

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Protecting Wild Spain: The Coto Donana, international conservation and avian landscapes

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Abstract

The article explores how the Coto Donana was understood, protected, and shaped as a national park and nature reserve between the early 1950s and late 1980s. In doing so, the article pays attention to the different valuations that were given to the region over the course of the twentieth century and the distinct cultures of landscape which were formed. The strongest contrast was between the reserving of the region as an elite sporting landscape evident in Chapman's writings and its re-imagining and re-configuring within ecological science and conservation practice as a nature reserve. In exploring this shaping of the Coto Donana as a changing landscape, my account draws on and seeks to extend the work on cultures of landscape to understand the competing ways of knowing, managing, representing, and valuing the natural environment, as well as the different forms of conduct and pleasure associated with contrasting uses of the land.

In 1969, the Coto Donana, a large wetland area in Andalucía, south-West Spain, was designated a national park. Administered by the Instituto para la Conservacion de la Naturaleza (ICONA), Spain's former Department of Forestry, the new park enclosed around 350 square kilometres of marshes, scrub, parkland and dunes. This included 68 square kilometres of land which had been protected for conservation and scientific research in 1965 through an agreement between the Spanish government and the international conservation organisation the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).¹

The decision to designate the national park and the WWF's investment in the area rested upon the Coto Donana's spectacular birdlife and associated flora and fauna. The area held large concentrations of waterbirds and birds of prey, some scarce or less abundant in the rest of Western Europe. These bird populations had survived relatively intact into the mid-late twentieth century under the protection of a succession of aristocratic owners who had managed the land as a sporting estate.² It was those associated with this sporting tradition who had done much to cement the area's international reputation as a place of avian riches. The most influential of these sporting propagandists was Abel Chapman. Chapman was a big game hunter who had travelled extensively in East Africa as well as across Europe. The two books that he published on Spain – *Wild Spain* (1893) and *Unexplored Spain* (1910) – both featured accounts of expeditions to the Coto Donana. Chapman's colourful style and his descriptions of the area's great diversity of birdlife did much to shape the region's allure to an English-speaking readership and were a major spur to later British collectors, hunters, and naturalists who travelled to the region. By the 1950s, these visitors were predominantly bird watchers and conservationists rather than sportsmen. As the area came under new development pressure, it was their interest in the distinctive ecology of the region and its spectacular birdlife which helped to drive the conservation efforts to protect the Coto Donana.

In this article, I explore how the Coto Donana was understood, protected, and shaped as a national park and nature reserve between the early 1950s and late 1980s. In doing so, I chart the shifting conservation regimes and strategies that were focused upon the area, locating the moves to protect and manage the landscape within a longer history of how the region was represented and worked for humans and wildlife. Written into this history lay different valuations of the region, different ways of being human in the landscape and different kinds of human relations with wild birds. If the strongest contrast was between the reserving of the region as a sporting landscape evident in Chapman's writings and its re-imagining and re-configuring as a national park, there were also important differences between the early years of post-war conservation management and the full-blown transformation of the area into a jewel of international bird protection.

In exploring the shaping of the Coto Donana as a changing landscape my argument draws on and seeks to extend David Matless's work on cultures of landscape. In both *Landscape and Englishness* and *In the Nature of Landscape*, Matless developed the idea of cultures of landscape to understand the competing ways of knowing, managing, representing, and valuing the natural environment. These ways of organising and valuing nature also shaped distinctive forms of conduct associated with contrasting uses of the land.³

In *In the Nature of Landscape*, Matless explored the cultural geography of the Norfolk Broads and drew out the contrasting understandings of this region through the twentieth century as a space of commercialized popular leisure, sporting recreation and natural history. Different forms of conduct and behaviour rubbed up against each other in these different ways of valuing, shaping, and being in the landscape. As Matless noted, some of the strongest conflicts were between the enjoyment of the region as a recreational waterland of exuberant and noisy pleasures and the reserved experiencing of the area by naturalists and nature lovers.⁴ For Matless, competing agencies, and authorities shaped these different versions of Broadland's cultural landscapes. They included commercial players like the holiday hire companies and the Great Eastern Railway, conservation bodies like the Norfolk Naturalists Trust, and private sporting estates like those at Hickling Broad.⁵

