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# Ecology of Pilgrimage: Building Socio-Ecological Community on the Way

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A developed sense of interdependence with the socio-ecological landscapes of pilgrimage can serve as a path for accepting and reducing the impact we have in our sacred travels. Developing ecological habits of mind allows the pilgrim to draw deeper meanings from and thus greater affinity with the natural world. Raising awareness of environmental issues and appreciating the interaction of humans and the natural world helps modern pilgrims play an important role in conservation and restoration of pilgrimage landscapes.

**Key Words:** rural depopulation, restorative ecology, socio-ecological pilgrimage

## Introduction

Ecology is broadly defined as the study of relationships between living and non-living things. From the Greek *oikos*, meaning home and community, and *-ology*, a field of study, ecology describes a modern science, an ancient faith tradition, and a philosophy.

*Relationship* is the operational term for this paper and I apply the concept to describe how the pilgrimage experience may be enriched with an understanding of living landscapes through which pilgrims travel. Developing ecological relationships to changing physical, social, and biological communities around us can lead to revelations, life-changing commitments, and dedicated interests in nature and socio-ecological concerns. These relationships lead to a greater understanding of our responsibilities. Francis (2008) states that an ecological pilgrim, aware of his or her responsibilities for our shared and rapidly changing planet, 'has accepted the obligation of extraordinary action.'

I was inspired to make nature observation an important component of my own pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago as I studied the environmental history of the most popular route that starts in St. Jean Pied du Port. One pilgrim companion, hiking through the historically managed high pastures of the Pyrenes, looked out at herds of sheep and declared sadly, 'This will not be a nature hike - just a walk through a bunch of farms.' With pilgrimage now considered a form of tourism, growing ever more popular with each passing year, we run the risk of severing the ties of communion with the land that supports our spiritual or healing endeavors by clinging to clichés of nature awareness.

## Methodology

I had two goals for this pilgrimage. These were to observe and interpret the connections pilgrims have with the natural landscape and to study the historical-natural landscape against recent phenomenon of rural depopulation and rewilding. As an environmental historian and ecologist, I was able to document at eye-level, decades and centuries-long changes in landscape use with the help of a series of Google Earth maps saved to my small tablet computer that I studied each night for the following day's walk. Satellite images of the Camino landscape can reveal anthropogenic features hundreds of years old that may be hidden to the eye of the pilgrim traveling through unfamiliar terrain. Perceptions of wilderness today contrast with historic landscape features of the pilgrimage route that indicate areas of heavy and widespread farming, extractive industry and mining, and deforestation.

I did not solicit conversations or conduct formal interviews. I simply wore (and used extensively) a compact pair of binoculars around my neck and took several nature observation breaks each day, often drawing scenes in my sketchbook and photo-journaling plants and insects. My activities attracted the attention of fellow pilgrims who were just curious or who had an interest in nature that they wanted to share with me. According to my daily journal entries I met on average three to five pilgrims a day, most of them non-English speakers, who would stop to enjoy a shared nature break, eager to tell me about what they knew about the scene and its creaturely inhabitants. Some walked with me for hours or days after our meeting and shared how nature and environment informed and guided them on their pilgrimage.

In addition, my nature observation breaks in country and town, attracted the attention of local people who pointed out various natural features and shared memories of ‘then and now’ concerning reforestation, industry-to-nature transformations, and the return or protection of specific species (European mink, Iberian wolf, white stork, etc.) for which they were proud to share progress reports.

This paper reflects my experience learning about pilgrims’ perceptions of nature and semi-wild landscapes undergoing such dramatic change. It became clear to me as I studied my journal for notes on conversations, shared bird lists, and sketches of the land, that an ecology of pilgrimage offers new and complex ways of describing the importance of environment to the sacred journey.

### Learning to See

Our preconceptions of nature become obstacles to full immersion in dynamic socio-ecological landscapes where nature surrounds us, even in the most modern cityscapes of our route. ‘I wish I had a field guide,’ my companion said as she wanted to identify a few roadside flowers on our way out of Pamplona, a city filled with birds, urban forests, and fresh food markets that hinted at the rich cultural relationship to the bounty of the land. The rather lifeless path out of town contrasted sharply with my urban birding day-of-rest where I encountered hunting Lesser Kestrels (*Falco naumanni*) communally nesting in a cathedral spire, Grey Herons (*Ardea cinerea*) fishing next to old industrial mill ruins, and grand city trees hundreds of years old. Yet my companion, smitten with city shopping and sight-seeing, did not see a most glorious show of the nature of Pamplona. She had assumed that the built environment was devoid of nature and solely the domain of people.

