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Balancing on the transhumant road: an updated political ecology of livestock driveways

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Abstract. The *cañada* or *vía pecuaria* is a trail or pathway that links highland and lowland Spanish livestock grazing regions, in the traditional practice of transhumance. This makes the stock driveway at once a path, a custom and ritual, a common-property resource, an economic undertaking, a historical fact, an ecosystem service, and an ongoing political controversy. Animals grazed over long distances can be sheep, cattle, goats, horses, or, historically, even swine; beyond Europe and North America, other animals are involved. In Spain, transhumant routes total 125,000 km extending from Andalusia and Extremadura to Castile and Léon, Galicia, and the Pyrenees, and traverse over 1% of the Spanish national territory. The use of vías pecuarias dates back at least to Roman times, if not to the Neolithic, preceding establishment of El Honrado Concejo de la Mesta de Pastores, a livestock association whose special privileges were decreed in 1273 by Alfonso the Wise. Stock driveways are by no means unique to the Iberian Peninsula, nor, obviously, is the practice of transhumance. There are more than 4 million hectares (10 million acres) of land across Europe associated with stock trails and driveways. In the United States, these also exist as an item of Spanish-Mexican heritage. Although regulations supposedly protect designated stock trails, the legal regime and enforcement varies widely. Across Europe some trails have been paved; others became home to squatters who expropriated land increasingly recognized in the law as common property resource. The legal and practical implications are serious, in this assault on common property resources — features owned not privately, but instead set aside for various forms of sharing. Implications for conservation biology corridors are no less significant. This discussion examines twenty-first century evolutions in the political ecology of "sharing economy" embodied in the livestock driveway.

Keywords. Transhumance – Vía pecuaria – Stock driveway – Political ecology – Common property resource.

État des lieux des routes de transhumance : une écologie politique actualisée des chemins parcourus par le bétail

Résumé. *La cañada ou vía pecuaria est un chemin ou sentier qui relie les régions de pâturage de montagne et de plaine en Espagne, dans la pratique traditionnelle de la transhumance. Ceci fait que la voie qu'emprunte le bétail soit à la fois chemin, coutume et rituel, ressource de propriété commune, entreprise économique, fait historique, service de l'écosystème, et controverse politique en cours. Les animaux pâturant sur de longues distances peuvent être des ovins, bovins, caprins, chevaux, voire historiquement porcins ; au-delà de l'Europe et de l'Amérique du Nord, d'autres animaux sont aussi concernés. En Espagne, les chemins de transhumance totalisent 125 000 km, depuis l'Andalousie et l'Estrémadure jusqu'à Castille et Léon, la Galice, et les Pyrénées, et traversent plus de 1% du territoire national espagnol. L'usage de chemins de transhumance remonte au moins aux temps des Romains, si ce n'est au Néolithique, avant l'instauration de El Honrado Concejo de la Mesta de Pastores, une association de bergers dont les privilèges spéciaux furent décrétés en 1273 par Alfonso le Sage. Les chemins de transhumance ne sont nullement uniques à la Péninsule Ibérique, ni évidemment la pratique de la transhumance. Il y a plus de 4 millions d'hectares (10 millions d'acres) de terres en Europe concernées par les routes et chemins de transhumance. Aux États-Unis, ils existent aussi comme héritage mexico-espagnol. Bien que les réglementations soient censées protéger les chemins de transhumance reconnus, le régime juridique et exécutoire varie largement. En Europe certains de ces chemins ont été pavés ; d'autres ont été pris par des occupants qui ont exproprié des terres de plus en plus reconnues par la loi comme ressources de propriété commune. Les implications légales et pratiques sont sérieuses pour ces attaques aux ressources de propriété commune ressources non possé-*

dées de façon privée, mais réservées à plusieurs formes de partage. Les implications pour les couloirs biologiques de conservation ne sont pas moins significatives. Cette discussion examine les évolutions au XXIe siècle de l'écologie politique de l' "économie du partage" incarnée par les chemins de transhumance.

Mots-clés. *Transhumance – Vía pecuaria – Chemins de transhumance – Écologie politique – Ressource de propriété commune.*

I – Introduction

The term "byway" in American or British English speaks to something set aside from the transportation mainstream; conventionally the term is contrasted with "highway," which would serve as a main road or transit route. But a second definition of byway is as a little-known area of knowledge, something other than an immediately obvious feature or subject of conversation. Both are apropos, here. While the doctrine of efficiency seems often to govern discussions at the planning and policy level for the European Union and other developed countries, which seek to hasten movement and increase a perceived productivity, traditional systems of production often include time-tested practices that cost little, sustain cultures, decrease risk, and provide benefits in ecosystem services and other less recognized efficiencies. Taking the other road –the byway– may offer significant benefits and a utility that may be equally difficult for either postmodernists or neoliberals to acknowledge. The livestock trail, copiously documented in Spanish life, but less so outside the anthropological literature in other countries, is a notable example of a linear feature of great reach but relatively non-intensive use that provides crucial connections among distinct places.

This study looks at the identification, and, indeed, the identity, of byways in a landscape as features that merit recognition as far more than an afterthought. A complex political ecology governs the byways of the world that provide transit routes for livestock – and not incidentally, offer travel paths for mobile wildlife, the distribution of goods and services, and ambulatory human and other voyagers who prefer to follow less travelled routes. While created by customary practice and on occasion maintained by express legal statute, stock driveways are a form of land use that is crucial at certain times to owners of livestock and the tenders of those animals, whether they are herders or shepherds or swineherds or cowhands. Because livestock trailing routes are often long and move between regions of upper and lower elevation, they forge a special relationship between road and landscape, something long understood by practitioners on the road, but less so by theorists concerned with the identity of landscape (Moore, 2015).