Whilst Matless' work on the Norfolk Broads has focused principally upon the shaping of its cultures of landscape by local, regional and national authorities, my account of the Coto Donana draws out the interplay between regional, national and international agencies in the making and remaking of a landscape and the different ways of being human within it. In what follows I show how the protection and development of the Coto Donana involved an alliance of elite landed interests, Spanish scientists and conservationists, the Spanish state, international conservation organisations, British ornithologists and American parks planners. Out of all these forms of authority and intervention came a valuing of the Coto Donana as not only a nationally important avian landscape, but also as an area of international value to all European states. It was the moves by international conservationists to protect the region by conceiving of it as part of Europe's wild heritage that was particularly significant. They drew upon the 'flyways concept' to see the Donana as a vital link in the migratory flyways of birds which summered in northern Europe and wintered in sub-Saharan Africa.⁶ In doing so, they conceptualized the Coto Donana as a Spanish-European conservation landscape central to the cosmopolitan lifecycles of many of its avian visitors and the trans – continental ecosystems upon which they depended.

In emphasising the role of international conservation groups and actors within the story of the Coto Donana's post-war transformation, the account that follows pays particular attention to the ideas and thinking of key figures within the WWF, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the US parks planners. In doing so, it draws on and partly seeks to revise how historians of environmentalism have understood the growth of international conservation in the period after 1945 and its relationship with nation state-sponsored protection. As Simone Schleper and Martin Holdgate have argued, the post-war internationalization of conservation led by organisations like the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources) drew upon a form of scientific internationalism. This was rooted in the science of

ecosystem ecology and models of international governance, with organisations such as the IUCN and WWF mediating between local conservationists and national governments⁷. Whilst their ambitions were genuinely global, the IUCN and WWF were closely associated, as Holdgate and Adams and Mulligan all argue, with the imperative to defend the conservation gains of Empire.⁸ As a result, Africa loomed large in the imaginations of leading WWF figures.⁹

The WWF, like the IUCN, was also dominated by Northern European and North American experts and administrators. This meant, as Schleper, Adams and Mulligan, and Holdgate have argued, that international conservation was not only under the leadership of those from the Global North, but that it also often developed conservation programmes at the expense of local communities in the Global South. As such, it was seen as perpetuating, in a post-colonial world, neo-colonial attitudes and approaches.¹⁰ For historians like Camprubi, these neo-colonial attitudes were even evident in the support given by international conservation groups to projects outside of African and within Europe. Camprubi cites the case of the Coto Donana as an example of this and my account echoes his argument by showing how leading British and Swiss figures within WWF exhibited an untroubled sense of their own unquestioned expertise and authority over Spanish conservation and its political actors. Yet my argument also seeks to complexify this reading of the neo-colonial tendencies of the WWF in southern Spain. As I argue, leading British, Swiss, and American conservationists worked to build and engage with new pan-European initiatives to protect European landscapes and their birdlife and to play their part in an emergent European conservation policy within which the EEC was to later prove pivotal. This worked to soften or at least complicate the sense that they knew best when it came to how to do the work of conservation in other peoples' countries.

