



Mountain and Coast Rural Development in Corse

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Introduction

"Isles have their own way to exist, which strongly distinguishes it from the mainland". This is particularly true if we contrast Corsica with mainland modern France.

Today the traditional Corsica fights to survive in the ever-changing modern world. It has to restructure its economy but without losing its identity. Today the mountains and the coast face new stress as the Corsicans try to implement modern economy in their island. If till the beginning of this century the mountains were at the core of the island's traditional economy, the regional plan created in 1957 looked for a reevaluating of the resources and turned its attention towards the coast. Today a question rises: is there any economic future for the mountains?

First of all we need to know that the Corsica's geography and history shaped the cultural and economic peculiarities of its people. The two of them are greatly responsible of the economic difficulties that Corsica had to face in this last century.

Geography of Corsica

Corsica, west of Italy, is one of the largest islands in the Mediterranean (8 722 sq.kms). It the most mountainous island of Mediterranean Sea. The island is blended from two mountain ranges: the granite range that has the highest summit in Monte Cinto (2 710 m) and the schist range, much more recent in formation. The central depression that runs NW-SE divides the two ranges. The granite range forms the backbone of the island. Due to its hard rocks it has a much more tormented relief with the rivers often flowing through gorges while in the schist the rivers carved larger valleys. As a result, the W coast has irregular rocky gulfs, while the E coast has long stretches of sandy shore. On the east plain the rivers slow down as they pass through the alluvial plain. Here they used to form marshlands close to the sea but recently the marshes were transformed in an intensive agricultural area.

The Corsican climate is a Mediterranean one with hot summers and mild winters. Due to its position and the alignment N-S of the mountain ranges, the West Coast gets more rain than the east one. This is due to the humidity brought by the west winds that is discharged in the form of rain on the west slopes of the mountains. Once over the mountain tops the air is dryer as it lost its humidity on the west slopes. There is also a difference in temperature between the N and S of the island. On the south coast blows the hot Sirroco wind while in the N and NE blow the tramontane and the grecale which are colder. Because Corsica has high mountains the influence of altitude is also evident. There are three altitudinal zones: coastal, mountain and above 1500, sub-alpine. So, the climate is pleasant and varied, being another asset for tourism.

The History of Corsica

The archeological discoveries provide evidence that there were people in Corsica some 8 000 years ago. Menhirs, dolmens record megalithic civilization on the island during Mediterranean Bronze Age.

