

## 7th Inventory of Land Stewardship Initiatives in Spain (2020–2023)

### Executive summary

The *7th Inventory of Land Stewardship Initiatives in Spain (2020–2023)* provides an updated overview of the status and evolution of land stewardship in the country—a conservation tool based on voluntary agreements between landowners or land users and stewardship entities aimed at protecting and managing natural, cultural and landscape values. During the period analysed, all indicators show significant growth: the number of agreements has reached 4,632, representing a 49% increase compared to the previous inventory; active entities now total 268, 23% more than before; and the area under stewardship amounts to 708,191 hectares, also a 23% increase and equivalent to 1.4% of the national territory.

The territorial distribution of these initiatives shows a consolidated presence across all autonomous communities except Ceuta and Melilla. Catalonia continues to be the region with the largest number of agreements, while Aragón and the Basque Country stand out for experiencing the most notable increases in this period. In terms of surface area, Extremadura and Andalusia concentrate the largest extensions, driven both by new initiatives and by the expansion of existing agreements. Most land stewardship takes place on private property, which accounts for 79% of the agreements and 61% of the land area involved. The rest is divided between public land and communal property, the latter showing significant growth in both number of agreements and associated surface area.

The profile of stewardship entities maintains the trend observed in previous editions: associations and foundations remain predominant, although the participation of public entities—especially municipalities and educational institutions—has grown, as has the presence of communal landowners' groups. The sector's activity is highly diverse, yet a small number of entities manages a considerable proportion of both the total agreements and the land area under stewardship.

Regarding the nature of the agreements, written agreements remain the most common, followed by territorial agreements with public administrations and verbal agreements. Their duration tends to be longer, with commitments spanning six to ten years being the most frequent, along with an increase in open-ended agreements, particularly those linked to land purchases made by stewardship entities.

The dominant land uses in stewardship areas continue to be forest and agricultural land, although dehesas and other agroforestry systems contribute substantially in terms of

surface area. Conservation objectives reveal a broad orientation: habitats and ecological systems are the most frequently cited, followed by species—although species-related agreements encompass the largest territorial extent due to initiatives focused on flagship species such as the Spanish imperial eagle, bearded vulture, Iberian lynx or brown bear. A total of 582 target species were identified, one third of which are included in the List of Wild Species under Special Protection Regime.

The strategies employed to achieve these objectives focus mainly on habitat restoration and conservation, the maintenance of traditional land management practices and the promotion of drought-resilient systems, alongside other actions related to landscape management, environmental education and climate change mitigation. Monitoring practices have improved noticeably compared to previous inventories: 57% of agreements are monitored annually or more frequently, contributing to enhanced technical quality and reliability of results.

The relationship between land stewardship and official protection frameworks continues to strengthen. Half of all agreements are located totally or partially within Natura 2000 sites, representing 57% of the total stewardship area. This highlights the complementary role of stewardship in managing high-value ecological areas, particularly on private lands and in contexts where public action is limited.

The report also includes advances in characterising funding sources, the products and services generated on stewardship lands, the role of volunteering and the development of new stewardship modalities—such as hunting-related, marine and coastal, and urban stewardship. Furthermore, the Land Stewardship Platform outlines future challenges, including strengthening the official recognition of the Inventory, improving integration of its data into the Spanish Inventory of Natural Heritage and Biodiversity, and aligning stewardship initiatives with international standards such as the IUCN’s OECMs. These efforts will be developed within the framework of the LIFE CUSTODIA project (2024–2028), which aims to reinforce governance, social innovation and financing mechanisms for land stewardship in Spain.

Overall, the Inventory confirms the consolidation and expansion of land stewardship as a collaborative, socially driven conservation tool—one that is increasingly widespread, more diverse in its participating actors, and more robust in terms of technical quality, monitoring and its capacity to contribute to the conservation of Spain’s natural values.