If the protection of the Coto Donana in the mid-late twentieth century was crucially shaped by the valuing of the region as a European avian landscape under the leadership of international conservation groups, I also develop an argument about the role of British, Swiss, and American actors in the practical management and working of the national park. In doing so, I seek to bring out the grounded practices of conservation management and ecological governance often absent in the historiography of international conservation. From the first ecological surveys of the early 1950s, scientists and conservationists sought to render the Coto Donana knowable through modern science and its methods of surveying, recording, and documenting. In doing so, they not only aimed to protect the region but to actively manage its diverse communities of fauna and flora and to shape the relations between people and birdlife. Thus, whilst conservationists repeatedly described the Donana as a 'wilderness', implying untouched wild nature, they knew both that its landscapes had been shaped by human action and that it was a dynamic ecosystem that required human intervention for the benefit of its avian and human visitors. In intervening to shape the landscapes of the Coto Donana, different models of conservation were brought to bear on the region. These included a conception of it as a largely private scientific reserve analogous to what Max Nicholson, Director of Nature Conservancy in the UK and a key player in the story of the Donana from the early 1950s, called a 'living museum' or 'outdoor laboratory'.¹¹ The idea of nature reserves as more or less private 'open-air laboratories', however, co-existed within the British nature reserves movement with the idea that reserves might also play an educational role in shaping public attitudes towards nature through allowing public access to these landscapes. It was this amenity and propaganda view of nature reserves which partly superseded Nicholson's original conception of the Coto Donana as a private scientific reserve. Certainly, by the late 1960s, supporters of the Donana, including Nicholson, increasingly saw the reserve as space of encounter with wild birds by a larger public of nature tourists. This latter vision of the reserve involved the careful management of both people and non-human animals. The designed environment was central to this process. Fences, wire, and control of human movement drew upon militarized ideas of conservation. At the same time observation hides, together with signage, footpaths and a visitor centre linked people and birds to a managed landscape. This shaped, programmatically at least, a distinct sensory experience of and bodily disposition within the landscape.

In the first parts of the article, I explore the Coto Donana expeditions of the 1950s. These involved a multinational team of ornithologists and ecologists who set out to study the bird populations and the broader ecology of the Coto Donana. A group of British ornithologists, amongst them Max Nicholson and Guy Mountfort, played a leading role in these expeditions. They were all inspired in part by Abel Chapman's accounts of the Coto Donana and the picture he created of the ornithological riches of the area. At the same time their scientific interest was also pricked, and they saw the Coto Donana as constituting one of two surviving fragments of habitats that had been largely destroyed elsewhere in Europe. The enthusiasm and interest of these British ornithologists dovetailed with a growing concern for the future of the Coto Donana from Spanish conservationists, and it was the alliance between this local Spanish action to study and protect the region and the international ornithologists which created the campaign to save the Coto Donana. This campaign was given urgency in the early-mid 1950s by growing threats to the area from agricultural and commercial development, and these sections explore the ways those concerned to protect the Donana went about saving a landscape they repeatedly – and tactically – described as a unique wilderness.

If the creation of the Coto Donana national park represented an important success for Spanish environmentalists and their international supporters, the decade following its establishment proved to be a testing one for the region's conservationists. Accelerating pressure from farming, industrial, and tourist development arising from Spain's 'economic miracle' of the 1960s continued to threaten the ecological health of the Coto Donana and divisions between local Spanish scientists and international conservationists, especially the WWF, over how the reserve should be managed caused a crisis for the Donana. This crisis led to renewed effort from WWF to create a new management plan for the park. In the middle and final sections, I explore this new phase in the shaping of the Coto Donana as a nature reserve and how it involved the importing of expertise and guidance from British and American conservationists. Their interventions led to a shift of emphasis in how the Donana was managed: from a model of it as a private biological reserve to its reimagining as a modern park which allowed greater access and sought to shape encounters between people and birds and wild landscapes. This used all the techniques of reserve management, design, and interpretative services to shape the Coto Donana as an 'instructive landscape' for its human visitors. In doing so, it aimed to educate the public about the natural world and to encourage an attentive and ordered encounter with wild birds and nature.¹² This culture of landscape promoted a distinctive moral geography of nature, differentiating the visual appreciation of the natural world from both the older sporting culture of guns, punts and flinty masculinity and the exuberant consumerist pleasures of Spain's emergent mass tourism that was developing on the Donana's doorstep.

Protecting a Wilderness

'Andalucía has always been a favourite hunting ground with Englishmen' (F.C.R. Jourdain, 1936, 725).