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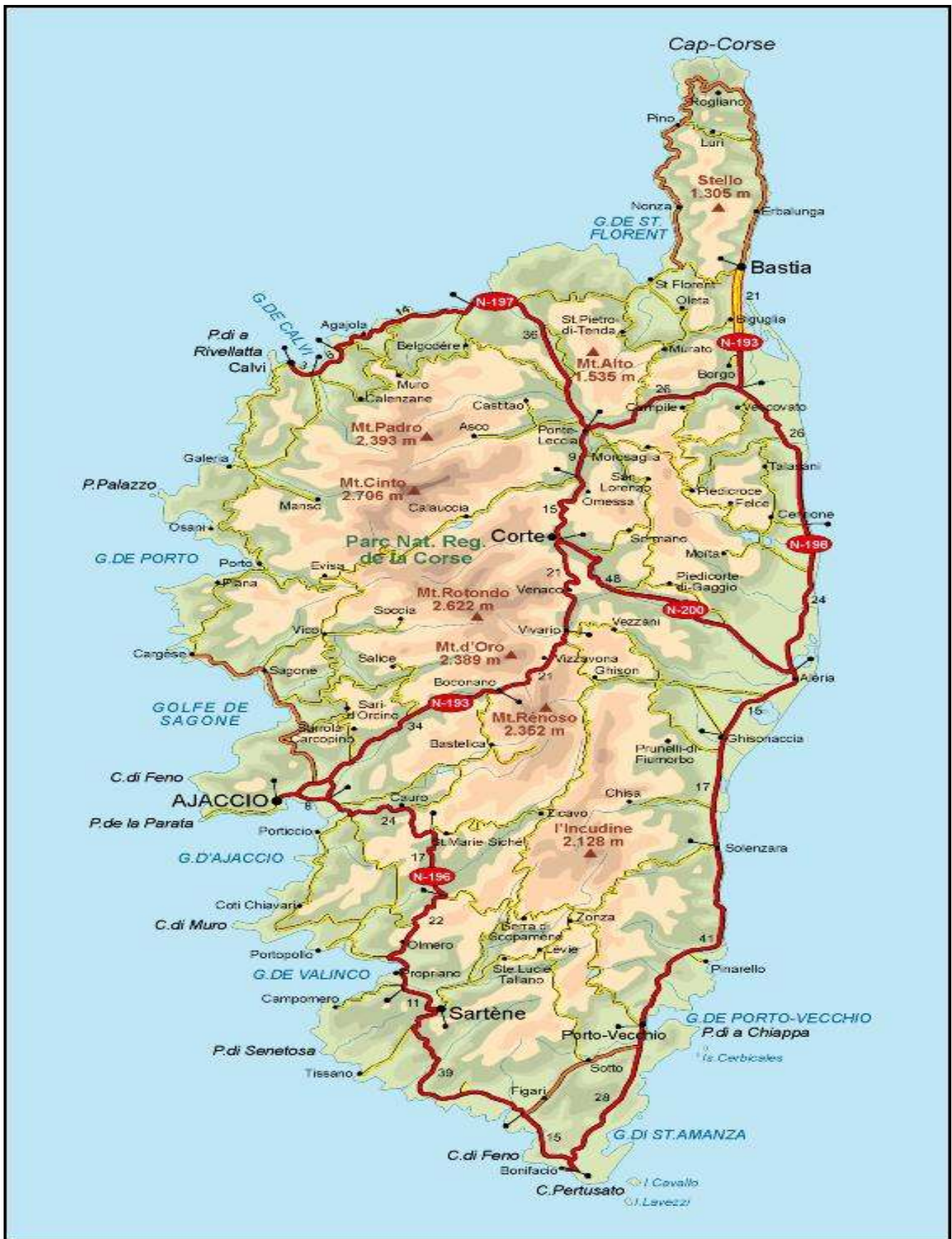


Figure 1. The physical map of Corsica.

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Even since the Antiquity Corsica's favoured position made it a staging place on Mediterranean trade lanes and one of great strategic importance. Greeks, Etruscans and Carthaginians fought for the sovereignty of the island. The Roman occupation brought peace to Corsica for almost six centuries. From the Romans the Corsicans' acquired Latin speech and Christianity. During the 5th and 6th centuries the island fell pray to the barbarian invasion. During the Middle Ages the tormented history of Corsica continued as the merchant states of Genoa and Pisa fought for the supremacy on the island. The Genoese fortifications are a statement of the troubled past. But the fights did not ended with the Middle Ages; beginning with the 19th century Corsica was the scene of clashes between France, Spain, Austria and Britain. Though Corsica finally became part of France in 1789, the bloodshed was not over yet. This time the Corsican was turned against Corsican and the hostilities of the past continued in the vendetta. This was mainly due to the persistence of clan structures that generated lack of cooperation between communities.

The Mountain as the Cradle of the Corsican Society

Corsica's tormented and troubled past took its toll on the life of the inhabitation. It directly influenced the distribution of population on the island. The insecurity caused by the fighting and the malaria on the plains caused the biggest majority of the villages to develop in the "coteaux" zone of heavily dissected granite and schistose upland. The mountainous relief isolated the village communities. This shaped the Corsican's character: reclusive, distrustful, and reluctant to changes. The Corsicans have never been seafaring people and fishing is of local importance only, so that the coastal settlements are not numerous. Like the Sardinians, the Corsicans have been content to remain isolated in their mountains and the changing currents of the civilization have affected them only superficially. The result was two fold: they preserved very well their traditions, especially in the interior, but also remained untouched by the industrial revolution and, this will later cause massive depopulation, as the young people migrated to more developed areas, like south of France or Paris area, that could satisfy their needs.

