

Local perception and knowledge of changing Alpine pastures

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Abstract

Alpine pastures are places in the Alps intended for grazing livestock during the warmer months of the year. Those in the Solčava region and more broadly in the Alpine area have been undergoing transformations due to the interrelation between geophysical, social and cultural changes in the landscape. Based on fieldwork in the Solčava region, this article explores the changes most often recognized by their owners and/or caretakers in the Alpine pastures of the village, and is an attempt to show how those changes are perceived and experienced by them. The specific understanding of the changes and the way the Alpine pastures are cared for are a result of distinct local perceptions, wherein knowledge, its attaining and intergenerational transmission have special significance.

KEYWORDS: Alpine pastures, landscape change, local perception, local knowledge, transgenerational transmission of knowledge, Solčava region (Slovenia)

Introduction

Alpine pastures co-create the Alpine landscape, together with forests, mountains, other environmental features and non-human and human beings, and have been a persistent

part of the surroundings for centuries. In some parts of the Alpine area they have been used at least from the Bronze Age (2200-800 BC) and in the Kamnik-Savinja Alps archaeological findings suggest pastoral settlements as early as the 1st century (Cevc, 2004; Gilck & Poschlod, 2019), initially for the purpose of grazing domesticated animals. In Slovenia—in the Solčava region below the Kamnik-Savinja Alps—many of the Alpine pastures have been abandoned entirely over the last century, while some have changed their purpose and been turned into mountain huts or private holiday homes; on some of them, however, the owners still maintain their agricultural presence and practices, although even where the “traditional” purpose is preserved, they are changing over time. They are faced with a challenge, best summarized by Laurent Garde and other authors of an article on pastoralism in the Southern Alps who write that mountain pastoralism is divided between representing a:

rurality that maintains humanized landscapes but that is dependent on public funding to maintain a production that can no longer find its place alone on a globalized market [or a] new “naturalness” that is based on the promotion of emblematic species whose future is legally preferable to that of the farmers. (Garde et al., 2014, p. 10)

The re-evaluation of Alpine pastures in broader society, resulting in their being used for purposes such as tourism, recreation, and the protection of biodiversity, is part of the reason for the changes. For their successful preservation, farmers have to adapt. On the one hand, they perceive the changes affecting the pastures and what is happening on them, which influences their livelihood practices as well as the environment; on the other, in their reactions to the transformations, they also generate change. Because of generations of dwelling and working on a farm, the farmers perceive changes in a different way to “outsiders.” Their way of dwelling on and with the Alpine pastures is largely part of the intergenerational passing on of knowledge and stories about the pastures and their care. Departing from this, I concur that their maintenance depends on local knowledge and agricultural practices which, according to the farmers that put animals to graze on pastures, differ in many ways from the knowledge introduced by various “professionals” (such as nature and culture conservationists or foresters).

Based on ethnographic material collected mainly on individually owned pastures in the region of Solčava, I identify and describe the changes in the landscape that are noticed by those tending the Alpine pastures. I roughly distinguish between outsiders and locals (i.e., the farmers) because their way of using, caring for, relating to and perceiving the pastures usually differ significantly. However, I am aware that both groups, particularly

the former, are heterogeneous and influence the landscape in different ways while also having diverse perceptions of it.

I begin the article with a short description of research methodology and the characteristics of Alpine pastures in Solčava. In the section on changes, which range from political, economic, cultural and social to environmental, I outline which of those occurring in the Alpine pastures are most noticeable for the farmers. However, as they are multifaceted and interrelated, I do not discuss them separately and in detail. In the last part of the article, I focus on how the farmers understand changes in the landscape based on their experience—gathered through long-term working on the land—and on local knowledge, which is largely a result of intergenerational passing on of knowledge about Alpine pastures. The main finding of the article is that family is essential in the preservation of Alpine pastures because it is above all in families that the knowledge and skills of successful maintenance of individually owned Alpine pastures are transmitted, adapted and applied.

Characteristics of Alpine pastures and agriculture in the Solčava region

Alpine pastures are one of the land categories called semi-natural: they have been shaped by humans for centuries and they represent habitats which are biologically more diverse because humans have cultivated the land (MacDonald et al., 2000; Vilfan, 2014). The biologically diverse landscape is just one of the aspects which makes Alpine pastures important, not just for the people who put animals to graze on them, but for broader society (tourists, recreationalists, environmentalists, cultural heritage conservationists and others) (Nori & Gemini, 2011; Pothoff et al., 2020). Mountain pastures in Slovenia have been studied ethnographically; archaeological research done by Tone Cevc (1984, 1995, 2004, 2006) on mountain pastures in Slovenia indicates the longevity of pastoralism in the Kamnik-Savinja Alps, dating back at least to the 1st century with evidence of cheese-making there from the 16th century. Špela Ledinek Lozej (2002, 2013, 2016) has written on pastures and dairying in the Gorenjska region, emphasizing the cultural heritage of pastures and the effect of heritagization processes on them. In their joint research with Saša Roškar on changes in pastures in the Julian Alps, they have pointed out, among other things, the marketing strategies of pastures (2018). Jaka Repič has written about movement and paths as constitutive components of cattle drives and cheese production in the Bohinj region (2014). A valuable contribution to my research

were various historical sources, as I was able to compare them with the information gathered during my own fieldwork (see Fajgelj, 1953; Spiller-Muys, 1926).

