

The Carpathian Convention and its Activities Related to Pastoralism

The purposes of this brief are to describe the relevance of pastoralism to the objectives of the Carpathian Convention, outline the various pastoralism-related activities in the Carpathian region supported by the Carpathian Convention, and introduce the link of the Convention with the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists 2026.

Brief background on the Carpathian Convention

The Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians (Carpathian Convention), a multinational environmental agreement, unites seven countries of Central and Eastern Europe in a unique partnership to protect the natural and cultural heritage of the area while promoting sustainable development in the Carpathian region.

The Carpathian Convention was adopted and signed by all seven Carpathian countries – Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Serbia and Ukraine – at the 2003 "Environment for Europe" Fifth Ministerial Conference in Kyiv, Ukraine. The Carpathian Convention entered into force in January 2006. It is the only multi-level governance mechanism covering the entire Carpathian region and is the second sub-regional treaty-based regime in the world that focuses on mountain protection and sustainable development, following the Alpine Convention. The Carpathian Convention's general objective is to pursue comprehensive policy and cooperation for protecting and sustainably developing the Carpathians: improving quality of life, strengthening local economies and communities, and conserving natural values and cultural heritage (Carpathian Convention, Article 2).

The Carpathian Convention provides a forum for stakeholders at all levels to dialogue; a framework for transnational cooperation across sectors; and a platform for developing and implementing transnational strategies, policies and projects for the protection and sustainable development of the Carpathian region. Its thematic sectors are outlined in Articles 3 to 13: including but not limited to spatial planning; sustainable agriculture and forestry; sustainable transport and infrastructure; sustainable tourism; cultural heritage and traditional knowledge; climate change; and awareness raising, education and public participation.

To ensure implementation of each thematic area of cooperation (Articles 3 to 13), various Carpathian Convention bodies were created to guide overall implementation of the Convention, develop tangible activities and projects, and establish strategic partnerships. As subsidiary bodies to the Convention, specialised Working Groups focus on specific thematic topics to support implementation of key Convention provisions. The Working Groups discuss issues that need to be analysed by experts before the main organs will decide on them. Current Working Group topics include biodiversity; spatial development; sustainable agriculture and rural development; forest management; tourism; transport and infrastructure; cultural heritage; and climate change.

A current leading topic for the Working Group on Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD) is Carpathian pastoralism (DECISION COP7/12 paragraph 2¹). Pastoralism, a traditional agricultural practice, is closely linked to several topics covered by the Carpathian Convention due to its ecological, social and economic contributions to sustainable development.² Thus, it is a relevant topic for the Convention's subsidiary bodies to consider as a priority activity for upholding the Carpathian region's biodiversity and cultural heritage.

Pastoralism and its relevance in Europe

Pastoralism encompasses many agricultural practices that both shape and are shaped by ecological and cultural landscapes. It is a livestock management system and a way of life that involves rural settlement, trade, land cultivation, and periodic or seasonal migration of livestock between mountain pastures.³ Livestock mobility can be practiced at different scales: short-term localized movements, grazing within village territories, grazing up to mountain pastures and back, long-range seasonal migrations, and more.^{4 5} Traditional herders of sheep, cattle and other ruminants manage these movements, organize grazing, and oftentimes prepare agricultural, medicinal or other products.

Pastoralism is heralded as an environmentally friendly practice, as illustrated by the European Union's (EU) recognition of its importance for safeguarding mountainous areas, which are regarded as 'Europe's ecological backbone.'⁶ While pastoralism has the potential for enhancing critical ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration, biodiversity protection, and soil and water conservation, whether it realises favourable environmental outcomes depends on the scale, intensity and distribution of pastoral activities and other complex linkages.⁷ Nonetheless, pastoralism is gaining new attention because of its potential to produce food ethically and provide essential ecosystem services.

Recognising the global significance of pastoralism, the UN designated 2026 as the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (RES/76/253). Building upon this momentum, the Carpathian Convention signed a [Memorandum of Cooperation](#) with the Global International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP) 2026 Coalition, a cooperation of pastoralist organisations and communities and non-pastoralist support organisations, to achieve the objectives and goals of the IYRP and relevant objectives of the Carpathian Convention. This provides a strong basis for the Carpathian Convention Parties, the Working Group on SARD, and other stakeholders to support, promote and protect traditional pastoral practices in the Carpathians by spotlighting the challenges and necessities of Carpathian pastoralism and the region's contribution to the worldwide pastoralism context (DECISION COP7/12 paragraph 2¹).

Pastoralism in the Carpathians and Carpathian Convention

Pastoralism is an important component of the Carpathian region's cultural heritage and cultural landscape management. Evidence of herding-related impacts upon the Carpathian landscape dates back to around 5000–2000 BC in some areas.⁸ These rangeland management techniques not only have the potential to aid in conserving biodiversity but also bolster local communities.

