

Article

Regional Identity and Intangible Heritage Related to Saffron Cultivation in Castilla-La Mancha (Spain)

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Abstract: Agriculture is an important economic activity across much of the Western world. Beyond its productive purpose, we can also identify a cultural function that is expressed in the existence of a rich heritage associated with the interactions between nature and humans over time. This heritage includes tangible and intangible assets, the latter including traditional knowledge, history, knowledge of natural cycles, and the identification of the local population with its landscapes; in short, resources are understood as a legacy that needs to be reappraised and passed on to future generations. Saffron cultivation is an example of an agricultural landscape with significant intangible heritage values associated with the know-how and the family-run nature of the farms. The resources linked to saffron cultivation in the region of Castilla-La Mancha (Spain) are described in this paper, with an emphasis on how local communities perceive them as an integral part of their geographical identity. The results, following in-depth interviews with different local actors, demonstrate the potential for the intangible values associated with saffron to drive local development in many rural areas once they have been reappraised and classified as assets for attracting tourism.

Keywords: saffron; intangible heritage; territorial identity; territorial development; local communities



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1. Introduction

Saffron is a supplementary industrial crop that is generally grown along with other crops in the agricultural structure of many Mediterranean countries. It is grown in a local production system with a specific cultural character and homogeneity linked to tradition, the type of landscape, the way the farm is managed, and the know-how of the people involved. Saffron is produced from a bulbous plant of the Iridaceae family (*Crocus sativus*) in a process in which the stigmas of the flowers are toasted to obtain an economically valuable product, popularly known as ‘red gold’. The crocus can withstand an enormous range of ecological conditions, both soil and climatic, although it is best cultivated in a temperate continental climate or in a Mediterranean climate influenced by continental conditions with cool winters and hot, dry summers, with limited rainfall throughout the year, and at altitudes of between 600 and 1200 m. These circumstances may explain the importance of this crop in historical times, especially since the Middle Ages [1,2].

On the global scale, saffron production is dominated by countries such as Iran, with about 400 tons per year and more than 100,000 people employed [3], followed by India, China and Pakistan. In Europe, the crop is mainly grown in Greece, Italy and Spain, where it is associated with the traditional Mediterranean trilogy (cereals, vines and olives), making it important to maintain agricultural incomes.

It is a natural, artisanal product (manual labour accounts for about 80% of the working hours required for production) that is of high quality and highly valued on the international markets due to its varied uses as a spice, colouring, pharmacological raw material, pigment or due to its use in mystical-religious ceremonies, etc. [2] (p. 208). It has also recently started to be used by the cosmetics industry, which is increasingly searching for natural ingredients in sun protection, anti-pigmentation and anti-ageing creams as well as in the production

of perfumes [4]. Commercial saffron is the dried or powdered stigmas obtained from the flower produced by the saffron plant. The stems grow from a bulb, and the flowers sprout from the top of the stem. They have purplish petals, three scarlet stigmas (threads) and yellowish stamens. Only the stigmas are used to obtain saffron, while the stamens form a by-product with no commercial value, although they are sometimes used to adulterate the saffron [1] (p. 16).

The process to obtain the final product begins with the saffron bulb, which is planted at the end of June, in furrows about 20 cm deep, with flowering taking place during the autumn (between 15 and 25 days), generally from mid-October to mid-November. The flowers are picked by hand and placed in wicker baskets in the early hours of the day to avoid sunlight; they are then spread out in the houses to be aired and the stigmas are then removed, with care taken not to break them and to ensure they maintain their reddish colour without yellowish tones (from the stamens) or violet tones (from the petals). This is a highly labour-intensive task and all the members of the family generally get together to increase productivity, since in order to obtain 1 kg of dry saffron, approximately 100,000 flowers need to be handled. The process continues with the slow toasting of the stigmas to eliminate the water they contain and form a kind of paste between 0.5 and 1 cm thick. This is a complex task since over-toasting detracts from the value of the product, and too little dehydration could cause the product to putrefy. Once the process is finished, the resulting saffron is stored away from light, humidity and air in order to preserve its aroma and colour until it is marketed [1,2]. It is important to point out that the saffron sold by the producer, which has a relatively low commercial value because it is a raw material, is one thing, but the saffron that enters the international markets is another product entirely, as it has been cleaned and prepared to acquire its true value. This essential stage increases the original value by more than 200%, in comparison to the average prices paid to the farmers [2] (p. 222).

The origins of saffron in Spain are unclear, although it was probably introduced by the Arabs [4]; several documents date this introduction to the 6th century, and it appears in the chronicles of Saint Isidore of Seville at the beginning of the 7th century. It is also mentioned in other references throughout history owing to its value and applications [5]. It is known that accounting data were collected from the 18th century onwards in the central part of the Iberian Peninsula, which were subsequently published in the 20th century [6]. The 18th century was a time when this crop became important in some regions such as Castilla-La Mancha, as the bulbs were well adapted to the climate and the soil type, and also because its production cycles were particularly complementary to the cycles of other dominant crops. Currently, about 90% of the saffron produced in Spain is from the Autonomous Community of Castilla-La Mancha, a fact we will return to later.

Spain is the world's second-largest exporter of saffron, maintaining trading contacts with the United States, Italy, the United Arab Emirates, Argentina and Sweden, with its output varying between 10% and 20% of total global exports. While most of the saffron is grown in Castilla-La Mancha, Spanish exports are led by packers from the Valencian Community with an average share of 40% of exports, followed by Castilla-La Mancha and Andalusia (around 20% each) and finally Catalonia (11%) and Murcia (around 5%) [3]. With regard to imports, national production is not able to meet domestic demand, so saffron imported from Iran is often used, which is packaged as a local product and then offered for sale.

The structure and conditions of the national and international saffron markets contrast with the characteristics found in a region such as Castilla-La Mancha, with its limited size, strong local and traditional character, and fascinating richness based on its traditional values, as it is a crop with hardly any mechanisation, using predominantly manual labour. However, at present, there are several structural factors that are threatening the viability of these farms, such as international competition, the lack of family continuity, the shortage of labour, the effects of periodic rodent and rabbit damage, the greater profitability of other agricultural uses, climate change, institutional and media neglect, and the small scale of the

producers, who face serious difficulties entering into the larger commercial networks [7]. This precarious situation in the sector has at least two likely repercussions: firstly, the possible disappearance of the landscapes and traditional knowledge surrounding this crop, and, secondly, the loss of an important local asset that is fundamental to promoting a local identity and to the design of economic diversification strategies in these rural areas. In view of its potential, the preservation and reappraisal of the agricultural heritage linked to saffron are essential to the current agricultural structure. Consequently, based on the identification of the heritage resources associated with its cultivation, especially those of an intangible nature, the question posed by this research project is as follows: are they recognised and valued by the local communities, thus enabling the local identity to be strengthened?