Between 1952 and 1957, three expeditions were mounted by a multinational group of ecologists and ornithologists to the Coto Donana. Guy Mountfort, President of the British Ornithologists Union and co-author of Europe's first field guide to birds, was a central figure in these trips, leading the expeditions of 1956 and 1957. Like many British ornithologists, he had first heard of the Coto Donana from reading Abel Chapman's *Wild Spain* in the 1930s. He was inspired by Chapman's account, recalling later how 'I longed to see for myself the fantastic wealth of birds and other animals which he [Chapman] described so vividly'.¹³ It wasn't until 1952 that Mountfort was able to visit the area. In doing so, he was following in the footsteps of others inspired by Chapman's tales of avian abundance. These were the British egg collectors, hunters, bird photographers, and birdwatchers who had pursued rare and scarce birds in the region through the

inter-war years. In the 1930s, for example, the renowned egg collector and ornithologist F.R.C. Jourdain had visited the region and recorded the bird species there. At around the same time, the British bird photographer G.K. Yeates made his first foreign trip to the region. Like later ornithological commentators, he was struck by the abundance of birdlife, seeing it as one of 'the greatest bird paradises in Western Europe'.¹⁴

Mountfort's first visit to the Coto Donana was not simply for recreational birdwatching. He formed part of an international expedition to the region led by the eminent French ecologist Francois Bourliere. Bourliere would later become the Vice-President and then President of International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) (1960–3 and 1963–6), an organisation with close ties to the WWF. On the Bourliere-led trip, Mountfort and the American bird artist Roger Tory Peterson, with whom he was travelling, spent most of their time recording the birds of the region and taking photographs. Mountfort realized that a more extensive expedition was needed to fully explore the Donana and that any future visits would need a large team of experts in botany and mammals as well as birds. With the 1952 trip effectively a dry run, Mountfort set about planning what became two more extensive expeditions in 1956 and 1957. Both were major undertakings. As in Chapman's day, access to the Coto Donana was via boat along the Guadalquivir river. It then required a 5–6-hour ride on horseback to reach the Palacio at the heart of the estate.¹⁵ Mountfort selected his companions based on their scientific and ornithological expertise as well as, as he put it, their 'good companionship' – and presumably their physical stamina.¹⁶ They included James Fisher, Eric Hosking, James Ferguson-Lees, Julian Huxley, Max Nicholson, and Lord Alanbrooke. The majority were well connected in British ornithological and conservation circles. The inclusion of Lord Alanbrooke, amateur bird photographer and former head of the British Army, enabled the expedition to gain access to Britain's military and diplomatic networks. Alanbrook used his connections at the War Office to provide the expeditions with both Army anti-mosquito lotion and sprays and Army field packs. The former Field Marshall also used private channels to obtain assistance from Lord Mountbatten, the First Sea Lord, with moving the group's heavy gear through Gibraltar and into Spain.¹⁷

The expeditions further benefitted from close and supportive relations with the owners of the private Coto Donana estate, notably Senor Gonzalez Gordon. Gonzalez Gordon, scion of Anglo-Spanish aristocracy, had a close relationship with the Spanish President, General Franco, who hunted on the estate. Whilst Franco was sympathetic to the desire of Gonzalaz Gordon and the other owners of the Coto Donana to protect the land, the Spanish state had been engaged in a sustained programme of land reclamation since the late 1930s. This had transformed parts of Andalucía close to the Donana, including the right bank of the Guadalquivir river and across to Seville. By 1957, a third wave of drainage was planned which threatened the survival of the Donana estate as a relatively unimproved landscape. Gonzalez Gordon was keen to work with British ornithologists to help protect the integrity of the Coto Donana from development.¹⁸

Surveying the Coto Donana

If the expeditions led by Mountfort were formed of an elite group of ornithologists and scientists with access to those with power and influence in both the UK and regional Spain, they were driven by a desire to understand and survey the region using the most up to date scientific methods. These involved studies of bird populations, their migratory movements, experiments into bird behaviour, and ecological surveys of the region. They also made extensive use of photography and film to capture the region's astonishing birdlife. The 1957 expedition sought to deepen ecological knowledge of the Coto Donana and did this through including Max Nicholson, Julian Huxley, and Don Antonio Valverde in the group. Valverde was one of Spain's leading ecologists and worked for the Instituto de Aclimatacion de Almeria, an organisation that studied the adaptation of plants to arid conditions. He was also one of the first Spanish scientists to recognise the threats to the

ecology of the Coto Donana.¹⁹ Huxley was an influential promoter of modern ecological and behavioural science and committed to scientific internationalism. As the first Director General of UNESCO, he had been the prime mover in the creation of IUCN and was a founder member of WWF. Max Nicholson, a close associate of Huxley and co-founder of WWF, was a key protagonist in the idea of state-sponsored conservation and of a 'planned countryside'.²⁰ He was the head of Nature Conservancy in the UK (1952–66) and President of the RSPB (1980–5).

