

Episode 3 - Eucalyptus abandoned

[background noises]

Manuel Bivar: Look at this river...

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: What river is it? A tributary of the Paiva?

Manuel Bivar: I don't know. Or the Paiva itself?

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: It's pretty here.

Manuel Bivar: Sort of. These pines, these eucalyptus...

M: How do they feel watching everything burn? I don't know. I don't know. It's impossible to know. And sometimes it's people in their right mind. I don't know... The pine is really drying out. It's the worm. It eats all the sap and the pine dies.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: In this episode of **Arsonist Country** we are going to Portugal's central region. We spent several days there over winter and spring, and I must say, there's an end of the world feel to the place. It seems like the game is up. Everyone left. And all that remains is land, eucalyptus and abandoned houses. The remains of a country that no longer exists. But where there is a lot of fire.

N: They said there was a fire down there and they said it was him who started it. I don't know if it was or not, I didn't see, you know? I don't know. Someone else might have lit it and he's the fall guy. Well, anyway, he was put away and never heard of again.

Manuel Bivar: And what about his siblings? Did they all leave?

N: None of his siblings stayed.

Manuel Bivar: They all moved?

N: Some are in Lisbon, others died, others are in Spain, and he has a sister in France.

Manuel Bivar: They all left.

N: He has no close family left here. Only distant cousins.

Manuel Bivar: Do a lot of people live here?

N: Oh, very few! We're getting soaked.

[soundtrack]

Arsonist Country

An investigative podcast
by Divergente

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: You see it when you leave Coimbra, Leiria or Aveiro and drive up to Viseu. You are surrounded by mile after mile of continuous eucalyptus plantations, a large part of which is abandoned. Driving up these roads, you can't help thinking: a fire here, with the right wind, it'll burn right up to Viseu. And, in fact, it did. In 2017 and 2024.

[soundtrack]

Manuel Bivar: I'm Manuel Bivar.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: And I'm Sofia da Palma Rodrigues.

Manuel Bivar: This is **Arsonist Country**, an investigative podcast by DIVERGENTE.

[soundtrack]

Manuel Bivar: Episode three: **"Eucalyptus abandoned"**.

[background noises]

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: It's like this, just houses and more houses...

Manuel Bivar: All empty.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: Either empty or at least you don't see a living soul. You know?

Manuel Bivar: There, someone's there, clearing. Wait...

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: Where?

Manuel Bivar: Here, there's a man with a brushcutter. I'm going to pull over.

Manuel Bivar: At the start of that spring we heard brushcutter engines everywhere. It was approaching the deadline for clearing the land around the houses. In one of these villages, that burned in the great fires of October 2017, we were searching for a man accused of starting fires. We knew that he had burned a small piece of land nearby, and before trying to speak with him, we visited the place. It was an area densely populated with acacias that nearly completely encircled the cemetery.

O: Can't you see, all the mess over there? In the middle of the village there are a load of brambles, it's full of them. And when June, July comes...

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: It's a tinderbox.

Manuel Bivar: But is there no one here, or...?

O: There is, but they don't want to know. It's complicated, it's a burden. Some people have the land, others inherited it, then they don't want to know. Then you hear these stories, it's what happened with my brother.

Arsonist Country

An investigative podcast
by Divergente

Manuel Bivar: The man we saw with the brushcutter was the brother of the person we were looking for. He asked us to not try to talk with his brother, but he agreed to tell us what happened in July 2017, when the land around the cemetery burned a number of times.

O: But that year, I don't know what got into his head. He got to drinking. When he set the fire, when he did the clearing, he'd been drinking. The incident can be traced back to alcohol, back to that. Back to everything. But there you go, so he was always saying, "I clear, he doesn't"—he did this because of the situation of some clearing and others not, which was why he did it.

Manuel Bivar: And his fire was small or big?

O: No... it was small. It was just a few metres, it was small. What burned was perhaps this little bit here. Also the firemen came and put it out quickly. The problem was that he did it more than once and that was his big mistake.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: But he always did it in the same place?

O: Always in the same place.

Manuel Bivar: On the land that was overgrown.

O: On that land. He wanted the land clear.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: He wanted to clear it.

O: He wanted the land clear. What happens here: the land, well, some clear it and others don't. He couldn't deal with it anymore, so this is how he dealt with it.

Manuel Bivar: In the middle of the conversation we understood why he didn't want us to speak to the brother: his time in prison did something to his head. He's still not right.

O: Later, well, my parents are in their 80s, so they didn't know, they had never been in these situations, they had never been in the courts, or involved in these situations. They didn't know. If he had arranged a lawyer at the time maybe he would never even have been detained. Well, they didn't sort anything out, then he went for another medical assessment and I don't know, I also don't really know how to explain it and he was declared unfit to stand trial. And this is what was complicated.