We start from the hypothesis that local identity is a key element if regions are to be competitive in the current context of economic and social crisis, as well as being an element that can boost the resilience of a geographical space by prioritising local culture [8]. We understand regional competitiveness to be a concept based on the learning process of local communities related to their productive resources [9,10] which allows them to reinforce their knowledge and a sense of belonging around shared values, feelings and meanings, in this case, associated with saffron, which can acquire economic importance when transformed into commercial products [11]. Furthermore, in relation to resilience, the reinforcement of a local identity can foster the positive adaptive capacity of municipalities facing adverse situations that generate serious impacts, which are reinforced by certain endogenous weaknesses that made them particularly vulnerable, and hence they emerge stronger from an internal transformation strategy [12] (p. 67). Therefore, it is essential that these resources are identified in order to promote adaptation processes (resilience) in rural areas because they enable a region to prepare for, resist and adapt to changing external circumstances [13–16]. This hypothesis is reinforced if we consider the saffron fields as one of the region's multifunctional agricultural systems, that is, a flatland agri-food system which, in addition to being multifunctional, is also characterised by its geographical nature, as it is anchored in the geographical area throughout the production cycle, particularly in the production and processing phases [17]. As we have pointed out, it is also a crop with strong cultural and social roots (social crop). We believe that enhancing the value of these heritage resources is essential if the region is to gain recognition as a cultural landscape, in line with other agricultural landscapes that have already been protected by official bodies [18].

The social nature of this crop is reflected in several important aspects such as its admirable capacity to make small farms profitable and the fact that the dedication to saffron production led to relatively higher income levels than those in the non-producing surrounding areas, which offered a certain degree of security in the farm income system. It has also been a powerful factor in financing improvements in agricultural structures (mechanisation and the upgrading of farm and livestock equipment, an increase in the size of farms through land acquisition, conversion from non-irrigated to irrigated land, etc.) due to its exceptional capacity to be capitalised by farms, although it can also be seen as a hindrance from the point of view of resizing the system of farms due to the cessation of activity. Without a doubt, the human factor is fundamental because of the high demand for manual labour it generates, the relatively small area required for cultivation, which results in little competition with other crops, and because it is producers who traditionally decide on the most opportune moment to offer their saffron to the market [2] (pp. 210–211).

2. Materials and Methods

We based this study on the methodological approach used by Ruiz and Cañizares to interpret and assess the intangible resources linked to the wine-growing operations associated with the vineyard landscapes in Spanish regions including Castilla-La Mancha [19]. It approaches the object of study in a comprehensive manner by applying a conceptual, descriptive and empirical methodology that can be adapted to the heritage resources and landscape of any agricultural use (agrarian cultural landscapes). The only elements of

discussion relate to the size of the sample and the nature of the questionnaires, which may vary depending on the culture and the level of organisation of the institutional and local actors.

The work is organised into three phases (Figure 1): in the first phase, an effort is made to define the main concepts related to the study, i.e., intangible heritage and agrarian cultural landscapes established from academic knowledge and from the initiatives carried out by official bodies. In the second phase, the intangible heritage resources related to the saffron landscapes in Castilla-La Mancha are addressed, an aspect in which the consultation of a specialised bibliography and the cataloguing carried out by the 2012 *Baeza Charter on Agricultural Heritage* with respect to this type of resource is fundamental, which will be further discussed later on. The third phase of the study focuses on characterising some of these intangible resources in the saffron landscapes, highlighting, above all, the organisation of informative and festive events promoted by the local administrations.

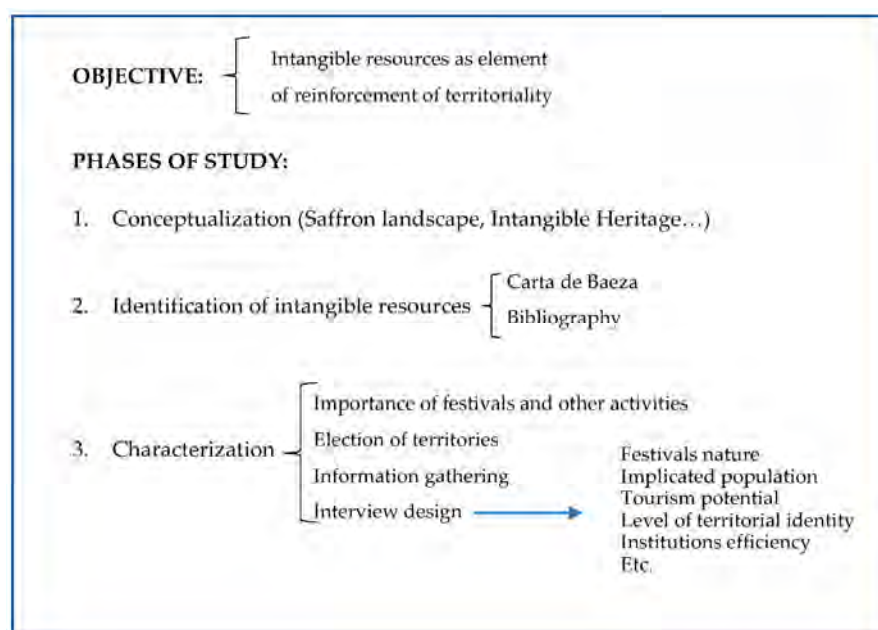


Figure 1. Methodological approach: Phases of study. Adapted from Ruiz and Cañizares [19].

This last phase has four sub-phases or stages: initially, the suitability of the festive and recreational initiatives as expressions of local identity is assessed, as they recreate and enhance important cultural resources such as the meticulous work techniques, the history of cultivation or even the role of saffron in musical traditions. After this, the municipalities where the fieldwork was to be carried out were chosen. The selection was made taking into account the tradition and significance of the festivals with the longest history and greatest renown that revolve around saffron, especially the most well-established ones such as the Jornadas del Azafrán in Madridejos and the Fiesta de la Rosa del Azafrán in the town of Consuegra, both in the province of Toledo and only 8 km apart. Thirdly, an in-depth consultation of the information obtained from the institutions and from the academic world was conducted; and finally, a questionnaire was designed based on the objectives of the work, consisting of a series of questions that attempt to evaluate the level of identification and sense of identity generated by this type of event, that is, to what extent these activities are reinforcing the local identity around the cultivation of saffron. The social actors interviewed were mainly leaders of local groups and public institutions, namely local governments.

