

**Chabier de Jaime Lorén, Jiloca Centre of Studies (Aragon, Spain)**

## **Citizen initiatives achieve the conservation of poplar pollard's culture in Aragon**

### **Initiative citoyenne pour la revalorisation des trognes de peuplier en Aragon**

*contact of the corresponding author: cdejaim@educa.aragon.es*

#### **Abstract**

In the mountains of southern Aragon the Black Poplar pollards have been part of the landscape as an element of the multifunctional rural economy for the production of beams, firewood and fodder. In 1960 farmers stopped using Black Poplar pollards. Many were cut down to plant Euro-American poplars or to win land for crops. Surviving trees were abandoned, missed the pruning and entering the stage of retrenchment. Even so, there are important populations of these trees. The intensive landuse of farmers has created deforested landscapes, Black Poplar (Chopos cabeceros) are the only remaining trees. These landscapes are under valued by current society, therefore it was necessary to explain to people the environmental and cultural value of these trees in order to preserve them. Various educational activities have been carried out in recent years. Educational innovation projects on the Black Poplar pollard and have been implemented in high schools. In 2009 was celebrated the 1st Festival of the Black Poplar pollard. Each year it takes place in a different locality. It consists of a walk in the countryside where trees are pollarded, art exhibitions are organized, a popular meal with traditional music. It is a very famous tree's festival. In 2015 Chopo Cabecero del Remolinar was the representative of Spain in the contest 'European Tree of the Year' and a popular mobilization took to the third place. This information activity has produced a change in the opinion of society. The Black Poplar pollard begins to be seen as part of the heritage, which has produced positive results. In 2016, Aragon Government declared Intangible Cultural Property (heritage register) to the popular knowledge that created and cared for the poplars in Aragon. In 2017, it has started the creation of the Alto Alfambra Black Poplar Pollard Cultural Park, a tool for the conservation of the ethnological, landscape and historical heritage of the poplar woodlands.

#### **Résumé**

Dans les montagnes du sud de l'Aragon, les trognes de peupliers noirs font partie du paysage en tant qu'élément de l'économie rurale multifonctionnelle pour la production de poutres, de bois de chauffage et de foin. Dans les années 1960, les agriculteurs ont cessé d'utiliser ces arbres. Beaucoup ont été abattus afin de les remplacer par des peupliers euro-américains ou de gagner de l'espace sur les terres cultivées. Les arbres survivants ont été abandonnés, n'ont plus été taillés et sont entrés dans la phase de sénescence. Malgré cela, il subsiste des populations importantes de ces arbres. L'utilisation agricole intensive des terres a créé des paysages déboisés. Les trognes de peuplier sont les seuls arbres qui subsistent et sont peu valorisés par la société actuelle. Il apparaissait ainsi nécessaire d'exposer à la société leur haute valeur environnementale et culturelle afin de les préserver. Diverses activités éducatives ont été menées ces dernières années. Des projets d'innovation pédagogique sur la trogne du peuplier noir ont été mis en œuvre dans les lycées. En 2009, la 1<sup>ère</sup> Fête de la Trogne de Peuplier noir (*Fiesta del Chopo Cabecero*) a été célébrée. Depuis, et ce chaque année, elle se déroule dans une région différente. Au programme des festivités, il y a des promenades dans la campagne pour observer les peupliers noirs, des expositions d'art, un repas populaire avec de la musique traditionnelle. Ce festival est devenu très célèbre. En 2015, *Chopo Cabecero del Remolinar* était le représentant de l'Espagne au concours « Arbre européen de l'année » et une mobilisation populaire a permis d'emporter la troisième place. Cette activité d'information a entraîné un changement dans l'opinion de la société : la trogne de peuplier noir commence à être considérée comme partie prenante du patrimoine espagnol. En 2016, le gouvernement d'Aragon a déclaré au titre des biens d'intérêts culturels immatériels ce savoir populaire, qui a créé et préservé les peupliers d'Aragon. En 2017, la création du parc culturel de la trogne de peuplier noir de la Haute Alfambra (*Parque Cultural del Chopo Cabecero del Alto Alfambra*) a débuté. Il représente un outil de taille pour la conservation du patrimoine ethnologique, paysager et historique des forêts de peupliers.