Manuel Bivar: As he was declared unfit to stand trial, instead of being tried and locked up...He was tried, imprisoned and then interned in a psychiatric hospital for four and a half years.

Arsonist Country

An investigative podcast
by Divergente

O: Normally that would be one year and a half, two years and he'd be out, but because he was declared unfit to stand trial and whatnot, it depended on the doctors...

Manuel Bivar: Ah, then they interned him. He was interned.

O: He was held there in the psychiatric wing. Interned... in the psychiatric wing of a prison. I went to visit him there lots of times actually, it's truly horrible. It was even worse, even worse for him.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: Going to the psychiatric wing?

O: It was worse for him. And he came back worse from there.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: He came back worse?

O: He came back worse. He was one person before going to prison and he is someone else after coming out. Angrier, more... He used to be calm, he was... well, I never saw him treat our parents badly, and even him, his head, since he went to that place, that was that. Gone. His head, I don't know, I just don't know...

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: How many years was he there?

O: He was there for about four and a half years. Four and a half years.

Manuel Bivar: And what did he say about it, about Santa Cruz..?

O: That it was hell on earth, that's what he told me, that's what he told me.

Manuel Bivar: Hell on earth?

O: Santa Cruz do Bispo...

[soundtrack]

Manuel Bivar: After being held in custody awaiting trial, he was sent to the Santa Cruz do Bispo Psychiatric Wing, in Matosinhos, where many of the arsonists considered unfit to stand trial are sent. Even when the court recognizes that this man could not understand the act that he committed, he was sent to "hell on earth". And all because he was fixated on clearing a piece of land.

After the measures imposed in 2017, clearing the land around houses became a hot button. There were massive campaigns calling for vegetation control and the National Republican Guard (GNR) stepped up their checks. The problem is that there's no people, and much of the land is completely abandoned.

João Pinho: A Galician friend said once, jokingly, every time a herder dies in one of the critical zones we have in Galicia, we know that there'll be at least 30 fewer fires per year.

Manuel Bivar: We already heard from João Pinho in the first episode of the series. He's the coordinator of the controlled burns programmes conducted by the ICNF (the Portuguese Institute for Nature Conservation and Forests).

Arsonist Country

An investigative podcast
by Divergente

João Pinho: We want these people to keep using fire, traditional burns. These sometimes get out—they do escape on rare occasions—but these people in the past knew how to do it very well. Now they’re finding it a little harder, but we want them to burn with us.

Manuel Bivar: With no agriculture and not enough people to keep the land clear, state institutions like the AGIF (the Agency for Integrated Wildfire Management), and the ICNF take on the role of using fire as a means of vegetation control.

João Pinho: We have a programme called the MARQ, that is, the Support Mechanism for Performing Controlled Burns and we meet with herders, “Hey, don’t do burns on your own. Do it with us—you tell us what areas you want to burn, and we’ll do it with you.”

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: And has there been much take-up, I mean, has it been used in municipalities? How have people used this tool?

João Pinho: The MARQ?

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: Yes.

João Pinho: It has been taken up principally in the mountainous regions. These are demarcated areas where we have capacity and technicians to deal with it all. Because we are always worried that we will meet with people and they will say, “tell us what you want to do”. And then we have to respond. Because we also don’t have a huge capacity because we are involved [...]

Manuel Bivar: Despite recognizing the importance of controlled burns, the area burned by the various state-run programmes is small. To give you an idea, in 2024, they accounted for little more than 2000 hectares, 610 of which were burned with support from the MARQ. That is, next to nothing in a country where, on average, 100 thousand hectares a year has burned.

João Pinho: This burn usually has to happen. If we start to pile on the pressure, to monitor and discourage—[through the] National Republican Guard—people are likely to start to burn at night, right? However, what they tend to do, because it has to be burned, is to go at the worst times, the times we don’t want them to. That is, “Eh, I’ll burn now, because the wind’s coming in soon and it’ll be a hot day and surely no one will catch me now.” Do you know what I mean?

Manuel Bivar: For those who aren’t covered by these governmental programmes, it’s not easy to do a controlled burn. It’s a bureaucratic process. And while some councils offer the service for free, others don’t.

Arsonist Country

An investigative podcast
by Divergente

João Pinho: How should they do it according to the law? Asking for authorization, preferably working with forest firefighters or the regular fire service. Obviously this is not your typical Portuguese herder, who knows full well they are capable of managing the landscape themselves, as their ancestors have done for millennia.

Manuel Bivar: And you have to pay for the Forest Firefighters to come out.

João Pinho: Then the problem, so to speak, is that some councils end up noticing, for example...and that's the real catch...

Manuel Bivar: It's the council?

João Pinho: The councils are responsible for authorizing, or receiving and validating the communications in relation to agricultural burnings and vegetation and waste management. There is a prior authorization process. Ah... some councils saw it as a source of income. This goes completely against that policy I told you about before, which is bringing the herders to us [...]