The ethnographic material presented in this article was collected in 2021 in the Solčava region, in the valleys of Robanov kot, Logarska dolina and Podolševa.¹ It is important to note that I grew up in Solčava; therefore, like the people caring for the pastures, I have a personal relation to the landscape I describe.² However, I understood pastures as an aesthetic element of the landscape and had never considered them practically, unlike the farmers I talked to. In 2021 six pastures in Solčava were listed in the register of agricultural holdings³ (Knez pasture, Plesnik pasture, Bukovnik pasture, Pastirkovo, Olševa, and Grohot), and this article is mainly concerned with these, but not exclusively; I also refer to users of unregistered pastures and to owners of already abandoned pastures. Although some of these pastures are without buildings or human presence, I understood them as Alpine pastures: places in the Alps above permanently populated areas, to which animals move from the valley farms in the warmer months of the year (see Novak, 1970; Pirc, 1954). Individually owned pastures in Solčava range from around 5 to 15 hectares in size and their naming already suggests that they are owned by individuals, since they are often named after their owners (see Cevc, 1984).

The Solčava region is in the northern part of Slovenia, below the Kamnik-Savinja Alps and the Karavankas and has about 500 inhabitants. It encompasses the village of Solčava, an Alpine village where there are around 50 active farms, of which more than half are located higher than 1,000 meters above sea level. The geographic position of Solčava, especially the highest situated farms, means that summers are shorter compared to non-Alpine farming areas in Slovenia, so the farmers must gather as much hay as possible in the short time available, which is why farmers send animals out to graze in high Alpine pastures. In Solčava the animals usually remain there from the middle of May until the

¹ The initial research was carried out for the purpose of my bachelor's thesis titled "Revaluation of pastures in the Solčava region: the contemporary meaning and function of mountain pastures", which focused on the different meanings ascribed to pastures, besides their agricultural function.

² Although I do not use the pastures for agricultural purposes or live permanently in Solčava, the changes in the pastures affect me personally, like the farmers, I have been able to observe them all my life, not only during fieldwork. Moreover, I was able to combine the ethnographic material I collected with my broader knowledge of Solčava. Outside of the grazing season I visited and observed pastures that were still being grazed in 2021, as well as some former pastures that no longer served agricultural purposes but had been turned into mountain huts, private holiday homes or were abandoned but still visible.

³ This made them suitable for funding from the European Union, so I initially limited my research to them. I focused my research on the registered pastures and one other pasture because it has animals grazing on it during the summer months, although it is not a registered mountain pasture. These were the pastures I considered "alive" and which are also perceived as such by the farmers: that is, pastures on which the grazing of animals is still present (even if no people reside on them with the animals).

middle of September, depending on the weather conditions each year. Farms in Solčava are much bigger than the average Slovenian farm. According to the website of the Municipality of Solčava (Občina Solčava, n.d.), today the average size of a farm in Solčava is around 130 hectares, and some farms cover around 700 hectares, while the average size of farms in Slovenia is around 6 hectares (Kranjc & Šuštar, 2021; Mizik, 2018). There is a tendency not to divide farms between family members, and almost none get abandoned, so their number has been fairly stable, at least for the past 70 years. Today about one third of farms in Solčava combine agriculture with tourism (Občina Solčava, n.d) and in general the Solčava region is a very popular tourist destination.

Pastures can be owned by agrarian communities, institutions (the state, the Church) or private individuals, and the pastures differ based on their ownership. Solčava is specific in the Slovene context because almost all the pastures are individually owned and used by individuals. That is different from the general situation in Slovenia, where around 90 per cent of pastures are collectively owned and managed by agrarian communities, usually consisting of nearby farms (Dular, 2013; Melik, 1950; Pothoff et al., 2020). The difference in ownership can be observed in the infrastructure or the buildings on the pastures (there are fewer buildings on individually owned pastures), which indicate the type of pasture as well as the livestock using it: for example, pastures where cows graze need more buildings, pastures with sheep hardly any (Novak, 1970; Pirc, 1954).

Most of the farmers I talked to were owners of some of the largest farms in Solčava, of which some have a long history as they were already mentioned in the Land Roll (Urbar) of the Benedictine Monastery of Gornji Grad (Oberburg) in 1426. In his overview of farms in Solčava from the 1960s, Drago Meze concludes that the oldest farms are also the largest and situated on the best terrain, while the newer ones are smaller as space had become limited (1963). We can assume that because of their size they did not need additional grazing areas on collective pastures as they were able to use those they owned individually. Today the families that own the pastures are nuclear, with two children at most, but from my conversations it is clear that the extended family used to be of great importance in the maintenance of Alpine pastures. Yet family members are still the main caretakers of the pastures and not only the conservation of pastures but also of the farms depends on them. In the following section I consider Alpine pastures as places continually influenced by different factors bringing about various changes—anticipated as well as unanticipated—and discuss which of these changes are most often recognized and how they are perceived by the farmers taking care of the pastures.

