

Land Use and Forestry in the Azores Shannon Blake

Perception of Land Use

Due to the geographic and historic isolation of the islands, the Azoreans have a singular view of 'native' species which consequently affects how they value preserving 'natural areas'. By definition every plant, animal, and human is an immigrant to the area because the land mass emerged from the sea independent of established continents. From the first human colonization of the islands dating back to 1439, the mostly Portuguese settlers transplanted their culture, their crops, and their ornamental plants to the islands. Having thrived and enmeshed themselves in the ecosystem, these introduced plants take on a native quality.

Status of Forestry

While the departments of forestry and agriculture may be a united government body, their interests are often at odds. The plethora of mountains found in the interior of all the islands is conceded to forestry endeavors and at topographic pinnacles you find nature preserves. Interestingly, 70-80% of the timber products never leave the islands. Producing for local use allows imperfectly shaped trees, trees with fungal spots, and single trees blown over in the wind to be utilized and not go to waste because the processing is largely done by hand on site, many times without the use of a mill.

The land use disputes within the department of Agriculture and Forestry stem from competition for usable land. Sr. Vasco Madeiros (a Forestry Resource engineer in Ponta Delgada for the Division of Agriculture and Forestry who was kind enough to entertain my questions for nearly two hours) told me about how he often must fight for sensible concessions from the agriculture sector concerning areas that are clearly poorly suited for grazing due to issues of erosion, run-off, and practicality. Where cows might cause great damage on a slope, a stand of trees might enhance the microclimatic and structural integrity.

Future of Land Use

Changes made to augment the tourism sector of the economy are already evident and how tourism is developed in the islands will shape future land use practice. The coastal areas would likely be built up as more accessible to visitors with more industry

emerging to cater specifically to travelers, but it is possible that the rural areas and forested areas *in the interior* will remain somewhat unchanged due to their inaccessibility and lack of universal touristic appeal. The balance between understanding the peculiarities and strengths of the Azores land while accommodating tourism and wanting to take advantage of sometimes unfavorable technological improvements will prove important for ensuring good land use practices in the future.