Manuel Bivar: To make matters worse, legislation on fire has been changing, to become much more aggressive against those caught doing controlled burns without authorization.

João Pinho: The latest legislation made—because in it, it says: ... without the necessary authorization it is considered arson. What the legislator wanted to say: in these situations, that it is deliberate, therefore the person, in the end, has to pay a fine.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: A criminal proceeding.

João Pinho: Well, that's the thing... It stops being a minor infraction, it becomes a crime.

[background noises]

Manuel Bivar: What?

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: The post code...

Manuel Bivar: Look, it's already here, you can see it there already...

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: Ruins.

Manuel Bivar: Ruins everywhere.

Manuel Bivar: In the northern region, in the district of Viseu, herders set a lot of fires behind the state's back. They are mountain ranges with little vegetation, such as Montemuro, and where the undergrowth was always burned to allow grass to grow and give the livestock something to eat. If you don't burn, broom, heather and gorse take over... and the pasture ceases to exist.

Arsonist Country

An investigative podcast
by Divergente

Manuel Bivar: Let's go to the cafe.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: Look, stop the music so we can...

Manuel Bivar: We went to a village in one of these mountain ranges, searching for a case that involved a herder. It was a small stone settlement, nearly totally abandoned, most of the houses were in ruins.

Manuel Bivar: These are also all falling down. And this one.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: Take this, or we won't be able to hear you.

Manuel Bivar: We were having trouble finding the house we were looking for, so we decided to stop to ask in a cafe we spotted.

Manuel Bivar: Good afternoon. Look, we have a question. Could you by any chance tell me where [...]

Manuel Bivar: When we entered, a group of men looked at us suspiciously. They asked us who we wanted to speak to. And when we said the name, everyone went silent. Finally one of the men stepped forward.

P: That's me.

Manuel Bivar: He was nervous. He thought we were police and that we'd come to take him in.

P: My crime was that down there at the end, I burned a bit of brush, I was put away, sent down for three years and eight months. And the rest, I didn't harm anyone. I don't have anything to say. What should I have to say? I was wronged. Well, it set my life back a bit. What should I have to...? My life got set back. But that's it. It was the first time I was sent away, but I won't let anything like that happen again.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: But why did you set a fire?

P: To get the grass to grow, we have cattle. We need green grass to grow for our animals' pasture. And it didn't harm anything... it burned the broom and... We have a herd of cows. I did it at night because we couldn't do it by day.

Manuel Bivar: Did you tell the judge why you did it?

P: Yes, it all came out in the court. And now it's over.

[background noises]

Manuel Bivar: But this thing about "I set fire to get the grass to grow..."

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: Yes...

Arsonist Country

An investigative podcast
by Divergente

Manuel Bivar: [sigh]

Manuel Bivar: Having heard this man's story, we understand the fear. This man spent three years and eight months in prison for having burned a small piece of land so their cattle would have something to eat. He didn't harm anyone. He didn't put houses or people at risk. And even so, he was imprisoned.

[soundtrack]

Manuel Bivar: In one of the court cases we read where the accused was also a herder, the panel of judges said in the sentencing, "using fire to clear lands, even when controlled, is bad practice". This is a statement that goes against that touted by public institutions such as the ICNF and the AGIF.

Paulo Fernandes: Managing fuel is...how to say... It's a huge task, particularly in a country where the countryside is being abandoned, you know? There's no people, there's no companies, there's not even forestry technicians, and so on. And there's no money [laughs] to do all this.

Manuel Bivar: We heard from forestry engineer and professor at the University of Trás-os-Montes (UTAD), Paulo Fernandes. At the beginning of our research for this podcast, we sought to interview some fire specialists and Paulo Fernandes was one of them. We talked mainly about how to manage fuel in such a sparsely populated, fire-prone territory as the central and northern areas of Portugal.

Paulo Fernandes: [laughs] This fire that's illegal, but that helps to maintain the mosaic of the land, making the landscape less vulnerable to brutal summer fires. It exists, but I think we should have more [laughs] of it, you know? Make the most of the burnings, monitoring, doing them in a certain way, as if they were controlled burns. It'd be a way of compensating for the controlled burns that we don't do.

Manuel Bivar: Paulo Fernandes was also of the opinion that the use of fire and grazing are the only viable ways of controlling vegetation in a country void of people. But he highlighted the problem that various state institutions have conflicting views on the use of fire.

Paulo Fernandes: Here we have a problem: we have various entities, each with their own doctrine. This shouldn't be the case. For example, the GNR is a militarized body. For them it is inconceivable not to report, fight and put out a fire caused by a herder, you know? And then we have the AGIF with guidelines, plans, and even public statements that endorse this sort of fire,

Arsonist Country

An investigative podcast
by Divergente

yeah? And then the ICNF in the middle [laughter]. So, with all this variation at institutional level, it isn't easy [...]