Perception and impact of change on Alpine pastures

Changes in the political, economic, cultural, social and natural environment shape the Alpine pastures, affecting the geophysical landscape but also the practices taking place in it (see Muir, 2003). I am referring to the changes which many of the farmers pointed out and which occurred during the 20th century, along with more recent changes in the 21st century. The locals do not categorize changes and it is impossible to divide them or neatly put them into groups, since one change is always the catalyst (and result) of one or many other (a political change induces a change in the environment and so forth). However, those noticed by the farmers include political changes, such as changes in legislation, which are often recognized by the farmers because they resulted in land reforms during and after the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Further they recognize weather and climate change (scarcer water reserves, changes in the seasons etc.), changes in the inhabitants of pastures (plant, animal, human), in agricultural practices (abandonment of practices, modernization etc.) and in the built environment and infrastructure (road construction, derelict buildings etc.). Knowledge about the changes was transmitted to the farmers by preceding generations along with those they have experienced for themselves.

The First World War had a lasting effect on the pastures in Slovenia, especially in terms of their abandonment (mostly in the Julian Alps and not to the same extent in the Solčava region). Many were abandoned because buildings and roads had to be repaired (Vilfan, 2014); moreover, pastures and meadows shrank between the 1920s and the 1940s because of the growing popularity of forestry (Meze, 1963). Most people I spoke to, however, consider the Second World War one of the turning points for Alpine pastures in Solčava in the 20th century, since the end of the war brought about many political and social changes. In the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia,⁴ of which Slovenia was part, the state controlled agriculture, which was considered backward compared to most neighboring countries, and was almost without mechanization or any modern agricultural equipment. It is important to note that to an extent traditional farmers, especially wealthy ones, were negatively perceived in the socialist system, because of the issue of private property that had prevailed up until then. Hence, after the Second World War agriculture was reformed, with the most important change being the nationalization (state acquisition) of land, although in general the agricultural sector was neglected in

⁴ Slovenia was part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) from 1946 until 1991 and was defined by communist and socialist political and economic systems. In 1991 Slovenia declared its independence and in the same year the Denationalization Act was passed which meant that, officially, the land which was confiscated with the agrarian reform in 1953 had to be returned to the farmers.

development plans (Čepič, 2002). In Slovenia, most of the family farms after the reform (and similarly now) were very small, around half of them were below 5 hectares. Before the Second World War and immediately after, deagrarization was characteristic of Slovenia because rural areas were overpopulated, but with the land reform in 1953 the state achieved even faster deagrarization, since by decreasing the size of bigger farms the chances of surviving from farming alone were further reduced (Čepič, 2002). Pastures formerly owned by agrarian communities (or parts of them in the case of individually owned pastures) were confiscated, and the changed ownership structures negatively affected their maintenance (Knific, 1995; Pothoff et al., 2020). In Solčava the average size of farms fell from 173 hectares to around 73 hectares (Anko et al., 2007, p. 20; Meze, 1963);⁵ indeed, the size of some farms in Solčava prompts the assumption that farmers were greatly affected by the confiscation of land (practically but also emotionally, because of their attachment to it). The changed political situation then brought about social and economic changes. While I was talking to a family who owns one of the largest farms and—with it—a nearby pasture, Mitja,⁶ a farmer in his 50s, made a remark that illustrates the interconnectedness of changes after the 1940s:

I think [the pastures] started getting abandoned after the Second World War, when the propaganda for agrarian communities was big. The work force ... fell. Before there were farmhands on the farm ... and they [the state] took the land. It's not easily accessible, it's dangerous. The [number of] livestock declined. You were not entirely dependent on yourself to produce everything; you could also buy some things. That is also why [the growing of] wheat was abandoned.

John W. Cole and Eric R. Wolf in *The hidden frontier: Ecology and ethnicity in an Alpine valley* (1974) similarly describe the effect economic changes after the Second World War had on farming in two Alpine villages in the Tyrol region. While they were largely self-sufficient until then, after the 1940s, the access to cheap wheat made buying it more economically reasonable than producing it themselves. With the abandonment of wheat fields, grazing areas in the vicinity of farms could spread, which resulted in the abandonment of mountain pastures (Cole & Wolf, 1974). Thus, political and economic changes after the 1940s resulted in the abandonment of certain livelihood practices—like the growing of wheat and milk processing on the pastures—and in changes in the built environment and in vegetation, visible in the overgrowing of pastures altogether or of parts of them.

⁵ Contrary to most of Slovenia, Solčava farms were still relatively large in size, but considerable land is mountainous and not used for agriculture and forestry.

⁶ Throughout the text I use pseudonyms for all my interlocutors.

The effect of the above-mentioned political and economic changes was that it became too expensive to have someone living on the pasture for the whole summer. Practices that almost completely vanished from the pastures were milk processing and the summer sojourn of *majericas*,⁷ influenced by industrialization and the modernization of dairying practices in Slovenia. Today there are no pastures in Solčava where milk cows graze, except for the Roban pasture. Compared to the situation before the 1950s, that represents a big change—for example, on the abandoned Bevšek pasture the milk was processed until around 1955; on Okrešelj, which hosts a mountain hut today, there were still milk cows in 1952 etc. (Fajgelj, 1953). The abandonment of milk cows and milk processing changed agricultural practices and also the built environment; because milk processing on pastures stopped, people no longer had to stay on the pastures with the animals, and certain buildings (e.g., cheese dairies, huts, barns) were no longer needed. In the longer run the result was that in most cases the pastures shrank in size while in certain cases they were abandoned altogether.

