



ANCIENT ROUTES, COMMON GROUND

Meet the Stewards of Ancient Trails Around the Globe

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Whether the trail was laid in 3,000 BC or in 2021, the goal of trail stewards around the globe is to someday, be one of the ancestors who built, protected and sustained a trail as a gift for future generations.

After five days of rain on the West Highland Way the mind starts to venture into some interesting territory. "This must be why they invented Scotch." "Why would people who live with midges wear kilts?" At one point a chill went through my body, a deep déjà vu. It might have been the onset of hypothermia, but I had the distinct feeling that if I had not been this way before, my DNA had. Generations ago an ancestor of mine walked this way. Most likely running to or from a lover or a fight. Certainly not as a recreational activity, as walking this way was for me. Stones smooth. Ruts deep. Bridges sturdy. Winding its way past ruins, built for a purpose now replaced by highways and flight paths, at one point this trail had been used for other reasons and if you look closely and thought deeply, it showed.

What makes a trail ancient? For many in the world trails community, their work doesn't just connect geographic points, it links the past to the present. They are the latest of many generations to steward, sustain and protect pathways. Is there something special or different about these routes? The following is a taste of a few ancient routes and the story of the extraordinary trail stewards who maintain them.

Eden To Addo – South Africa

What better place to start our journey than in a place called the Garden of Eden? Tucked on the South Coast of South Africa, this particular Eden

Stephen Couchman meeting monks on the trail in Bhutan.



"is home to the last truly free roaming elephants, unfenced but unwilling to move due to fragmentation of the landscape," says Joan Berning, a Director with the *Eden to Addo Corridor Initiative*. "400km to the east is the *Addo Elephant National Park* where elephants were decimated down to 11 elephants by hunters many years ago. (Now numbering 300 thanks to conservation efforts.) *Eden to Addo* has a dream that, perhaps one day, the lonely *Garden of Eden Elephant* may once again connect with her kin in the *Addo Elephant National Park*."

According to Galeo Saintz, elephants are the original *trail builders*. They cleared trees, packed down pathways, identified efficient routes, discovered low passes and connected water sources across much of Africa. With memories that span generations, herds shaped passages across the landscape for other species –including humans—to follow, dating back 400,000 years! Berning says that "Until as recently as the 1800's, the *San* people moved through the *Eden to Addo* corridor, from the coast where they gathered limpets, mussels and fish to the inland areas where they gathered a diverse range of geophyte bulbs such as the *Watsonia*. They lived in harmony with the ecological rhythms of the corridor until the *Khoekhoen* and the *Sintu* people arrived and later the colonials. Rock art is found along the length of the corridor trail. Prior to that people from the *Stone Age* times left their mark as witnessed by the many stone tools found. For the first time in 200 years hikers on this trail will be contributing towards linking the three mega reserves by means of a biodiversity corridor, thereby restoring some of the ancient paths for not only mammals but also plants, insects and birds." Berning continues, "The Trail is not just about corridors in the landscape, but also corridors of the mind. Walking the trail is an immersion in nature, in the tapestry of life, where the mind is opened to the awareness that if the threads are broken and lost, ecosystems falter and crash. So many have remarked on arriving at the end of the trail in *Addo*, 'it changed my life'."

Greece

For people who love trails, Fivos Tsaravopoulos has a dream job. Manager of the *Paths of Greece Social Cooperative*, Fivos is tasked with

Trekking the Eden to Addo Great Corridor. Photo: Joan Berning



locating, mapping and restoring ancient trails across Greece. *Paths of Greece* works with communities and archeologists in their mission to discover and revive old ways, some of which date back to 3,000 B.C. Minoan civilization. "We never go to a place if they do not call us," says Fivos. "The locality has already thought of developing trails which means that it has much more potential for success." One of the keys is to interviewing elderly people to gather stories. "These trails are theirs. By bringing back trails we bring back memories."

In relatively modern times by Greek standards, the name *Peripatetic School*, founded by Aristotle (384-322BC), translates to "walking about". For Aristotle and his students, philosophy required movement. According to Fivos this is as important today as it was then. "There is a need of our society to explore nature and culture in a slow way to experience the way people did in the past rather than simply consuming." "When I walk on a trail and I see the stones that delineate the route, I think about the very moment when the person is holding the stone and calculating the very best way to place it, so they hold the step or wall bridge. This really touches me. But also, I am full of hope that when I design a trail that connects two old trails, that this trail will be hiked and loved even after I am totally forgotten. The strength of the feeling is the same."

THE CAMINO: THE PILGRIMAGE ROAD TO SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

Since the Ninth Century, pilgrims have been drawn from all directions to the *Tomb of the Apostle, St. James the Elder in Compostela, Spain*. The *Apostle of Christ*, and *Patron Saint of Spain*, James was martyred in Jerusalem in 44AD. His followers returned his body to Spain where he had previously preached the gospel. And, pilgrims have been journeying to his gravesite since in numbers approaching 300,000 in recent years. For Francisco Singul, art historian, author and curator, the *Camino* is a calling. Singul believes that walking the *Camino* can be a transformative communal experience filled with hospitality, fraternity, ritual, prayer and reflection. "The pilgrimage road to Compostela has been used during centuries as a spiritual practice, an ascetic road of purification looking for an inner regeneration of a person. Actually, in our days, the *Camino*

Top: Fivos Tsaravopoulos on the Trail Photo: Spencer VanDerStarren

Bottom: Hiking Kythera Island. Photo: Fivos Tsaravopoulos

experience is profound, emotional and spiritual, although it can also offer a time of sport and holidays in nature and traditional culture, very particular and different from globalization landscape."

