment and lack of participation of the community on the management of the MVMC, based, among other factors, on a lack of democratic recent tradition and on the low economic incomes that the MVMC products (mainly wood) was producing.

The new Steering Committee enhanced the direct democracy system of the MVMC, and developed several transparency tools -e.g. a free-access minute book. On the other hand they enhanced the social, cultural and environmental values of the Covelo MVMC that had been quite neglected.

As in all MVMC, the governance system of the MVMC of Santiago de Covelo is direct democracy by means of a Commoners Meeting. Currently fifty houses (families) are commoners of the Covelo MVMC, and the Steering Committee is elected every 4 years. The current Steering Committee has been reelected on the last two elections, meaning that this is their third term of office of four years.

The basis of MVMCs is that any neighbour house has the right to become a commoner and share rights, responsibilities and benefits related to the management and governance



Reviewing of the preliminary information and preparation of the 1st grassroots discussion. Photo: Sergio Couto



1st grassroots discussion with the MVMC Steering Committee. Photo: José Eugenio Gutiérrez

of the MVMC, just for living in the *Parroquia* of Santiago de Covelo -*parroquia* is a territorial division of the municipality. Once a family lives in the *parroquia*, they have their share of the rights irrelevant of its nationality, origin, economic status, etc. All neighbours of the *parroquia* have the right to share all MVMC surface, having no right to divide, inherit, sell, hire, etc. any part of it. Another important point of MVMC is that administration -meaning any representative of the state, including municipalities- has no representation or voice in the MVMC governance system, being thus all decisions made by the Commoners' Meeting independently of administration, although, of course, inside the established legal and administrative general framework.

The Commoners Meeting is mandatorily held once a year, and is the governance body where all decisions are taken. Additional meetings can be called as many times as needed.



Fully functional traditional waterwheel restored by the MVMC. Photo: Alexandre Cendón, MVMC of Santiago de Covelo.

Commoner Meetings are based in a direct democracy system, where no intermediaries exist, and where all votes are equal. Each commoner house is represented in the Commoners Meeting as one vote, meaning a commoner house as a group of relatives living in the same house. The decisions adopted by the Commoners Meeting are implemented by the Steering Committee, elected by and among the commoners.

2. First grassroots discussion and main threats to the MVMC of Santiago de Covelo

A study on the threats to Santiago de Covelo MVMC was conducted by the research team from 6th June to the 18th August 2012. The research was led by the regional ICCA Consortium coordinator for Western and South Europe and counted with four volunteers, three of them local and a the fourth being a common governance expert. After contacting the president of the Santiago de Covelo MVMC, the research team visited the MVMC to do a preliminary study of the area and meet the relevant agents related with the MVMC and its threats and responses.

After having spent several days in the area, the research team facilitated the first grassroots discussion in Covelo in a meeting co-organized by Santiago de Covelo MVMC Steering Committee.

The meeting took three hours involving a open participation with the Steering Committee regarding threats to their MVMC. The discussion revealed key threats to the area. It also highlighted ways in which Commoners have thus tried to counteract these threats.

As result of the discussion the threats identified by the commoners and the solutions



implemented by them were the following:

Ageing and depopulation: Covelo is a rural area having experienced depopulation for several decades now. Although this is a general problem for many European rural areas, the Covelo MVMC Steering Committee and community members are working to promote and attract tourism to the MVMC by developing trails and signaling its rich environmental and cultural heritage by sign posting specific sites. These initiatives had good results and currently, many rural tourists arriving at Covelo enjoy the MVMC trails and visit their cultural features. This small but clear increase in the touristic value of the area has been confirmed by the interviewed manager of a rural inn established close to the MVMC main entrance.

Municipality interference: Commoners complaint about the bad relation with the municipality, which used to have the power that is currently on the hands of the Commoners Meeting. The Steering

Committee has been working hard to enhance commoners participation, learning of its rights and transparency in the decision taking processes -e.g. by means of developing open-access written official minutes, to avoid



Detail of a sign on the Iron Age village archaeological site of the MVMC. Photo: Sergio Couto

interested critics and misinterpretations on the management and motivations of the Steering Committee. As result the Steering Committee has been re-elected for the 3rd period of 4 years in 2012.

