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Implementing a “Sense of Place” Pedagogy in The Valley of Alagón, Spain: *Interview*

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IJE -- *What geographical location and environmental situ give rise to your “sense of place”?*

ANCR -- ...is an interpretative center situated in the *cacereña* community of Cachorrilla, northeast of the Spanish province of Cáceres, in the Valley of Alagón, and centrally located within la ZEPA: “Canchos de Ramiro y Ladronera.” Our sense of place is derived from our shared experience of living in *Extremadura*, Spain, a land of extremes.

IJE -- *What is your eco-education mission?*

ANCR -- Our main objective is to become an environmental nexus for the region in order to promote and conserve the natural resources of the Valley of Alagón. Therefore, through our itinerant classroom, a ZEPA’s topographic, raised-relief interactive model with a thematic exposition, we aim at facilitating the environmental interpretation and discovery process of La ZEPA. The importance of this region rests on environmental values exemplified in geology, flora, fauna, and territorial patrimony. While employing the term “eco-education,” even during informal teaching, we promote education which integrates emotional, social, and spirito-critical sensibilities. The practice of eco-education is thus a pedagogical vehicle through which emotional intelligence (empathy) can be developed towards acquiring a deeper understanding of our surrounding natural environments. In this we try to implement Howard Gardner’s ideas of multiple intelligence.

IJE – *How does your vision/mission translate into specific learning objectives? What educational activities do your teachers and students engage in?*

ANCR – Sharing (nature walks; nature interpretation; historical interpretation) the natural resources of Valle de Algón, is, we believe, central and foundational in order to foster a spirit of innovation and change. For example, we visit the bird protected zone with the aim of instilling an appreciation of these environments toward a rising sensibility for these lands and, ultimately, challenging detrimental society-derived habits and behaviors while substituting these with resilience and persistence.

Specifically, we conduct two eco-itineraries: “Canchos de Ramiro” and “Aceña del Tío Jeromo.” Both are guided excursions into ZEPA territories via known trails (*caminos*; *senderismo*). These trails are recommended for children eight years and older; with the affective-cognitive capacity to “reconnect with nature”: develop an understanding of these ecosystems and, behaviorally speaking, also an environmental ethic. These environs consist of both Mediterranean forests and scrublands, an ecological niche where large-sized birds and mammals co-exist within a *dehesa* (holm oaks, cork oaks, and pasture lands).

Other places, activities, zones and topics of eco-educational interest are:

- 1) The transformation of Mediterranean forests into a sustainable harvesting of their resources.
- 2) Riparian and wetland zones formed by the traversing of the Alagón and Árrago rivers, both bird sanctuaries during the winter for a number of aquatic species (e.g., blue herons -- *Ardea cinerea*).
- 3) *El roquedo*: home to several large bird species (Griffon vultures/*gyps fulvus*, Egyptian vultures/*neophron percnopterus*, Golden eagles/*aquila chrysaetos*, Peregrine falcons/*falco peregrinus*, Black stork/*ciconia nigra*, and many more).
- 4) Workshops on recycling used olive oil into various artisan soaps containing the natural oils of the local flora.
- 5) Workshops on reusing containers as masks of bird feeders and on classifying debris and rubbish and the proper labeling of containers in our towns and cities.
- 6) In this work we are guided by concepts such as “*el poder de la colaboración*” (the power of collaboration) applying the four Rs: *reeducar, reducir, reciclar, reutilizar* (reeducate, reduce, recycle, reutilize).
- 7) No cereals are planted in this area since the construction of the Alcántara dam (1960s). The economic activities associated with these labors have long ceased to be productive. We nevertheless conduct historical lessons about the patrimony associated with the remaining local mills (*aceñas; molinos*).
- 8) We offer workshops on the construction of nesting boxes for insects. Through this work an awareness is raised about the diminishing numbers of birds around the world: the importance of our local birds and how to conserve these populations. We also address the importance of effective and widespread pollination, a bioindicator of successful conservation efforts.
- 9) Other hiking activities focus on developing the senses, the observation of the changing seasons, orienting skills, and tracking, the latter aided by taking field notes and participating in tracking workshops.
- 10) Due to the prevalence of our relatively dark skies, we learn about stars and how to orient oneself by their recognition.

IJE – *How do you evaluate learning from all your activities? How do you know you are adhering to your educational goals?*

ANCR – The activities we offer and lead demand active participation. We gauge the quality of educational interactions by observing the degree to which students gain an intimate familiarity with our environs and the emotional involvement in valuing and conserving these resources.