Like most trail organizations, the *Camino* is doing its best to create a safe experience for pilgrims during COVID. Recently, the Pope extended *Holy Year* celebrations from July 25, 2021 to 2022: "All of you will be received in Galicia, a hospitality land, with the security of anti-Covid measures of hygiene and social distancing at the public and private hostels, along a pilgrimage road where there has been implanted a special health insurance for all the pilgrims, with free medical attention in hospitals and pharmacies, and repatriation trips in case of Covid-19 contagion."

So important is the *Camino*, that it was the first trail to be recognized by the UNESCO as a *World Heritage Site*. Over the course of 2 decades starting in 1993, three routes to Santiago de Compostela were protected. Singul says that, "Archeology is ongoing along the *Pilgrimage Road* with relevant findings including, pilgrim's tombs, medieval structures of the original village of Compostela and the two first churches of St. James... The new discoveries belong to anthropological research of pilgrims with the discovery from the remains, that many of them were women. Really interesting!"

What value does the *Camino* have in contemporary life? The pilgrimage road to Compostela offers to contemporary life a modern ascetic experience, walking with few belongings during days or weeks, accepting the hospitality and helping of others, assuming the role of a real and humble pilgrim in a material world searching spiritual emotions."

Kumano Kodo – Japan

On the other side of the world from Spain, another ancient pilgrimage route is the *Kumano Kodo* in Japan. Located on the *Kii Peninsula*, the area has been a sacred site for nature worship since prehistoric times. In Japanese mythology it is the *Land of the Dead*, a sacred conduit between this world and the *other-world* where spirits congregate. In the 6th

Pilgrims on the Camino. Photo: Friol Miraz





century, after the introduction of Buddhism to Japan, the area became a site of ascetic practices. The sacred sites were formalized in the centuries that followed and pilgrims began to use a network of trails, now known as the *Kumano Kodo*, to visit the sites.

"The walk along the trail is part of the pilgrimage process with worship, purification sites along the way. A series of spiritual gates or borders were passed along the way. The sacred sites are considered as Buddhist paradises on earth, as well as the esoteric *Womb and Diamond* realms," explains Brad Towle from the *Tanabe City Kumano Tourism Bureau*. Originally from Canada, Towle considers himself privileged to have spent the last two decades helping with the preservation, continuation and communication of this sacred site. "The *Kumano Kodo* has a special place in my soul...This is one of the richest areas of spiritual worship in Japan with literally tens of thousands of relics and sacred objects..."

The region and trail are so important that it has garnered every protection available ranging from the local municipalities all the way to being designated a *UNESCO World Heritage Site*. Towle has a hard time singling out a specific example of the many rituals that take place on the trail. "One that is quite unusual in the *Kumano Hongu Taisha* annual festival when young boys are imbued with deities and carried on their father's shoulders over a steep pass....The fact that it has been walked for over 1000 years is a big part of the story of the trail. It is the essence of the experience; trekking on the same trail to the same sacred sites that pilgrims have been doing for millennia...It offers a place to slow down and meditate on one's life, connect with a rural Japanese way of life, meet new people and new perspectives, reconnect with nature, and experience first-hand the spiritual ethic of the Japanese people. It is an active and immersive experience!"

Trans Bhutan Trail

The time before paved roads is still within the living memory of many citizens of Bhutan, a tiny Kingdom, wedged in the eastern Himalayas between China and India. Dasho Sonam Rinchen, *Senior Project Director*

Nachi Falls and Pagoda, Tanabe City. Photo: Courtesy Kumano Tourist Bureau



for the *Trans Bhutan Trail* knows. "Walking on the trail reminds me of my childhood. When I was 10 or 12 years old, I used to accompany my Grandmother to take the cattle from Bumthang to Trongsa [Approximately 50km over a mountain pass]. It has been 60 years now since I walked those trails...To me this time when I walked for the first time in 60 years, I couldn't believe that I am walking the same trail from when I was a boy...It's a nostalgic feeling, of course. I get the same smell of the trees and the mud, and all the birds chirping...For me it was like going back to the past."

Rinchen is referring here to the near past, but the trail itself has been around much longer. The first records of the trail date back to the 16th Century but it was likely used long before that. Historically, the trail reached just over 400km connecting Dzongs, many constructed by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel, considered to be the founder of Bhutan. These massive fortresses were built for protection, storage of food for distribution during poor harvest, administration, and to house the *Monk Body*. In ancient times the trail was used for commerce, pilgrimage and communications. "The messengers were known as *Garps*. They carried very important communiqués from Dzong to Dzong, travelling at great speed. Their journeys are legendary because they hardly slept. They kept on walking for days and nights without any food." Covering impossible distances some were said to have acquired mystic the ability to "ride the wind." There are many stories of *Garps* encountering spirits along the trail. "As a Buddhist we understand that each locality has its own deity. It's so important that when we hike the trail that we are not there to cause any disturbance or disrespect. When we travel, or we do any work on the trail, we must perform religious rituals, so we do not upset local deities."