For many Carpathian areas, pastoralism is a way of life: it provides economic benefits and family subsistence, and it continues longstanding family traditions rooted in generations of herders. The commercialisation of pastoralist-derived products contributes to both short and long food supply chains. For some herders in Romania, for example, dairy products are distributed in the local market, while sheep and meat products are distributed in the international market.² Additionally, some local communities hold a collective identity based on pastoral traditions and foster cultural events and festivals, handicrafts, folk music and other traditions related to pastoralism. For many communities, these cultural events are tourist attractions.

The Carpathian Convention promotes pastoralism through its legislative framework and projects that the Secretariat supports. Several Convention Articles and the Protocol on Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD Protocol) directly relate to pastoralism, mandating that Parties protect and maintain traditional land use practices, traditional knowledge, and other sustainable agroecological and land resource management practices (see Box 1). The Carpathian Convention Secretariat has supported several projects that sought to perpetuate and uphold pastoral traditions and facilitate the exchange of good pastoralist practices among Carpathian countries (see Box 2).

BOX 1: Carpathian Convention Articles and Protocol that directly relate to pastoralism

Articles

- Article 7: Sustainable Agriculture and Forestry
Parties are called to “maintain the management of land traditionally cultivated in a sustainable manner.” Given that pastoral practices have woven seamlessly into the tapestry of sustainable land management over centuries, this article tacitly champions such traditions.
- Article 11: Cultural Heritage and Traditional Knowledge
This article aims to safeguard traditional land use patterns. By acknowledging and validating traditional land uses, including grazing routes and livestock movement, the Convention ensures that ensuing generations can harness ancestral wisdom and perpetuate environmentally harmonious practices.

Protocol on Sustainable Agricultural and Rural Development (SARD)

- Article 1, subsections g and d
Parties are called to cooperate on (1) preserving and promoting traditional farming practices and related traditional knowledge and (2) promoting sustainable and/or extensive agro-environmental and land resource management practices to protect biological and traditional cultural landscape diversity, including natural and semi-natural habitats like grasslands.
- Article 9: Protection and management of traditional cultural landscapes
Traditional cultural landscapes should be protected and managed, especially grasslands and related traditional ecological knowledge. Parties should support traditional, low-intensity agricultural practices and management of cultural landscapes, and traditional ruminant grazing.
- Article 12: Traditional knowledge and practices
Traditional farming practices, small agricultural holdings, cultural landscapes, and traditional ecological and agricultural knowledge should be preserved and promoted. These knowledges and practices “represent significant economic and social features of the rural cultural patrimony of the Carpathians.”

However, despite its historical and ongoing importance to the Carpathian region, pastoralism is threatened by climate change and socioeconomic challenges in rural areas, necessitating a better understanding of these linkages to prevent loss of cultural heritage and traditional knowledge, urban pressure on grazing land and unsustainable local livelihoods.

Many herders cite difficulties in passing on traditional knowledge and skills because of a lack of interest from outsiders and/or younger family members in pastoral activities. Knowledge of traditional land-use management and local community governance is jeopardised by this lack of exchange. The rise of private ownership and urban expansion leads to more land fragmentation and built-up areas, and thus a loss of grazing land.

Threats to pastoralism are intrinsically linked to Carpathian mountainous areas, including climate change effects. As grasslands face drought, erratic weather, floods and more, the productivity of grasslands and pastoralism is compromised, leading to exacerbated rural poverty and decreased ecosystem services.

BOX 2: Pastoralist Projects Supported by the Carpathian Convention

- [Carpathians Unite – mechanism of consultation and cooperation for implementation of the Carpathian Convention](#)
This project ran from 2012 to 2015 in Poland and aimed to protect and sustainably use biological and landscape diversity in the Polish Carpathians by supporting implementation of the Carpathian Convention. Included in the project activities were developing traditional sheep grazing and shepherding in the Carpathians through trainings and sheep run events.
- [The Carpathians connect - Traditional shepherding as a form of active protection of endangered species and natural habitats in the Carpathians](#)
Implemented by GRID Warsaw in 2018 through 2021, the project was a follow-up to the previous Carpathians Unite project. It focused on maintaining and improving semi-natural, non-forest ecosystems of mountain meadows and grasslands in the Polish Carpathians through traditional sheep grazing and other traditional pastoralism practices.
- [Carpathian Sheep Transhumance 2013](#)
This project aimed at recreating the historical transhumance of the Vlach shepherds, who are historically linked to the settlement of the Carpathian Mountains and the development of a common pastoral culture in the Carpathians. This encompassed an area of approximately 1400 km through Romania, Ukraine, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic.
- [Carpathian Route](#)
This project planned, but never realized, a study visit and workshop in Romania about revitalizing pastoral traditions and Carpathian shepherd practices and publishing a “Compendium of good pastoral practices” that sought to compile best practices and lessons related to traditional pastoral economy, pastoral traditions and culture, and traditional pastoral local products.