Developing an ecological awareness, before and during the pilgrimage experience, can serve as a tool for accepting and reducing the impact we have on ecosystems and natural resources. Developing ecological habits of mind such as establishing personal connections to the land can help us conserve energy and water, appreciate traditional agriculture, and see the benefits of good land stewardship (Rogers *et al.*, 2013). Having an eye for scale and history allows the pilgrim to draw deeper meaning about nature and thus a greater affinity with the natural world. Those pilgrims who stopped to join me on a bird observation or to photograph wildflowers seemed to appreciate the interconnectedness of man to his environment.

Why is ecological thinking important to the experience of pilgrimage? I believe it is now a more necessary component of contemporary pilgrimage than ever. We need to learn to see and understand centuries of environmental change as the product of human ambition, adaptive management, and resource exploitation. The industrial-age pilgrim of today finds solace and meaning traveling through landscapes that remind us of a simpler and more deliberate way of life. Contemporary sacred landscapes, however, contain complexity, modernity, and, to the untrained eye, very little nature as we imagine it for ourselves. As we tune in to the nature around us, we open our pilgrimage experience to powerful metaphors for transformation and restoration.

### Re-Claiming the Relationship

In the Christian pilgrimage tradition many saints, including St. Francis and St. Cuthbert, considered animals and plants to be companions on the way. Modern Christian pilgrims struggle, however, with ideas of dominion and domestication of animals as central to some Biblical teachings that separate man from nature. For the Western pilgrim who tries to reconcile ideas of wilderness against the human-adapted landscape, agricultural land may be overlooked as symbolic of resource stewardship (Miller, 2001).

In Western environmental thought, utilitarianism and utopianism clash in fields of conservation versus preservation, and many North American pilgrims with whom I spoke considered the Camino landscapes either dominated by human activity (thus unnatural) or ‘wild just around the edges.’ Rooted in early twentieth century American ideas of wilderness, pristine nature minus the influence and presence of humans is considered pure, while land managed for sustaining forests and soils for human use is sometimes looked upon as unnatural, not meeting preferred Western definitions of nature (Worster, 2008). The American pilgrim’s comment while crossing the high pastures of the Pyrenes was understandable given her Western perspective of pristine versus human-occupied nature.

For the non-Western pilgrims I met along the Camino, nature appreciation is becoming an ever more important aspect of walking a religious route. Speaking with several Chinese student pilgrims who accompanied me for an early morning birding walk, I learned that the Five Sacred Mountain destinations of ancient Buddhist and Taoist pilgrimage traditions are experiencing a revival thanks to an awakening of

environmental concerns in their country. Research bears this out, identifying reasons such as mourning the loss of clean air and nature-based traditions for visiting the sacred mountain range (Wang, 2016). A pilgrim from Punjab whose family immigrated to France from India with whom I shared a full day of botanizing and butterfly watching, shared that many Hindu pilgrimage destinations are places of great natural beauty yet have taken on serious environmental challenges as the popularity of religious tourism strains local resources to protect natural resources. High numbers of immigrants traveling back to India on pilgrimage seem on a collision course with the preservation of these sacred sites (Shinde, 2007). Ashok worried about the increasing popularity of the Camino and some of the more sensitive areas being trampled by careless numbers of pilgrims. For both the Chinese students and Ashok, the experience of nature on the Camino was a critical part of their faith-based experience.

How does concern for the environment inform Western ideas of pilgrimage? During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a non-religious tradition of pilgrimage evolved out of American environmental and civil rights movements. John Francis (2008) and Peace Pilgrim (1992) are two notable secular pilgrims who walked great distances for environmental and social issues that included deep relationship with nature. War veterans (Shaffer, 1981) and those who seek healing from trauma (Strayed, 2013) engage in personal pilgrimage where nature figures prominently in transformative experiences. Solo travel as pilgrimage to lesser known and more isolated locations may serve as a form of protest against commercialism and materialism that have overtaken more popular parks and natural areas (Reason, 2014).

