

## **LIA Final reflection**

### **Regenerating Spanish landscapes**

My Leadership in Action project consisted of taking a Regenerative Agriculture course at the Regeneration Academy in La Junquera, a farm in Murcia, Spain, as well as volunteering at Rewilding Spain (in Spanish “Fundacion Española de Renaturalización”). Experiencing both contexts enabled me to understand how ecological restoration can be approached through very different models: one based on public land and rewilding, and the other on private land, agriculture, and community regeneration.

#### **La Junquera: Regenerative Agriculture and Community Restoration**

La Junquera, together with the Regeneration Academy, represents one of the leading examples of regenerative agriculture in Spain. Since 2014, the farm has been transitioning away from the extensive cereal production it had pursued since 1969, an era marked by depopulation of the surrounding town. In its place, La Junquera has embraced regenerative agriculture, seeking to restore soil health, biodiversity, and ecological function while rebuilding the social fabric of the community.

The farm integrates vineyards, orchards, livestock, and vegetable plots. Cattle are rotated to mimic natural herbivore movements, improving soil fertility and water retention. Vineyards are managed to support biodiversity, while orchards and vegetable gardens provide a diverse range of crops. At la Junquera, productive agriculture guided by regenerative principles enables ecological restoration.

Yet what makes La Junquera especially significant is its role as a social and educational hub. It is the first farm to join the global Ecosystem Restoration Communities network, connecting its local actions with a growing international movement. The Regeneration Academy hosts students, researchers, and practitioners from around the world, offering training in regenerative practices (such as 10 week internships for undergraduate students) and creating a space of knowledge exchange. Camp Altiplano, located on the estate, provides volunteers the chance to engage directly in restoration work. Together, these initiatives are helping to repopulate the town, attract new generations, and rekindle a sense of pride and belonging in a rural area that had been in decline for decades.



*Weeding the regenerative vineyard*



*The classroom at the Regeneration Academy*



*Grazing sheep*

### Rewilding Spain

While La Junquera highlights the role of private initiatives in linking agriculture with restoration, Rewilding Spain operates in a very different context. Founded in 2020, it is a non profit organisation, part of the wider Rewilding Europe network, with projects across thirteen countries. Rewilding Spain is located in the “Iberian Highlands” (Sistema Iberico Sur), which spans 850 000 hectares in the provinces of Cuenca, Guadalajara and Teruel. It encompasses a huge variety of ecosystems, dominated by pine, holm oak and juniper forests, and witnesses the presence of both steppe and agricultural land and rocky and riparian ecosystems in the canyons and along the banks of the Tajo and Jucar rivers.

### *What is rewilding?*

Rewilding is a dynamic approach to conservation that aims to actively restore ecological processes and allow landscapes to regenerate into self-sustaining ecosystems. It seeks to create the conditions for biodiversity to recover and for ecological resilience to emerge. At the core of rewilding is the principle of trophic restoration: the reintroduction of keystone species such as large herbivores, predators, and scavengers that shape landscapes and maintain ecological balance. Grazing species (such as the wild horses and tauros reintroduced in the Alto Tajo) open up habitats and reduce fire risks, scavengers recycle nutrients, and predators regulate prey populations. Together, these processes lead to healthier, more complex ecosystems.

Like La Junquera's region, the Alto Tajo too faces demographic decline. Over the past century, waves of rural depopulation have led to what is often referred to as *La España vaciada*, "the emptied Spain." Villages have lost much of their population to cities, traditional farming has declined, and extensive grazing systems that once maintained open landscapes have largely disappeared. These shifts have left the land vulnerable to social and ecological degradation. Rewilding Spain responds to both ecological and social needs by reintroducing missing species, restoring natural processes, and supporting economic activities linked to a thriving natural landscape. It strives to make the Iberian Highlands a living example of how rewilding can tackle biodiversity loss and rural decline simultaneously.

### Domains of action

#### *1) Restoration of Trophic Chains*

At the heart of Rewilding Spain's strategy is the restoration of trophic chains, the ecological networks of feeding relationships that connect species and sustain ecosystems. For centuries, these chains in the Iberian Highlands have been disrupted by hunting, deforestation, intensive farming, and rural abandonment. Rewilding seeks to fix this by reintroducing key species whose ecological roles are essential: large herbivores.

More specifically, Rewilding Spain has reintroduced Przewalski's horses, serrano horses, pottoka ponies, and tauros, all of which act as natural grazers. Their grazing prevents shrub overgrowth and keeps landscapes open. This process also reduces wildfire risk, a pressing threat in these rural landscapes where fuel accumulates (as seen this summer with the breakout of extreme wildfires in Spain). By breaking up dense vegetation, these herbivores create more fire-resilient ecosystems.