Still, even today, the idea of "my village" holds enormous importance to Corsicans and even though they may work and even live "in town" during the week, there is an exodus to villages at the weekend. The village is almost as important to a Corsican's identity as his family. This remains true even for the Corsicans in the Diaspora, many of them returning to the island during the summer months, causing an increase in population of up to ¾ of a million.

The Corsican Problem

During history, the continuous fighting produced fluctuations in population and a low-level economic development. This will heighten towards the end of XIX century due to specific factors.

Because the villages developed into a zone with steep slopes, thin soils and limited possibilities of irrigation, the agriculture evolved on the basis of dry-farming cereals, tree crops (mostly olives) and extensive grazing of sheep and goats. The agriculture developed in the mountains while the eastern plain remained practically deserted due to its endemic malaria, which was eradicated only in 1944 by the Americans. As a result the local economy was not capable to resist the more competitive modern economies or to retain population during the 1900s. If the emigration was quite a tradition in Corsica, being practiced even in antiquity, it became massive after 1850 when industrialization was in full bloom on the continent. This was due to the improvements in communications with the mainland, through which the young Corsican found there is so much out there. So, the ancient traditional economy could no longer satisfy his needs. If in 1901 the population was around 220 000 inhabitants in 1966 was less than 160 000 permanent inhabitants. The wave of immigration still continues today but at a lower scale. This major exodus caused massive land abandonment. If in 1913, 30 % of the land was cultivated in 1950, the cultivated land covered only 3 % of the island's land.

The Regional Plan of Development

Recognizing the gravity of the Corsica's problem the French government created a regional plan of development, which was published in 1957. The plan envisaged an agricultural and tourist future for the island. The security of the interior, the forest and pastoral resources of the mountains esteemed in the past were now considered anachronisms, while the littoral zone was projected as the way to the economic revival.

The tourism was considered adequate to become the backbone of the island's economy while the rehabilitation of the agriculture was considered essential to restrain rural depopulation and to contribute to the economy by producing commercial crops. The organization of the restructuring was given to two societies: SOMIVAC (Société de Mise en Valeur Agricole de la Corse) and SETCO (Société d'Équipement Touristique de la Corse).

The first action taken by the SOMIVAC was to make some research regarding the possibilities that the eastern plain, that was mostly uncultivated, had to offer. They researched the soil, the climate and hydrology in order to find out what type of crop was best suited to the physical conditions and which offered the best commercial possibilities. The company bulldozed clear new farms, introduced irrigation for the dry summer season, built access roads, farm buildings and created installs. By this system over 100 new farms were created, totaling more than 8 000 acres. The land was mostly acquired through land reclamation of unproductive maquis areas on the eastern plain, but also by purchase of adjacent land from private owners. There was a certain amount of opposition from the farmers and shepherds to changes in their centuries old working methods and living habits. Moreover, due to the fact that the new farms necessitated large amounts of money, most of the native Corsicans could not afford them. Instead, the repatriates that came in Corsica after France lost Algeria, in 1967, immediately seized the opportunity of re-establishment. 75 % of the new farms were allocated to them. And even though the SOMIVAC decided that the best crops to be cultivated were the citrus, a large number of the new farmers cultivated wine. Nevertheless, the influx of the repatriates with valuable agricultural experience and the decline of the Algeria economy benefited Corsica, as it opened up market opportunities for the wine and fruit of Corsica.