The reports, articles, and books that the expeditions produced sought to understand and value the region in radically different ways from those of the earlier sporting naturalists, especially Chapman. His two books had offered an account of the region viewed from the wildfowling punt and shooting butt. They mixed travelogue with observations on the climate, culture, and people of Spain. The latter, seen by Chapman, 'by a slight stretch' as he put it, as part of the wildlife and 'ferae naturae' of the region, were depicted in strongly Orientalising terms. Andalucía, particularly in the heat of the summer, required, for Chapman, the inhabitants to 'discard European habits' and adopt those of 'Moorish or Oriental races'.²¹ In *Wild Spain*, especially, Chapman slipped between a reading of the Andalusian landscape as 'more African than Africa' and a description of the rural Spanish as succumbing to Oriental apathy.²²

In these forays into social commentary, Chapman rehearsed Dumas's notorious idea that Europe begin at the Pyrenees, with Spain closer socially and economically to Africa than Northern Europe. As such Chapman's comments represented an instance of what Mary Louis Pratt has called the reworking of colonial tropes within European culture itself, as Northern Europeans looked down in condescension upon the 'contaminated' or disorderly South.²³

Chapman's two books on Spain, however, did more than rehearse Orientalist tropes. He was an acute observer of the natural world and one of the first to recognise the importance of Spain as a major migration flyway between Northern Europe and Africa.²⁴ His accounts of Andalucía recorded the notable birdlife of the area and painted a vivid picture of the vast numbers of waterbirds and raptors which filled this 'ornithological Eden'.²⁵ He was clearly enchanted by this great diversity of life and by the landscape and repeatedly described the region as a 'wilderness' or 'nature in its wildest primeval garb'.²⁶ Chapman's reflections on the 'wild nature' of the region were woven together with dramatic accounts of the hunting and shooting of wild birds and game. One of the chapters in *Wild Spain* detailed Chapman's thrilling encounter with great bustards, a large Turkey-sized game bird, and were organised around the drama of the hunt. They culminated in his description of shooting three birds with a left and right shot followed by a single shot.²⁷ Elsewhere he offered a striking account of how a volley of his shots 'cut a lane through a phalanx of flamingos'.²⁸ *Wild Spain* and *Unexplored Spain* were littered with lists of the numbers of birds and specimens he had obtained.

This representation and experiencing of the Coto Donana as a sporting landscape in Chapman's accounts stood at some remove from how the ornithological expeditions of the 1950s sought to understand and value the region. The work undertaken by Max Nicholson, J.A. Valverde, and Julian Huxley during the 1957 expedition in particular aimed to produce a systematic account of the relations of animals and plants to each other and to the environment of the Donana.²⁹ It was the product of over 40 years of applied ecology, the theoretical work on ecosystems and its techniques of surveying.³⁰ For Nicholson, Valverde, and Huxley, the Coto Donana represented a large, surviving fragment of habitats that had been destroyed elsewhere in Europe and, as such, formed 'one of the outstanding ecological demonstration areas in all Europe'.³¹ They worked to identify the main habitats of the Donana – from beach, dunes, coastal slack, pine woods, and swamp (marismas). Nicholson then used transect lines, a method of dividing up the terrain, that intersected with a variety of habitats to map the birds typical of each zone.³² Studies of vegetation were also undertaken, together with research on the climate.³³

One of the striking features of the ecological surveys of the Coto Donana concerned the way that Nicholson and Valverde were repeatedly drawn to think about the ecology of the area in relational terms. As Nicholson put it, the 'delta [of the Guadalquivir] constantly demands

comparison with that other great bird-haunted delta of SW Europe, the Camargue'.³⁴ The two areas represented ecological siblings in Nicholson's imagination as the last great surviving wetland wildernesses or ecosystems of (southern) Europe. Both provided opportunities to study wetland ecosystems in action and how these might be managed and preserved in the face of pressures from farming, industry, and tourism.