Proposed wind turbine projects: This is a common phenomenon in this mountainous area. On the basis, commoners do not support this kind of impacting projects, however, an especial Commoners Meeting will be called to address the issue. Commoners are worried about the fact that administration has legal tools to develop the project in the MVMC, even against the will of the MVMC. So far the only decision implemented to face this serious threat has been to call the Commoners Meeting.

Forest fires: Forest fires are a constant threat for Spanish forests, particularly in summer. Commoners are attempting to tackle this by



Meeting with Marcos Estévez, forest engineer.
Photo: Carolina Porto Paderne

implementing management tools focused on prevention. They include: the elimination of exotic pyrophylic species (mainly *Eucalyptus*), enhancement of native wet atlantic forest, including extensive mixed reforestation with native species as the chestnut tree (*Castanea sativa*) and the diversification of the landscape in a multifunctional mosaic (development of pastures, forests, bushes, bogs, etc.) preventing the spread of fires. As

Visit to the house-museum *Pazo da Cruz*, in Covelo. Maximino helped us to understand the historic strong relation of Covelo inhabitants with forest management. Photo: Carolina Porto Paderne.





Meeting with Graciano, the president of the Hunting Society "A Covalense", which commonly exploit the MVMC hunting rights. Photo: Carolina Porto Paderne

result there have been no fires for more than eight years.

Damages to the MVMC's cultural heritage: In the past, several cultural items as waterwheels, petroglyphs or megalithic monuments were damaged because of the ignorance of their

value or existence, something also related with the former abandonment of these structures by the MVMC. Currently the MVMC has catalogued and sign-posted them all, with the aim to feature their value. In some cases, restoration activities have been developed for a waterwheel, several stone crosses and ancient vaulted niches, traditionally used to worship dead souls -this latter structures are known in Galicia as *petos de ánimas*.



Pazo da Cruz old photo collection. Photo: Carolina Porto Paderne

Damage to the MVMC natural heritage: As in the case of cultural items, several habitat and species of the MVMC were in an unfavorable conservation status, due to the lack of appreciation by an important part of the local community -including the MVMC commoners- of the rarity, threatened status and ecological importance of these habitats and species. Although the conservation status of the MVMC area was far better than the surrounding areas, its lack of care and monitoring during last decades was leading the area to an increasing degradation. The new Steering Committee has since raised these problems among the commoners focusing a conservationist approach to enhance the ecological functions of the

Roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) is a species recently recolonising the area, after its extinction in western and central Galicia. Roe deer hunting is forbidden in the Santiago de Covelo MVMC territory, a decision taken in the MVMC Commoners Meeting to boost its recovery. Photo: Daniel Cara, MVMC of Santiago de Covelo.



habitats and species of the MVMC of Santiago de Covelo.

As result of the decisions passed in various Commoners Meetings, several species are now being actively protected inside the MVMC territory, and its enforcement guaranteed by the Commoners themselves. For example the Commoners Meeting decided to forbid roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) hunting inside the MVMC to help the ongoing recovery and spread of the species in the region. They also decided to invest own funds and subsidies restoring, wood fencing and signposting several bogs -endangered and priority habitats under the European Union Habitats Directive. Although the Iberian wolf (*Canis lupus signatus*) is already protected, the MVMC policy is to help the species by enhancing the compatibility among livestock management and Iberian wolf recovery.

In order to maximize the multifunctionality of the MVMC's natural heritage, the MVMC have signed an agreement with a local common hunting organization, known as "A Covelense" Hunting Society. The agreement stipulates special restriction rules (beyond those imposed by the current legal and administrative framework) from which the Hunting Society is mandated to comply with to commonly enjoy the MVMC hunting rights.