(Fig.1) The “chopo cabecero”, the black poplar pollard

[Link to access presentation / Lien vers la présentation : http://www.agroforesterie.fr/colloque\\_trognes/Chabier-De-Jaime](http://www.agroforesterie.fr/colloque_trognes/Chabier-De-Jaime)

### Introduction

Historically, black poplar pollards have been a part of the landscape of the South of Aragón's mountains (Fig.1). These trees have been an element of the multifunctional economy of the villages that were used to supply building wood, firewood and fodder. During the second half of the 20th century, great social and economic changes took place in rural areas. The migration of most of the population to the cities, intensive farming, regression of livestock and the abandonment of many traditional land management, have transformed the culture and landscape.

Farmers stopped taking profit from the black poplar pollards. Many of them were cut to plant European-American poplars or to extend some spaces for the crops. The surviving trees were abandoned losing the practice of pollarding and going to retrenchment phase. Even so, in the valleys of the province of Teruel, some of the most important populations of European black poplar pollards are conserved.

The climate of the Mediterranean mountains and the intense use of livestock and agriculture have created an austere and deforested landscape. The black poplars on the riparian river banks are the only trees around. They are landscapes under valued by current society. Therefore it was necessary to spread the environmental and cultural value of these pollarded trees to achieve their conservation. But it was not easy. It is a depopulated territory, limited public knowledge and these pollarded trees were not really appreciated. It had to start from the beginning: education

### Initiatives to spread the value of the black poplar pollards

In 2002 High School Valle del Jiloca of Calamocha started a project on black poplar pollard in which the students studied for two years the traditional uses and the ecology of these trees, introducing their results to the congresses of young researchers, one of them in Belgium. The Aragón Medio Ambiente Prize to educational project was awarded in 2004. Although it is a small population, the villages of southern Aragon have active associations that organize several cultural activities. So it is a great opportunity to spread the value of the black poplar pollards. In a few years more than thirty conferences have been given and more than fifteen articles have been published in local cultural magazines and ten articles in specialized publications in tourism, culture, science or education. The Jiloca Center for Study made a monographic exhibition on “El chopo cabecero” (black poplar pollard) that has been presented in eighteen locations, including the Zaragoza airport.

Some reports have been recorded and broadcasted on the poplar pollard in nature, agriculture, tourism or entertainment programs of public and private television channels.

But we had to go further. We needed an event that would allow the black poplar pollards to connect with people. Under their branches it was easier to understand their heritage value and, at the same time, enjoy the sensations they generate. The solution was to have a party. In 2009 the 1<sup>st</sup> “Fiesta del Chopo Cabecero” was held. Each year it would take place in a different locality. At the party there is a walk through the countryside, the pollarding of several trees, artistic exhibitions, audiovisual projections, a popular meal and music concerts. At the end, the “Amigo del Chopo Cabecero”, award is given to people or entities that work for the conservation of this heritage. It has been granted to farmers, woodcutters, researchers, artists, journalists, town councils or associations. In 2017, it celebrated its ninth edition. This festival mobilizes hundreds of people from towns and cities. The impact on society is very large for such small villages. These trees begin to be visible. They begin to be part of the heritage, such as churches and castles.



(Fig.2) People understanding the pollards and the landscape



(Fig.3) TV reports

### A stronger and stronger involvement

In these years some village councils have begun to get involved. Educational trails, didactic materials and a museum has been created in Aguilar del Alfambra, in order to assist students in discovering that these trees are part of their environment (Fig.2 & 3).

We have a very important document that was introduced in 2009 called “Manifiesto para la conservación del chopo cabecero”, whose is to expose the main problems of these trees and to give alternatives in order to ensure the future of this heritage. Since then it has been signed by more than one hundred cultural associations, scientists and municipalities.

‘European Tree of the Year’ is an event that aims to promote the relationship between trees and people in Europe. Old trees are a natural and cultural heritage, as well as a means to encourage nature’s conservation (Fig.4). It is a contest in which hundreds of thousands of citizens elect annually and by popular vote the European Tree of the Year. Spain had never submitted any candidate to this contest. In 2015 the “Chopo Cabecero del Remolinar” (Aguilar del Alfambra) was the representative of Spain. A large popular mobilization led to get the third position to obtain the support of 13.951 people who since then knew what the black poplars pollards were.



