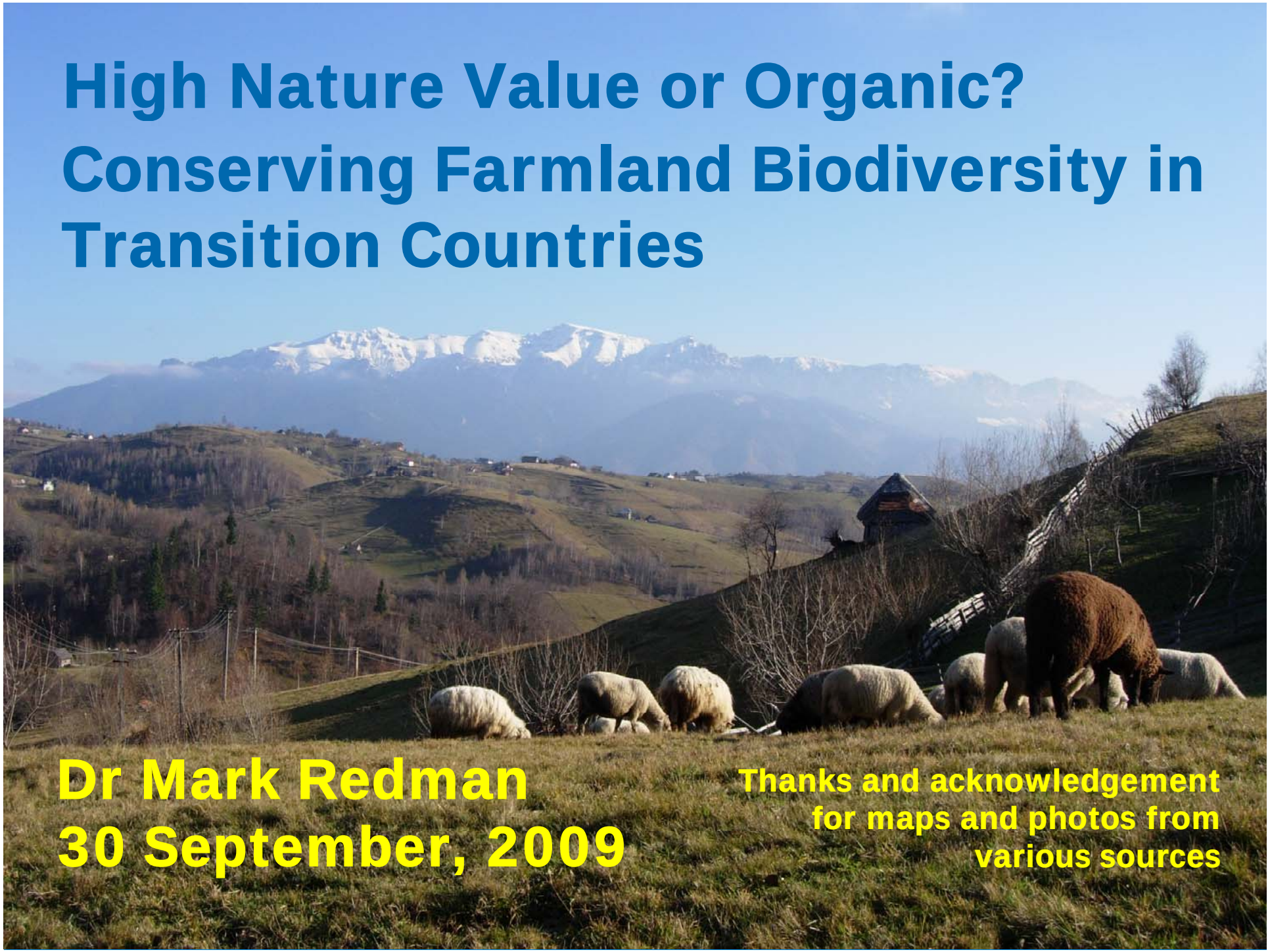
High Nature Value or Organic? Conserving Farmland Biodiversity in Transition Countries



Dr Mark Redman

30 September, 2009

Thanks and acknowledgement for maps and photos from various sources

FACT: Organic farming is a profitable and **“biodiversity friendly”** alternative to intensive, industrial agriculture