Because no one permanently resided on the Alpine pastures during the grazing period, access had to be made easier and faster, which brought about an infrastructural change: the creation of roads leading to pastures. Today all the registered mountain pastures in Solčava on which grazing still occurs have a road leading to them, except Olševa (one of the collective pastures). Roads are generally an important factor for the maintenance of Alpine pastures because they make it easier to care for them (Hubert, 2005). As one farmer told me, “Where they made it so that it’s possible to get with a car or jeep or a tractor to the top, those pastures were made more *alive*, because the access is easier.” Roads are thus an important infrastructural change which, once created in the landscape, had intended as well as unintended consequences (easier access and maintenance but also the possible destruction of habitats). An intervention such as a forest road thus triggers “elaborate networks of change” (Muir, 2003, p. 397), because it “becomes the instigation for consequent changes, which in turn produce reactions which catalyze fresh phases of change” (Muir, 2003, p. 386).

Farmers also observe changes in the natural environment which are transforming the Alpine pastures but in addition to those due to human impact. Even in favorable political circumstances, farming in mountainous areas can be more challenging than in the valleys, because of the lack of fertile land, topography which makes work and the use of machinery more difficult, shorter growing seasons and other factors (EEA, 2010). For the

⁷ *Majerica* is the term used for the woman, usually young, who resided on the pasture during grazing season, took care of the animals and processed cow’s milk; they were common figures on the pastures besides the shepherds.

successful maintenance of pastures their caretakers and owners have to be attentive to non-biological environmental change, such as weather, seasonal or even climate change. This shows in a remark by one of the farmers, Ana, who said:

Farming on Alpine pastures is totally special, it is a special branch. You have to be very inventive and have to adapt to all conditions. [You have to] wait for the right moment to do the work which is needed.

The “right moment” in summer is largely defined by the right weather for mowing and hay harvesting, so being attentive to the weather and adapting to it is of great importance. Further, changes in the natural environment include the transformation of plant and animal life on Alpine pastures, one of the most obvious being the overgrowing of forests. In 1953 around 47 per cent of Solčava was covered by forests, while in 1970, the figure had risen to around 64 per cent (Anko et al., 2007). Forests in Slovenia were increasing in size throughout the 20th century, but their spread accelerated from the 1950s because of industrialization, the abandonment of farming, changed land use and an emphasis on the harmful effects of grazing in forests (Vilfan, 2014; Pothoff et al., 2020). Today the forest is not only spreading across abandoned pastures but, according to the farmers, also over pastures where farm animals still graze. They fight it by “cleaning” some parts: cutting down the young trees and bushes that appear there and putting their animals out to graze.

Humans are not the only actors recognized as shaping their surroundings; the farmers acknowledge domesticated and wild animals as important agents in the shaping process, so animals are also generators of change. According to Karl Benediktsson, “landscape is a part of a continuing conversation between animals and their environment, and between different species of animals” but animals are often not included in the narratives about shaping the landscape (2010, p. 177). However, their role is recognized in the refashioning of the Alpine pastures, as they prevent overgrowing and create paths. Moreover, the humans have knowledge of the animals and their surroundings and feel like they know the ways in which animals act upon them. Animals do not only shape the landscape; some interlocutors mentioned that they also adapt to different living conditions which results in changes in the animal inhabitants of Alpine pastures.

According to Eva, one of the farmers whose family used to have a pasture, cows have adapted to lowland grazing conditions because they no longer graze on Alpine pastures. She added, “Today’s cows would fall off [the paths to Alpine pastures], but in the past they were such mountaineers.” Jan also stated that animals adapt to the “freedom” of

the Alpine pastures, which he sees as the reason why “the cows don’t allow milking up [on the pasture], they are just like that, they have calves, and that’s it.”

With regard to changes in animal life the most pressing issue is the growing number of wild animals, specifically bears and wolves, which are seen as ruining the Alpine pastures.⁸ However, this mainly concerns the pastures on which sheep graze. As Ana told me:

If the white wolf were still alive, all the Alpine pastures in Solčava would vanish in two years.... Because it created so much damage and ... here, the farms ... have this advantage that they can put the sheep out to pasture in the summer. That’s one added value. And they are very beautiful when they come from the pasture. If there were wolves, [shepherding] would be put to an end.

The growing number of bears and wolves is perceived as a threat to Alpine pastures, and many understand these wild animals as a risk which could be a crucial factor that entirely puts an end to grazing. While according to some, bears are only “passing through,” wolves make grazing on Alpine pastures impossible as they attack (and kill) sheep and occasionally cows. The owners of farm animals on Alpine pastures fear financial loss, some also face emotional stress because of killed farm animals, and the shepherds feel like they are alone in their “lonely struggle with the wolf” (Garde et al., 2014, p. 1).