The interview covered items such as the activities that take place within the events; the number of people participating; the aspirations or potential of the events in relation to tourism; the identification of obstacles or threats to the reinforcement of the local identity; and estimates relating to the involvement of the institutions and the value that the local

residents place on this type of event. The results obtained allowed us to assess the level of awareness of the local community regarding their own resources as key elements in the conservation of the saffron landscapes and their promotion as a local asset.

3. Results

3.1. Saffron Cultivation in Castilla-La Mancha (Spain): General Characterisation

Since the beginning of the last century, saffron cultivation in Spain has been slowly declining, and it has disappeared in some regions in the interior of the country. The reasons for this are related to the dynamics of the rural areas themselves (priorities of the Common Agricultural Policy, labour shortages, etc.), together with competition from international markets. The graph below (Figure 2) shows that, in the short period shown, there was a slight upward trend in the cultivated area, which has stabilised at around 180–200 hectares in recent years, with a slight decrease in the last year for which we have data (2020). Production has fallen sharply since 2016, mainly due to climatic factors such as the lack of rainfall and higher temperatures in September and October, not to mention the low yields generally obtained in the first and second year of the harvest cycle.

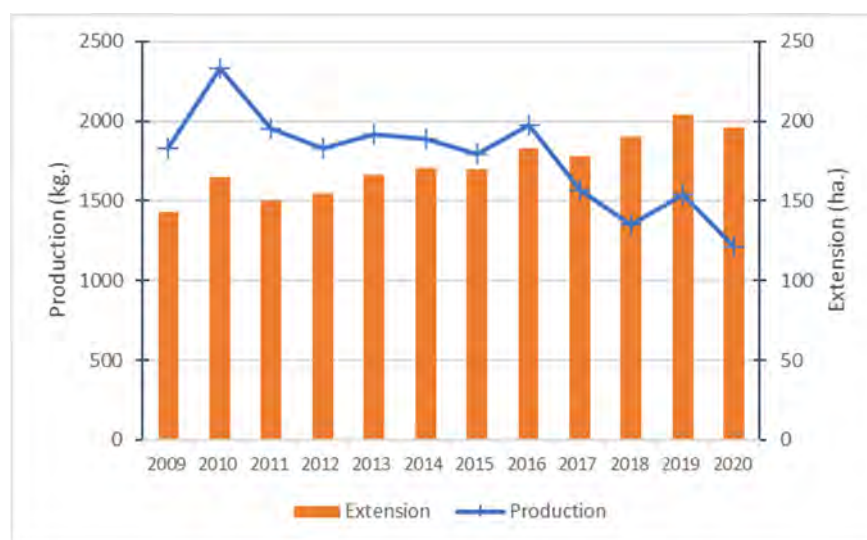


Figure 2. Saffron extension and production in Spain (2009–2020). Source: M. de Agricultura, Pesca y Alimentación (2021), (p. 388). Own elaboration.

In 2020, of the total area (196 hectares), approximately 90% was in the Castilla-La Mancha region, with 156 hectares dedicated to saffron cultivation. Geographical factors such as the optimal physical and chemical conditions of the soil, the adaptation of the crop to the climatic rigours of an inland Mediterranean climate, and other social and historical factors, favour its concentration in some central areas of the region, as can be seen in the following map with information on cultivation area and production in the municipalities included in the “La Mancha Saffron” (Azafrán de La Mancha) Protected Designation of Origin seal of quality, to which we will refer later on and whose towns are shown on the following maps (Figure 3).

As we can see, in terms of the surface area dedicated to this crop, the areas around towns such as Villafranca de los Caballeros, in the province of Toledo, have the largest area with 16.96 hectares in 2021, as does Motilla del Palancar with 12.8 hectares, in the province of Cuenca, together with Pétrola with 9.66, Fuensanta with 7.51 and Munera with 6.67, all of them in the province of Albacete. In production, the same municipalities also produce the most, although their order varies: Motilla del Palancar with 65,267.91 kg in 2021, Villafranca de los Caballeros with 52,060.63 kg and Pétrola with 24,558.97 kg.