Compared to intensive, industrial agriculture - organic farming systems *commonly* have a **much greater abundance and diversity of wildlife species**, including:

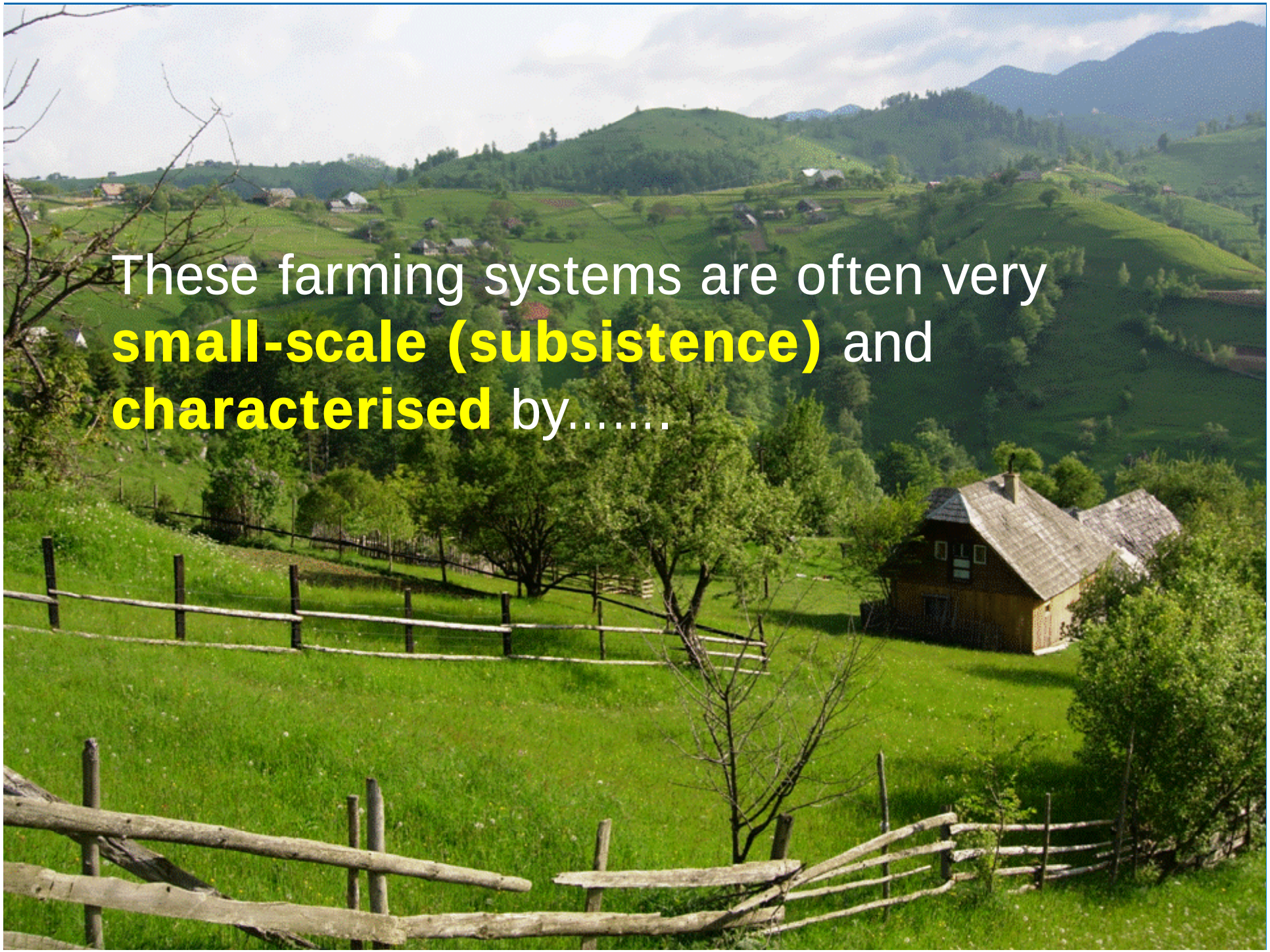
- Wild plant species, especially in arable fields
- Farmland bird species
- Invertebrate species, including non-pest butterflies