An environmental law professor from a western US university accompanied me for two days in common appreciation of nature. She shared her passion for eco-theologian Thomas Berry, who wrote in *The Dream of Earth* (1988) that after hundreds of years of industrial-strength environmental degradation, people have come to a point in history poised to acknowledge our responsibility. He predicted that our opportunity will come as a great transformation, a prophesy she deeply believed. The challenge will be of our own choosing and our choice will have immense consequences for life on Earth. We will be tested to choose a route that either reunites us with Creation or forever separates us from our ecological home. Reunification of faith with nature, she asserted, will be an essential survival strategy if humans are to fully understand how to take responsibility for what our species has done.

## This Pilgrim's View

As an environmental historian I am interested in economic, technological, and political forces that have driven exploitation of natural resources in the past and how historic socio-ecological responses to degradation can inform our way forward. I took my pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago across Northern Spain to celebrate completing my doctorate in 2016. My dissertation work involved understanding the ecological and social impact of industrial (mechanized) agriculture and its role in the 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon of rural depopulation and land abandonment in the US. Though certainly for different political and environmental circumstances, Spain's rural depopulation occurred during the same time period as my research (Collantes & Pinilla 2011). I knew that to celebrate the completion of my work I needed to extend and understand it in a wider context while at the same time honoring my family and friends who helped me through many years of difficult work. My Catholic upbringing informed my decision to hike the Camino in honor of my parents who instilled in their children a passion for learning, research, and academic achievement.

Land is abandoned by farmers and other rural people because of contamination, drought, soil exhaustion, militarization-industrialization, and poverty. In the US much ruined farmlands were acquired in the 1930s by government agencies such as the US Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, and US Forest Service to restore as conservation areas. By comparison, land abandonment in Spain did not receive government intervention and vast tracts of former farming areas were left to recover as semi-wilderness, letting nature take its course. Only since the end the Franco Era in the 1970s have both governmental and non-governmental interests taken firm stock of the opportunity that land abandonment has offered to advance conservation goals. For a nature enthusiast like me, the Camino offered wonderful opportunities to observe nature reclaiming working landscapes that had been highly modified and managed by people for over a thousand years.

As a vital pathway for bird migrations from Africa to Europe, the Iberian Peninsula offers countless examples of local and regional restoration solutions for establishing critical bird habitat for migrants and recovering populations of breeding species. Near Logroño I met local birders who were rightfully proud of their city's avian conservation efforts along the Ebro River. One gentleman, who had recently completed a



pilgrimage, expressed a religious obligation to welcome birds to the city. At sites of former industrial plants, there are now greenway parks and places to fish. He was sure that their work made ‘Dios feliz.’

At Atapuerca, I was shown a newly restored wetlands complex north of town that, viewed from the churchyard above, was a beautiful mosaic of blue open water ponds and whispering grasslands. This area is formerly farmed land where wetlands had been historically drained and is an important rest stop for migratory waterfowl. My guide, a birder from Tarifa on pilgrimage, struggled to find the right word in English for *transformational*, to describe the marsh that is now noisy with birds. ‘It is a *transfiguration*!’ he exclaimed as we walked to a photography blind at the edge of the wetland. I did not correct his word choice and felt it was the perfect way to describe the changes brought about here. A devout Catholic, Javi professed his faith as a conservation biologist ‘to follow in the steps of Francis.’<sup>[1]</sup>

For non-Spanish pilgrims who stopped to inquire about my bird watching over scrubland or recovering wilderness, most had no ecological context or relationship to the land. They appreciated early morning birdsong, the night skies, and other natural or cultural encounters, but expressed frustration akin to the kind of nature deficit that Louv suggests (2003) separates us from the non-human world. Kurt, who had walked from the Netherlands was an avid hunter and fisherman. We crossed paths frequently during our ten days on the Meseta and he also carried binoculars. He enjoyed teaching me and others how to identify the call of the Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*), which he called ‘Jacob’s bird’ (Leviticus 11), along with many other species heard but not seen. Having come to his pilgrimage already immersed in knowledge of nature and possessing a great faith, Kurt was truly akin with the landscapes through which we travelled. We spoke of how to help pilgrims feel more at ease and curious in these unfamiliar surroundings by turning to nature. I suggested that unfamiliarity could serve as a foundation for meditation or prayer from which kinship with Creation arises.