Neither SETCO had an easy life in Corsica because it too met with some "opposition by an island race, proud, independent in mind and outlook, fiercely attached to a traditional way of life, who feared erosion of tradition, language and manners through massive and repeated invasions by 'Continental' aliens bringing decadence and condescension with them." (Roland Gant –Corsica-Guide). The first action taken by SETCO was to establish a chain of new hotels and recreational areas. Besides this it also acted as a sponsor of private developments. As a result, in spite of the inadequacy of the infrastructure, tourism has continued to expand more rapidly and by 1967 reached 600000 visitors. But, because most of the Corsicans were not properly trained, they usually got the low paid jobs in the field. Even today, half of the workforce in tourism comes from outside the island.

The main concerns were the fact that the local companies needed to export their products because the small size of island's economic market was insufficient for them to be economically viable. Also the cost of local production was high due to the fact that machinery and fertilizers had to be imported. The problem that exportation posed was that tourism, wine and citrus cultivation were and are very competitive economic sectors so an economic development based on these areas would require a good coordination and a big financial effort.

Another problem that appeared was the fact that the regional development plan, because of the way it was structured, heightened the polarization between the mountain and the plain on various levels. To the initial situation, characterized by difference in soil quality- high in the plains and low in the mountain area, in economy - crops culture in the plain and pastoral in the mountain and in life style – mostly urban on the coast and rural in interior - other facts added.

So, the contrast deepened: between the "Corsican" mountain and the ethnically diverse coast; between the large scale commercial farming on the plain and the traditional and highly fragmented farms in the mountains; between the developed coast and underdeveloped interior.

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Mountains and Coastal Economy in Today's Corsica

The first sign that the regional plan of development was working, at least to a certain level, was a decrease of emigration and an increase in the number of the inhabitants. In the last years it began to grow again and in 1990 was around 250 000. The immigrants continued to be mostly from rural areas in the mountains. So, today, almost half of the total population of 260 000, is concentrated in the towns of Bastia (52 000) and Ajaccio (59 000) - so over 40 % of the island's total population-, while the inner part of the isle is still depopulated, often with a density of less than 10 inhabitants/km². Also, the composition of the population is not a very promising one: a quarter of the population is over 60 years old, while 10 % are foreign workers, including North Africans (mostly Marroccans-14000) and Portuguese (4000).

Nevertheless, the most important result of the regional planning was the fact that for the first time something new was taking place and new land was cleared and farmed. This had an invaluable psychological impact and brought a change of attitude of the Corsicans, who so far had been reluctant to accept the new. They were responsible for some of their economic misfortune, which was partially caused by political infighting and willingness to live on pensions, social security and money from abroad. Corsicans decided to change, to make themselves a place in the future. For, this they seem to focus on tourism. As a result, the number of the tourists has multiplied by four in the last 20 years, reaching today around 2 millions per year. Modernization and the expansion of services made it possible. There is a lot of advertising, especially in the French media (on the web too) upon the holiday opportunities in Corsica that offer any tourist a general view upon the attractions on the island. The improvements in transportation had an important role in the development of tourism. 2/3 of the tourist traffic is made by sea with ferries from Italy and France. The number of harbours grew, many of them being used for yachts but also for cruise ships. The sailing harbours are in large part equipped to receive boats of any height and are designed in order to ensure important accommodating: in 1995, 60 000 calls were registered in Corsica's harbours. The most important of the Corsica's harbours is Ajaccio: a large and modern harbour. During summer there are four airports: Ajaccio, Bastia, Calvi, Figari which receive tourists mainly from France, Germany, England, Netherlands, Luxembourg and Switzerland.

Due to the development plans, the coast economy has developed greatly in the last years due to the expansion of agriculture and of coast summer resorts. Now, the resorts are developed on the place of old marinas, and are focused on the development of water sports. There are many new hotels, and holiday villages are being developed on the coast. In 1996, even a "Free-Zone" was set-up for 5 years to attract investment by reducing some tax and social costs.

