

Kean valonia oak and acorn festival 2014

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The place: Only 1 hour away from Athens lies the Aegean Island of Kea (Tzia). From afar it looks desertified with low vegetation cover but the island's mainland is totally different with disperse valonia oak stands forming typical silvopastoral and silvoarable systems. The event took place in the village of Korissia, which is the port of the island, in one of the original old buildings at the port.



Fig. 1. View from the port of Kea

The species & system: Valonia oak or *Quercus ithaburensis* is an endemic species in the central and east Mediterranean basin. It is easily distinguished from the other oak species by its semi-circular crown and sized acorns. Its various sub-species can be found in Greece, SE Italy, Turkey, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, S. Albania, and Iraq. Isolated individuals are present in the interior of forested islets in lowland and semi-mountainous agricultural fields, relics from old forests. In Greece we find the sub-species *Quercus ithaburensis* subsp. *macrolepis* (Kotschy) Hedge & Yalt. It mostly prefers warm areas where it forms dense forest stands without any specific preference to soil or other site characteristics.

The product: Χαμάδα (pronounced Hamada) is the Kean (Tziotiko) word for the giant acorn caps collected annually for exportation to leather tanneries in Europe. Despite a 49 year gap, acorn caps are once again collected and sold on Kea. 35,000 kilos left the island in 2014.

The event: On Saturday 25th of October Anastasia Pantera visited the island after being invited by Marcie Mayer the “soul” of the “Hamada Acorn Initiative”. The Hamada Acorn Initiative is a non-profit organization that aims to restore the acorn as an important factor for the local Kean economy. Marcie had already arranged a stakeholders meeting to promote opinion and ideas exchange between participants. Anastasia had the opportunity to talk about agroforestry, the present research on this issue and the AGFORWARD project. Actually two of the participants volunteered to participate in the project including their silvoarable valonia oak systems.

Anastasia, also talked about agroforestry in other Mediterranean countries and initiatives that the locals could adopt to enhance the economic sustainability of their systems. It was very interesting that the farmers described all the past practices on “Hamada” collection and valonia trees pruning. They also commented on the lately increased value of valonia oak trees due to the acorn initiative by Marcie which offers them an additional income from “Hamada” collection.



Fig. 2: Meeting in Kea and Marcy's invitation to the event

On Sunday 26th of October and at 10 a.m. the festival commenced with lots of traditional music, tsipouro and, of course acorn cookies! Initially participants had to separate the acorns from the cups. It was great fun and soon everyone passing by was trying to do as many as possible. Anastasia was trying to locate a large acorn to participate in the forthcoming largest acorn contest ... but with no luck!



Fig. 3: The best - and prettiest - volunteers ever: separating acorns from their cups

Young participants had the opportunity to use acorns and their cups to make ornaments and have a lot of fun. Other participants, young at heart, also had a great time making colorful little ornaments as a gift for their friends.



Fig.4: Little participants creating ornaments by acorns



Fig. 5: Marcie and Kostas with some of the valuable creations of the little participants

Treasure hunt was another major event of the day. The finder of the golden acorn would earn several packs of acorn cookies and bottles of wine from Kostis' winery. The rest of the colorful acorns, hidden throughout the village of Korissia, provided the lucky participants with lots of cookies and pizza. Young and old had the opportunity to enjoy, sing and dance many traditional songs throughout the event.

Maybe the biggest event of the day for the all participants was the "Largest acorn contest". Anastasia, was not prepared to bring her own large acorns from the lab so the one she found during the "Hamada" separation, was not the winner... Too bad because the winner would leave the festival with a box full of bottles of wine!



Fig. 6: ...and the winner was really heavy!



Fig. 7: Valonia oak acorns are, I think, the largest of all acorns in the world

The festival continued until late in the evening with lots of music, tsipouro and dance. The cups collected during the day would be exported to Germany and be used for leather tanning and dying industry. Acorns would become feed for the cows (a local Kean breed) and other livestock. We all had a great time and, above all, Anastasia was really happy to see local people re-evaluating valonia oak and its agroforestry systems to be something more than firewood!