Whether pilgrims were walking with religious or adventurous intent, some who stopped to talk with me

and Kurt on our ‘nature breaks’ were frustrated that they couldn’t understand the lay of land and were eager to learn to read it as we walked. Kurt was happy to walk with those who were interested in learning. I helped pilgrims to recognize landscape structures from the Middle Ages, traces of peasant farm plots, ancient coppiced trees, erosional landscapes that indicated centuries of deforestation and mining. If Wifi was available at night or during meal breaks, I showed my temporary companions how to read Google Earth maps to find old roads, fire histories, and footprints of ancient settlements. A popular walking activity was to read field wall construction to discover whether a wall was built to keep animals in or out, to surmise where the stone was sourced from and how it got there, and how it was cut and laid.

From my view as pilgrim and ecologist, these many informal interactions with fellow pilgrims helped them to appreciate the semi-wild landscape for the biological wealth it contained. It was a pleasure to introduce my companions to an abandoned pit mine, a rough place at first glance, now a treasured wildlife preserve. My long stop at an abandoned industrial site near Zubiri, though ugly with derelict buildings and assorted crumbling steel structures, attracted a crowd of young college-aged pilgrims and we passed my single pair of binoculars around the ground so that everyone had a chance to see Red and Black Kites (*Milvus milvus*, *M. migrans*) hunting rodents (see Figure 1). My companion from the Pyrenes stopped as well, her face brightened at the sight of so many birds of prey over the quarry site. It was a transformative moment for someone who had previously complained about the lack of nature on the Camino. She later emailed me several poems she had written about finding the calm and healing of nature when she most needed it for what had been a physically challenging pilgrimage she had been unable to finish. Her metaphor for her pain, the scarred industrial landscape, was transformed in one poem by the young forests that reclaimed the site and the uplifting hope of the kites that ‘swept down the river valley’ to a place she knew she could rest.

Louv (2008) quotes Huxley to illustrate how ignorance of natural history limits us. ‘To a person uninstructed in natural history,’ wrote Huxley in 1854, ‘his country or seaside stroll is a walk through a gallery filled with wonderful works of art, nine-tenths of which have their faces turned to the wall.’ With on-the-spot interpretation and instruction on how to see and read our Camino landscapes, however, pilgrims were amazed with everything they would have otherwise walked by without a second thought. Excited by what

1. From journal notes dated June 3, 2016, in Atapuerca with Javi Ellorriaga of Tarifa, Spain, on pilgrimage in Northern Spain: ‘I am a bird biologist because I love to follow in the steps of Francis.’ We had arranged to meet to bird the wetlands and discuss Spain’s growing conservation movement.

**Figure 1 : Raptors Zubiri to Pamplona**

Source : Eppig, 2016

they were seeing, they were quick to pass on their discoveries to others. Sharing the nature of the Camino often resulted in storytelling, with memories of nature from childhood and home shared as we walked.

From my perspective, the discovery of nature in unexpected places brought new layers of meaning to many of my companions as it did for me. Reading nature as a metaphor for renewal of faith in oneself or in one's religion was an observation noted frequently in my journal. Sharing and teaching appreciation for nature and environment also helped build community among pilgrims and for me, friendships that have lasted beyond the Camino experience.

### Constructing an Ecologist's Community

Each day as I stopped to sketch a bird or flower, pilgrims seeing my open sketchbook would stop to watch me draw. I was asked, 'What kind of rock

formation is this?' 'Why do storks nest on bell towers?' 'Why are the soils red?' 'Do you think I saw a wolf?' Discussion about the nature and cultural histories of the Camino was always satisfying even if pilgrims were just engaging in conjecture.

Ecological storytelling broke down cultural barriers and fostered dialogue about shared concerns, thus addressing the community aspect of ecology. The Iberian wolf, central to medieval mythology and lore, is making a comeback in Spain. For a pilgrim who saw a wolf while she wandered lost off-trail, the sighting served as a deeply meaningful encounter symbolizing rebirth, renewal, and finding her way back. Sharing stories of our experiences with the wilder aspects of the Camino each night gathered for meals or resting in commons areas, helped us learn the stories of each other's lives, overcoming language barriers and cultural differences and bringing us closer.

Berry (1999) calls for a reunification of man with his ecological community and restates an earlier call for a new science of ecology, of relationship to nature and to each other, made in the late nineteenth century. Advocates for the new science and philosophy were inspired by Alexander von Humboldt, the 18<sup>th</sup> century explorer and naturalist, considered the father of modern ecology. In his travels he developed personal philosophies about interactions between human beings and their environment that were born out of trekking across magnificent landscapes to record new species of birds, mammals, plants, and geological wonders (Wulf, 2015).