[soundtrack]

Manuel Bivar: Look at this river.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: What river is it? A tributary of the Paiva?

Manuel Bivar: I don't know. Or the Paiva itself?

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: Or the Paiva itself.

Manuel Bivar: The river was the Coja, a tributary of the Dão, that flowed down below, audible from the village where we were looking for a man of about 40 who, according to the accusation in the court, had bought a can of petrol and tried to set fire to a clump of pine trees.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: It's pretty here.

Manuel Bivar: Sort of. These pines, these eucalyptus.

Manuel Bivar: On the slopes that went down to the river and on the tops of the hills the landscape was a bit desolate—patches of dead-looking pines everywhere you looked. As they explained to us later, the pine wood nematode is to blame—a worm invisible to the naked eye that attacks the trees' circulation system and dries them out.

Q: Ah, if only I had legs like that.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: [laughter]

Q: I'd run over there.

Manuel Bivar: Let's just see what's going on there, this is number 5.

Manuel Bivar: There didn't seem to be anyone at the house we knocked on, so we asked the neighbour who, right next door, was washing his car that Sunday morning. He told us that the man no longer lived there.

R: He's in Lisbon, not here.

Manuel Bivar: Ah...OK.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: Where is he?

Manuel Bivar: In Lisbon.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: Ah...ok, ok. And no one from the family lives here now?

R: They do. His mum does, but his mum [...]

Arsonist Country

An investigative podcast
by Divergente

Manuel Bivar: But when we were getting ready to leave, the neighbour called us back.

R: Look, you see...

Manuel Bivar: Yes, yes.

Manuel Bivar: And he ended up telling us his version of the story.

R: So this is how I saw it... Some people said he used to steal, and all that. He was going through a difficult phase in his life, and he was hanging around with some questionable sorts. So, people say that he's a bad person, that he's this, and that. He's not a bad person. He, well, he was injecting, so he was going through a tricky patch. Drugs and everything, but he managed to get over it. He got out of it. His mum put him straight in the head, he went to Lisbon, he has a sister there. His sister put him on the straight and narrow. Now, he, he's... Let's say he likes men, OK. His mother took this very badly, this part, because she's old, she doesn't understand the modern world, OK. His mum never stopped talking to him and has always supported him but she wanted him, OK, to be a man who liked women and that would give her grandkids, you know. That's it. So it's like this... And he got over it and he's good now, OK. But at the time he was mixed up in drugs, or drinking, and when the fire happened on the other side of the tracks where you were going just now to speak to his mother, there used to be an overgrown bit, OK and they say he took some petrol in hand but that's a lie, a complete lie, I saw him [...]

Manuel Bivar: We often came across responses like "who knows if it was him?", which suggests that they had been a fall guy. As one woman told us, a scapegoat accused under pressure because they needed someone to blame. And these incriminations normally fell on the people who were easiest to accuse.

R: [...] but then they put two and two together, and he was unfairly incriminated and, well...

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: And so you never knew who set that fire?

R: No, that's beyond me.

[soundtrack]

Manuel Bivar: The fire burned 0.0117 hectares, as the judge wrote. Said like that, it could seem like a large area. But it's only 117 m². The damage caused was estimated at 51 euros. The sentence: 18 months in prison. His criminal record didn't help: theft, failure to comply with a lawful order and drink driving. And also,

Arsonist Country

An investigative podcast
by Divergente

as you can read in the judgment, the “people locally having a poor opinion of the accused”.

S: We had a 200-strong flock there.

Manuel Bivar: And did you have more or less scrubland here? Was the eucalyptus here when you were young?

S: No, no.

Manuel Bivar: It wasn't?

S: No sir.

Manuel Bivar: From the high zones with little vegetation where the maritime pine dominates, we descended into the lower regions, where there were lots more houses, some factories, and eucalyptus started to appear.

Vegetation thrives in the climate all through the central region of Portugal. Everything grows quickly. But then you have summer, and there's a lot of biomass waiting to burn. To make things worse, the territory is dominated by rugged terrain, which helps fires to spread and makes them difficult to fight. This set of factors makes the central region, together with the Minho and the south of Galicia, one of the most fire-prone places in the world.

Manuel Bivar: But the eucalyptus arrived about what, 20 or 30 years ago?

S: No, longer. Longer. They cut them already, they have come up again.

Manuel Bivar: But what covered the mountain sides here before the eucalyptus?

S: It was all scrubland.

Manuel Bivar: All scrubland?

S: All scrubland.

Manuel Bivar: The worst land was scrubland, where sheep and goats would graze, and that would be burned periodically. The best land was used in agriculture. Now the mountains and lowlands as far as the eye could see were covered with abandoned eucalyptus and mimosa forests stretching down to the river.