Though the initial development plan focused on the coast, the Corsicans have not forgot their mountains, this because Corsica is its mountains. A lot of effort is now being made to offer a new economic future to the mountains by developing the agri-food business and the tourism. The Regional Natural Park of Corse, established in 1972 covers 350 000ha. It plays, alongside the Agency of Economic Development, an important role in the revitalization of the interior, in order to stop its "desertification".

In order to stop the migration of rural population it tried to promote the development of mountain tourism by creating a network of tracking routes of about 1500 km in length in order for the tourist to see the spectacular gorges, glacier lakes and high peaks of the island. Fra I Monti (GR20) is considered one of the most difficult hiking routes in Europe. It has 200 km entirely marked out. Due to the new improvements in the infrastructure it has a lot of private hotels and refuges on its path. There are also four trails of medium difficulty for a less trained tourist (Mare a Mare - 3 runs and Mare a Monti). In other words a lot of attractions for a tourist looking for adventures.

There is also the Asco resort which represents the Corsicans' attempt to develop winter sports. The resort tries to attract tourists that consider the French Alps either too expensive or too agglomerated. The Corsica Raid Adventure in 2000 at its 6th edition, a leading European adventure race, with 30 teams as participants, was widely covered in the press, especially in France. Its sections: canyoning, rope sections, abseiling, sea kayaking, orienteering, mountain bike show the potential tourist the attractions of the island.

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The Regional Park and the Agency for Economic Development encourage projects which not only create jobs, but integrate public and private efforts. They offer special grants, that can run up to 80 %, for businesses setting up in communes with the population of less than 500 people.

Alongside with tourism development, emphasis is placed on agricultural development in the mountains. As a result, the sheep population is rising both in number and quality, as is the resulting cheese production.

Every effort is made to develop the interior in order to maintain the population in here. For a better economic and administrative organization, even a new capital of the Corsica Assembly was proposed: Corte, situated more towards the center of the island, on the border between the north and south regions of Corsica .

Conclusions

During the past five years, the economy of Corsica has known a visible economic growth, especially in tourism, which triggered development in all services, in commerce, transportation, construction and agri-food business but not in industry. In 2002, employment in agri-food business – which comes second as importance, after tourism-increased by 11 % and production by 20 %. The sector includes both farm and industrial production. For the most part sales are within Corsica (71%) with a quarter in continental France and only 5 % is export, but this latter part is growing. The biggest export buyers are Italy, the USA, Germany and Switzerland. The main products are wine, charcuterie, cheese, olive oil, chestnut flour, honey, biscuits and farmed fish.

Nonetheless, the Corse economy is one in which is a very high level of seasonal employment: the unemployment runs at about 9 000 people in the summer, rising to 15 000 in the winter. Also, is worth mentioning that the size of industrial establishments by number of employees is very small. Of 1 524 establishments, 671 had no employees at all and only 11 had more than 50 in the year 2000.

Corsica has one of the least polluted environments of the Mediterranean, but is under heavy pressure, especially from tourism. The tourist “pressure” (the proportion of tourists to population) is relatively high 6.8 , coming second to the Balearics (11.2). The number of tourists varies greatly, by location, country of origin and other factors. There are striking differences between Corsica and neighbouring Sardinia in the structure of its facilities. Lodging by bed type differs greatly : hotel beds: 27 % C vs 49 % S, camping beds 69 % C vs 49 % S; other beds 4 %C vs 2 % S.

The newly evolving economic policy of Corsica is now focused on the harmonious development of the interior with its mountains, forests and water courses, especially supporting heritage and culturally specific activities. The aim is to encourage a wider market economy, balancing the coastal and rural areas and preserving the very things that make Corsica so special.

Thanks to the efforts of the French State and the European Union, Corsica has managed to overcome some of its severe underdevelopment, but a lot remains to be done to reduce the island's level of dependency, and to enhance its economic and cultural assets.

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