Humboldt worried that Enlightenment thinking had severed human beings from nature, and he proposed a theory of holism to restore our place as members of life's dynamic story. A century after Humboldt's death in 1859, attempts to reunify human beings and nature had matured as ecology was recognized finally as an integrative field in both natural and social sciences. This occurred at a time of environmental crisis brought about by two massive World Wars, debilitating economic depressions, and a new phase of the fossil fuel revolution that threatened global health.

A charismatic pilgrim from France who was on his third Camino experience (having walked from Lourdes) spent much energy one evening deriding his fellow pilgrims for their choice to use overseas flights, and thus fossil fuels, to walk the Camino. He wondered why overseas travelers made the choice to contribute to global warming in order to go for a long walk, something he insisted anyone in America could do just



by 'walking out their front door.' This pilgrim argued passionately with me and others who had flown into Spain, Italy, or France to walk our holy walks. 'You kill the birds in order to see them.'

In 1979, Pope John Paul II gave ecology its very own patron saint, Francis of Assisi. This was an interesting nod to the medieval world of religious superstition and mysticism that the Age of Reason, predecessor to the Enlightenment, attempted to erase. Francis founded his religious order steeped in anti-intellectualism and promoted instead a living gospel to include brotherhood with the land, its creatures, and the non-rational mysteries of a personal God. As a humble pilgrim, Francis experienced the fragility of humanity's relationship with Creation and recognized that arrogance towards nature caused it harm. Francis sought to rebuild God's *oikos* - an ecological community - for all living and non-living members of His house. The pilgrim from France who argued that night in Sahagún, stressed that surely we needed to recognize our own ecological homes in need of repair.

My pilgrim identity as an ecologist formed unique relationships that evolved as co-joined eco-spiritualities. Knowledge of faith in and about nature shared by pilgrims and locals became the basis for my 'primary university' that Wendell Berry (1999) suggests should always be our first and most important school of direct experience.

*Through these instruments of observation, we enter profoundly into the most hidden realms of phenomenal existence itself while at the same time these hidden realms enter our own minds. It is a reciprocal relationship. We are touched by what we touch. We are shaped by what we shape. We are enhanced by what we enhance* (Berry, 1999:81)

My own community of fellow birders, botanists, and conservationists developed to greatly enhance my understanding of land stewardship and the paradox of abandonment and conservation. My growing network of ecologically-minded pilgrims served as a continuous sharing of our shared concerns and passions. No tiny wildflower or small bird was too insignificant to pass without appreciation.

With a recommendation from Matu, an ornithologist from Seville, I downloaded a handy app on my small computer tablet to help me confirm my field identifications each night. We were able to communicate through the app and share our sightings and locations when we hiked apart. While making a field sketch of roadside flowers, I met a botanist who

specialized in the medicinal plants of Iberia who helped me name the flowers. These were the medicines of medieval Iberia, said Maria, the *farmacia* of pilgrims and peasants alike. It was a revelation to me that she treated an injured pilgrim's bruised and painful leg with arnica cream she carried in her kit on the same day she had identified the plant from one of my sketches. A married couple from Canada, avid flower photographers, recited Francis' Cantic of Brother Sun one night in Astorga.

*All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Earth, our Mother, she feeds us in her sovereignty and produces various fruits and colored flowers and herbs.* (Francis of Assisi, (c. 1224). *Cantic to Brother Sun and Sister Moon*)

My network of eco-pilgrims offered ideas on what to see and do when bad weather prevented me from making my daily observations. I was told which galleries and museums to visit with the intention of looking specifically for botanical art. Illuminated manuscripts offered rich examples of the interdependence of animals and plants with medieval society. Modern art galleries contained a diversity of Spanish cultural arts where plants and animals play major roles in translating customs, legends, and ancient practices. I jumped at the chance to spend a rest day in Burgos and accompany a fellow pilgrim who loved anthropology to the Museum of Human Evolution to view prehistoric carvings and sculpture. Cathedral galleries offered rich hunting grounds for animals in Medieval religious art. I found that using my compact binoculars indoors to gaze up at ceiling frescoes and statuary facilitated a better appreciation of how botanicals and bestiaries were employed in architectural art (see Figure 2).

