

Organic Heirloom Seed Revival in Kars, Turkey A Holistic Approach to Sustainable Village Projects

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Author's Background

Beti Minkin, a native of Turkey, organized sustainable village projects in Anatolia since the 1990s. Owner of TOHUM® Organics and President of Anatolia Foundation USA, she initiated and directed an agro-biodiversity conservation project in Kars Province. She was awarded in 2010 as a One World Award Finalist by IFOAM / Rapunzel, for her efforts in bringing back the ancient endangered grain Emmer with organic farming methods.

Summary

The Kars project aims to revive heirloom seeds and traditional products. The goal is to develop a healthy village model that addresses local's relationship to their environment within a holistic framework. The project links bio-conservation with organic food production and ecologically viable livelihood. It focuses on a full-scale Organic Certification Program with over 300 farmers and the revival of the ancient grain "Kavilca" or Emmer (Triticum dicoccum), amongst other important ancestral crops. Flora studies were conducted by experts, wild flower honey production was encouraged and women benefited from food and health related botanical workshops. The project positively impacted the ecological, social and economic conditions of the villages. Its final phase is underway, focused on the development of organic products for long-term sustainability.

Background

While the Anatolian Peninsula of Turkey harbors one of the richest ecosystems of the world, it has also become one of the most endangered. A motherland of fertility, the image of the Earth Goddess arose here over 9,000 years ago. As biodiversity is at risk, the local, nutritious, heirloom crops are also disappearing. The Kars project is an important model for reversing this trend. Participants inspired others in the region, where organic farming has spread tremendously.

Main chapter

MAIN ACTIVITIES

The Revival of Ancestral Seeds / Bringing Back Local Flavors

Emmer (*Triticum dicoccum*) is the most important crop propagated by project farmers.

This highly nutritious grain is one of the earliest domesticated wheat varieties known to mankind. Low in gluten and high in fiber, it survived locally, as it is still served in a few villages with tandoor-cooked goose during cold winter months.

Emmer seeds were difficult

to find in the beginning of the project, but they have now spread throughout the region. The project also gave importance to local red wheat, best for tandoor bread. Flaxseed production was tried but could not be continued for lack of farming equipment.

Organic Certification Program

Anatolia Foundation run the Organic Certification Program in partnership with the certification agency Ceres and funded it between 2006-2010. The Program is still thriving under the supervision of Nejdet Dasedemir, local project coordinator and President of Kars Natural Farmers Association (Kars Yoresi Dogal ürün Yetistiricileri Derneği –KADU) .

SUPPORTING ACTIVITIES

Wild Honey Production

Excellent quality wild honey production is a traditional occupation in Kars region. Supported by the project, a few families brought back the endangered Caucasian Queen Bee and improved their honey yield.

Health and Nutrition Workshops For Village Women

Village women participated at every stage of the project. They demonstrated and described more than 100 regional recipes and participated in health, nutrition and botanical workshops. These opened up the possibility for the usage of wild plants for food and simple herbal formulas.

The Sustainability Strategy of The Project

For such project to be sustainable, it is important it rests firmly on social, ecological and economical pillars. The Kars project is conceived as an investment to the long-term wellbeing and prosperity of the village community. Its main objective is to preserve biodiversity by developing environmental awareness and by presenting alternative means of livelihood to participants. It foresees that dynamic activities such as organic farming and product development and eco-tourism, could keep village youth in their native lands and guarantee the future of village life.

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Core messages and conclusions

PROJECT OUTCOMES

- The project has touched all aspects of village life. It has brought a new awareness of the relationship of food, health and environment. Food preferences have changed to include organically grown, traditional, wholesome foods. This is reflected in an improvement in the general health of farmer families.
- Project villages are located in environmentally sensitive regions, near important designated flora and fauna conservation areas. Organic farming helps protect the quality of soil, air and water, creating a healthier environment for people and wildlife.
- Organic agriculture was a rare activity in the region before the project. It has now spread to more villages. Project villages, known as "organic villages" have become an exemplary model of sustainable development for the region.
- Farmers have financially benefited from grants, state incentives, sales and the cessation of chemicals in agriculture. They now see organic farming as an alternative source of income. Organic certified grasslands and fodder also provide the opportunity for organic animal husbandry and dairy production.

CONCLUSIONS

The Kars project was initiated and funded by Anatolia Foundation between 2006-2010. It received additional funding from UNDP-SGP in 2007. Since 2010, it sustains itself and Project Managers continue to support its activities on voluntary basis. The current phase of the project is focused on organic production and marketing for a sustainable future.

The project shows that the conservation of ancestral seeds with organic agriculture is not only beneficial to the environment, it can also be an important source of income for rural communities. Its sustainability results from a holistic approach to village living and the building of bridges between ages-old wisdom and contemporary know-how.

With this presentation, we will to share the project's positive impact, but also discuss the lessons learnt and the obstacles encountered during its implementation. We would like it to be an interactive event, with visuals and possible farmer attendance, and a learning experience for everyone.