The landscapes of the Moroccan High Atlas have been shaped by close relationships between humans and natural environments for millennia. These cultural landscapes are maintained by the traditional practices of the Amazigh indigenous peoples who manage them. These practices support a regional biodiversity hotspot and ensure social and ecological resilience.

Cultural Practices of Conservation in the High Atlas

What are Cultural Practices of Conservation and why are they so important?

Cultural Practices of Conservation (CPC) shape biodiversity and landscapes, maintain a vibrant mosaic of ecosystems and sustain local livelihoods. These dynamic, living traditions are increasingly threatened by changing environmental, economic and social realities, such as the exodus of young people from rural areas, severe and prolonged drought, and low monetary rewards from traditional agriculture. Understanding these Cultural Practices is fundamental to the creation of socially and ecologically appropriate biodiversity conservation and landscape management approaches.

Multiple roles of Cultural Practices of Conservation

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Although a wide variety of cultural practices shape the High Atlas landscapes, only one practice – the agdal sylvopastoral resource management system – has been studied. To assess the importance of local cultural practices and deepen our understanding of agricultural, pastoral and culinary traditions, Global Diversity Foundation (GDF) and local partner Moroccan Biodiversity & Livelihoods Association (MBLA), carried out in-depth research on cultural practices in the High Atlas communes of Ait M’hamed in Azilal Province and Imegdal in Al Haouz Province, funded by the MAVA Foundation.

These activities are at the heart of GDF’s High Atlas Cultural Landscapes programme. We aim to strengthen these traditional practices for the conservation of unique High Atlas biodiversity while enhancing wellbeing of the communities that have managed and maintained these beautiful landscapes for millennia.
Lessons learned

Socioeconomic and environmental conditions in High Atlas rural communities are changing quickly and radically. These changes often result in either the loss of cultural practices of conservation, or in adaptive shifts. When analysing the drivers of change such as increased weather instability or limited economic development, both men and women emphasized the importance of maintaining local values and traditions in a changing environment, while adapting to present contexts.

Inhabitants from the communes of Aït M’hamed and Imegdal identified multiple aspects of change in rural life, as shown in the figure below: environmental (light green), agricultural (dark green), sociodemographic and cultural (yellow) and administrative/institutional (blue). The size of the labeled circles corresponds to the frequency of each listed response.

Our methodology

Between 2016 and 2019, we trained and supported local researchers as they conducted interviews with community members to identify cultural practices and describe those that are still actively maintained. Our team carried out a total of 300 interviews and 15 focus groups. We documented more than 20 distinctive practices, including local biocultural systems used to sustain soil, water, plant life, food production, wellbeing, social cooperation and other aspects of rural life. We also collected data on how plants are used, allowing us to identify plants that are important for local livelihoods.

Through a community-based approach, we explored recent changes in local practices and the drivers of these changes. This helped us to understand the complex interconnections among factors that impact traditional practices, and guided our development of participatory strategies to strengthen them.

The complex and long-standing systems of cultural management of landscapes by Amazigh communities in the High Atlas must be understood and revived as a socio-environmentally resilient, economically effective and dynamic approach to land use.

We provide support to communities in their quest to maintain, adapt and transmit their cultural practices to the next generation, whilst enhancing local livelihoods and preserving biodiversity and culture.
The landscapes of the Moroccan High Atlas have been shaped by the close relationships between humans and the environments they live in, over the course of millennia. These landscapes are maintained and transformed by a great number of traditional practices that support a regional biodiversity hotspot and ensure ecological resilience.

An agdal is a type of communal resource management system in which there is a temporary restriction on the use of specific biological resources within a defined territory, with the intention of maximizing their availability in critical periods of need. Agdals provide animal fodder and allow for the regeneration of grazing plants in spring.

Astour is an Amazigh word that refers to the practice of building small circular or square enclosures with stones (or branches) to protect fruit trees in home gardens. This practice provides shade for vegetation and increases soil humidity. Astour is also used to protect ash, juniper or oak saplings in grazed areas to promote reforestation.

Arras n targa is an annual practice during which sediments in irrigation canals are cleaned at the beginning of summer when water levels are low. This practice ensures efficient irrigation of agricultural plots and is repeated if necessary (e.g., after summer storms). It is considered a key activity due to the importance of irrigation to local livelihoods and is carried out by tiwizi (see below). One man from each household participates in arras n targa after agreeing on a date. If irrigation canals are shared between villages, each village contributes men to the common effort of cleaning the canals.

Tawala n anrar, translated as “Threshing in turns”, is the management system for threshing. Once cereal is harvested and dried on the rooftops, members of the community collaborate for the threshing of each other’s grain production. This activity requires a number of donkeys and mules, each contributed by the participating households.

Throughout the year, different practices are carried out in Amazigh High Atlas communities, as exemplified in these agricultural calendars for Ait M’hamed’s agdals’ (a) and crop production (b); and Imegdal’s transhumance, ċ aêzib (c) and crop production (d).

Spatially, different cultural practices are distributed across an altitudinal gradient. Rivers in the valleys anchor agricultural lands and terraces, where irrigated and non-irrigated crops are cultivated. Households are usually located a bit further up the slopes, while higher altitudes are used for extensive pastoralism and transhumance. The manner in which these practices are carried out and the management systems used differ according to whether the practices are implemented at a household or family, community or inter-community level.

High Atlas Amazigh populations have a rich and diverse ethnobiological knowledge of the plants and animals that provide key social and ecological services and strengthen the resilience of these communities. These knowledge systems, which include practices, beliefs and social institutions, are highly dynamic and prone to abandonment under 21st century social and ecological pressures.

What’s next? We will continue to identify, describe and document cultural practices of conservation in the High Atlas and changes to these. We will extend our work to a third site, the commune of Oukaimeden, in 2019. We are also working with communities to raise awareness and support advocacy actions that recognise, sustain and strengthen key cultural practices of conservation, traditional plant knowledge and communal resource management systems.

For more about our work in the High Atlas, visit www.global-diversity.org/programmes/mediterranean/