In thinking of the study and protection of the Coto Donana in relation to the Camargue, Nicholson and Valverde were drawn into a dialogue with the environmentalists and scientists who were working on the southern French wetlands. The most influential figure involved in their study was Luc Hoffman. Hoffman was heir to the Hoffman LaRoche chemical business and had used his private wealth to devote his life to developing avian field ecology, particularly the relationship between wetland ecosystems and waterbirds.³⁵ In 1954, he established a private biological station and nature reserve at Tour du Valet, in the Camargue, to study wintering geese and greater flamingos. He became a tireless champion for the further protection of the Camargue, particularly as pressure grew in the late 1950s to reclaim land in the delta for salt and rice production. This led Hoffman to promote wetland conservation on the international stage, and he was a leading player at an international conference in 1962 which called for the listing of the most important wetland sites along intercontinental migratory flyways. He also played a key role at a later conference held at Ramsar in Iran in 1971. This produced a treaty, The Convention on Wetlands, which represented a major step forward in the international protection of wetland habitats.³⁶

Hoffman's research and campaigning made him a key ally in Valverde's and Nicholson's moves to protect both the Donana and the Camargue as the last surviving great European wetlands. Publishing the scientific data on the importance of these regions was central to this strategy. Between December 1957 and September 1958, Hoffman, Valverde, and Nicholson published three linked articles in the journal *British Birds*, which set out the ecological make-up and importance of the two areas. The articles were also a call to action to preserve these unique wetland systems.³⁷ As Nicholson and his co-authors suggested in conclusion, 'All Europe would be poorer if either of these remarkable regions were to be invaded or damaged by unsuitable development'.³⁸

If, under Hoffman's patronage, the Camargue had a biological station and private nature reserve, the Coto Donana lacked this protection and resources for ongoing scientific study. In the wake of the Coto Donana expeditions, and working with Valverde and the Spanish authorities, the campaign to protect the Donana and to create a biological station there became a priority for Nicholson, Mountfort and Hoffman. In the early 1960s, they worked together to establish the WWF and the Coto Donana became the first and one of the most expensive purchases of land made by the fledgling conservation organisation. Significantly, the WWF was able to buy the land with money not only from national appeals in the UK, USA, Switzerland, and Holland, but with an interest free loan of over £79,000 from Luc Hoffman.³⁹ In a pleasing historical twist, the purchase was also supported by a £25,000 bequest to the WWF from one of Abel Chapman's relatives, a Miss Chapman.⁴⁰

WWF and the Coto Donana national park

In January 1963, the WWF issued a press release celebrating its agreement with the Spanish government to secure the future of a part of the Coto Donana estate as a nature reserve. The acquisition had created, as the press release put it, 'Europe's most important wildlife sanctuary'. It was an area with an 'extraordinary richness of birdlife . . . and regarded by scientists as unique and of vital importance to wildfowl migrating between Africa and Western Europe'.⁴¹ The press release went on to confirm that the reserve would be administered by a scientific council representing both the Spanish government and the WWF, with the Palacio at the heart of the estate becoming a biological research station.⁴² Just over two years later, WWF confirmed the formal handing over of

the title deeds of the new reserve to Spain's equivalent of Nature Conservancy, the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, at a ceremony in Madrid. The WWF again emphasised the environmental importance of the Coto Donana as not only a 'birdwatchers paradise' but of international significance for myriads of migrating birds.⁴³

