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Will the Alpine pasture season soon have UNESCO status?

Alpine pastures and huts are the epitome of green living, and the summer grazing season is a tradition to be protected – says Switzerland, which has applied to have the Alpine pasture season included on the UNESCO list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity

EVA HIRSCHI

Cows crowned with flowers and hung with huge clanging bells walk majestically down the mountain, accompanied by traditionally dressed herdsmen and women. A dog keeps the bovines in check. Every Swiss has this image in their mind when they think of an Alpine cattle descent. And if they have never witnessed such an occasion in person, they will at least have seen it on television.

“Our cows always stir with excitement. They look forward to it,” says farmer Roger Felder from Flühli (canton of Lucerne). From mid-May until late autumn, Felder lives on the mountain with around 150 dairy cows, suckler cows and beef cattle (100 of which belong to other farmers) as well as a number of other animals. He makes the ascent and descent on foot, assisted by family, friends and acquaintances. The village holds its own Alpine fair at the end of the grazing season.

In March, the Federal Office of Culture applied to UNESCO to have the Alpine pasture season and its associated traditions included on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list. Felder: “UNESCO recognition would be a nice acknowledgement of the job we do.” His father and grandfather used to spend summer on the high pasture, although the custom itself dates much further back. Families in the Alps have been herding their cattle, sheep and goats at altitudes of between 600 and 2,900 metres since the late Middle Ages.

“We also want to increase awareness of the role and importance of Alpine farming,” says Isabelle Raboud-Schüle, a member of the Swiss UNESCO commission who was heavily involved in submitting the application. Recognition as intangible cultural heritage means that Switzerland would undertake to preserve the tradition. “Of course, we are not going to start telling farmers to bring their cows up to the pastures on foot instead of on the back of a truck,” she continues. “Traditions will always evolve. We don’t want to ban farmers from using mobile phones, do we?”

National pride

Instead of imposing a straitjacket, UNESCO recognition is therefore about promoting traditions and practices that have been passed down through generations, giving communities a sense of identity and continuity. Basel Carnival and Swiss watchmaking are two items already on the UNESCO list. The Alpine pasture season also encom-

passes related crafts such as cheesemaking, shingle-making and dry stone walling, as well as customs such as the traditional melody sung or played on the Alpine horn to call the cattle from pasture, or the Alpine blessing recited from the mountaintops every evening.

“Over 200 years ago, Jean-Jacques Rousseau portrayed the Alps as symbolising Swiss unity,” says Raboud-Schüle, adding that the high pasture conjures less of a sense of national feeling among Alpine neighbours France, Germany, Austria and Italy. “Olive oil and the ruins in Rome are much more important to the Italian psyche.”

Farmers since the late Middle Ages have been driving their cattle, sheep and goats to meadows between 600 and 2,900 metres above sea level to take advantage of the extra pasture.

The cachet of UNESCO status is not the whole story either, believes Moritz Schwery, a board member of the association of Swiss Alpine farmers, the SAV. “Studies show that the summer grazing season is conducive to animal health,” he says. “Younger animals in particular develop better resilience.” It also preserves the mountain pastures and promotes biodiversity. And it benefits tourism.

Hard reality for mountain farmers

Schwery notes that many traditions are experiencing a revival. Younger farmers and cattle herders are again increasingly descending from the pastures on foot. UNESCO is expected to give its verdict by the end of 2023. Is it necessary for the Alpine pasture season to be included on the list at all? Schwery takes a pragmatic view: “It could give policymakers added impetus to support farmers.” He means financially.

This is because the romanticised image of Alpine herding does not always reflect reality. Climate change is drying out the pastures, hikers are dropping litter, mountain bikers are ignoring the designated cycle paths, and wolves are attacking livestock. “Many think of shepherds looking after their cows in the mountains while the sun shines. But life on the pasture can be really hard.”





Every year, 17,000 Alpine farmers bring their animals up to the high mountain areas. Some 436,000 cows, cattle and calves as well as over 120,000 sheep, goats and pigs spend summer on 6,672 Alpine farms.
Photo: Keystone



During the 10th century, farmers ventured higher into the Alps, clearing forests and expanding their pastures up to 2,500 metres above sea level. Their labour continues to shape the image of Switzerland's mountain landscape to this day.
Photo: Keystone



The 5,033 square kilometres of summer pasture in the Alps and Jura account for around a third of total land used for farming in Switzerland.
Photo: Keystone



Every summer, 5,000 tonnes of Alpine cheese are produced on the mountain farms, representing four per cent of the total cheese production in Switzerland. Perhaps not be a tremendous amount, but certainly one with great symbolic power.
Photo: Keystone