While transhumance is a lively topic, generally well-studied in present-day Spain, it is less widely embraced as a theme of moment in other European countries where transhumance is generally considered a topic of relict anthropological interest. And rarely are drove roads or livestock trails considered as topics significant unto themselves – they are instead seen as the means to an end: seeking forage at the terminus of a journey. But just as ecologists in the 1980s launched intensive studies of habitat corridors as factors in conservation biology, so too are the corridors used to trail domesticated animals (and not incidentally, acting as wildlife transit routes) of significance.

Because Mediterranean-type ecosystems, with their cycle of wet season broken by nearly no summer precipitation, pose a particularly difficult requirement on livestock owners who must locate suitably lush forage during those summer-dry months, in particular because that is typically when an animal's young offspring are growing fastest and are beginning to find forage on their own instead of relying on nursing. Those are times when the byway is especially important and used, yet there are other uses for the common property resource trail, especially in the twenty-first-century, that merit examination and discussion.

The livestock trailing route is simultaneously a means to an end (forage in mountain or lowland environments) and an entity unto itself. A trail, like any road, has an independent reality, and forms

a distinctive space; typically, it is not privately owned, but instead a community or a government-controlled resource (Ingold, 2007). There is, in short, a clear political life to the livestock trail (Massey, 2013). Working from lessons gleaned in the historical circumstances and present-day realities in both Spain and the western United States, this study extracts larger principles and meaning from the livestock trail as a "byway" in European and North American life.

II – Materials and methods

Materials drawn on in this study include cartographic analysis of existing maps and aerial images; archival records; interviews; a sizable secondary literature including past conference reports and scholarly inquiries. Particularly important is photo-documentation and recording of past and existing routes to supplement the map-based resources. Cartographic research, undertaken as part of the Ley 3/95, has created a geographic information system database documenting the extent of all levels of livestock driveways in Spain. Livestock driveways or trails, known in Spain as *vías pecuarias,* occupy approximately one percent of the surface area of the country. An examination of controversies associated with lands formerly employed as livestock travel routes now no longer in use suggest that expropriation of land by individuals, corporate entities, and in some cases, cities and regional authorities is anything but rare, raising difficult issues in the geography of land use and legal authority, especially where remediation is unlikely.

Roads and trails are variously defined, which can only be dealt with in brief. A first part of this exercise delves into the literature, the oral history, and traditional local practice as described by residents and neighbors, to fill out the history of past use of the stock driveways in Spain. A second element sees the developing uses that exist now and in prospect for vías pecuarias, and documents those (Rodriguez Pascual and Maya Frades 2008). A third inquiry examines practical issues associated with the conservation and the protection, by regular use, of the trails. Finally, political issues associated with livestock trails are discussed as a novel frontier, one that is, as the geographer Timothy Ingold notes (2007), fundamentally linear rather than areal in extent, in much the same way that recognition of corridors altered the understanding of conservation biology in the 1980s.

III – Results and discussion

The important results of this project can only be described in this short paper by two images that capture the complexity of the rural byway, as a common property resource, being put to use (Figs 1 and 2). An extensive description of the project results are to be found in ongoing work that is forthcoming, and in the literature review that is available upon request.

IV – Conclusions

There are significant differences between nomadic and transhumant grazing. The livestock trail constitutes a route through political jurisdictions that necessarily goes along the edge of many properties and ownerships. This suggests a problem of moment in political ecology, which the geographer Peter Walker (2005) rightly identifies as a potentially sophisticated joining of biophysical ecology and social science realities. Mangas Navas (2004) goes to the heart of the matter in noting that livestock driveways employed in transhumance –or left in a relict state after the trailing of domesticated animal has ceased– "should be considered ecological corridors essential for migration, geographical distribution, and genetic exchange of wild species" (265). There are potential ties, for example, between the re-wilding movement that is active in Europe and the United States and these significant corridors (Oteros-Rozas *et al*., 2012).

Fig. 1. Nearing Avila, Spain, this *vía pecuaria* is maintained by the movement of livestock, but as seen above, also is useful for local residents out for their afternoon constitutional walk and exercise. The varied uses of such common property resources are nothing to be minimized. (Photograph by PF Starrs, 2016).

Fig. 2. At the largest and highest level of recognition as a vía pecuaria is the "Cañada Real Soriana Occidental," established under the ancient rules of the Mesta (Photograph by PF Starrs, 2016).

One of Spain's most ardent defenders of the dehesa and the via pecuaria, Jesús Garzón Heydt (2001), brings a potent background in government service, ecological training, and pro-transhumance activism to his ground-breaking work on transhumance. A field ecologist by training, he notes a variety of deleterious effects associated with a cessation of transhumance by trail, a process that began with the arrival of movement of livestock by rail and later truck in the late nineteenth century. These ill-effects include overgrazing, since, when no alternate seasonal pastures are available local sites are grazed harder; the destruction of holm oak regeneration by longer grazing seasons; the pollution of water sources from livestock crowded in a smaller space; the destruction of shelter and food resources for wildlife; and disturbance of reproduction cycles for sensitive species.

A corruption of local community values, an endangerment of once-traditional products and practices; a loss of culture and history, might be added to the roster of undesirable results. As Garzón writes (2004, p. 263): "With the last transhumant shepherds much will be lost e.g. a wealth of knowledge, gastronomy, artisanal technology, vocabulary, songs, music, dressing traditions, and vernacular architecture, diversity of local plant varieties and hardy breeds. One of Europe's ancient and most interesting cultures will therefore be lost, unless something is done urgently to prevent it".

And that would be a loss for all – mountain peoples, lowland peoples, livestock, and the cultural patrimony.

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⇒ Eighty additional references and further sources are available upon request: *starrs@unr.edu* ⇐