Agricultural and conservation policies as generators of change

The growing number of wild animals is a complex process but partly a result of various conservation policies (like the Nature Conservation Act, Decree on protected wild animal species etc.) that prioritize the protection of wildlife over agricultural practices. Some farmers feel that policies are also the reason why the cutting back of overgrown areas, the expansion of pastures or even the maintenance of some parts of them is obstructed. Looking at different legislation and subsidies regarding agriculture and nature conservation (like the Common Agricultural Policy [CAP] payments, High Nature Value [HNV] farmland etc.), it is clear that supporting agricultural production on pastures is

⁸ Farmers have different attitudes toward specific wild animals (some of them, like chamois and stags, are considered good, and referred to in Slovenian as *divjad*, meaning wild animals; others, like bears and wolves, are perceived as a threat and referred to as *zveri*, meaning beasts). According to one of the farmers, the presence of domesticated animals on pastures attracts chamois and stags, whose being there is seen as favorable. Ever since there have been no cows on one of the pastures “you can go there a hundred times, and you won’t see a stag. Before, when it was used for grazing, they were there all the time. Now it’s not interesting anymore, even for wild animals.” Cows attract favorable wild animals, but the presence of sheep supposedly attracts bears.

often not their main aim and it can seem like the conservation measures for species and the conservation measures for habitats cancel each other out.⁹ In 2007 Slovenia became a member of the European Union, which again changed conditions in the agricultural sector. On the one hand, it became eligible for certain financial means concerning agriculture—as it became part of the CAP partnership, which operated with almost 40 per cent of the EU budget in the years 2014-2020 (Erjavec et al., 2018)—but on the other hand, the market and consequently the competition increased. It also had a big effect on emphasizing sustainable agriculture.

Thus, Alpine pastures have become places of nature conservation and the protection of biodiversity, a “traditional” landscape, customs and traditional livelihood practices, and it can seem like their role in agricultural production is of secondary importance (Nori & Gemini, 2011; Borsotto et al., 2014; Liechti & Biber, 2016). Measures for conservation are mostly derived from the changed understanding of them, connected to the shift from production to protection in which the landscape stops being a by-product of agricultural practices and becomes the product itself (Setten, 2004).

Because of their growing value and the understanding of mountains as common goods and places belonging to everyone, the pastures are used and visited by many different groups of people, although in Solčava most are individually owned. Various interests collide on the Alpine pastures so that local knowledge and way of tending intertwines with “bureaucratic knowledge ... perceived and presented as objectified, technical, neutral and distanced” (Setten, 2004, p. 403). Like agricultural landscape, Alpine pastures are sometimes promoted as being part of an untouched landscape despite being a result of human activity (see Setten, 2004) and the owners of the Alpine pastures in Solčava feel like the work that is needed to maintain them is often obstructed (because of the prevention of the creation of forest roads, woodcutting, the rise in wild animal attacks etc). Yet they believe that to preserve the Alpine pastures, the work on them must change to accommodate modern farming practices. On the one hand, the locals are attached to the landscape’s idealized form, which sometimes presents a value worth pre-

⁹ The financial support farmers get for maintaining pastures is given according to the amount of land they manage (not per head of animals on the pastures) (Program for Rural Development, 2021) and the aim of this is to “ensure a minimum level of maintenance to lands receiving payments, and to monitor and prevent significant declines in permanent pastures” (Nori & Gemini, 2011, p. 3). This means that there are, theoretically, attempts being made to prevent the overgrowing of pastures with the help of funding from the European Union, which provides subsidies for the preservation of agropastoral lands and their biodiversity as well as for practicing sustainable agriculture (Slameršek, 2012).

serving despite being unprofitable or impractical (Vranješ, 2005),¹⁰ but, on the other, many believe that in order for them to withstand the competition of intensive farming (or valley farming) and the cost of maintaining the pastures in general they have to modernize and, most importantly, adapt.

Local knowledge and intergenerational transmission of knowledge

Part of the landscape changes affecting pastures were those which were experienced by their current owners and caretakers, but transformations were also transmitted to them through the intergenerational passing on of knowledge. The histories of Alpine pastures in Solčava are an integral part of family histories (especially of those that are individually owned but also of collective pastures). It was apparent in my conversations with the farmers that tending them is to a great extent based on local knowledge and on the intergenerational transmission of stories about them. Departing from this, I define local knowledge as a way of knowing and dwelling that stems from long-standing relationships, care and respect for the pasture, farm, home and wider local environment in Solčava, which includes both human and non-human realms. The farmers of Solčava often contrast local knowledge with the bureaucratic knowledge of environmental or cultural conservationists. Martin, one of the farmers who does not have a registered, individually owned pasture explained this as follows in reference to the work on his farm:

So, I decide to create a new road in the forest.... First three professionals who have been doing their job for maybe fifteen years say. "No!" And in twenty years they won't be seen anywhere in history anymore. Nowhere. But no...while our lineage has been here for six hundred years.