(Fig.4) Chopo Cabecero del Remolinar, representative tree of Spain, for the European Tree of the Year in 2015

Website “Chopo Cabecero” is a specialized portal that explains the characteristics of these trees, collects and offers publications, educational materials, conservation and festive activities. On the other hand, the Facebook page has almost a thousand followers who are interested in the subject.

This intense informative activity has produced a change in the society’s opinion. These trees begin to be seen as part of the heritage and all this effort has produced positive results.

The cultural associations schedule more activities every year in the villages. Town councils develop management projects in their municipalities. Small companies arise specially dedicated to pollarding. However, the low profitability of wood on a commercial scale avoid the farmers could potentially be interested in these trees.

Recently, the Aragon Government has launched two important initiatives that will favour a change in the social perception about black poplar pollards, both of them from the cultural point of view.

## The creation of the Cultural Park

In 2009, Aguilar Natural (cultural magazine) prepared the document 'Project Draft of the Cultural Park of the Black Poplar Pollards of Alto Alfambra'. This association considered that in the upper part of the Alfambra valley there was an exceptional heritage, threatened, with a great value for their inhabitants but little known by society: the black poplar pollards. These trees may well be the central axis of a cultural park, a figure of heritage protection in Aragon, having its own character compared to other existing ones. Alto Alfambra gathers other material values of great interest (architectural, artistic, archaeological, paleontological), natural values (natural spaces, places of geological interest, etc.) and immaterial values (oral traditions, speech, folklore), which also deserve to be integrated into the cultural park. The creation of a cultural park is not just compatible with traditional agricultural activities, it is based on them. It was, finally, an opportunity to generate economic activity and increase the future expectations of some villages that are in economic and social regression.

The fundamental core of the Cultural Park was the pollard trees was original in Spain. The fluvial dehesas of black poplar pollards, a product of secular human exploitation, was a type of heritage that, until now, has not been recognized as cultural heritage.

This document was signed in 2009 by the mayors of the ten villages of Alto Alfambra and by the Comarca Comunidad de Teruel. Then it was presented to the Gobierno de Aragón. In 2013, General Director of Cultural Heritage confirmed to the promoters the existence of solid bases to create the "Chopo Cabecero del Alto Alfambra" Cultural Park. He also indicated that the difficult economic situation did not make possible its creation. After several meetings, the good news came.

In 2016, the Education and Culture Department of Aragon declared the Intangible Cultural Property to the popular knowledge about the black poplar pollards that made and took care about these trees in Aragon. The management and exploitation of them are a singular example of the relationship of the people with nature, as well as the configuration of anthropic landscapes through a traditional extractive activity. It is a model of respect and integration in the natural environment through all the previous generations. It is a model of patience and knowledge of the farmer's activity in obtaining resources. It is a model of the ethnological heritage and a clear example of sustainability for our current society.

In November 2017, the Education and Culture Department of Aragon started with the creation of the "Alto Alfambra Chopo Cabecero" Cultural Park, a useful tool for the conservation of the ethnological, landscape and historical heritage. And it is a strategy for the economic and social development of this territory. This Cultural Park has a characteristic landscape, consolidated for centuries, of a great uniqueness and enormous potential, and that has shaped the life scenario of generations of mountain people (Fig.5). In that landscape are strongly linked the history, the management of natural resources and the daily life of their villages, lasting in the architecture, in the popular culture and in the traditions of this area.



(Fig.5) Landscapes from the Alto Alfambra Chopo Cabecero Cultural Park

## References

- Coulon, F., Meiffren, I. and Pointereau, P. (2003) Architectures végétales de Midi-Pyrénées. Haies, arbres et vergers. *Solagro*. Toulouse.
- De Jaime, Ch. and Herrero, F. (2007) El chopo cabecero en el sur de Aragón. La identidad de un paisaje. *Centro de Estudios del Jiloca*. Calamocho.
- Montserrat, P. (2009) La cultura que hace el paisaje. Escritos de un naturalista sobre nuestros recursos de montaña. *Editorial La Fertilidad de la Tierra*. Estella.