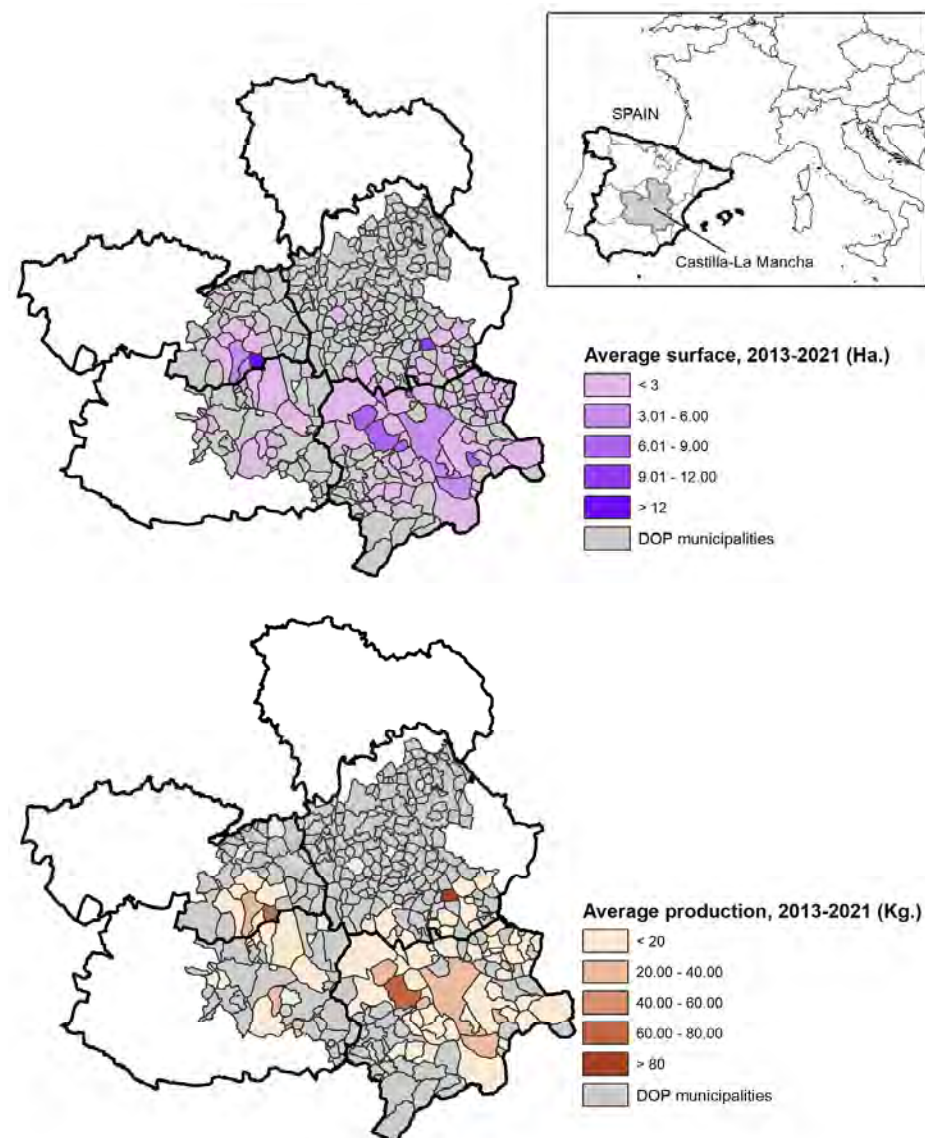


Figure 3. Average surface and production of saffron (2013–2021). Source: DOP Azafrán de la Mancha. Own elaboration.

The periods of activity in the annual saffron cycle are defined by the planting and harvesting of the flower, with the latter being the most labour-intensive process, as it needs to be carried out by hand. It is a task that has to be carried out within a period of ten days to two weeks, in addition to extracting and toasting the stamens on the day they are picked [20]. The production on each farm is usually in five-year cycles: the corms are planted in the first year and the yield is usually zero; optimum production is then reached in the second and third years, after which it declines in the following years. The corms (underground stems) are usually lifted after the fifth year or even earlier. The flowers emerge during the short flowering period, and yields usually range from 1.5 to 4 kg per hectare per day.

The general pattern of cultivation (Figure 4) has been repeated for decades, as it is associated with small farms located on the outskirts of population centres that have optimum-quality land combining deep and permeable clay soils that are sensitive to problems of waterlogging and aeration, and that are well adapted to drought; specifically, with a minimum requirement of between 150 and 200 L of rainfall per year [21].



Figure 4. Saffron landscape. Authors (2022).

The ownership structure is related to the existence of large landowners who were not interested in the mobility of day labourer families, so they encouraged these small family farms with a heavy manual workload focused on preparing the fields, harvesting, extracting and final toasting the stigmas. Furthermore, saffron cultivation can be easily combined with other crops, such as cereals, without hindering the need for labour. Currently, it is estimated that only 20% of producers are exclusively dedicated to saffron [3]. The income obtained from its cultivation confirms this relationship, as 70% of the producers declare that saffron accounts for less than 20% of their annual income, in a context defined by a continued reduction in the number of producers that is small but constant. Historically, it has been considered a “savings product” because, after drying, its conservation was assured for a period that could last for several years, an aspect which, together with its high economic value in relation to its small physical size, made it an element that could be used to cover any unexpected expenses [1] (p. 17).

The quality seal offered by the “La Mancha Saffron” Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) (Figure 5) guarantees the physical, chemical and organoleptic properties of this product which has a high colouring power (the Technical Quality Specification requires a minimum colouring power of 200 units), a strong, exotic aroma and a slightly bitter taste. It is easily distinguished because the red stigmas protrude clearly from the flower (Figure 6) and because the length of the style is very short. These characteristics make it a magnificent flavouring capable of transmitting deep aromas, and it has been an irreplaceable spice in numerous Spanish dishes, especially in La Mancha cuisine, from the Middle Ages to the present day. Saffron from the latest harvest is always used, as it loses its quality over time, and it is only presented to consumers as flexible and strong threads, with bright red stigmas, it is never sold as a powder. Its slow toasting gives it its presence and its intense aroma, higher safranal and colouring power content [22].



Figure 5. Logo of the Protected Designation of Origin “Saffron of La Mancha”. <https://www.azafranesmanchegos.com> (accessed on 5 January 2022) and Authors (2022).



Figure 6. Freshly picked flowers. <https://www.azafranesmanchegos.com> (accessed on 5 January 2022) and Authors (2022).

3.2. Saffron Cultivation: Cultural Landscape and Regional Identity in Castilla-La Mancha

In Europe, the European Landscape Convention signed in Florence in 2000 gives great prominence to landscapes, which are now considered to be the “part of the land, as perceived by local people or visitors, which evolves through time as a result of being acted upon by natural forces and human beings” and these landscapes are beginning to be valued as fundamental elements of the human environment, “an expression of the diversity of their common cultural and natural heritage and the basis of their identity” [23] (p. 3) and, as such, they are attracting a great deal of interest. Analysis of landscapes is now based on the assumption that they are complex and fragile realities, containing “ecological, cultural and heritage values that cannot be reduced to land value”, which makes them “non-renewable” assets [24]. Moreover, their status as resources for socio-economic development, an important aspect in disadvantaged rural areas, gives them a strategic nature.

Landscapes, and in this case those associated with agriculture, are changeable and identity-defining. Society survives in them through their use and transformation, through crops, livestock or forestry activities, and this allows the social groups to identify with a specific geographical area, with particular characteristics derived from their culture and know-how over the course of time. They are “cultural” landscapes insofar as they result “from the interaction over time between people and the natural environment, the expression of which is a landscape perceived and valued for its cultural qualities, the product of a process and the support for the identity of a community”, as defined by the National Plan for Cultural Landscapes in Spain [25]. These are changing realities that arise from the processes that take place over time in a geographical area, and they are complex because they are made up of natural and cultural, material and immaterial, and tangible and intangible components. A definition that is similar to the one that has been used by UNESCO since the 1990s, but which, in Spain, includes any type of landscape of cultural

interest, as opposed to the necessary “outstanding universal value” required for inclusion on the World Heritage List.