Martin owns a farm which is one of the biggest and oldest in Solčava. Because he and his family have cared for it successfully for centuries, it is hard for him to accept advice from "outsiders" (see Setten, 2005). Most of the farmers I talked to are convinced that they know best how to take care of their farms, particularly the changes they have to generate in order for the farms to survive in specific social and political circumstances. Many farmers are dissatisfied with the interference of authorities in their work and do not see it as helpful. In Solčava, one can often hear doubts about the people "living in the cities" making decisions on how people should take care of their farms. Andrej,

¹⁰ Adaptations of pastures are seen as practical by the farmers, but for some of them, they are still seen as destroying the romanticized image of the pastures. Road access to pastures is necessary for easier work on pastures but, as one of the farmers told me, "In its own way it is so romantic to access it like that [along a path], [but] for work and maintenance it's not good."

whose farm is in the protected area, told me that they are not really in conflict with conservationists, but that those who live locally know best how to take care of nature, “protect” it and behave in it. One had to pay a fine after cutting down part of a forest and his father Jan told me in desperate tones that it is “unbelievable” how he was expected to follow the rules, as “he would get old before anything got done on those institutions and change.”

The private property on which the farmers work is shared with different users, while many farmers feel that their work and knowledge needed to preserve the landscape is not acknowledged. Perceptions of landscape by those who work *the* land (for example, conservationists also work but *in* the landscape) and those who observe it are different, and the former see that part of the reason for this is the fact that they are closer to the land than others (Setten, 2004). This closeness is in many ways a result of the same family living on that land for centuries, of working it and preserving it successfully. The care of Alpine pastures is largely based on experience and transmitted knowledge; farmers gain knowledge about the animals through long-term caring for the pastures and feel like they understand them and similarly the environment. That is seen as a requirement for successful farming in the less favorable conditions of the Alpine environment, defined by climate, morphology, topography and so on.

The landscape is understood as being a result of the hard work the previous generations put into it, so tending it and in this way keeping it “alive” is a sign of respect but also obligation (see Vranješ, 2005). Pastures form a traditional landscape that has not only an economic but also a social significance and are, consequently, an element of economic and cultural capital. Ana told me that “for us [our family] preserving the cultural landscape is one of the values in our putting animals out to pasture and why we maintain the pasture.” It is important to note here that the pastures on which grazing was abandoned can be perceived as “dead” by the locals. For example, Mitja told me that if as a tourist “you go somewhere and see all the animals that graze there, it is completely different than if everything is dead,” while Jan said how “nice it is, if the pasture is alive,” referring to the presence of people on the pastures. The presence of animals or people on pastures thus makes the landscape seem more alive. This points to the interconnectedness of humans, animals and their surrounding in the creating of landscape; they mutually reshape each other. Change in one of those three constitutive parts results in adaptation and transformation of the other two, as the examples above indicate.

Change and adaptation is, on the one hand, necessary for the survival of pastures, but on the other, it should not be too obvious, and the landscape should remain similar to

the one known from the past. In his article on overgrowing in the Trenta Valley, Matej Vranješ (2005) finds that the locals' perception of how the landscape should be is based on the idea of how the landscape always was: in continuity with the past. In Solčava, preserving the landscape "like it always was" shows in the way the pastures are cared for. For example, structures built by previous generations on all the "living" pastures are either maintained or built anew in a way which resembles the previous buildings. Further, the farmers I talked to can compare the size of current pastures to those they knew in their childhood or youth, or from stories, and are thus aware of their shrinking. Overgrowing was seen as negative in all my interviews because it results in the landscape losing its value for the local population as well as for tourists. As Mitja said, "It would be very bleak if it were not [cut down]," explaining that if all Alpine pastures became overgrown the valleys would be "bleak" and "not interesting for anyone." Jan also told me:

Everything is getting overgrown ... the tree line is also ascending, you can see that everything is overgrown up there. If everything becomes overgrown, what will we do? You have nothing from tourism. For tourism and then also for the people who live here ... and the landscape image in general.

The perception of many locals is that overgrowing would negatively affect the appearance of the landscape as it would make it uninteresting and bleak, while for the farmers it would transform the landscape which they and their ancestors shaped over generations through agricultural work. Further, overgrown forest takes away the possibility of using pastures for agricultural purposes, which has an impact on the successful working of the farms, as they are able to breed a larger number of animals because of them. Jan, for example, discussed with me his knowledge of the former size of their pasture which, while he had not experienced it himself, had been passed down to him. We sat at their farm as he explained to me how it was transmitted from generation to generation. He told me how his father took care of the farm, which was then passed on to him and, now that he is slowly retiring, is largely managed by his son, but other generations preceded them. Knowledge about Alpine pastures in Solčava is not only gathered in the timespan in which one individual cares for them but it is transmitted over the generations. The idea of how the landscape always was is sometimes passed on through old pictures, which are frequently seen hanging in homes or in the huts on the pastures, and is based on memories of the way the pasture was during the life of the present owner or caretaker and on stories about them. Stories about the pastures form part of the landscape and not just that:

the landscape tells—or rather *is*—a story.... It enfolds the lives and times of predecessors who, over the generations, have moved around in it and played their part in its formation. To perceive the landscape is therefore to carry out an act of remembrance. (Ingold, 1993, p. 152, emphasis in original)

Like Mitja's farm, Jan's is also managed by a nuclear family, although in the past it was managed by extended family with the help of farmhands. This is what he told me:

I would say that [compared to] the old times, before the Second World War and even earlier [the pasture] is much smaller. Back then [the land] was bare everywhere, from here up to the top.... In those times there were lots of livestock on farms everywhere. There were many people. My grandfather had eighteen brothers and sisters.