Later commentators have been struck by the involvement of the WWF and Northern European conservationists in the protection of the Coto Donana. Why, given its focus upon conservation in Africa, was the WWF's first major purchase and one of the biggest investments in its first decade of existence, the Coto Donana? For Hamilton and Camprubi, the answer lies in Northern European attitudes to Spain. Hamilton suggested these drew on long-standing Orientalist stereotypes of Spain as an underdeveloped country culturally closer to Africa than Northern Europe. Camprubi was more direct, suggesting that the moves by the WWF and its key British figures to protect the Coto Donana required the 'Africanizing' of the region.⁴⁴ Whilst the British led expeditions to the Donana in the 1950s were certainly not free of Romantic conceptions of Andalusia, Hamilton, and Camprubi are perhaps guilty of conflating the post-war attitudes of Northern conservationists with Abel Chapman's undoubtedly Orientalist views of Spain. It is more plausible to suggest, taking up Alexis Schwarzenbach's observation, that the desire by Northern conservationists to protect the Coto Donana was in part a way of signalling the global scope of the WWF's project.⁴⁵ In seeking funds from the public in Western Europe and North America, the WWF had to ensure that its conservation goals were truly international and included regions closer to home for western conservation supporters.⁴⁶ There was also another logic at work. The leading British ornithologists who visited and sought to protect the Coto Donana did not so much 'Africanize' Andalucía, as see it through a British lens. A large part of the reason why they were captivated by the region was because of the abundance of birds that were rare or scarce in the UK.⁴⁷ It was also the case, as we have seen, that the Coto Donana had occupied a special place in the imaginations of British naturalists since at least Chapman's time. Because of this, as Max Nicholson suggested, they had a 'special obligation' to the protection of the area.⁴⁸ Whilst there is no doubting Nicholson's sincerity, his conviction about British responsibility towards the region speaks of an un-reflective (neo-) colonial sense of British superiority over Spanish conservation projects, even if this did not require the 'Africanizing' of Andalucía.

In understanding the involvement of the WWF in the purchase of the Coto Donana, it is also important to insist that Spanish conservationists, like J.A. Valverde, were not passive recipients of Northern European conservation largesse. He was a determined and effective campaigner for the region. Furthermore, as Hamilton shows, the Spanish government was keen to foster links with international conservationists in a period when it was seeking to break free from its international isolation and improve its image abroad.⁴⁹ The Coto Donana was saved, in this sense, through an alliance of different groups whose interests aligned at a key moment in the post-war history of the Donana. Safeguarding the land from immediate development threats, however, was just the beginning of the story of the Coto Donana from the mid-1960s. Managing the landscape and establishing effective governance between the Spanish authorities and an international wildlife organisation proved to be significant challenges. At the same time, the WWF and Spanish authorities struggled to balance a conception of the reserve as a largely private scientific research station with growing international public interest in accessing the area and its birdlife.

Making a nature reserve

In late October 1961, Peter Scott, Guy Mountfort, and Luc Hoffman, as trustees of WWF, visited the Coto Donana to meet with J.A. Valverde. They aimed to survey the part of the estate that was up for sale and to begin negotiations on the purchase price. The report they subsequently produced of the visit was revealing about some of the difficulties they felt existed in working with the Spanish state and negotiating wider Spanish attitudes towards nature conservation. As Scott

and Mountfort put it, the authorities in Spain might pay lip service to conservation but offered little statutory backing for it and tended to think of the natural resources of the region through the lens of shooting or their economic value. Public opinion in Spain exacerbated the problem, with the Spanish generally 'apathetic towards wild animals except as sporting quarry'. Consequently, they concluded, a 'great deal of conservation propaganda' would be needed from the WWF.⁵⁰