At the top of one slope, from where you could see for miles, we spoke with a man, who we will call Jacinto, who lived there completely isolated in a shack with an enormous stone statue of Our Lady at the door. He had had problems a few years back for trying to set fire to everything around him. It's the same story: a stroke and issues with alcohol... But now Jacinto is extremely calm, smiling and contemplative as he looks at the eucalyptus trees and the river while patting a puppy.

Jacinto (not his real name): I set the fire just to see the helicopter put it out.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: Did you like to see helicopters?

Arsonist Country

An investigative podcast
by Divergente

Jacinto (not his real name): Yes, ma'am. They'd fill up at the river and then go up top to put it out.

Manuel Bivar: Ah, because you can see the river there, you have the river down there.

Jacinto (not his real name): I can see it, yes.

Manuel Bivar: You can even hear it, that is the river down there right? That we can hear here?

Jacinto (not his real name): Yes, you can. That noise is the water.

It was up there where I lit the fire. I did it to see the helicopter, that's all, see it go up and down.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: But can you explain why you liked to see the helicopter?

Jacinto (not his real name): Look, it was just an idea I had. I picked up a lighter and went to make the fire happen. I regretted it later, after it burned.

Manuel Bivar: But why did you think such a thing? This is our...

Jacinto (not his real name): Look, I wanted to see the helicopter fill up with water down there and come across here, in this direction.

Manuel Bivar: Were you drunk when you set the fire, or not?

Jacinto (not his real name): No sir.

Manuel Bivar: Nothing, no alcohol, nothing at all?

Jacinto (not his real name): Nothing. I was how I am today.

Manuel Bivar: It just popped into your head, but not... It just came to you. You didn't...

Jacinto (not his real name): Yes, sir. The idea just came to me because I wanted to see the helicopter go up and down. Then the firefighters came, the helicopter came, they quickly put it all out, and there was nothing else to see. Then I went up there and told them it was me who started the fire, the GNR appeared, they took me away to a room, to the station. "Were you the one who started the fire?" and I told them I was. I did it to see the helicopter, that's all. I know it was wrong. How I came to do it, how I used the lighter.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: You explained all of this?

Jacinto (not his real name): I explained it all.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: And these crazy ideas never occurred to you again?

Jacinto (not his real name): [laughter] No, ma'am.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: You're making me want to laugh too. [laughter]

Manuel Bivar: You had never had these ideas before, then one day it popped into your head...

Jacinto (not his real name): I had the idea.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: It's just hard for us to understand, that's why he's insisting so much... [laughter]

Manuel Bivar: So, you'd never thought about it before?

Arsonist Country

An investigative podcast
by Divergente

Jacinto (not his real name): No sir.

Manuel Bivar: You'd never wanted to before?

Jacinto (not his real name): No sir, it was the first and last time.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: Not even to see the fire?

Jacinto (not his real name): No ma'am, I'm not into that anymore. I had my fill of fires.

Manuel Bivar: 600m2 burned because of Jacinto, and as the judge said, "if it hadn't been for the swift intervention of the firefighters, the fire would have spread throughout the whole eucalyptus forest which extends over hundreds of hectares". And there's the big difference. A few decades ago, the fire started by Jacinto wouldn't have burned more than a bit of scrubland and would probably have died out as soon as it arrived at a sown field. But there are no longer any worked fields. And any oversight, or a fire started in a fury, can mean hundreds of hectares of forest burn.

Jacinto was interned for a number of months in the Psychiatric Hospital of Sobral de Cid, in Coimbra, and he didn't seem to mind the experience.

Jacinto (not his real name): Look, they fed me... They didn't beat me.
[laughter]

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: You mean in Sobral Cid.

Jacinto (not his real name): It was good there!

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: It was good there?

Jacinto (not his real name): Yes, ma'am. I don't have anything to say about it. I ate well there, they cleaned, they washed me in the morning, because I couldn't wash myself, they dressed me... There were ones who were in for longer than me... One was there because he'd asked a saint I don't know what, and he'd gone and set fire to the altar. [laughter] They were all good people there, they got on with me, I got on with them, we drank coffee together, with one another... Just one thing: I didn't smoke, but everyone there smoked, so I stayed away from them because I don't like tobacco. They would sit next to me and I [whoosh] to another bench. One used to say, "Have a cigarette" "No, I don't want one". No ma'am, that's a habit I could do without, and one I never picked up.

[soundtrack]

Manuel Bivar: Eucalyptus here was planted everywhere nearly without a break. It grew quickly and wasn't much work, and for years it was very productive. Today, as we hear repeatedly from those who try to sell the wood, prices are through the floor and it doesn't pay to manage the eucalyptus plantations. Various producers' organizations talk of prices that haven't moved since the 90s.

Arsonist Country

An investigative podcast
by Divergente

But the state seems to know little about the species, that, in accordance with the last forest inventory, occupied 844 thousand hectares of Portugal's Central Region.