Many farmers refer to the way the pastures were cared for before their take-over of the farm, and to the people who were caring for them. According to Jennifer E. Cross, a place cannot be wholly experienced through narratives of it, as "the sounds and smells and feel of a place, cannot be reduced to any telling of that experience" (2015, p. 504); however, through narrative, people learn about a place and develop an attachment to it. Further, they exclude others from it who have no stories to tell about it and are thus without a shared experience with members of the community (Cross, 2015). The owners and managers of pastures were able to tell me about the times before the 1940s or even earlier, seen above when Jan compares it to "the old times, before the Second World War," although he was born in the 1960s. Stories are a way to put a disorderly reality into narrative form which makes its transmission easier but also more powerful, considering that through narrative reality is usually presented by "obscuring large portions of that reality" (Cronnon, 1992, p. 1349). What I am suggesting is that there were probably important events specific to each of those Alpine pastures which resulted in the abandonment of certain practices, overgrowing and so on. However, as the Second World War, together with the developments and events that followed, was such a decisive event in the lives of Solčava inhabitants, it lives on in the collective memory of many residents of Solčava as one of the main reasons for the changing of Alpine pastures.¹¹

The knowledge farmers have of the land has two levels: it consists of "detailed memory of alterations of the farmland" and of "long-term memory by referring to agricultural practices by both living and dead ancestors" (Setten, 2005, p. 73). Transformations on

¹¹ Generally, after the Second World War deagrarianization became characteristic of the SFRY and the rural areas were essential for providing workforce for the industrial sector. From 1948 to 1953 the percentage of rural inhabitants in Slovenia fell by 14 per cent. The speed of declining numbers of rural inhabitants was five times higher than in other SFRY countries (Čepič, 2002, p. 59).

farms are connected to family history and many different family members are mentioned in conversations about the Alpine pastures' pasts. Andrej explained that they used to have sheep on the pasture until his sister moved away, while Jan recalled that the pasture was out of use for a few years after his father's passing. Julija, an 80-year-old farmer and former *majerica* explained that she stopped keeping sheep after her sister passed away. Important events in families are thus interconnected with the happenings on the Alpine pastures but knowledge of the pastures is also "based on stories of which they have no personal memory" (Setten, 2005, p. 73). As Ana told me, "On the pasture they used to have a *majerica* and [women] shepherds. As far as I know there were always children from this family [on the pasture]." The practices and the people that used to reside on the pastures are part of her memory of it, although in her life, milk processing on the pasture had already been abandoned. Most of the farmers I talked to were born in the 1960s, so they had never known shepherds and *majericas* on the individually owned pastures. Nonetheless, these figures form an important part of Alpine pasture lore and come up in conversations about them.

In my conversations with Julija (former *majerica*) and Eva (talking about her mother's experience as a *majerica*)—both around 80 years old—the time on the Alpine pastures is described in very fond terms; they recall, for example, that "the butter is more yellow [than the one prepared in the valley]" and "the birds sing differently." *Majericas* indulge in nostalgic memories of the time when they lived on the pastures. Eva said she *remembers* how much her mother loved to go to their pasture and how "she really enjoyed being up there." She also recalled how her friends who were *majericas* on the Grohot pasture loved being there and the fond memories they have of the grazing season: "[it was like] a Solčava community. It really was and so many houses, cottages and also plots. Almost everyone up from Sveti Duh and around there had [a hut] in Grohot," She added:

Up there it was really fun for them while they were up. Those who remain, we often talk with them, they cannot forget how much fun they had. There were many, they sang and had fun.... You know, I believe they had fun, they did not have to think about much. Just about putting the animals out to pasture. It was not stressful.

In contrast, Ana's story of her mother's experience on the pasture is different as she told me they were "secluded up there, it was hard for her [mother] to go to the pasture."

The importance of family in the conservation of Alpine pastures

Family almost always comes up in discussions about changes in Alpine pastures because it serves as a transmitter of knowledge about them, but in a way it also seems to defy the changes in contemporary society. Giulia Fassio and others write in a study on mountain pastoralism in the Italian Alps that despite pastoralism going through many transformations through time, “households display complex structures reminiscent of those that existed in the past, which point to the continuing importance, in greatly changed circumstances, of some basic organizational requirements of mountain pastoralism” (Fassio et al., 2014, p. 341). Thus, although the families caring for the individually owned Alpine pastures in Solčava are exclusively nuclear, even today family is significant, because it is important in the passing on of knowledge about tending Alpine pastures but most importantly because only a skilled successor will know how to maintain them (which is in most cases inseparably connected to the preservation of farms). The required knowledge is, according to Cristina Grasseni, an element of the “skilled visions” that are part of how people have been taught to look at the world, gained by “repeated *acts of looking*” (Grasseni, 2018, pp. 2-4, emphasis in original). She adds that “looking is a culturally situated capacity that is learned, embodied, and socialized in specific ways in heavily layered and structured sociohistorical contexts” so the skilled visions can seem “esoteric or even exotic for the outsider, but are spontaneously applied on an everyday basis by the initiated,” in this case the farmers (Grasseni, 2018, pp. 2-4). The knowledge needed for the care of Alpine pastures is gained by looking but also by doing.

