Future without cork?
– Saving the cork oak for our children -

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Abstract:

The "classical" method of closing a wine bottle is to cork it up. This method which looks back on a tradition of many centuries has started to retreat a couple of years ago. Today, especially in the low price segment of the wine market, natural cork is more and more substituted by plastic or glass stoppers or even by screw caps. These techniques have been improved during the past years so that the taste of the wine is not impaired as long as it is consumed within a reasonable period of time which is not long for low-price wines anyway.

While the traditionalists among wine connoisseurs are still disgusted with this development the new method of sealing wine bottles has become more and more accepted by the wide public. Wine producers welcomed this development because for them it means a reduction in costs and a possibility to keep prices low in a market which has become more and more competitive during the last years. Ten thousands of liters of wine have to be taken back every year by wine traders and winegrowers because it is corked due to bad corks.

Things are different with cork producers, especially in Europe. They suffer from reduced demand while wages are high so that they cannot lower their prices. As a consequence more and more cork producers in Southern France, Spain and Portugal drop out of the market and former cork oak plantations are given up by their owners. Vast areas are running wild or – even worse - are bought up by land developers who build holiday complexes in former cork oak forests. This change towards a much more intensive land use does not only destroy the former beauty of the landscape and its tranquil atmosphere but leads also to severe damages to the ecosystem and a distortion of the ecological balance in the respective regions. Most importantly, due to their exceptional fire resistance cork oak forests function as a barrier against desertification in Southwest Europe.

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In this paper we suggest to subsidize cork producers in accordance with their non-market production, i.e. the preservation of cork oak plantations in the Mediterranean and the ecosystem services as well as the aesthetic values accruing from them. Under such a regime cork farmers could sustain their plantations even though their pure market incomes from producing and selling cork stoppers alone would not be sufficient for them to survive. Ideally the subsidy payments would exactly match the social benefits accruing from the plantations. Therefore we suggest to assess these social benefits using a direct environmental valuation technique like the Contingent Valuation Method (CVM) or Choice Modeling (CE). Both are interview-based valuation methods aiming at the assessment of people’s willingness to pay (WTP) for the aesthetic values and ecosystem services accruing from the cork oak plantations. The paper discusses in detail the features and applicability of CVM and CE in the context of cork oak preservation and gives an outline of a suitable project scenario and questionnaire.