Manuel Bivar: Just one thing, I believe you worked in the cellulose trade, is that right?

Tiago Oliveira: Yes, yes.

Manuel Bivar: One of the people we asked about the matter was Tiago Oliveira, the AGIF president, who worked, between 2008 and 2017 with The Navigator group, the main Portuguese brand for cellulose transformation and paper pulp. Before 2016, it was called Portucel Soporcel.

Manuel Bivar: And I wanted to ask something: something that stood out as we travelled through the central region, in particular, was the number of abandoned eucalyptus plantations—I think, maybe know, that the price of eucalyptus is extremely low—is anything in place to deal with this? Because in the end there are miles upon miles of eucalyptus plantations that are clearly completely abandoned, some of which have already burned, where they have started to regrow, where shrubland is reappearing and so on, and it's a large part of the landscape there.

Tiago Oliveira: If you read my interviews, I always say this: it's important to share the value with the owner and guarantee proper regulation and governance of forest resources to avoid negative externalities. I say that in all of them. And this means sharing the value between those who sell the final product—pine, corks, paper—with the ones producing the raw material.

Manuel Bivar: And why do you think the price has been dropping? Eucalyptus prices?

Tiago Oliveira: Well, international markets, you have to ask... Speak with Celpa, Biond, they have more information than me and can explain. But it's the international markets no doubt—competition, prices, and all that. But what I do know is that owners of cork, pine and eucalyptus selling at current prices, as they are, if you do the maths, they'd earn more in the 1980s than they do today. And that's why people give it up. It's a financial decision. And this abandonment impacts everyone.

Manuel Bivar: And do you know if there are any strategies to fight it?

Tiago Oliveira: The strategy, from our fire perspective, is to go by the records. That's what we can do. We need to know what is there: the inventory. Then developing statistical information from the forest industry, and that record is on hold. We don't know...

Manuel Bivar: And who is in charge of that?

Arsonist Country

An investigative podcast
by Divergente

Tiago Oliveira: The National Institute for Statistics. That is, we need a public information system about how much is there, and what income forestry owners have.

Manuel Bivar: Because one of the things we hear about is price fixing...

Tiago Oliveira: I don't know...There's a, what I can say, and it has been said, is that there's a mismatch in the prices between those buying and those selling. There are, in theory, 400 thousand owners selling to three buyers, or ten. I'm not sure exactly how many. A tiny fraction. And it's disproportionate, you have to ask the Portuguese Competition Authority. It's a good question for the Competition Authority.

Manuel Bivar: We asked the Competition Authority if there were any open or completed investigations into the eucalyptus, cellulose or pulp sectors.

The press officer responded that "whenever we become aware of anti-competitive practices, we never hesitate to open administrative cases". But after insisting, we concluded that only one case had been opened in the last ten years—against five non-Portuguese companies, who wanted to supply the Portuguese market with wood chips—and this was closed for lack of evidence.

[background noises]

Manuel Bivar: So, this is quite a populated area, there's a factory there, run by a French group, in the middle of the eucalyptus trees, up there...

Manuel Bivar: We asked various specialists if there was any literature on the ecology of abandoned eucalyptus plantations, but no one seemed to have much to say about it. But as we drove down the different roads, we saw that in among the eucalyptus trees that had been burned, a new forest of oaks seemed to be emerging.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: But do you know where you are going?

Manuel Bivar: If I know where I am going?

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: Hm, hm.

Manuel Bivar: Not really.

Manuel Bivar: Everything there seemed carry on regardless, with the help of fire, and with no interference from the state or the landowners.

Manuel Bivar: Look, all that wood there.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: Yes, but you saw. We didn't find a single case of loggers in the courts. Not a single one!

Arsonist Country

An investigative podcast
by Divergente

Manuel Bivar: In the courts, no. The other day, I was watching the interview [...]

Manuel Bivar: When people talk about fire, eucalyptus and burned wood, the subject of economic interests tends to come up. But for someone who has been studying the matter for years, this seems to be fairly irrelevant.

Cristina Soeiro: Look, I've studied this since 1997, and really, from 1997 to now, there were some years—2013, 2017—when it just went completely mad, you know? What's going on here? We seemed like a country of arsonists, pyromaniacs... And in fact, not even pyromania can explain it. So, it's more complex than that, you know?

Manuel Bivar: We're listening to Cristina Soeiro, Head of Psychology at the Judicial Police School, and there's probably no one in Portugal who has studied arsonists more than her. And one of the first questions we ask the psychologist is about the economic interests linked to fire.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: And economic interest is not a cause...

Cristina Soeiro: This has been debunked [laughter] over the years. The issue hasn't come up here, which doesn't mean no one ever admits to receiving money—it's just that they're amounts you can't believe, like 50, 60 euros to get their own back on someone. They're a very small part of it, they don't represent the phenomenon of arson—of the cases investigated by the Judicial Police, that I believe reflect the complexity of the situation.