According to the aforementioned National Cultural Landscape Plan, the landscapes related to saffron cultivation would fall into the category defined by “Agricultural, live-stock and forestry activities, independently or associated (historical agro-sylvo-pastoral systems), marine, fluvial and hunting activities”. A grouping with numerous examples in Spain where landscapes are closely related to agricultural production systems, their heritage values and the artisanal activities associated with them. This allows us not only to understand the complex variables involved but also to broaden the basis on which to establish development strategies to include activities such as tourism. They represent “a cultural heritage, the product of the economic exploitation of the ecological potential carried out by the different agrarian societies and human groups that throughout history have occupied, exploited and organised the countryside” [26] (p. 7). Their cultural interest is not so much linked to the beauty of the “end result” as to the intrinsic value they possess from a cultural point of view [16]. In fact, in the culture of saffron cultivation, the tasks “are varied (weeding, combating field mice, tilling the soil, harrowing, etc.), but among all of these tasks, because of the demand for labour that it requires and also because it is concentrated into a few days of work, harvesting is the most important, including the collection of the flowers in the field, removing the stigmas at home, and the drying of the removed stigmas” [2] (p. 204).

In the case of saffron in the region of Castilla-La Mancha, it is clear that this crop is linked to the region with different extra-economic meanings that give it social and cultural values that are not always recognised, in which the human presence is fundamental. From the first records of the crop in this region, several characteristics can be seen that are still present today and which we have already mentioned: small-scale plots, the high market value of the product, and a significant social value with considerable involvement by women. However, its uniqueness is also related to local dynamics, since, at the same time as large areas of cultivation were established, first in cereals and, from the 19th century onwards, also in vineyards, there was also a system of smallholdings with small plots of secondary products such as pasture, melons, vegetables, potatoes, hemp and also saffron. The transfer of these small plots of land, usually between one and two hectares, by the large landowners was part of the social and economic balance of the areas [27]. Furthermore, saffron crocuses were frequently used as a dowry for newlyweds, as a basis on which to start their new life [28], as well as giving saffron stigmas to brides and grooms as a symbol of the wish for prosperity.

The recognition of heritage resources associated with crops, such as in this case saffron, is linked to the theoretical reformulation of some concepts such as heritage, which is broadened from simply relating to a “monument” to incorporate elements and resources inherited from the past in all forms and aspects (practices, knowledge, landscapes, etc.), which are now interpreted from a holistic point of view and as cultural expressions. For its part, the land itself has come to be considered as a “non-renewable, essential and limited asset” [12,20] to be passed on, in the best possible condition, to future generations by ensuring the values of “each of its parts”, i.e., the landscape.

As with other agrarian cultural landscapes, those associated with saffron cultivation are the result of the transformation over time of natural landscapes by a social group; in this case rooted in an area within the Mediterranean agricultural tradition, where the culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, and the landscape is the result. A humanised landscape in which the reassessment of culture is related to everything that is linked to heritage [29] (p. 138), where this crop “also contributes to defining the character of the people who raise it, who take advantage of the resources it offers, and who experience them, in short” [30] (p. 8), as more than its value as an agricultural product. People who perceive these resources in a unique way and who take an active part in understanding the set of customs and traditions that make up the tangible and intangible heritage, i.e., their legacy for the next generation.

With regard to the wealth of heritage resources linked to saffron cultivation in Castilla-La Mancha, we will base our approach, as mentioned in the methodological section, on applying the resource classification offered by the Baeza Charter on Agricultural Heritage [31]. This is a document signed in 2012 that was created in Spain in response to the undervaluing of agricultural assets as cultural and heritage elements in a current context in which agriculture is only valued from a purely productive perspective. The Charter states that agricultural heritage “is made up of all the natural and cultural, tangible and intangible assets, generated and used by agricultural activity throughout history” [27]. Consequently, agricultural heritage is appraised as representing values and meanings arising from agricultural activities, highlighting its contribution to food; its harmonious relationship with the land, manifested in a sustainable and dynamic use of natural resources; its essential identity as part of the relationship between culture and nature; and its essential contribution to biological and cultural diversity [16]. On this basis, we can distinguish different groups of heritage resources related to this crop, such as Moveable Assets that include the utensils, implements or tools used for tillage and cultivation, in general, these are modest tools (hoes, bulrush baskets, wooden containers, textile and embroidered accessories to protect the stamen before and after toasting, small cookers for toasting, etc.) that form part of the rural culture itself and which have been progressively replaced by more modern versions. Today, they can be seen in the Saffron and Ethnographic Museum in the municipality of Madridejos (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Saffron and Ethnographic Museum of Madridejos (Toledo). Authors (2022).

Singular Structural Assets include constructed elements which, in this case, are almost non-existent, given the small surface area of these plots of land. On the other hand, Group or Linear Structural Assets mainly consist of landscapes and agricultural fields, as well as rural settlements. We would highlight small towns where ruralisation is still present in Castilla-La Mancha such as Villafranca de los Caballeros, Madridejos and Consuegra in the province of Toledo, La Solana in the province of Ciudad Real, Motilla del Palancar in the province of Cuenca and Pétrola and Lezuza in the province of Albacete.

For their part, *Intangible Assets*, which we will examine in more detail below, are diverse and probably represent the most attractive assets within the legacy related to this crop. Starting with linguistic issues, there is an important collection of specific terms

(bulbs, corm, threads, etc.), in fact, as an activity linked to society, saffron has developed its own vocabulary, which is expressed through more than 100 words and expressions that make up its lexicon in the region. Saffron and the people involved in its harvesting and processing play a leading role in the folklore of La Mancha, particularly in the 'jotas manchegas' (popular dances), as well as in the varied presence of saffron in songs and proverbs. Also important is the knowledge, the know-how, surrounding the uniqueness of this crop, especially in relation to peeling and toasting, together with the cuisine, where its function as a condiment is widely recognised, as well as, in general, the culinary culture associated with its use in dishes such as 'gazpacho manchego' stews, 'gachas' (savoury porridge) or 'arroz con leche' (rice pudding). Finally, the *Natural and Genetic Heritage* refers to local varieties and crop specificities with specific organoleptic properties that are different from those of other saffron fields.

3.3. Intangible Heritage and Social Practices in the Saffron Landscapes in Castilla-La Mancha

Today, oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices relating to nature and the universe, and knowledge and skills linked to traditional craftsmanship are globally recognised as part of what is known as "intangible heritage". UNESCO includes them under the category *intangible cultural heritage* or "living heritage", i.e., practices, expressions, knowledge or techniques transmitted by communities from generation to generation [32]. It relates to a heritage that serves to foster regional identity and that can be recreated by local communities reflecting their environment, their interaction with nature and their history.