The changes in society affect the maintenance of individually owned pastures, which were usually cared for by family members (and sometimes by hired help), as “large, structurally complex households were better suited than nuclear families to working spatially separate resources and meeting the conflicting demands on time and labour arising from the need to synchronize agricultural and pastoral work” (Fassio et al., 2014, p. 337). Most farmers I talked to recognize the changed family structure as one of the reasons for the disappearance of Alpine pastures or certain practices on them. Jan observed that “households used to be big. One was the landowner, then there were hired men and hired girls and automatically you had people to be up there [on the pasture].” Families caring for Alpine pastures in Solčava no longer have an abundance of family members at hand to work on them; however, it seems that voluntary, unpaid work is still important in their maintenance. Some get help from friends or extended family when work on the pasture must be done, some from the local hiking association and

other locals, while on the collective Grohot pasture hunters and farmers get together to prevent the regrowth of the forest.

Expanding modernization and the abandonment of farming go hand in hand with changing family structures, which have resulted in a lack of work force on the pastures and the disappearance of certain livelihood practices on them. Further, it has resulted in visually evident changes on pastures, like overgrowing or abandonment of agricultural land or buildings. Again, all these transformations are interconnected and cannot be fully understood by looking at each of them independently. Yet, despite all the shifts affecting Alpine pastures, some patterns used in farming them, like the continuing importance of family, have persisted for centuries because they have been shown to be the most effective in a challenging environment (Fassio et al., 2014). Farming on Alpine pastures is constantly adapting to societal, political, economic, environmental and other changing conditions. Although it has existed for centuries, it is in a way the opposite of a static condition or a relic of the past. The people working on the Alpine pastures adapt to the changes and are the generators of change. The ways in which they adapt and act on the environment is dependent on local knowledge of the Alpine environment and thus has to be seen from the dwelling perspective, as defined by Tim Ingold, who sees the landscape as a result of active living in it, developed over generations (Ingold, 2011).

Conclusion

Alpine pastures have been part of the Solčava landscape for centuries and, although they persist through time, they are not immune to the changes happening around them. Based on conversations with the owners or (former) caretakers of mountain pastures in Solčava, I have acknowledged some of the transformations which were most strongly felt by them, such as the abandonment of certain livelihood practices (e.g., milk processing), the shrinking of pastures because forest overgrowth, their abandonment altogether or their adaptation to modern farming practices. The growing number of wild animals on pastures and the adaptation of domestic animals to different living conditions were also noted. The way these changes are understood differs between various users of the pastures, not only between farmers and others, but between the farmers themselves, as they too are a heterogeneous group whose members experience change differently. The knowledge farmers have of the changes is based on intimate knowledge of the Alpine pastures, dependent on experience, and is further enriched by the knowledge and stories transmitted through the generations of people who have cared for the same land. Through their long-term work on them, they have observed how animals and the sur-

rounding environment change, and they have adapted and reacted to those changes. Since all the pastures considered in this article are still “alive,” one can assume that their adaptations have been successful until now, at least from the perspective of the farmers, although not necessarily from that of natural or cultural conservationists. Because of the centuries-long human cultivation of that land, the pastures have been predominantly preserved by those who put animals out to graze, but the ways they care for them can sometimes collide with the understanding of nature and culture conservationists.

This article has tried to explain how farmers do not only perceive changes which happened during the period of their caring of the Alpine pasture, but almost always compare their present state to a state from the past, about which they know from stories. Stories and their transmission through generations are thus constitutive and constituting processes of the Alpine pastures the farmers know. These landscapes connecting them to the past are valued by the farmers and effort is put into their preservation. However, the farmers want to use modern technology and adapt the Alpine pastures to modern conditions in order for them to feel like their maintenance is not too time-consuming. Alpine pastures are constantly changing under the influence of different factors, even though they might seem like static elements of the landscape, and the people caring for them are adapting to those changes. This article touches upon many aspects and changes, of which each could be researched thoroughly in itself. My aim is to offer an overview of the changes that are most strongly perceived by the owners and caretakers of pastures and to show that the perception of these is based on local knowledge and its intergenerational transmission.

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Povzetek

Pašne planine so prostori v Alpah, namenjeni paši živine v toplejših mesecih v letu. Uporabljane so že stoletja a so nenehno preoblikovane, kar se kaže skozi preplet geofizičnih, kulturnih in družbenih sprememb v krajini. Članek obravnava tovrstne spremembe na pašnih planinah v vasi Solčava in kako so te percipirane in izkušene s strani njihovih lastnikov oziroma oskrbovalcev. Na podlagi intervjujev z lastniki planin članek razpravlja o spremembah, ki jih ti najpogosteje zaznavajo. Planine so prostor, ki si ga delijo tako ljudje in neljudje, ki raznoliko živijo, doživljajo geofizične, družbene in kulturne spremembe, ki osmišljajo in vzpostavljajo današnje Solčavsko. Članek je poskus prikaza razlogov za specifično zaznavanje in odzivanje na spremembe, kjer ima vedenje in z njimi povezane prakse ter nenazadnje njihov medgeneracijski prenos o planinah in širši krajini, še poseben pomen.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: Slovenske Alpe (Solčava), pašne planine, gorski pašniki, spreminjanje krajine, domačinski pogled, medgeneracijski prenos znanja

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