These biodiversity benefits are connected to the **intrinsic (but not exclusive!) characteristics** of most organic farming systems – notably:

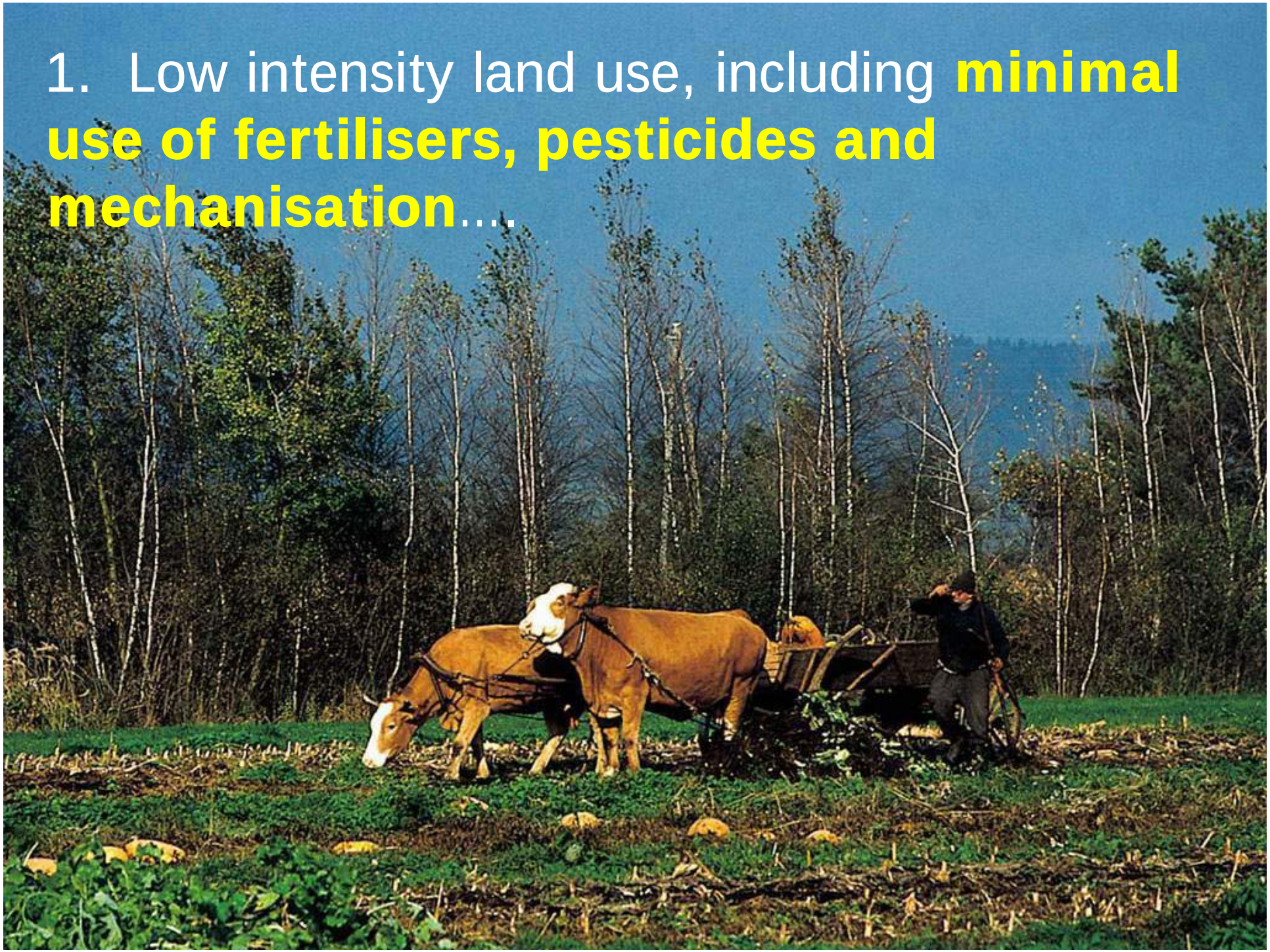
- Prohibition of agro-chemicals
- Maintenance of mixed farming, including crop rotations
- Sympathetic management of non-crop habitats e.g. field margins

BUT - Not all types of "conventional" agriculture are bad for biodiversity

Many widespread farming systems (particularly in transition countries) are VERY good for biodiversity


These farming systems are often very **small-scale (subsistence)** and **characterised** by.....

