Preserving Dryland Forests and Agrosilvopastoral Systems: Sustainable Rangeland Management at the Committee on Forestry (COFO)

From
CGIAR Initiative on Livestock and Climate

Published on
06.12.23

Impact Area
Adaptation
Drylands cover about 41 percent of the Earth’s land surface and are home to nearly 2 billion people. The majority of these people depend on forests, rangelands and agrosilvopastoral systems to meet their basic needs. In fact, trees and forests in drylands generate a wealth of environmental services, offering habitats for biodiversity, safeguarding against water and wind erosion, preventing land degradation, aiding water infiltration into soils, and enhancing soil fertility. They also help increase the resilience of landscapes and communities in the face of global change.

However, sustainable restoration of these systems requires a holistic approach that integrates ecological, social, and economic factors while promoting biodiversity, soil health, and community engagement. From September 10th to 13th, 2023, the 3rd Session of the
experts and stakeholders committed to the protection, sustainable management and restoration of dryland forests and agrosilvopastoral systems. The COFO, which convenes biennially, aims to foster a profound understanding of these vital ecosystems and promote good practices for their preservation.

This is a cause also championed by the International Center for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA). As a contribution to the CGIAR Research Initiative on Livestock and Climate and in collaboration with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), ICARDA has developed the Sustainable Rangeland Management Toolkit, a game-changing resource advocating a holistic and participatory multi-stakeholder approach for improved rangeland management. Mounir Louhaichi, an ICARDA Research Team Leader specializing in Rangeland Ecology and Forages, presented the toolkit, in a joint COFO in-session seminar titled “Regional Exchange and Innovation for Integrated Drought Management” on 11 September.

‘Strengthening the resilience of dryland forests and agrosilvopastoral systems in the Near East through conservation of agrobiodiversity, coupled with science-based innovations is more than a decision; rather, it constitutes a dedicated long-term commitment from all concerned stakeholders. These ecosystems will require increased global attention and protection to effectively combat and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss, safeguarding both the inhabitants and
Louhaichi’s address underlined the significance of agrosilvopastoral systems, which exhibit a unique adaptability to the challenges of water scarcity and climatic variablity prevalent in dryland regions. He emphasized the role of genebanks and agro-biodiversity, innovative technologies, and regenerative practices such as opportunistic grazing. These practices are essential in tackling the challenges posed by deteriorating dryland ecosystems.

The session served as an opportunity to advocate for regional agro-biodiversity and enhance land management in drylands through the implementation of science-based innovative agricultural technologies and seed banks. The Sustainable Rangeland Management Toolkit provides a clear path forward for the preservation of these critical ecosystems.

Preserving dryland forests and agrosilvopastoral systems is not just an environmental imperative; it is also a social and economic necessity. These regions play a vital role in providing food, livelihoods, and biodiversity. The Sustainable Rangeland Management Toolkit offers a comprehensive approach that emphasizes the importance of multi-stakeholder participation, ensuring that local communities are actively engaged in the decision-making process from the very beginning.
organizations to address the pressing challenges facing dryland regions. By highlighting the interconnectedness of land management, climate change, and sustainable agriculture, this event emphasized the need for innovative solutions to safeguard these valuable ecosystems. COFO was an opportunity to foster regional agro-biodiversity and improvement of dryland agrosilvopastoral systems using the toolkit and other innovative agricultural technologies.

Learn more about the Sustainable Rangeland Management Toolkit: Better land-use decisions on the horizon (Innovation brief, 2021).

Header Image: Sheep grazing a restored silvopastoral site in central Tunisia. Photo by M. Louhaichi/ICARDA.

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