



## Respectful publication of traditional herders' ecological knowledge

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### Abstract

Knowledge partnership between traditional herders/pastoralists and researchers is vital for adapting to rapid socio-ecological changes. Respect can efficiently help these partnerships as we need trust, time and dedication to bridge scientific and traditional knowledge systems. The three authors of this contribution have been closely working together since 2009, and beyond co-producing scientific papers and media articles they are experimenting with various other adequate and respectful types of "publications" to share herders' traditional ecological knowledge with scientists, diverse stakeholders and the wide public. In this paper, we share some of the experiences of our long-term collaboration and motivate others to experiment with and prepare diverse types of publications.

### Introduction

Indigenous, traditional and local ecological knowledge is increasingly respected and collaborations between traditional knowledge holders (TKHs) and scientists are now widespread. Scientists usually publish their research results in scientific papers and, in the case of social sciences, often in scientific books. But do we know who read these publications? And what readers get and understand from the traditional knowledge of TKHs documented in these publications? Will they bring the desired change, especially improvement, in the life of TKHs?

Experience shows that scientific papers and books do have, but only a limited power to change people's behaviour. Alternative ways of publications are needed to reach more people and more efficiently.

In this paper we aimed to summarize the experiences of a herder family and an academic researcher about the benefits and challenges of alternative ways of publishing (sharing, teaching) traditional ecological knowledge.

### Positionality

László Sáfián is a traditional herder coming from a seven-generation herder family. He has been working with Zsolt Molnár since 2009, teaching each other and testing diverse ways of collaborations, and co-production of knowledge and publications. Ibolya Sáfiánné is a traditional shepherdess, born into a herder family. She is the leader of the Hungarian Women Herders Group. Zsolt Molnár is a botanist, ethnoecologist working with traditional herders and farmers in Central Europe since 2000, and in Mongolia, Iran and Kenya since 2016. He was not born into a herder family.

**Methods**

This work is based on 15 years of collaboration between a herder family and a scientist. All data and conclusions below are based on our own experiences. The paper was designed and prepared together by the three authors, first in Hungarian (the mother tongue of the authors) and then translated into English. Many of the mentioned publications are also available in English, because one of the aims of the knowledge co-production between the authors was to share herders’ traditional knowledge abroad, to put Hungarian herders on the global map of science on pastoralism.

**Results**

In most cases the design and the preparation of publications was led by the scientist (or outsiders, like journalists and film makers). Partly because the publications appeared in the scientific sphere, especially at the beginning. The TKH partners were not experienced on how to work in these unfamiliar settings. However, with time, the design turned more and more into co-design, and the preparation became also increasingly a co-production. Recently, publications were led by the herders themselves (see Sáfiánné et al. 2024, and journal and radio reports).

Our experience shows that many herders simply hate, as they express it, or at least feel very uncomfortable, being interviewed by journalists, participating in scientific works, but even they feel and know the benefits of these ‘tortures’: “People see and understand our life much better.” Herders tend to be patient even in situations that are far beyond their comfort zone, especially if they experience reciprocal patience and respect from the other side.

**Table 1** Various forms of publication of herders’ traditional ecological knowledge for traditional knowledge holders (TKHs) themselves, for scientists and the wider public based on the experiences of the authors of this paper

Scientific publications	Films, media and conferences		Exhibitions and other
Scientific papers (high-ranked, English)	Short documentary films (English)	Media articles (English)	Exhibitions (photo)
Other non-local language papers, book chapters	Short documentary films (local language)	Media articles (local language)	Exhibitions (complex)
Books (English, multi-lingual)	Slow films (English)	Agricultural journal articles	Field discussions at the knowledge holder’s place
Books (local language)	Slow films (local language)	Conference presentations (local language)	Field discussions at other knowledge holders’ places
Local language scientific papers	Radio reports	Conference presentations in English/abroad	Facebook pages
Reports (e.g. IPBES, CBD, IYRP)	Podcasts	Online discussions (long presentations)	Teaching course (in person)
	Short TV reports		
	Talk shows		

