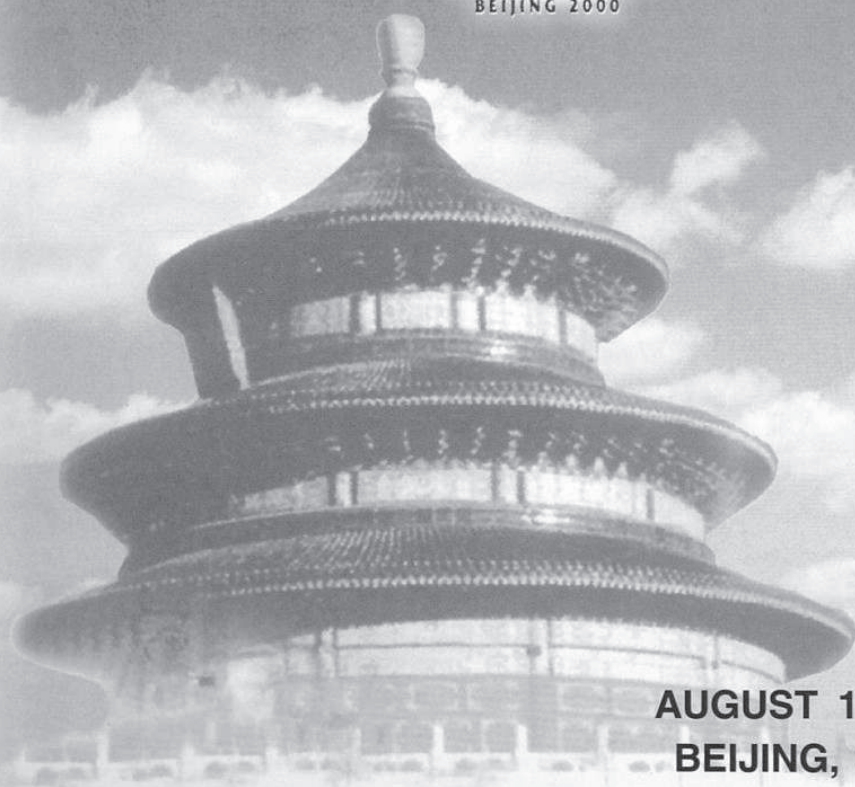


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PORTUGUESE WOOL TRENDS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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In the last decade it was possible to verify some pattern changes in intermediate and final textile consumption, showing an increasing demand of the natural fibres, namely wool, replacing synthetic fibres. Predictably these market tendency will increase in the future.

Sheep breeding is a relevant activity in large areas of interior South of Portugal as well as in all Mediterranean areas; mainly these areas, are Less Favoured Areas (LFAs) with severe structural problems leading to human and physical desertification. The maintenance of this activity is fundamental, not only for keeping animal biodiversity, but as well for the non existence of economic viable alternatives. Nevertheless, it is necessary to find new ways of valuing sheep products in order to increase the income and life conditions of farmers and rural population.

Concerning wool, it is possible to identify three different ways of use and marketing, related to the quality of raw material.

Medium quality wool produced by Merino sheep is traditionally used by textile industry in the manufacture of conventional products to the medium market segment. Socially and economically it is an important sector, whose survival and profitability is threatened by the liberalisation of trade within WTO; in 2005 the Portuguese market will be supplied with lower price products, so, the national textile industry must make an effort in order to diversify products and markets.

Fine and superfine wool (less than 20 μ diameter), also produced by Merino sheep, should be graded in order to obtain high quality raw material, that can be transformed in products with exclusive design to emergent segments of market characterised by high income.

The analysis of fine and super fine wool prices in the Portuguese and International markets shows an increasing valorisation of these products; This fact, linked with the high demand by the fashion industry of lighter and softer products, opens new and interesting perspectives to the Portuguese sheep production that should be oriented in order to increase the production of this kind of wool. Animal fine and superfine fibre products will have undoubtedly an increasing demand in the forthcoming years.

Thicker wool originated mainly from non Merino sheep is used for handicraft products and decoration, namely tapestry .

Handicraft has an increasing role in rural economy, specially if associated with agri- tourism, not only as a supplement of agricultural income but also for the maintenance of rural jobs with an added value in local economies.

Valorisation of wool products depends upon an integrated vertical organisation at production level, in order to retain there the generated added values, and as well upon a marketing strategy which the essential items are: product, price, place and promotion.

Product should be recognised by consumers as natural and with quality. To achieve this aim a certification system must be implemented to insure its authenticity; The quality recognition will lead to higher prices contributing to the development of LFAs.