## Ecological Storytelling

I carried a copy of *The Cantic of Brother Sun* that provided a framework for looking at landscapes as a sum of their parts. Each verse of the Cantic, dedicated to sun, fire, plants, animals, water, wind, and soil, became a meditative focus for me at different points on my walk. St. Francis' poetic dichotomies of life and death, night and day, heaven and earth, gave me ways to express complex relationships of humanity and nature in my nightly writing. At the time Francis wrote the poem he was near the end of his life, gravely ill and in constant pain. The poem helped him transcend his suffering to offer gratitude and praise for the gifts of nature that had made his life possible. Life on the Camino was sometimes difficult, but

**Figure 2 : Birds of Burgos - Ecology**

Source : Eppig, 2016

carrying the poem reminded me that even in pain there is beauty, and that hours slogging through cold, wind, and rain helped me appreciate the gifts of a warm bed offered by my hosts each night.

Along the way I met a mother and daughter from Maine, both struggling to stay with their hike and with each other. They were barely communicating, and each was in pain. We determined that an ill-fitting pair of insoles was causing the daughter excruciating foot pain. We threw those away even as her mother protested loudly at how expensive they had been to buy. I realized that the mothers' anger was really a manifestation of her fear and learned that she had been terrified of biting insects. She wore a suffocating head net to seal herself away from the mosquitoes she was sure carried some deadly virus. We talked about her

fears and how they limited her experience. She admitted to watching so much hyped-up TV reporting about the Zika virus at home before leaving for Europe that she had ruined her enjoyment of spring time in Spain. The ecology of pilgrimage must include those who carry the heavy burden of their fears. I hoped that a more positive experience of the environment would help the mother redirect her anger.

I copied the *Canticle of Brother Sun* twice while the three of us rested together on a bench outside a massive Romanesque church and I gave them each their own copy. We walked on together for the rest of the afternoon, a community of three, and admired the flowers, butterflies, and bees. I told the story of The Wolf of Gubbio who was gentled by Francis and relieved of his suffering from starvation. The wolf became a welcomed and much-loved member of the village, and he was cared for and fed by the people of the town. I was hoping the metaphor of the wolf as fear was making an impression on the mother. By the time the three of us parted ways to find our beds for the night, the mother had removed her head net so that she could bend down to smell the flowers. I saw them again weeks later near Sarria, walking and talking together without the nervous tension of our previous meeting. The mother walked along admiring flowers and the daughter pointed out beautiful clouds. I would like to think that our time together made a difference in how they navigated the challenging landscape of human emotion and behavior ahead. Whether doing their pilgrimage for religious reasons or enjoying an adventure together, they had clearly adopted a more amicable presence with each other and a healthier relationship to their physical environment.

The power of ecological storytelling helps establish pilgrim community norms and in the case of the mother and daughter from Maine, helped allay fears about new and strange places. I was treated to local storytelling while staying in O Cebreiro as part of a communal meal celebration and was spellbound by descriptions of a pre-Christian landscape where giants and sprites co-existed with an ancient mountain people. Galician-Celtic oral traditions recognized the uncontrollable and unpredictable spirits of nature interwoven among the elemental, animal, and human worlds and places human concerns within a panorama of other-than-human and more-than-human ecological communities. With these stories in mind, we set off the next morning in a howling wind storm complete with freezing rain. We were mindful to check our sense of adventure against the real possibility of cold exposure and injury.



## Eco-Economics on the Way

Evidence of centuries of degradation caused by human activity can be found throughout our seas, in the quality of the air, and the health of soil. Along the Camino there is abundant evidence of centuries of poor farming practices that resulted in ravine-like erosional landscapes. Depopulation of rural areas makes listening to the stories of elder locals who remain on the land important for pilgrims to hear. A kind grocer in Sahagún spent a quiet siesta afternoon telling me about the firebombing of his father's butcher shop in the 1960s and threats made to his family by local thugs for selling meats and cheeses from an underground cooperative of farmers who protested the government's harsh food policies. He was happy to see how pilgrims, streaming through his town, are more interested than ever in obtaining locally grown produce and fruits. The Camino has brought to life a new small farm culture, he said.

Hand-in-hand with a growing eco-agriculture economy are local and regional conservation projects that spur growth in wildlife-related tourism. This was evident during my stay in O Cebreiro where a group of wildlife watchers had gathered to participate in a photography tour of a rewilding area that contains Iberian wolves. A small bar was overflowing with gear-laden outdoor photographers excitedly talking about their day afield.

