

**Verified Conservation Area (VCA) Audit
Conservation Management Plan of AlVelAl (Altiplano de Granada, Los Vélez y Alto
Almazora), Spain**

by Ton (A.P.M.) van der Zon, September 2018.

The Alvelal-area was visited from 26-28 August 2018. Coordinator Elvira Marín and technical director Fernando Bautista of the project core team of Alvelal accompanied me during the visit. The visit was concluded with a meeting of the core staff and some members of the board. A special interpretation of the VCA standard for the landscape approach has been developed and approved by the VCA secretariat (see at the end of the audit).

Alvelal is an association of farmers, businesses, research institutions and public organisations with the goal to improve the conditions of the local people through restoring the land and creating businesses. A good collaboration of the association with all the stakeholders is essential for the success of Alvelal.

The Alvelal-area is the large plateau ‘alteplano de Esteparia’ of appr. 1 million ha, mostly above 1000 m altitude, situated in the Andalusia and Murcia regions. In the extensive area quite some built infrastructure such as towns, villages and farms exists and the highway A92 transverses the area. About 250.000 inhabitants live on the plateau and 50% of the area is used for agricultural crops, mainly almond orchards; one third is protected areas,.

The Conservation Management Plan (CMP) assesses the baseline conditions of the area and focusses on the restoration of the biodiversity in the region and on the potential impacts of external factors. It provides an adequate base for an effective set of conservation actions. The CMP gives an extensive description of the area, including maps and a bioregional overview and a science-based description of the biodiversity baseline conditions. Little attention is still given to the exotic invasive species and the way to cope with them. Also little details are given of the extend and the impact of the hunting (legal and illegal, endangered species) and to the regulation of the hunting. The CMP contains the details of the management authority. The managing team has the right to implement the conservation actions of the CMP in the area. There is broad support for the management team from the stakeholders.

The long term vision of the Alvelal association is the restoration of the degraded soils and their biodiversity and the establishment of ecological corridors through the valleys and orchards between the mountain national parks. The strategy of the organisation is to establish nucleus sites of restored habitats (plantations, mountain slopes) and farms where through the ecological management of the orchards the soil quality and the biodiversity of the farms will improve. These best practices and results should convince the remaining farmers to adopt these practices.

The strength of the Alvelal project area is the small but very enthusiastic team and the strong support of the local people. The project has a good collaboration with scientific organisations. The current financial basis is good through the support of the Commonland-organisation and of other donors. This base is still quite small and efforts to bind more and more diverse donors but also the regional governments for a longer period should have a high priority.

The weaknesses of the project are the still limited size of the project and team in the vast area.

The long term threats are:

- the more and more pronounced climate change with a high vulnerability for desertification.

The project copes with this through soil restoration, diversification of crops, water infiltration, and strengthening of the biodiversity.

- the large emigration and high unemployment. Although the project has only limited impact on this threat it cooperates with education institutions in the region and stimulates quality employment for higher qualified youth.
- the EU regulations and policies; they stop real progress in the restoration of the area. The EU-pressure for high production of for example cereals on poor marginal soils causes soil degradation and erosion; those EU-funds could better be directed towards payments for ecosystem services such as soils and biodiversity restoration.

The opportunities for the region are:

- the high value of the global market for regenerative almonds and other products of the agricultural biodiversity;
- the emphasis on ecological corridors between the national parks which should entitle the project for a broader landscape support;
- diversification of the crops. The CMP mentions almond trees interspersed with other species such as pistachio, walnut, grapes and others. This diversification linked to complementary businesses offers new opportunities for new regenerative markets.

Conclusions

The CMP includes a set of conservation actions that addresses conservation priorities for the area to be registered as a VCA. The analysis of the area is thoroughly done but a focussed SWAT exercise could still strengthen the process. There is no need for an EIA. The actions are directed towards the conservation priorities of the Andalusia region and to the broader landscape with the corridors that connect the national parks and to the adaptation and better resilience to the expected climate change.

The conservation actions in the plan are well elaborated and represent the activities in the field. The focus on soil conservation and restoration of the natural ground cover will cope with the long term effects of erosion and climate change. Sometimes they are still experimental in order to find the best solutions, for example the green cover, wind breaks, check dams, contour lines. Best practices and results should convince the farmers about the way to manage the farm more soil- and biodiversity friendly. The efforts to re-establish original vegetation on degraded mountain slopes are well under way. More emphasis should be given to exotic species and to the regulation of the hunting in the area.

The actions focus on education, strength of the willing, demonstrating the results, conservation of soil, windbreaks, green cover. A core set of stakeholders are positively engaged in the implementation of these actions and others are to be convinced.

The planned actions are coherent, realistic and strategic; the actions are monitored and the monitoring procedures are robust.

My overall assessment of the effectiveness of the area's CMP is that the plan is realistic and the actions coherent, strategic and realistic. The area's CMP is compliant with the VCA Standard as explained and interpreted in the attached VCA landscape standard.

It has been discussed that a good timing for the next audit maybe April 2020, an annual visit seems hardly to be realistic for measuring progress. Points of attention for the coming period are the invasive exotic species, the hunting, SWAT, and the stronger link of the Board with the local and regional authorities.

My conclusion is that the Alvelal area be registered as a VCA.

The VCA landscape approach. The VCA intends to stimulate public and private partners to take initiatives to protect biodiversity jointly in a landscape approach. The landscape comprises public areas under the responsibility of local authorities, private lands, areas privately owned by involved partners and lands under the influence of the conservation

measures. Apart from individual landowners/ managers also a coalition of willing may seek the inclusion of a defined landscape in the VCA register.

For this to be successful, it needs to be clear what the boundaries of the landscape (the area) are. It needs to be clear that the coalition has ownership or a management title on substantial parts of the area and is in a position to work with other landowners in the area to achieve the formulated ambitions. This collaboration with other stakeholders needs to be described, and translated to measures (communication, information/ public awareness, incentives) to illustrate their potential contributions in the Conservation Management Plan. This plan also describes the conservation actions with the responsibilities of each of the partners for the actions in the timeframe covered by the management plan.

Public awareness of the conservation goals of the concerned landscape is an important component of the conservation actions.