1. Low intensity land use, including **minimal use of fertilisers, pesticides and mechanisation**….




...especially where production is **heavily restricted** by the natural capacity of the land


2. Presence of large areas of **semi-natural vegetation (grasslands)**...

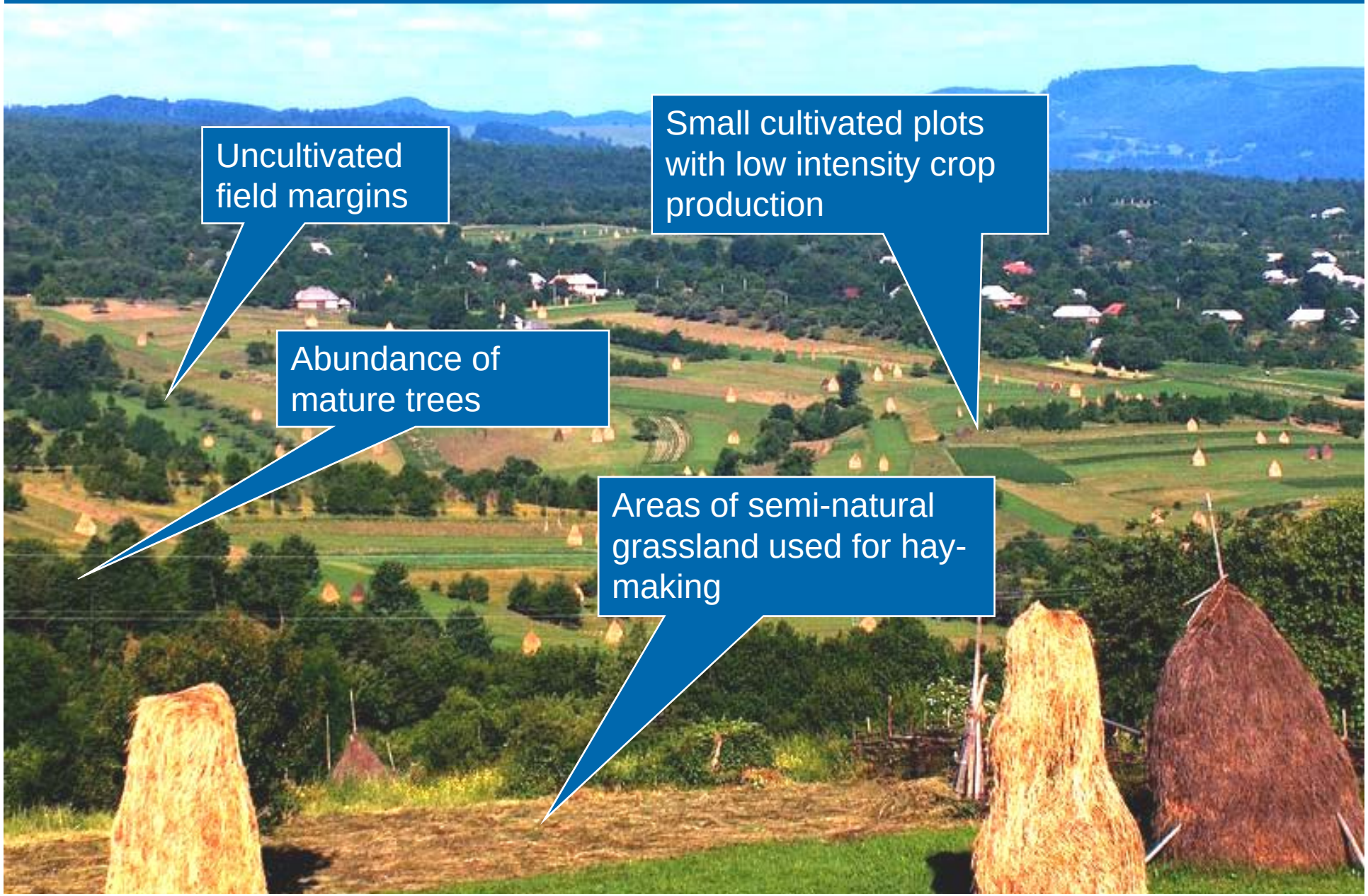
...which is **grazed by livestock and/or mown for hay**...