3. Meetings with other relevant actors

In order to complement information provided by the commoners and Steering Committee, some other relevant actors were also interviewed. These are:

Ignacio Munilla Rumbao: Professor of the Botany Department, University of Santiago de Compostela, Galicia. Ignacio is specialist on plant-animal interaction. He provided valuable information and data of the natural habitats and species of the Covelo area, especially on their importance within the European Union Natura 2000 Network.

Marcos Estévez: Forest engineer. Marcos has been working for several years on MVMC forest planning in the area. He provided a clear, experienced and interesting insight into the social and economic processes related to MVMC management, its technical criteria and its relation with administrative institutions.

Maximino: Pazo da Cruz Museum House Manager, Covelo. This museum holds a collection of traditional objects and methodologies for understanding how Covelo ancestors lived in the area, as well as the social and economic changes the area has gone through the last decades.



Commoners of the MVMC of Santiago de Covelo celebrating the inauguration of the MVMC culture and nature trail. Photo: Alexandre Cendón, MVMC of Santiago de Covelo

Graciano: President of the Hunting Society “A Covelense”. As mentioned before, this Hunting Society currently holds the hunting rights of the MVMC by means of a recent agreement based in strict conservation-oriented rules.

Susana Costa: Biologist and works at a rural inn, Santiago de Covelo. She helped research team contact relevant actors of the area, and provided many useful addresses. Her information on the tourist interest on the MVMC cultural and natural values and its impact on the local economy provided an insight into the degree of success of MVMC tourist initiatives.

The research team also collected old pictures that could help in the photo story, we had visited the municipal library and the photos collection of the museum-house “*Pazo da Cruz*”.

4. The photo story of the threats of the MVMC Santiago de Covelo and its responses

Once that the first grassroots discussion took place, the representatives of the community and the research team put the conclusions of the meeting together in order to develop a draft of the photo story script, with special attention to describe and communicate the community threats and its responses in the most clear and effective way. Once this decided, the research team helped the community to find those pictures that the community did not have itself.

Regarding the pictures used in the photo story, they were taken by some of the members of the Steering Committee of the MVMC: Álex Cendón is the president of the MVMC of Santiago de Covelo and Daniel Cara is photographer and member of the Steering Committee. Some other pictures were taken by the authors during the field visit to the MVMC and the old ones were kindly provided by public library of Covelo and by the museum-house *Pazo da Cruz*, also in Covelo.

The research team provide help and advice, especially on technical aspects of the computer program. Once finished the first version of the photo story, the community took a time for internal revision and, after some subsequent minor changes, the current final version arrived.

5. Resilience and security of the MVMC Santiago de Covelo

To better understand the threats that ICCA communities are facing, the ICCA Consortium had developed a “ICCA Resilience and Security Tool”. The Tool comprises a set of questions to help local communities self-evaluate their ICCAs’ resilience and security relative to a combination of internal and external factors.