Collaborative transboundary policy is critical for defining standards that protect both pastoralism and environmental resilience. The Carpathian Convention supports these efforts through regulatory instruments like the Carpathian Biodiversity Framework; partnerships with Euromontana and the IYRP 2026; and supporting the inscription of Carpathian pastoral-related practices in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List of Humanity.

The Carpathian Convention acts as a regional mechanism for enhancing the implementation of both global and European environmental policies, including the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. The Carpathian Convention translated the Global Framework’s goals and targets into tangible, transformative actions relevant for the region through the Carpathian Biodiversity Framework, which was adopted in October 2023. Included in the Carpathian Biodiversity Framework is a strategic objective focused on sustainably developing the agriculture sector, including protecting traditional knowledge and traditionally managed land. Towards this objective, the Framework’s Annex includes suggested policy measures that promote supporting Carpathian pastoral practices.

The Carpathian Convention partners with Euromontana and the IYRP 2026 to fulfil its pastoralism-related objectives and needs. The Carpathian Convention established a formal partnership with Euromontana⁹ in 2023, a multi-sectoral association that facilitates cooperation and sustainable development of European mountain areas, to promote sustainable agriculture and rural development in the Carpathians. Partnering with the IYRP 2026¹⁰ will not only help raise awareness of Carpathian pastoralism internationally, but potentially help mobilise grassroots pastoralist organisations and communities and pastoralist-support organisations in the Carpathians for greater collaboration.

Inscribing Carpathian practices related to pastoralism in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO ICH list) could build international recognition of its importance and bolster support for investing in the pastoral sector by:

- Bringing national and international visibility to and understanding of the Carpathian pastoralist communities, especially at the governmental level which must take responsibility for and resource its safeguarding plan;
- Enhancing regional and global cooperation on sustainable development in a rural context through increased understanding of the role of ICH in rural and sustainable development;
- Promoting dialogue among diverse communities regarding life in agro-silvo-pastoral systems, such as landscape, crafts, food, traditional assignment of grazing areas, history and culture.

In 2023, Romania – alongside nine other European nations – successfully enlisted “[Transhumance, the seasonal droving of livestock](#)” on the UNESCO ICH list. With the support of the Carpathian Convention Secretariat, Romania is supporting other Carpathian countries in enlisting their own national transhumance practices under UNESCO ICH.

Conclusion

Carpathian pastoralism must be safeguarded through increased exchange and communication, integration of pastoralists into decision-making systems, and coordinated agricultural legislation. This will help ensure the economic stability of pastoralists, maintenance of traditional knowledge and heritage management of pastoralism, and success of conservation goals in the Carpathian region.

¹ Relevant Decisions of the 7th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Carpathian Convention include COP7/12 paragraphs 2–4.

² Grădinaru, S., Triboi, R., Iojă, C., & Artmann, M. (2018). Contribution of agricultural activities to urban sustainability: Insights from pastoral practices in Bucharest and its peri-urban area. *Habitat International*, 82, 62–71.

³ Marcol, K. & Kurcz, M. (2022). Continuities and Disruptions in Transhumance Practices in the Silesian Beskids (Poland): The Case of Koniaków Village. In L. Bindi (Ed.). *Grazing Communities: Pastoralism on the Move and Biocultural Heritage Frictions* (pp. 174-202). New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.

⁴ Ivaşcu, C. M. & Iuga, A. (2022). Contemporary transformation of the pastoral system in the Romanian Carpathian: A case study from Maramures region. In L. Bindi (Ed.). *Grazing Communities: Pastoralism on the Move and Biocultural Heritage Frictions* (pp. 203-221). New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.

⁵ IUCN and UNEP. 2014. Pastoralism and the green economy – a natural nexus?

https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/13708/policy_brief_2014_english.pdf

⁶ European Environment Agency EEA. 2010. Report No 6 Europe's ecological backbone: recognising the true value of our mountains. Office for Official Publications of the European Union.

<http://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/europesecological-backbone/>

⁷ Nori, S. & Gemini, M. (2011). The Common Agricultural Policy vis-à-vis European pastoralists: Principles and practices. *Pastoralism: Research, Policy and Practice*, 1(27), 1–8.

⁸ Schumacher, M., Schier, W., & Schütt, B. (2016). Mid-Holocene vegetation development and herding-related interferences in the Carpathian region. *Quaternary International*, 415, 253–267.

⁹ [CC/COP7/DOC22 – Memorandum of Cooperation between the EUROMONTANA and the Carpathian Convention](#)

¹⁰ [CC/COP7/DOC21 – Memorandum of Cooperation Global International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists 2026 Coalition and the Carpathian Convention](#)