a) at **very low stocking densities**

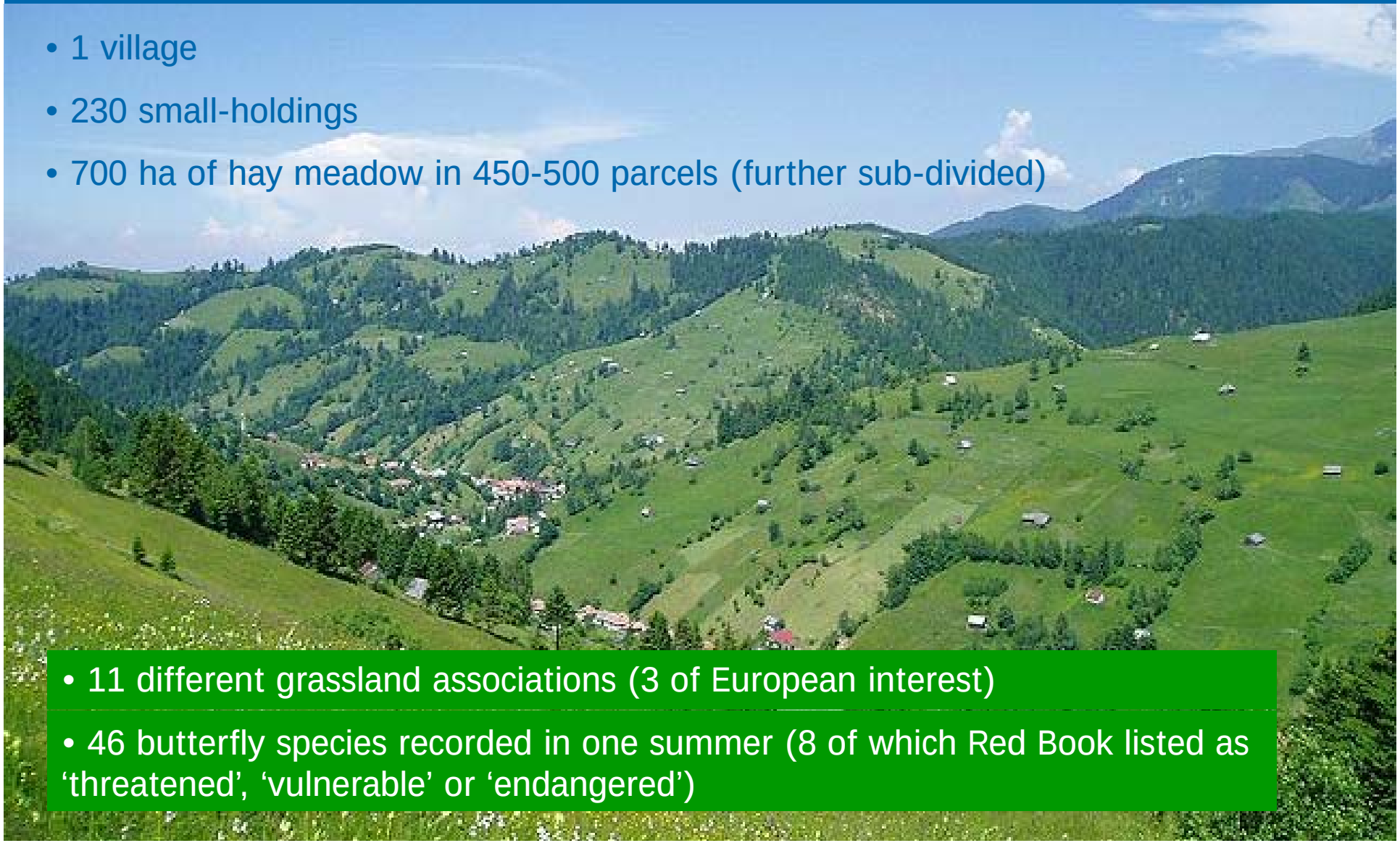
b) often using **indigenous / endangered breeds**

