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The Alpujarra: Where Moorish Ingenuity Sustains Spanish Farmers Today

ORGIVA, Spain – The fertile slopes of the Alpujarra valley harbor echoes of an ancient technology that helped turn southern Spain into a much-admired verdant paradise as far back as 1,200 years ago.

Terraces skillfully carved into valley slopes are fed by snow-melt and spring water from the peaks of the Sierra Nevada mountains by a network of irrigation channels known as acequias, a technique mastered by the Islamic Moors of Arab and Berber descent that continues to sustain local farmers today.

“The system of acequias began with the Romans and was perfected by the Arabs when they began their silk industry,” said one such farmer, Antonio Perez.

Sprightly at the age of 60, he showed EFE his three-hectare (seven-acre) organic agriculture smallholding perched above the village of Pampaneira where he grows potatoes, strawberries, raspberries and green beans.

“The Romans grew vines,” he said as he gave us a tour of his plot of land, or finca, just as the sun began to drop over the Poquiera gorge in the western Alpujarra.

Under the watchful eye of an excitable mule, which was taking a brief break from running around in a frenzy, we made our way down through the terraces. Antonio pointed out a gnarled chestnut tree, which he claimed was over 800 years old.

At such an age, the first farmers to toil in its shade would have been the Moors of Al-Andalus, who took root here in the 8th century until the last of them were expelled from the Alpujarra in 1609. They left an indelible print on the land that, like the tree, is still visible today.

But their legacy goes beyond the white-washed villages of squat buildings so reminiscent of Morocco’s Rif. Their language also trickled down the centuries; indeed, the word “acequia” derives from the old Arabic term “as-saqiya” meaning both “water-bearer” and “barmaid.”

Hundreds of kilometers of acequia channels, nowadays raised and lined with concrete, spread out from the villages of the Alpujarra and tap into the aquifers high in the Sierra Nevada.

Mountain water streams down this vast labyrinth of flumes to fatten the oranges, lemons and olive groves on the terraces and low pastures.

The acequias are managed on a community basis, and each farmer is allocated a certain amount of time on a given day to access the stream. This is done by opening a solid metal grate that allows the water to pour into the field.

Antonio's farm is located over 1,000 meters (3,280 feet) above the sea level in the catchment area of mainland Spain's highest mountain, Mulhacen. He stores his acequia run-off in a small reservoir on the top terrace of his farm.

"The advantage of flood irrigation is that you don't waste water," he said.

"We get water from the snowmelt; but when this whole area is flood-irrigated, what tends to happen is that the water is absorbed by the soil, sort of filters down, descends and resurfaces further down the hillside," he continued.

This cycle is known locally as "the entertainment of water."

According to Antonio, flood irrigation underpins the rich ecosystem in the valley. The region, which has a unique climate, plays host to a wealth of plants, insects and birds.

"I remember turning over the earth when I was a child and finding it full of snails and worms," he remarked.

But modern problems pose a threat to the traditional way of life in the Alpujarra.

Antonio has noticed the effects of global warming. The summers are becoming longer and hotter, transforming the dry grass growing in the empty fincas of the Poquiera gorge into a tinderbox for wildfires.

Less snowfall during the winter months jeopardizes the efficiency of the acequia channels at their very source.

But there is a more immediate concern for Antonio. In his lifetime, the population of Pampaneira has dropped from 1,200 to 300, and around 90 percent of the arable land in the gorge has been abandoned.

This means rationing of acequia water between Pampaneira and the nearby settlements of Bubion and Capileira is no longer necessary. While this may sound ideal for the remaining farmers, it points to a worrying generation gap.

Young people have left the Alpujarra in droves, choosing university education over a life in the countryside. They take with them a knowledge of the local area.

Antonio said an influx of foreigners has somewhat bucked the downward trend in the population, but added that they rarely bring the necessary expertise to revitalize the traditional forms of agriculture on a grand scale.

“Before, there were around 200 people at hand to clear out an acequia channel. Now, you would be hard-pressed to find anyone,” he told us.

Antonio’s family used to own a handful of goats and cows and would sell milk directly to the local villagers on market day. Those practices have long disappeared.

He has had to adapt to the changing times.

For the last five years, he has been working as a certified organic farmer, servicing a demand for bioproducts that ballooned with the growing international community.

He now sells much of his fruit and vegetables to local cooperatives.

Other traditions are unchanged.

Rather than using a tractor, Antonio tills his soil with a mule-drawn plow. His father, about to turn 90, continues to help out where he can, like by pruning plants for instance. The crops are still fed by the mountain water drawn down by the acequia and the ancient chestnut tree stands strong.

Who exactly will toil in its shade in the generations to come remains to be seen.