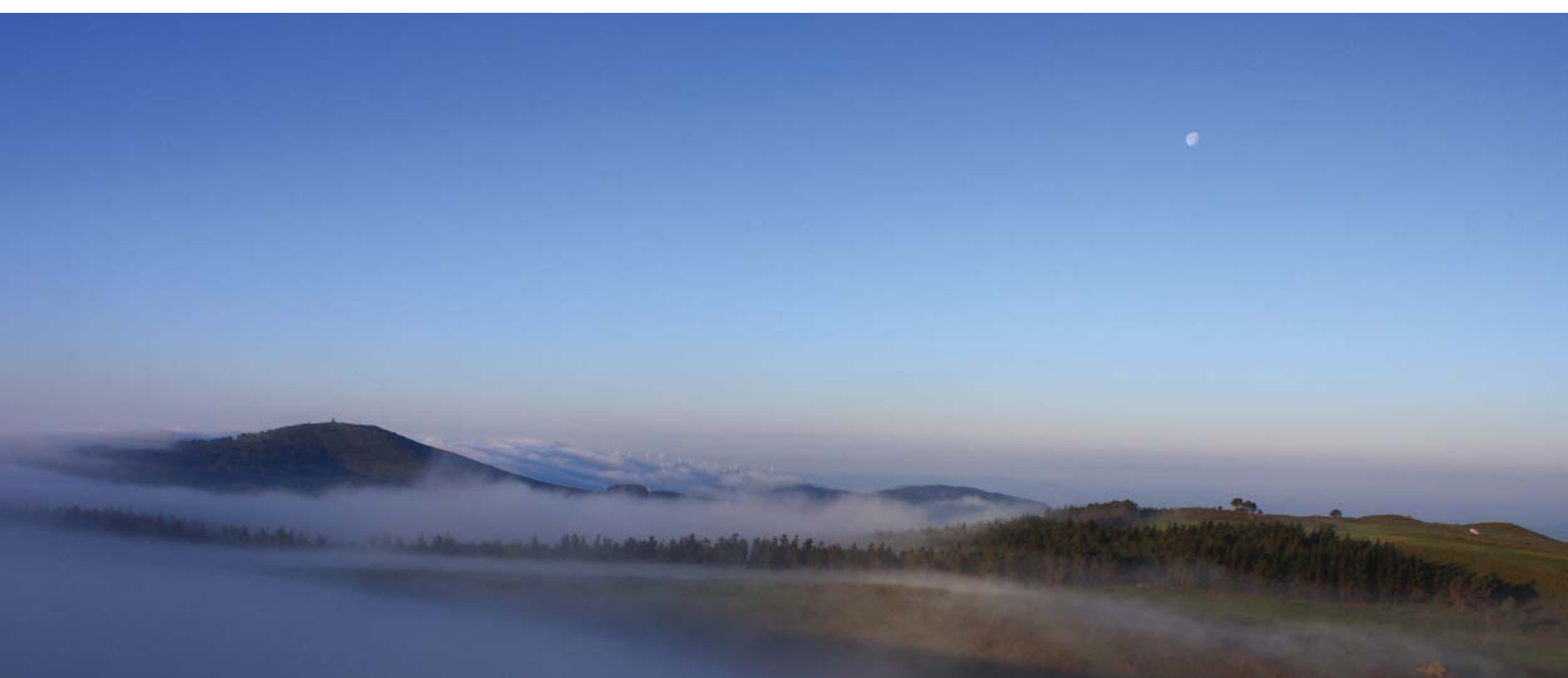
After the first grassroots discussion, the documentation team asked the MVMC Steering Committee about their views for the Covelo Commoners community to conduct a Resilience and Security evaluation. Due to logistical restrictions –the Commoners meet once a year-, it was the Steering Committee who completed the aforementioned “ICCA

Resilience and Security Tool”. The result of the resilience and security tool is included in annex I of the present report. The total score index for the MVMC Santiago de Covelo is 0.68.

As conclusion of the Resilience and Security Tool the community perceive that they have a good legal and administrative recognition, but that they lack real administrative support or general society recognition of their work and values. Regarding the threats, fast cultural and socioeconomic changes, including emigration of young community members are among the most important. For more information on the “Resilience and Security Tool” please see annex I.

6. Final conclusions and recommendations

Recognition threats: In Spain, MVMCs are fully recognised within a legal and administrative context, having both their own national and regional laws, as well as specific statutes passed at MVMC Commoners Meetings. In the case of Covelo MVMC legal and administrative recognition is one of the



Landscape of the high lands of the MVMC of Santiago de Covelo. Photo: Daniel Cara, MVMC de Santiago de Covelo

key foundation stones ensuring its survival as an ICCA.

One of the key threats to MVMC relates to the lack of knowledge and recognition by the general society -from local to national level-, the administration -meaning the state administration bodies, from local to regional or national- and even a part of the local communities of their historical, cultural, environmental and democracy values linked to MVMC. In the case of Covelo MVMC, the Steering Committee have been able to enhance and galvanise the community into appreciating of these values by developing the social and environmental functions of these commonly managed forests, whilst also taking into account its economic function.