c) and managed with **traditional “shepherd” systems**

3. Diversity of **land cover** (mosaic landscape)....

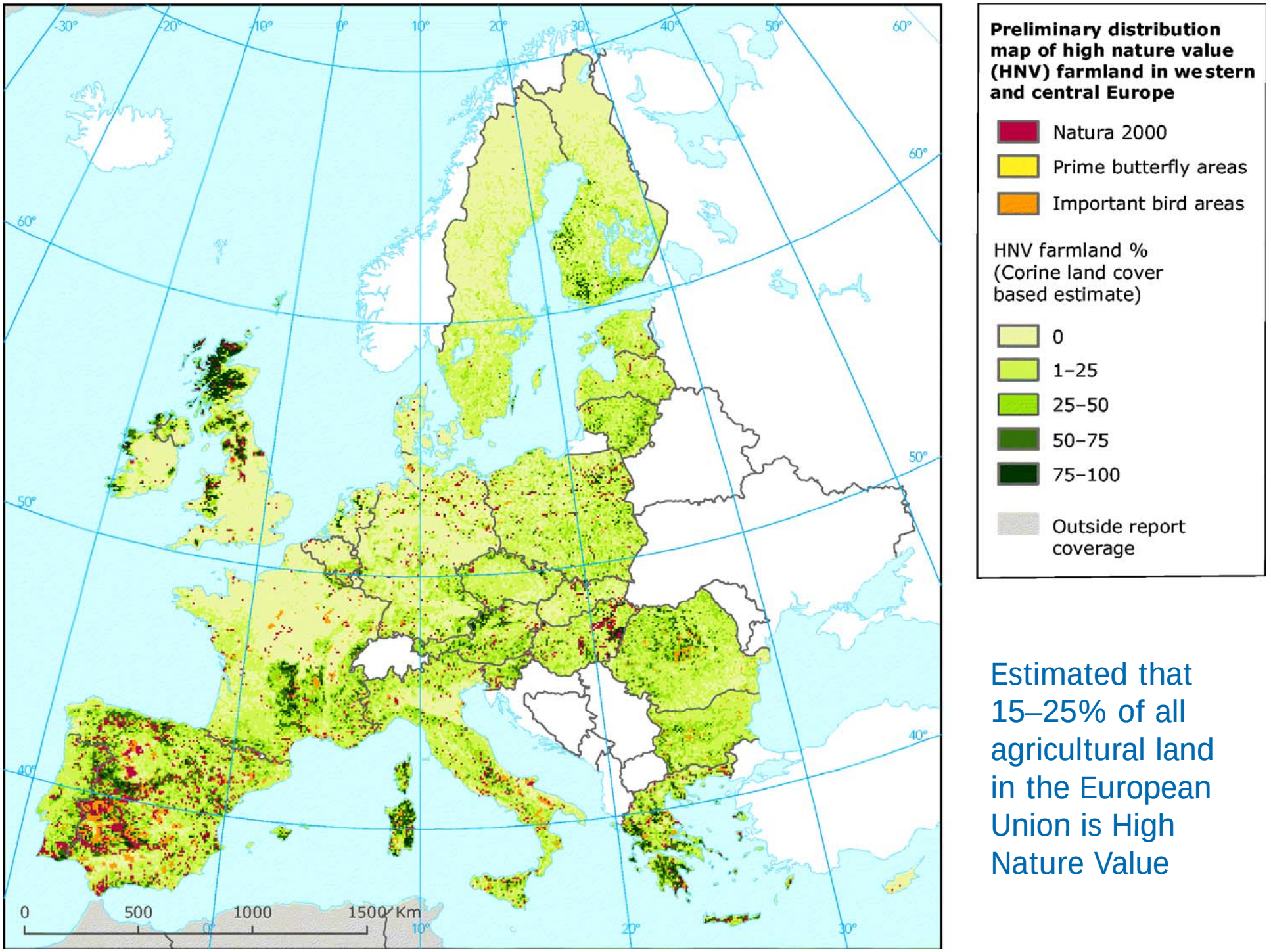


...including subtle variations (time and space) in **land management**



- 1 village
- 230 small-holdings
- 700 ha of hay meadow in 450-500 parcels (further sub-divided)
- 11 different grassland associations (3 of European interest)
- 46 butterfly species recorded in one summer (8 of which Red Book listed as ‘threatened’, ‘vulnerable’ or ‘endangered’)