- High-ranked papers can bring high respect for TKHs, especially when later they meet readers (academics, professors) at international conferences. Real co-authorship in scientific papers was achieved first by co-producing the results and discussion sections of the papers, and later by co-designing the whole research process.
- Short films, radio and TV reports prepared by outsiders can be challenging (even frustrating) for herders because uncaringful journalists can strengthen misleading and disrespectful stereotypes and

misunderstanding. We found that experienced TKHs can help journalists to learn respectful and decolonial behaviours and approaches, slow down the preparation of the product and give a chance to TKHs to check the product for technical correctness and respectfulness before the publication. The success of these deep and respectful reports and articles can be unexpectedly big.

- Longer films and content rich, colourful books increase the chances of sharing traditional knowledge and can lead to respectful and adequate inclusion of local TEK in policies but also in cross-cultural scientific reviews. When TKHs see themselves in films and books, this increases their self-confidence, and they become aware of the value of their knowledge. Herders argue that with books their knowledge gets a chance to survive longer.
- After some less successful attempts with publishing traditional knowledge in culturally less appropriate forms, we designed and made a three hours long slow film. This film became an unexpected success. Viewers not only enjoyed watching the film and having a deeper than ever insight into herders' knowledge but many of them expressed later to the herder that they learnt a lot and they use the learnt knowledge in their everyday herding. The storyline of the film is very simple: an "uncut" video about an afternoon-long, herder dog-assisted herding of 300 sheep on a patchy semi-natural pasture made with two cameras and a drone. Later, the first author narrated the whole film by answering the questions of the researcher. The Hungarian version of the film has >730 000 views (December 2024), and >115 000 viewers watched the whole film.
- Conferences are a big challenge for TKHs. To lessen stress, for local language conferences we developed a dialogue-based presentation style, where the herder(ess) answers the researcher's questions (agreed upon before), while at foreign conferences the herder(ess) speaks in her/his mother tongue while the slides have rich English content.
- Personal encounters are missing in most forms of publications. Online seminars turned out to be a useful tool for cross-continental 'virtual personal' discussions. Students got a chance to ask their personal questions after or during the 1-1.5 hours long presentations. Herders were also enthusiastic what and how foreign students asked from them.
- Personal visits by scientists to TKHs' pastures and families can help build bridges between cultures and between scientists and TKHs. Experiencing TKHs' life in their own environment gives a chance to scientists to cross the boundary line between the scientific and traditional knowledge systems. In our case, many of these scientists watched the slow films in advance, which helped them ask respectful, adequate and specific questions while on the pasture. Personal visits by a TKH to like-minded people and herders abroad, especially to other continents helps them understand their own culture, increase the understanding of the value of their knowledge. Cross-cultural similarities of how to care for the livestock and what challenges others have help TKHs (reciprocally) to overcome the feeling of loneliness with their problems.
- Facebook is a great opportunity for TKHs to network, even internationally (cf. automatic translations). Having photo and video cameras in the mobile phones helps THKs to document their world themselves and share them directly without any liaison person. This is a new and great opportunity to share (publish) ideas, feelings, knowledge, stories, challenges directly. The group of Hungarian Women Herders especially expressed their happiness of having a closed FB group where they can freely share their everyday stories with other women working in pastoralism.

## Discussion

Alternative publications are often still in the experimental stage, but it is clear that publishing traditional ecological knowledge not only in scientific papers and books is crucial to reach diverse stakeholders and potential partners. Herders argue that with these publications, they feel the increased respect towards knowledgeable herders both from the public and from scientists and conservationists. They also became aware of the crucial importance of finding new ways of intergenerational knowledge transmission of their knowledge.

IYRP (the UN International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralist, 2026) could efficiently help promote awareness raising around the issues of pastoral people, especially their adaptive knowledge, role of women and prospects of pastoral youth, as these have vital role in the future of pastoralism. As the number of herders decrease, they get more isolated, thus networking through IYRP could be a key mechanism for developing a better future for pastoral people.

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