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: Not even the question of loggers' interests, of...?

Cristina Soeiro: We looked into that. No... No, nor the firefighter issue. We also have a few firefighters, but they are all ones who had already been thrown out of the fire service or who were having trouble adapting.

Manuel Bivar: Not even the fire tackling industry?

Cristina Soeiro: No, they aren't ones we catch. This is... Look, if we look at how the fire started. The majority are simple, very few employ incendiary devices. Most fires are started with a lighter or matches [laughter], just to give you an idea. Every so often we have a case where accelerant has been used, or where people have used candles from the corner shop with some things [laughter], and they leave it burning and walk off, but they are very simple things, nothing thought out [...]

Manuel Bivar: Since 1997 the Judicial Police has been building a database of all the arsonists sent to prison.

Arsonist Country

An investigative podcast
by Divergente

Cristina Soeiro: [...] we went to all the prisons holding those jailed for wildfire arson and we realized that we needed to come back to this study, because doing the interviews in prison gave us [...]

Manuel Bivar: But the issue has only been studied systematically since 2015, with statistical analyses of the forms filled out by the inspectors when they interrogate those accused of setting fires.

Cristina Soeiro: [...] information about the psychological makeup of the attackers, of the arsonists, but we were missing a whole set [...]

Manuel Bivar: Since then 647 arsonists have been added to the database.

Cristina Soeiro: And we created a different methodology and used a criminal profiling technique. And in fact this population isn't homogeneous. We're not talking just about people with cognitive deficits, nothing like that. It's a complex profile, they fall into three different typologies. One is the instrumental typology, then we have one of people with psychological problems and mental illness, and we have to differentiate here, we've had to perfect this profile because originally it only included mental illness and it's not [...]

Manuel Bivar: The profile of Portuguese arsonists, as depicted by the Portuguese judicial police, divides the arsonist population into three different groups.

Cristina Soeiro: Then we have one with psychological problems [...]

Manuel Bivar: 38% of the cases correspond to people with psychiatric illnesses, such as depression, schizophrenia, personality disorder, or cognitive deficit and who set fires for reasons like being angry, revenge, excitement, pleasure or as a cry for help.

Cristina Soeiro: [...] revenge and anger, or boredom too [...]

Manuel Bivar: Another 38% of cases are people who set fires for these same reasons but who have serious alcohol problems.

Cristina Soeiro: And then we have alcohol consumption and then the mental illness indicators [...]

Manuel Bivar: The other 23% had not been drinking, but have mental health problems [...]

Arsonist Country

An investigative podcast
by Divergente

Cristina Soeiro: [...] these states of existential crisis [...]

Manuel Bivar: [...] and who committed the crime with an instrumental motive, like clearing a piece of land or vandalism.

While the large majority of arsonists on the judicial police register in Portugal are men, there are also large numbers of women who set fires.

Cristina Soeiro: We have a sample of ninety-odd women.

Manuel Bivar: Ninety-odd women?

Cristina Soeiro: It's the largest sample of female arsonists in Europe. [laughter] Because we've been collecting...

Manuel Bivar: How would you describe it?

Cristina Soeiro: Well, there are publications about it. There are publications about it. Our studies go right into it. And the thing is, women are much more homogeneous in terms of their motivations for setting fires. They tend to set fires for emotional reasons, and they always, in one way or another, set fires either as a cry for attention or out of revenge or anger. It is usually linked to romantic relationships in some way or another. That's what motivates women. For example, many of the women who set fires have a history of depression, sometimes diagnosed, often in the Central Region—the departments that have most women arsonists is in the Central Region, which is also where there is most forest.

Manuel Bivar: OK, but can you explain this more?

Cristina Soeiro: It's related to where there's a greater area of forest.

Manuel Bivar: But something I don't understand... We've also been interviewing people who set fires and the place where it's easiest to find people is in the Central Region.

Cristina Soeiro: It's where most cases are.

Manuel Bivar: OK, and most forest. But why do people in other areas not set fires? If they want to set fires, why is it that...

Cristina Soeiro: They also set them, but as we see more fires started there, perhaps it's about the structure of the rural space? The types of property, also the fires might be higher profile, more...

Manuel Bivar: Well, there is more to burn...

Cristina Soeiro: Exactly. We can't just analyse the human component, we have to analyse it together with the forest component, you know?

[soundtrack]

Manuel Bivar: When something happens en masse, when between 2015 and 2023 647 new arsonists appear, something is up.

Arsonist Country

An investigative podcast
by Divergente

Jacinto, who we talked to earlier, who set a fire to see the helicopters, said he had had his fill of fires. Just like Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods hiding it in a fennel stem to take it to mortal humans.

But Prometheus was freed by Hercules and humans used fire for centuries, burning mountainsides, clearing forests, setting fire to the remains, heating pots and using ashes for fertilizer.