Initiated in 2019 it is hoped that the *Trans Bhutan Trail* will be officially opened to trekkers in the spring of 2022. "It is His Majesty's vision that we should revive this trail to show to our citizens that this is part of our heritage it is also his vision that once the trail is restored communities, will be connected again and we can promote health and fitness. When it

Pema Drukpa and Dashi Sonam Rinchen (Right) Presenting Trans Bhutan Trail Plans at Paro Dzong
Photo: Stephen Couchman



opens for international and domestic tourism our local communities also stand to benefit.”

Inka Road

To say that Ramiro Matos has the Inka Road in his blood, would be an understatement. From childhood Prof. Matos has spent most of his life exploring and studying the 60,000km *Inka Road* that stretches along the spine of South America. His work, which was highlighted in a recent exhibit at the *Smithsonian Institute*, follows the expansion of the *Empire* from the 13th Century to its conquest by the Spanish in 1572. But the story goes back much further than that. “The Inka took advantage of the pre-existing road system...The oldest data refer to the sacred roads that linked the temples of the *Chavin* culture, *pan-Andean* expansion culture, developed during the first millennium BC.”

“During the administration of the Inka Empire, there were several types of roads, the main one being the *Qhapaq Nan*, road of the Lord (*Camino del Señor*) or *Holly Road* (*Camino Sagrado*), a network of roads enabled exclusively for the service of the State administration.” With no iron tools or the wheel, the Inka undertook exceptional engineering to extend the routes out from the capital of Cusco across some of the most treacherous terrain on the planet.

“The Holy Road system linked the provincial capitals, places with natural resources such as mines, wood, etc. to product storage centers, centers for the redistribution of goods to the population. The secondary roads were to serve the local population of each region, there were sacred roads leading to the temples, to the high mountains called *Apu*, whose route was exclusively for the priests. Inka cosmology is still in force. In many indigenous communities...the Andean priests are still active, who conduct rituals and ceremonies in honor of the *Apu* (Mountain spirit), *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) and spirits of special places that inhabit the high mountain ranges.”

On the Inka Road Photo: Andrew Barker



Of the original network, about 6,000km is still in use today including the relatively short 50km tourist trekking route to the famous ruins of Machu Picchu. Like the *Camino* in Spain and the *Kumano* in Japan the road is also a *UNESCO World Heritage Site*. Bolivian Walter Alvarez, a descendant of the Inca, told Matos that the road is alive. Passing along the way of our ancestors, we are protected by the *Pachamama* [Mother Earth]. The *Pachamama* is life energy, and wisdom." To this day, Alvarez said, traditional healers make a point of traveling the road on foot. To ride in a vehicle would be inconceivable: The road itself is the source from which the healers absorb their special energy."

Matos continues, "Among the indigenous communities of the Ecuadorian, Peruvian and Bolivian highlands, the tradition of rituals and offerings on the road remains strong." The main offering is called "apacheta". It consists on leaving stones taken from the traveler's place of origin of the trip and placed in sacred places. For the native people, the ancient road is a companion to share the travelers during their journey." "Quechua speakers," Matos says, "use the same word, *pacha*, to mean both time and space. "No space without time, no time without space," he says. "It's very sophisticated."

Ancient Routes?

But if there is no space without time, how do we judge what makes a trail ancient? There is, of course, an argument to be made that, regardless of when it was blazed, any trail that passing through nature is by definition, *ancient*. Cedar trees clinging to the rocks on the *Bruce Trail* in Canada are up to 1,000 years old and the limestone escarpment on which they grow dates back over 450 million years to an ancient seabed containing fossils which -who knows- could be our ancestors to. This itself was created in part by sediment from the erosion of the Appalachian Mountains that formed roughly 480 million years ago, the smoothed remains of which are now the treadway of the Appalachian Trail. The years back to 3000 BC is a blink of an eye compared to the ancestry of these paths.

Machu Picchu Photo: Andrew Barker

Returning to the other side of the planet from the Quechua I recall that an elderly farmer, that the *Trans Bhutan Trail* survey team encountered, reinforced this same perspective. "Where have you come from?" he asked in Charshup, the local dialect. "From Trashigang," replied Cheki. The old man looked quizzical. "Why?" "We are looking for the ancient route across Bhutan," said Cheki. The farmer roared with laughter. "What's so funny?" Waving his callused hand across the rugged horizon the herder croaked wisely between snorts, "They're all ancient routes!"

They're all ancient routes. And, as Fivos Tsaravopoulos reflected, whether the trail was laid in 3,000 BC or in 2021, the goal of trail stewards around the globe is to someday, be one of the ancestors who built, protected and sustained a trail as a gift for future generations.



Oyunohara Festival Procession, Photo: Courtesy Tanabe City Kumano Tourism Bureau