

THE CORK OAK FORESTS MANAGEMENT IN SICILY: CURRENT SITUATION AND POTENTIALITY

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The economic importance of cork forests is mainly attributable to the role of provisioning non-timber forest products that they have played and still play in the Mediterranean region. In Sicily, according to the latest regional forest inventory (IFRS, 2010), the surface covered by cork forests amounts to 14,732 ha; the 52.4% of this area is not affected by cultural practices, while in the 41.3% of cases productive cultural practices are adopted. In fact, the prevailing silvicultural system type is the peculiar one aimed at the cork production. The cultural abandonment of many cork oak stands threatens their survival because of the close link between the conservation of cork stands and its use for productive purposes. The cork oak pure or mixed stands, in fact, are the result of human action that eliminated or limited the number of other species in favour of the cork oak. Therefore it entails close relationships between production and conservation.

Objective of this study is to analyse and summarize the existing data on the evolution of distribution and silvicultural practices carried out in cork oak forests in Sicily. The analysis of the current situation suggests the action and intervention ways aimed to continue preserving this typical Mediterranean forest landscape. In fact, cork oak forests not only assume an economic and productive function, but also have a strong social, ecological and landscaping value. In this perspective, the management of cork oak forests in Sicily, certified by specific sustainability indicators and aimed at obtaining quality productions, should foster and allow a sustainable development of this system with a balance of ecological, economic and social benefits.

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