Despite its fragility, this heritage contributes to maintaining cultural diversity in the face of the media standardisation imposed by globalisation, serving as a dialogue between cultures and promoting respect for other ways of life [33]. Its importance lies in the wealth of knowledge and skills that are passed down from generation to generation, and whose social and economic value is of relevance to social groups, especially in relation to crops such as the one being analysed here. Among the main characteristics of this type of resource, UNESCO [28] highlights the following, which can be perfectly associated with the agrarian cultural landscapes created by the cultivation of saffron in Castilla-La Mancha and which has already been applied to other crops such as vineyards [16]:

- It constitutes a traditional, contemporary and living heritage as it continues to be present in the agricultural structure of the region, albeit subject to market pressures. It bears witness to traditions inherited from the past, among which the most important are the work of peeling and toasting, which are carried out collectively and generally by women (Figure 8).
- It is inclusive, as the expressions of heritage are similar in all the municipalities that grow saffron, grouped together in the "La Mancha Saffron" Protected Designation of Origin. All of them produce an identification with the cultural cycles of sowing, harvesting and transformation that have been passed down from generation to generation, thus contributing to social and cultural cohesion by fostering regional identity and a sense of belonging.
- It is representative, especially on the basis of its cultural uniqueness, with techniques and customs that are handed down from generation to generation.
- Finally, its link to the community that grows, processes and enjoys it is fundamental, as its cultural and heritage value is related to the recognition of the local population in a "bottom-up" heritage process. No one can decide for them that a particular expression or use is part of their heritage and thus of their regional identity.



Figure 8. Workaround saffron at the Saffron and Ethnographic Museum of Madridejos (Toledo). Authors (2022).

Among all the resources included in the intangible or immaterial heritage associated with the saffron landscapes in Castilla-La Mancha, we will focus on some festivals linked to social and ritual uses that are representative of the agrarian culture in relation to this crop. Generally, they have been built on habits and customs that reflect the work of social groups linked to this crop and its associated socially shared activities. They also reaffirm identity in relation to both public practices (harvesting, peeling, etc.) and private practices (cuisine). A set of resources that, according to UNESCO [34], help to mark the changes of seasons, times of agricultural work, and stages of human life, and are intimately linked to the worldview, history and memory of the communities.

In the areas where saffron is cultivated in Europe, and specifically in Spain, there are numerous rituals and festivals that are normally held around the time of the harvesting and toasting of saffron, while their value is not recognised universally, they are established in the regions and/or states in which they are found, the case of Spain being certainly unique in the European context. Occasionally, these social practices, rituals and festivals are profoundly affected by the changes that the communities are undergoing in modern societies, as they depend to a large extent on the broad participation of those who practise them. In the case of saffron, as in the case of other crops harvested at this time of year, these festivals in a way mark the beginning of autumn.

The most significant manifestations of intangible heritage related to the festivals in the Castilla-La Mancha region (Spain) are songs, popular dances, works of literature, paintings, etc. The following are some of the most important ones: the Jornadas del Azafrán held for the last 15 years in Madridejos (Toledo); the Fiesta de la Rosa del Azafrán in Consuegra (Toledo), which has been held since 1963 and has been declared a Festival of Regional Tourist Interest, in connection with which the peeling competition and the Folklore Festival are a significant part; the Semana de la Zarzuela in La Solana (Ciudad Real), an annual event in the village where Romero y Fernández set the play “La Rosa del Azafrán”, with music by Jacinto Guerrero, which premiered in 1930 (in the past there was also a peeling competition); and in Albacete, the Festival de la Rosa del Azafrán in Santa Ana, which has been held for over 30 years, but with a more local character than the previous events. We will focus on the first two because of their national and international character, their extensive experience, together with the existence of a strategic plan that integrates elements from different spheres under saffron as an integrating concept.

3.4. Case Studies: *Las Jornadas del Azafrán in Madridejos (Toledo)*

These events have been organised since 2007 and have arisen from an annual local celebration, with the aim of promoting the celebration on a wider scale outside the region, with a more ambitious strategy. After a first few years of development and growth, the event is now in a consolidation phase. The objectives that the town has set itself with this highly social annual event are as follows:

- (a) Promote saffron from an integral point of view as a symbol of tradition in Madridejos.
- (b) Position the Saffron and Ethnographic Museum as a major tourist attraction.
- (c) Promote other local tourist resources, such as the mills and cave houses (these are called “silos” in Spanish).
- (d) Promote the cultivation and use of saffron among young people.

From the point of view of the built heritage, the main element of reference is the Saffron and Ethnographic Museum, whose inauguration in 2008 is the main cornerstone of this initiative (Figures 9 and 10). The museum is housed in a unique building, a Franciscan monastery that has been renovated and refurbished for a dual purpose: on the one hand, to house an extensive ethnographic collection, with pieces and elements related to the culture of La Mancha; and on the other, to dedicate a large exhibition area to saffron culture, including its cultivation process, its importance in the local context and its economic significance and social impact in La Mancha.



Figure 9. Ethnographic Museum of Madridejos (Toledo). Authors (2022).



Figure 10. Saffron roasting. Authors (2022).

Other related structural resources are cave houses and ancient dwellings carved out of limestone rock that served as humble dwellings in the past. The vast majority of them have now disappeared or are privately owned by families in the town. Two of them (the Silo del Tío Zoquete and the Silo de Tío Colorao) have remained as examples of this unusual structure and they are also part of the elements that form the backbone of the Jornadas del Azafrán.

Based on the museum as a tangible asset, a festival has been developing whose main characteristic is its heterogeneity, as it integrates cultural, musical, culinary, recreational, educational, academic and tourist activities. Therefore, under the umbrella of saffron, multiple events are brought together, which, as a consequence, have different target audiences. The local public is the most important element, both in terms of the target audience and in terms of participation, with a special focus on children, who will learn more about the historical importance of saffron through visits and educational and recreational activities. Visitors, generally from the region and neighbouring regions, along with international visitors, are the target group for culinary and leisure initiatives. Increasingly, the appeal of the event as a tourist attraction motivates people who may be attracted by more specialised culinary and academic activities, in addition to the range of leisure packages offered outside the region. The week-long event features guided tours of the fields and other heritage buildings, such as the cave houses and mills.

