

Exchange of experience of traditional pollarding techniques

Leitza, Navarra

3-5 February 2011

A VERY TRADITIONAL SOUND was to be heard in the Basque mountains at the beginning of February 2011. Amidst the bells of the grazing ponies and the trickle of water from the streams was heard the rhythmic chop of wood being cut by many axes. People were pollarding ancient beech trees, continuing the tradition of many generations – but with a subtle difference from the time over 50 years ago when they were last cut for firewood or charcoal. First the climbers were equipped with modern harnesses and ropes and secondly most of them were doing it for the first time.

The three days, blessed with amazing sunny weather, were organised by Trepalari (the Basque Arboricultural Association) as an international meeting to facilitate the exchange of information about traditional methods of tree pollarding. Attended by people from all over Spain, as well as Italy, UK, Germany and Switzerland the focus was very much on learning techniques of axe cutting.

Guided by Gabriel Saralegi the group were initially taught about the different types of axes and were then able to practice on branches and logs both on the ground, and then propped on nearby trees to simulate a more natural situation within the canopy of a tree. For those experienced arboriculturalists the opportunity was then given to use their tree climbing skills to get into the canopy of the pollards and cut the branches in the traditional way, guided on where to cut them by Miguel Barriola, a former charcoal maker.

25 people attended the practical sessions and cut 12 old pollards (10 beech and 2 oak) and one new beech pollard over the three days, which also included an indoor session by Gerard Pasola about the physiology of pollards (attended by 40 people) and a discussion about the results of work carried out previously to restore lapsed pollards at Leitza comparing different cutting techniques.

The meeting was conceived as an extension of previous 'experience exchange' days where trained arboriculturalists had helped teach axe cutters how to use a climbing harness and to climb safely in the trees, in exchange for lessons in cutting with an axe.

As a result of these days it is hoped that work in some (Spanish) woods may be a little quieter in the future, but just as productive!

Helen Read
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Top - Axes on display
Above - Practise cutting
Right - Cutting pollards