Scavengers and predators are another crucial layer of the trophic web. Rewilding Spain has successfully reintroduced 21 black vultures into the Iberian Highlands, part of the largest release in the region. Together with bearded vultures, these carrion-feeders recycle nutrients, limit the spread of disease, and provide balance within the ecosystem. Alongside this, an experimental programme for the reintroduction of the Iberian lynx has begun. As an apex predator, the lynx regulates prey populations, helping prevent imbalances such as rabbit overpopulation that can damage crops and vegetation.

During my time in the Iberian Highlands, I contributed to this domain by assisting with the behavioural monitoring of Przewalski and pottoka horses, as well as with the care and maintenance of tauros and serrano horses. This included supporting the release of new tauros into the landscape, ensuring their safe integration into herds.



*Herds of Prewalski horses near Villanueva de Alcorón*



*Pottoka horses in La Campana, near the town of Checa*



*Maintenance work for the Tauros (these were brought from Frias de Albarracin, another part of Rewilding Spain, where they lacked food due to a heavy drought)*

## 2) *Forest Management*

Forests dominate much of the Iberian Highlands, providing important habitats and carbon storage but facing threats from abandonment, homogenisation, and fire. Rewilding Spain works both to protect old-growth forests and to reduce fire risk through landscape management. A key achievement has been the agreement with Vega del Codorno, the first in Castilla-La Mancha, which secures thirty years of income in exchange for conserving its ancient woodland. This initiative highlights the ecological and social value of preserving mature forests, while the presence of grazing herbivores in surrounding areas helps to maintain more diverse, fire-resilient landscapes.

## 3) *Socio-Economic Development*

Rewilding Spain highlights that ecological restoration cannot succeed without addressing the social and economic realities of the Iberian Highlands. The project therefore places strong emphasis on creating sustainable livelihoods linked to healthy ecosystems. So far, nineteen jobs have been created directly in the landscape, while a growing number of local enterprises benefit indirectly from rewilding initiatives.

Community engagement is central to the project's success. I participated in *Naturtajo*, a two-day sustainability and tourism festival, helping to showcase Rewilding Spain's work and engage the public in discussions about ecological restoration. Living in Mazarete, I also worked with Mames and Lucia, the town mayor, who guided me through geology lessons in the area and took me truffle hunting with their dog.



*Talk by Jordi Palau at Naturtajo*



*Truffle hunting with Mames' dogs*

### Legal contexts

Much of the Iberian Highlands is public land, meaning that rewilding projects are fully accessible to visitors. Anyone can see the Przewalski horses, tauros, or vultures, which strengthens transparency and builds local support.

Compared to the public lands of Rewilding Spain, La Junquera operates under a very different set of constraints and opportunities. Large private holdings allow for coordinated interventions at scale, but they require continuous human oversight and investment. Whereas rewilding prioritises natural processes and the gradual recovery of trophic chains, regenerative agriculture deliberately orchestrates interactions between

species, soil, and crops to achieve both ecological and economic goals. Both approaches, however, share a common aim: increasing ecological resilience and restoring ecosystem functions, whether through autonomous natural processes or carefully managed agricultural systems.

### Integrating Both Experiences: Leadership in Action

Participating in both contexts allowed me to see how restoration strategies shift depending on history, land tenure, and community structures. In the Iberian Highlands, depopulation and public land create opportunities for rewilding, letting natural processes recover while building new forms of economic activity. In Murcia, La Junquera shows that regeneration can be driven by private initiatives that combine agriculture, ecology, and education to actively rebuild both landscapes and communities.

For me, this dual experience underscored the importance of adaptive leadership in ecological work. Leadership requires reading context carefully: understanding when to step back and let natural processes take over, as in rewilding, and when to actively manage and orchestrate ecological and social dynamics, as in regenerative agriculture. Both approaches share a common commitment to sustainability, but the strategies differ radically depending on scale, governance, and history.

### Conclusion: Outcomes and Significance

Both Rewilding Spain and La Junquera demonstrate that ecological restoration must coexist with human needs, identities, and livelihoods. Rewilding Spain has restored trophic chains, reintroduced 21 black vultures, established Spain's largest Przewalski horse herd, and secured protection for old-growth forest, while also creating jobs and boosting local pride in *La España vaciada*. La Junquera has regenerated soil and biodiversity, while also positioning itself as a social hub, home to the Regeneration Academy, Camp Altiplano, and the first Ecosystem Restoration Community, helping to repopulate the town and attract international attention and knowledge.

Taken together, these projects highlight that restoration is never just ecological or just social: it is always both. My Leadership in Action project gave me hands-on experience in species reintroduction, regenerative farming, and community engagement, while also showing me the ethical challenges of balancing ecological goals with human realities. These lessons helped me understand leadership as a form of stewardship: one that requires adaptability, cultural sensitivity, and a commitment to both ecological and social sustainability.