We do not have official participation figures, so we cannot have a quantified record of how the event has developed. However, according to information provided by the museum's management, participation in registered activities (guided tours, tastings, culinary events, etc.) is booked up well in advance, an example of the interest aroused by this resource. The management and promotion of the event are based on local public and private participation led by Madridejos Town Council and including local agents, cultural associations, producers and local packaging companies. Social participation is mainly coordinated through the "El Carpio" Cultural Association, which aims to maintain local culture through different collaborative initiatives, such as its involvement in maintaining the unique elements of the structural heritage, both the aforementioned museum and the local cave houses that are open and can be visited. Behind this management core is the institutional and financial support of the regional administration and the cooperation of various businesses in the town, especially restaurateurs and leisure establishments.

The general strategy is based on creating a competitive event and promoting it beyond the local area, centred on the local identity, with saffron as the main theme and not only in its agricultural dimension. Its progressive consolidation reinforces the local identity around the historical significance of saffron. The greatest threat identified in the interviews is the same as the one that applies to the saffron sector itself: the lack of replacement by the next generation of producers, which is gradually reducing the cultivation base and local production. This problem contrasts with the growth of the event, which is increasing in popularity and demand every year, a contradiction that calls for greater institutional attention.

3.5. Case Studies: *Fiesta de la Rosa del Azafrán in Consuegra (Toledo)*

The Fiesta de la Rosa del Azafrán in Consuegra has been held since 1963 and has always had an aspect related to the world of agriculture and livestock farming in La Mancha. It is a well-established and well-renowned event, with a programme of activities that is very similar from one year to the next. Nowadays, it is a week of celebrations with entertainment events that attract people from outside the area. It presents two fundamental objectives:

- (a) Maintain the awareness of people from outside the area and act as a focus for tourism.
- (b) Group all the local activities under the same strategy.

It maintains an agricultural and rural profile, with a trade fair showcasing local agricultural and livestock products, including producers, together with the exhibition and sale of agricultural machinery, and the exhibition space is shared with stalls for leisure activities and culinary demonstrations. Various socio-ethnographic events linked to the

world of agriculture in general and saffron, in particular, are held over the course of a week: competitions in flower harvesting, tractor driving skills, traditional wheat milling, etc. Folklore is closely linked to the festive programme, with various traditional and modern music activities that culminate in the National Saffron Rose Folk Festival, which brings together folk music and dance groups from all over the Iberian Peninsula. In short, almost all the activities revolve around saffron, both of a local nature (sports competitions, contests, etc.) and the more widely publicised tourist-oriented events.

This festival is a regional, national and world landmark, due to its longevity and established nature, and it has been declared a Festival of Regional Tourist Interest (Figures 11 and 12). The programming and management are mainly supported by the municipal services, involving various areas, especially the Department of Tourism, and it has institutional support from other high-level administrations. There is significant local participation, structured through local associations and companies that support the performance of the activities, where the presence of local assets is especially evident in the parallel events, less related to the nature of the festival itself, such as sports, competitions or demonstrations far removed from the world of agriculture. These activities are interwoven within the Rosa del Azafrán theme in order to integrate the week's leisure and cultural events into the week as a whole.



Figure 11. Festival of the Saffron Rose of Consuegra (Toledo) (2021).

There are no official data on participation, although large crowds are evident throughout the week and especially during the weekend. The presence of tourists and visitors is evident, along with the local festive atmosphere. As a result, this celebration is highly competitive and deeply rooted as a local landmark and as the main economic and cultural asset recognised outside the local area. It reinforces Consuegra's local identity and raises its visibility outside the local area based on the values and meanings shared by the local population.

Saffron is the main focus of the event as a whole. Harvesting the flowers and peeling and toasting them form the starting point around which the rest of the activities are organised. However, its actual presence is diluted by the abundance of other events. This loss of prominence is the result of the problem of generational replacement and crop continuity, a real threat to the sustainability of the crop in future generations. Nevertheless, saffron continues to be a motivating, distinctive and catalytic element of sufficient importance that it can be used to create unique events that take place at the same time as those in Madrideojos, which are differentiated in terms of their profile and implementation. Of particular relevance is the fact that the two towns are barely 8 km apart and that both events coincide on the same dates, a situation that influences the interpretation and complementarity of these events.



Figure 12. Festival of the Saffron Rose of Consuegra (Toledo). Ayuntamiento de Consuegra (2022).

As saffron is a crop so dependent on its annual cycle, especially for the harvest, which is concentrated in just 10 days in autumn, the time frame for scheduling a festival around it is quite limited, which explains the coincidence in the dates the festivals take place. In fact, several nearby towns also have festivals related to saffron on the same dates, but without the character and profile of the two we are describing here. The festival in Consuegra has an unquestionably long-standing tradition, while Madridejos launched its festival later and with a strategy that has sought, from the beginning, to differentiate its character from that of the neighbouring festival. This has allowed both to create their own spaces, which to some extent complement each other, although there has thus far been no initiative for synergy or integration between the two festivals. However, in both cases, the main problem stems from the worrying trend in cultivation as such, which is suffering from a slow but progressive decline and a lack of young people to take over.

4. Discussion

Saffron, as we have analysed, has had and continues to have a great social impact in regions such as Castilla La Mancha (Spain) due to its high demand for manual labour, especially by women, and also because of its economic impact due to the high profitability derived from marketing the product. Moreover, as a traditional, multifunctional agricultural system in rural areas with low productivity, it is capable of supplementing farm incomes based on the availability of labour and the vagaries of the international market.

From a heritage and cultural point of view, we have analysed how the cultural legacy of a geographical area expresses its social, familial and sustainable nature, where the tradition of saffron production in Spain and in Castilla-La Mancha is both a strength and a weakness. As a crop associated with the Mediterranean trilogy, it reflects an interesting link between know-how and the family farming system, but at the same time, the predominance of small, non-specialised producers and the complementary nature of the activity places the sector at a disadvantage compared to large international producers. The increasing mechanisation of activities, with the consequent threat to the manual labour that gives saffron its traditional character, together with the introduction of more profitable crops, also pose serious short- and medium-term challenges to the survival of this and other types of agricultural cultural landscapes.