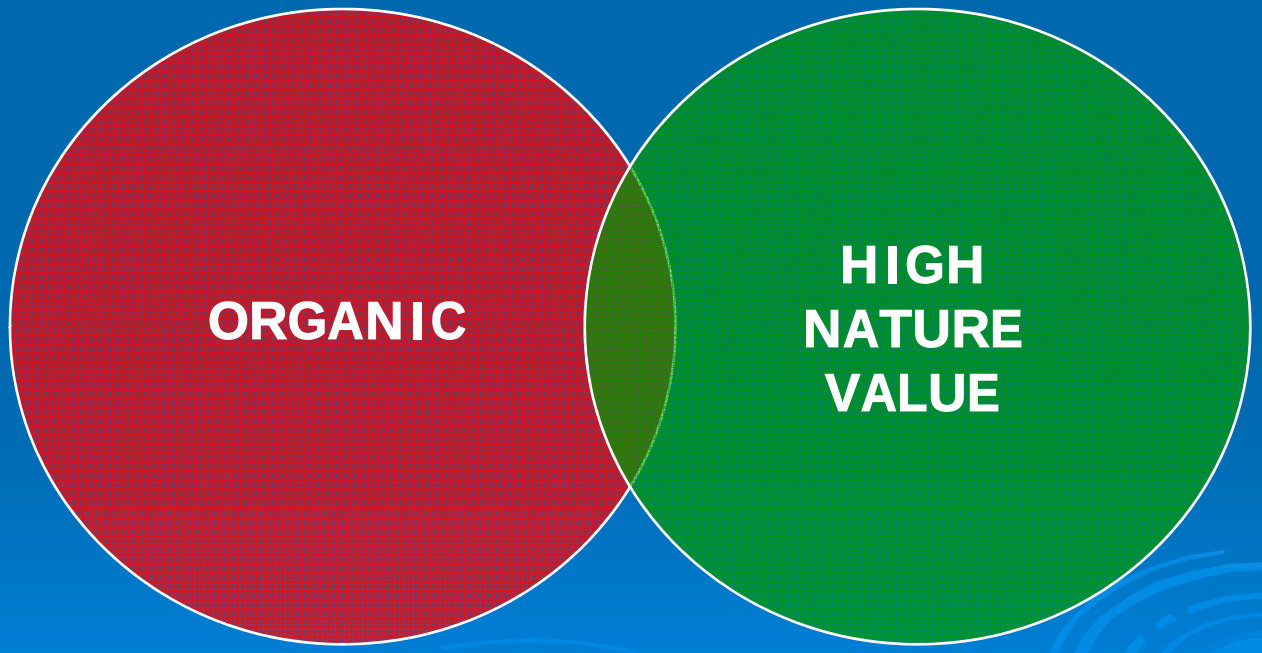
The maintenance of **High Nature Value (HNV) farming systems** has an increasingly high priority in EU policy-making



Estimated that 15–25% of all agricultural land in the European Union is High Nature Value

What is the **relationship** between Organic Farming and High Nature Value (HNV) farming?

Organic Farming is **NOT** High Nature Value (HNV) farming.....although there are some good examples of overlap



Organic farming standards ensure the integrity of the production system, but they **do not guarantee** any biodiversity benefits....

....although **some** organic standards (e.g. UK Soil Association) do include **additional environmental standards**

Organic production standards **are not 100% compatible with biodiversity conservation** and the maintenance of HNV farming systems

Good opportunities exist for "adding value" to HNV farming systems via organic certification

– but are **limited** by two key factors issues:

- Large proportion of HNV farmers are **subsistence farmers** with no connection to a formal market chain

- HNV farming is **economically and socially very vulnerable** and unlikely to survive any additional “costs”

The **maintenance of High Nature Value farming systems** is arguably more important for biodiversity conservation in transition countries than the expansion of organic farming……

…..and the **challenges are very different!**