The myth of Prometheus was recorded for the first time in the 8th century BC. During the preceding centuries, the eastern Mediterranean had undergone a true agricultural revolution. Forests were felled by axe and fire, and subsequently they were grazed by goats and sheep and regularly burned. A landscape sculpted by fire. And here, on the other side of the Mediterranean, the same story. And Prometheus also tells us about that. Of a powerful land management tool.

How can we not see Prometheus chained up by the State on a cliff in Mondego, with his booze-pickled liver ravaged by cirrhosis, and an osprey flying over the waters of the river, swooping down to peck at him. But every so often he breaks free and uses his fennel stem, transformed into a lighter, to set fire to everything.

Scientific articles published in forensic psychology journals told us that the majority of Portuguese arsonists are men, with mental health problems and who are alcoholics. But they did not speak of the desolate landscape, the abandonment and the consequences of living in a territory where nearly everyone has left and scrubland is growing all around.

But these are the subjects that after studying arsonists for 26 years seem to be what most interest the judicial police psychologist.

Manuel Bivar: And any case that particularly drew your attention in all these years studying arsonists? Or people you have spoken with, stories that have stuck in your head?

Cristina Soeiro: Of arsonists? I don't know. It's been 26 years. I don't know, cases that caught my attention... Yes. I think so. Particularly the young ones, very young people. Who live in the interior of the country, a country like ours, in the middle of the 21st Century, and we see there are people who are going nowhere, who have no motivation, no purpose in life. And to understand that often the interior doesn't offer them anything, it doesn't offer a solution to these people and often these people end up in the system because, look, because a series of circumstances came about or not for them to adapt to life. These are the cases that stick in my mind.

I remember a kid who set fire to his parents' land because he wanted a computer, but his parents didn't have electricity at home. That gives you a glimpse, let's see, you see here a certain lack of opportunity in the interior of the country, you know? And, well, young people also have to live in the

Arsonist Country

An investigative podcast
by Divergente

interior, and they also need some other type of solution or outlet. It's difficult, all these... For me, a lot of the issues related to forest fires, arson, are linked with these three issues we have been talking about here, which are: the issue of forest management, together with the issue of the management of the interior that responds to the needs of people who live there, you know? And then the capacity to respond to people with serious problems, such as alcohol-related dementia or serious mental health problems. Sometimes, we have couples who have problems with alcohol, and young people too. Once I went to the house of a family because they were looking for a 22-year-old who had set "n" fires, and when we got there, his parents also had serious alcohol problems. His mum even said, "Ah if they send you to prison, can you take the form for my new ID card to save me the trip to Lisbon". You see? That for me... you know? It's worrying. The country is built in such a way as everything is centralized in the large cities, and then in the interior you see these sorts of issues too, you know? That's what hits me, what really gets to me.

Manuel Bivar: It's been overwhelming for us too as we've been interviewing people. This has been what's got to us.

Cristina Soeiro: Right?

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: They're abandoned.

Cristina Soeiro: Right? Yes, but OK. Everything is very centralized. And we see the consequences. Those who adapt, adapt. Those who don't,...

Sofia da Palma Rodrigues: Very Darwinian.

Cristina Soeiro: Yes, a bit. But OK. I don't know, any other issues?

Manuel Bivar: Fire pulls a lot of people into the system. And maybe it is against the system that fires are being started too. The next episode of **Arsonist Country** talks about how the State deals with those accused of arson. About broken judicial and mental health systems; about the bureaucratic delays and abuse that can put an end to someone's life.

CC: She was speaking with a crazy person, but she couldn't even see that. She was so cold with my brother. But so cold, really. I got outside, I got outside, she came over, I said to her: "Look you're not a judge, you're a heartless human being, you have a heart of stone, I think stones in fact would have more feelings than you do". And she just looked at me, with this stupid face, just like that.

[soundtrack]

Manuel Bivar: **Arsonist Country** is an investigative podcast by DIVERGENTE. If you want more details, you can consult the website at divergente.pt/paisdeincendiarios.

Arsonist Country

An investigative podcast
by Divergente

The research, interviews and script are by Manuel Bivar and Sofia da Palma Rodrigues, with the script editing by Diogo Cardoso, Luciana Maruta and Pedro Miguel Santos. The podcast editing is by Inês Sambas, the soundtrack by Henrique Silva and Zé Cruz, with sound editing and mixing by Luís Pinto. Illustrations are by Nogueira Lopes, design by José Mendes, interactive graphics by Beatriz Malveiro and Rita Costa, and graphic animation by Pedro Lopes. Web development is by Manuel Almeida, text editing by Teresa Montenegro and image consulting by Ricardo Venâncio Lopes. Production is by Ana Pereira and communications by Beatriz Walviesse Dias. The recordings were made in the Fumaça studio, an investigative journalism podcast.

Speak soon.