The initial hypothesis was based on the necessary reappraisal of saffron heritage resources in order to consider them as “local assets” in the processes of social and economic

revitalisation. In this case, these assets are based on such revealing aspects as the family and community cultivation, exploitation and processing system; the tangible resources related to it, such as the cultivation fields or the tools and implements used; the folklore, traditions, events and popular festivals surrounding it; and the certification of the origin and quality of the product. In those areas with a greater presence of farmland, we find a confluence of these elements that make saffron an element that provides identity and structure from the bibliography consulted, both in general on cultural aspects and in particular, in this case on the saffron fields, we can see the importance of the intangible assets that we have highlighted by applying the Baeza Charter on Agricultural Heritage.

We answer the initial research question in the affirmative, since, based on the selected case studies, in towns such as Madrdejos and Consuegra, the resources derived from intangible or immaterial heritage, specifically the Jornadas del Azafrán and the Fiesta de la Rosa del Azafrán, respectively, are known and valued by the local communities. They have undergone a “bottom-up” process of patrimonialisation, as they are undoubtedly local assets on a micro-scale [35], possessing an identity value attributed by the local population. This process is complemented by the institutional one, especially in the second case, which is more “top-down” and which allows the reinforcement of the local identity in both locations and, by extension, promotes socio-economic dynamisation through tourism.

Resources such as know-how, the family nature of saffron harvesting, historical tradition and associated cultural events are, in themselves, cognitive and emotional experiences that constitute potential local assets on which to plan and design saffron-related tourism products without forgetting, of course, the assets of a linear and genetic nature, such as the obvious scenic values of its landscapes [36,37]. Saffron would thus be positioned not only as a product of certified origin and quality but also as a cultural asset around which to build a protected landscape strategy that would have two essential objectives: strengthening the local identity related to saffron and the population of the producing areas and promoting a reappraisal of the cultural landscape of saffron in the context of the multi-functionality of the rural world.

In this sense, a special element of discussion would address the efforts made in the cultural reappraisal of these landscapes. The commitment to the museumisation and the organisation of festival activities is an essential reference for strengthening regional identity, promoting processes of economic diversification, and providing elements of debate on the protection of this type of agricultural cultural landscape. The interviews carried out with the social agents certify the commitment to defend the cultivation of saffron as part of the rural character of their municipalities, which is a praiseworthy exercise in the patrimonialisation of resources from the bottom-up. Obviously, a reappraisal exercise can be carried out from the local level around resources that are already shared and recognised, and it is also necessary to involve competent administrations (top-down approaches). We understand that the absence of tacit recognition of the cultural value of agricultural landscapes by the competent administrations ostensibly conditions their protection and promotion, not only in terms of their tourist potential but also as a social crop that expresses a specific way in which people relate to their land.

Consequently, we find ourselves in a debate associated with the duality that exists between agricultural activity and its identity value. Agricultural activity in itself maintains positive elements, such as adaptation to the land, the capacity for simultaneity with the dominant agricultural system, market value and a recent trend towards stabilisation in the area of land cultivated. However, there are negative aspects, such as the aforementioned modest production figures in the context of the international market and competitiveness that tends to reduce the final value of the product under productivist parameters. At the local level, the main problem is the lack of generational replacement in agricultural activities, a feature that can easily be extrapolated to other agricultural uses with moderate profitability in the plains of inland Spain.

In short, the preservation and promotion of saffron must combine the vigilance and protection of its local value, with its traditional roots, in the face of external market dynam-

ics, which are highly competitive, as well as strengthening its economic and sociocultural dimensions. The promotion of festivals and popular events, intangible or immaterial heritage resources, educational efforts to raise awareness and cultural appreciation among local populations from an early age, and recent attempts at the museumisation process, would strengthen the identity values and the possible viability of many family farms, once their tourism potential has been identified. In this sense, it would be essential to design a clear and integrated range of tourist attractions related to the saffron fields, which would combine visits to the fields where the beauty of this agricultural landscape can be appreciated, as well as access to museums, events and festivals that contribute to the patrimonialisation of this landscape. We reaffirm the hypothesis that the reappraisal of this type of resource by local communities and institutions favours economic diversification and, consequently, its multifunctional character, once its possible use for tourism has been considered. We also believe that public support and participation are essential to safeguard and maintain it for future generations. At the present time, the preservation and promotion of saffron need to combine the monitoring and protection of its local value in the face of external market dynamics, as well as promoting its economic and sociocultural dimensions.

5. Conclusions

The cultivation of saffron in Spain, and specifically in Castilla-La Mancha, shapes a distinctive agricultural landscape with a clear cultural character, the value of which began to be reappraised at the turn of the century. The importance of saffron in some Spanish regions is evident, especially in Castilla-La Mancha, which is located in the interior of the country. This area's physical characteristics have, over time, offered favourable conditions for the expansion of this crop. However, the small scale of the cultivation and its complementarity with the Mediterranean trilogy, as well as the economic competition in the marketing of the final product, make these landscapes fragile, despite the importance of the heritage resources they contain.

Enhancing the value of both the tangible resources and, above all, the intangible ones, offers the possibility of socio-economic revitalisation for some of the municipalities included in the "La Mancha Saffron" Protected Designation of Origin seal of quality. They also reinforce the geographical identity of the people who work, cultivate and practice the traditions and customs related to saffron. This is the case for Madridejos, where the Jornadas del Azafrán not only promote this product, which is highly valued in cuisine, but also serve to raise awareness of the heritage resources related to it, in the case of the Saffron and Ethnographic Museum, as well as other elements of local heritage such as the cave houses. This is also the case in Consuegra, where the Fiesta de la Rosa del Azafrán, which is listed as being of Regional Tourist Interest, also promotes the value of the crop, its landscape and the traditions surrounding saffron with the clear aim of attracting tourists. In both cases, too, the educational importance for the younger population is very clear, especially in the absence of generational replacement on farms.

The strengths of the agricultural heritage and cultural landscapes generated by saffron are therefore related to essentially non-agricultural values, where culture and tradition are still deeply rooted in Castilla-La Mancha. In line with our initial hypothesis, the social, cultural and landscape values of saffron are an important asset in the areas where it is traditionally grown. It is a sustainable crop, not based on productivist patterns, and with a proven potential for establishing its identity. After having actively protected its origin for more than twenty years, Castilla-La Mancha now has a unique product on the international market that competes in a globalised world without sacrificing its traditional agricultural structure. During this time, it has been possible to maintain the stability and continuity of the farms, although it is clear that the regional and landscape values of saffron cultivation need to be properly addressed, which would make it possible to complete the strategy for protecting the product and recognising its heritage values by creating an agricultural cultural landscape of a very singular nature in the Spanish and international context.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

HP	Hydrogen potential
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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