Management threats: Another momentous risk is that many MVMCs are currently managed by big wood pulp companies. Although the legal exploitation rights remain with the MVMC Commoners, many MVMCs communities across Galicia are quitting their management responsibilities by signing exploitation contracts with these companies. This leads to the establishment of Eucalyptus monocultures, critically affecting the social



Forest Management Plan of the Santiago de Covelo MVMC

The free ranging Galician horse breed is a basic trophic resource for the Iberian wolf, and helps to prevent overgrown in Galician mountains. Photo: Alexandre Cendón, Santiago de Covelo MVMC.



and environmental values of many MVMCs. Nevertheless, this is not the case of Covelo MVMC.

A strong point of the MVMC of Santiago de Covelo has been their confidence on technical advising to implement and achieve their management goals. Although this kind of professional planning can be expensive and time consuming, it has demonstrated itself to be a key tool for the management and implementation of the general goals and criteria shared by the Commoners. The same case can be seen within the Forest Management Plan elaborated by a specialised forest planning company.

Governance processes implemented by the Commoners are mainly related with the direct management of MVMC, thus helping to integrate, understand and learn from the different local interests -hunt, pastoral, leisure, cultural, economic, ecologic interests- being thus a tool that, when open, transparent and democratic, help members to gain and internalise democratic community coexistence values.

Instrumentalization: Another important threat manifests itself in local administration -municipalities- instrumentalising the MVMC. This occur when municipalities or political parties, are able to promote persons on the governance bodies of ICCAs to serve not the community interests, but other interests, as big companies or political party interests, independently wether this interests meets

the community interests. This is a common practice in Spain where interest groups - often political parties - seize power in organizations which were initially developed to serve public interests such as: neighbour associations, public organizations, worker or farmer unions, etc. This is done via local or regional agents who use these organizations to serve the interest of a given political party, independently of the genuine interests of the social group they represent, whilst developing their own political careers and often their personal assets.

It is something of additional difficulty for any governance group, as it is the case of the MVMC of Santiago de Covelo, to develop their activities without the support -both economic and political- or with the animosity of some of this institutions and logging companies that should be sharing, at least, some of the community goals. Nonetheless, Covelo MVMC has faced this threat by enhancing the transparency and democracy of its governance system. This has proved crucial for defending the MVMC Steering Committee governance system, the implementation of its decisions and the transparency of the financial statements. Particularly so considering the considerable criticism and pressure put on them, intended to undermine the confidence of their community, and especially against the current Steering Committee approaches on management. As result, the popular support of the Commoners -by the elections to the Steering Committee and by supporting these approaches in the Commoners Meetings- have been enough to make this management approach possible.

Commoners commitment: The lack of an active commitment from most Commoners on the management of the MVMC has also proved challenging for the Covelo Steering Committee. In former times, when the family economy greatly depended on the MVMC management, there was far greater active participation. Currently, as the economic importance of the MVMC decreases for Commoners families, this commitment can be perceived as “an unnecessary and bothering

waste of time”. Thus, it is crucial to enhance the social, cultural and environmental values of the MVMC to drive the focus to new interests and satisfy new needs of community members and general public. The MVMC has been able to do this, although this ‘change in perception’ process is slow and, furthermore, many local inhabitants of Covelo are not interested in being commoners anymore. One of the threats to this, is the fact that all the changes and improvements on conservation and democracy of Covelo MVMC is based on the friendship and personal commitment of a handful of young commoners that forms the Steering Committee. This is important, as the resilience of the aforementioned improvements will remain low as far as the rest of the Commoners do not get more actively involved in the initiatives to fight Covelo MVMC threats.

From our point of view the never-ending process opened in the MVMC of Santiago de Covelo by this young group of commoners -even if not free from threats and difficulties-, is an extremely interesting experience with a demonstration value that it is difficult to overestimate. In the other hand the Santiago de Covelo MVMC represents, at least in rural Europe, an intelligent way to match current social, ecological, economic and democracy needs of current society with the ancient values that are still present -although disappearing- in many of this ICCA areas and institutions, once the former subsistence rural economy is swiftly disappearing, along with the economic dependence of the related local and rural communities from the resources MVMCs provide.

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