Though difficult for some to accept, wolves and people are learning to co-exist explained a local guide. In the more remote landscapes of the region biologists are looking to increase the number of wild horses and roe deer to draw wolf packs away from farmlands and villages where they seem to gravitate for food and refuge. Though the wolf is now a protected species in Spain, its mortality rate is still high, with 65% of deaths each year due to accidental vehicle strikes and 20% due to illegal hunting (Llaneza *et al.*, 2012). The guide invited me to come back after my pilgrimage to participate in an upcoming tour. 'The whole town benefits,' he assured me, 'but so do the wolves.'

Nature-based retreat lodges are increasingly gaining popularity along the Camino and offer the pilgrim several days to a week to enjoy a break from walking as they engage art and music classes, mindfulness walks, and explorations to see local archeology and religious art. In addition, end-of-the-route retreat lodges in scenic areas offer rest time and meals that help pilgrims transition to their return home. Especially beautiful are the many naturalized gardens found

among casa rurales and privately owned albergues and hostels that provide tired pilgrims with restorative time in afternoons and evenings. One albergue host suggested that it was the lure of the flower-filled gardens, bird feeders, and bubbling pond that attracted pilgrims to her establishment. I know it's why I chose to stay the night, even when cheaper accommodations are found close by.

Whether secular or religious, I noted in my journal, pilgrims seemed drawn to accommodations that offered access to scenic or natural areas as places to rest and reflect. In terms of pilgrimage-based tourism, lodgings appointed with natural themes, exposed rustic or natural building materials, and beautiful commons environments offer modern pilgrims the promise of meditative and reflective spaces. Beauty and nature are a powerful draw for tired pilgrims looking to spend the night, a rest day, or a week in retreat.

## Conclusion

The study of pilgrimage as a phenomenon of human migration must take into account the importance of the sacred geographies that contain elements of nature and natural history that inspire and enhance the meaning of the journey. My own pilgrimage journal is filled not with the names of saints or litanies of prayers, but it is filled with sketches of animals and plants I encountered on my walk from St. Jean Pied de Port to Finesterra. I was invited by fellow pilgrims to examine their journals and found much the same. Nature as subject of pilgrimage emerges in our daily encounters with birdsong and banks of wildflowers. Without acknowledging and immersing ourselves in the ecology of pilgrimage, our relationship to the path may be nothing more than following waymarks to get from start to finish.

During my own experience of walking the Camino de Santiago Frances, I sensed in many pilgrims a disconnection with the landscape, a frustration, if not a sense of real loss, at not having the mental framework for drawing upon and expressing meaning from their encounters with the land. With Louv's nature deficit hypothesis in mind I offer several suggested preparations in advance of the pilgrimage to encourage a fearless immersion into the natural experience of the sacred trek. These preparations will help develop ecological habits of mind and a basic skill set for nature and history interpretation:

- At the very least, start by keeping a journal of nature inspirations before the trip. This will sharpen

the senses to the sounds, sights, textures, and emotions of the outdoors experience. Then, when the time comes for the pilgrimage itself, take along a small nature journal or keep a blog or diary to include nature observations as part of daily reflection.

- Enroll in classes at a local nature center near home and learn how to use binoculars and a field guide.
- Research the websites of various conservation organizations in the area of planned travel and enhance your understanding of environmental issues that are important in those regions.
- Research land use history, study Google Earth, and read up on cultural and industrial histories of the area.
- Get acquainted with online pilgrim discussion forums for recommendations of books and online resources in nature study.
- Study topographical maps and field guides that cover the pilgrimage route. Become a member of regional conservation groups to receive their newsletters and access to publications. I joined the Andalucia Bird Society and joined their discussion groups. Their quarterly newsletters were invaluable to me as a new birder in Spain.

None of these preparations will make anyone an expert, and these suggestions are not meant to suggest that expertise in anything increases the meaning or sacredness of pilgrimage. Developing ecological habits of mind, however, help us to deepen our pilgrimage experiences and move us towards restoring our connection to the natural world as an important component of the pilgrimage experience. In the vast literature of pilgrimage studies, nature and ecology are relegated to niche areas of research, but I argue that the ecological underpinnings of modern pilgrimage may serve researchers with new venues for understanding the influence and impact of nature of the sacred journey.

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