The concerns expressed by Scott and Mountfort were born out by a later visit. In May 1965, following the establishment of the nature reserve, Peter Conder, Director of the RSPB and Stanley Cramp, one of its Council members, visited the Coto Doñana at the request of the WWF to inspect progress on the creation of the reserve and to offer advice on its administration and management. They found the director of the reserve, J.A. Valverde, struggling with lack of resources to effectively run and develop it. Despite its promises, the Spanish government had paid only a small portion of the grant to cover the management of the nature reserve. This shortage of funds was exacerbated by a confusion over the purpose of the reserve. As Conder and Cramp noted, the director, Valverde, wanted the biological research station to be the focus of his work. This was geared towards scientific study and formed a restricted area from which visitors were excluded. At the same time visitors were encouraged to view those areas of the reserve outside the biological station, though little was done to enable them to see the best parts of the reserve or control their movements when they were there. Conder and Cramp were clear that addressing the management of visitors and with it the underlying objective of the reserve were the central issues to be resolved. With the completion of a new road to the coast due in 1966 and a connecting road to the Palacio already built, Conder and Cramp felt that there would also certainly be an increase in visitors. Because of this, putting in place a clear management plan for them was a high priority. With the RSPB's own experiments with reserve management very much in mind, Conder and Cramp suggested that a reserve manager should be appointed with responsibility for creating trails around the reserve. These would enable visitors to experience the reserve in the 'shortest time causing the least disturbance'. As they went on:

'The trails should lead to large hides which give good views of the heronry and the hide should be close enough to allow photographers with long lenses to get adequate pictures. The hides could be approached through covered ways [...] the scrapes [artificially created shallow pools] in the marismas will obviously require hides'.⁵¹

The idea of creating new artificial pools or 'scrapes' had been pioneered at the RSPB's Minsmere reserve by its reserve manager Bert Axell in the early-mid 1960s. Axell's 'scrape' aimed to attract birds to the new landscape feature and to allow visitors close up views of them through observation hides placed overlooking the new pools. The hides and the paths to them allowed the movements of visitors to be controlled and disturbance of wildlife and damage to the habitat kept to a minimum. Conder and Cramp urged Valverde to come to Britain to see the RSPB's reserves at work and to learn how to manage both birds and visitors through adopting the RSPB's management techniques.⁵²

This proposal was picked up by Max Nicholson, who was by now one of the key movers in the British-led support for the fledgling Coto Donana reserve. Acting as convenor for the International Biological Programme (IBP), he wrote to the RSPB Director Peter Conder endorsing his proposal for establishing what he called 'an effective system of conservation' on the reserve. This was pressing given Nicholson's own assessment of the 'grave deterioration which it [Coto Donana] is suffering'. Nicholson offered the RSPB and Conder funds to pay for the loan of the services of their experienced reserve warden, Bert Axell. Axell would, in Nicholson's words, 'help to establish a system of conservation management on the Coto Donana reserve including the provision of observation posts for the use of scientists and visitors, and arrangements for the handling and briefing of visitors in the light of the extensive British experience'.⁵³

Bert Axell made his first visit to the reserve between 18 March and 12 May 1966, on secondment from the RSPB. The aim of his visit was, as he put it, to 'help establish a programme of conservation management including a method of controlling and catering to visitors'.⁵⁴ This

would involve the building of observation hides and the making of trails with the ambition to not only improve the visitor experience but also to lessen the disturbance of birds and limit any inconvenience caused to the scientists working at the biological station. Axell noted that the Reserve's director was most committed to the idea of the Donana as primarily a 'biological reserve' and expressed a 'much reduced desire to encourage and obtain revenue from ordinary visitors'.⁵⁵

Like Conder and Cramp before him, Axell felt strongly that dealing with the likely increase in visitors and finding ways of controlling and managing them was crucial. He was concerned that the current visiting arrangements left many birdwatchers free to wander off and in so doing disturb nesting birds. Unregulated camping was also a problem on the reserve, and Axell advised against allowing any new visitors onto the reserve in the spring of 1966 until effective ways of controlling them had been put in place. Even then he recommended that day visitors should only be allowed onto the reserve 2–3 days a week in the breeding season, with the number of visits per day restricted to 15 people or less. Permits to visit would need to be applied for a month in advance. This understanding of controlling visitor numbers mirrored the approach Axell had taken at Minsmere, where access by the public was similarly regulated by permit and tightly controlled.⁵⁶ It contained elements of the militarized approach to bird protection which had set deep roots in the RSPB since the mid-1940s. Axell, like other key RSPB figures, had served in the Second World War and brought what Garlick calls a 'post-conflict' approach to managing people and birds.⁵⁷ Fences, barbed wire, and surveillance, together with the safeguarding of birds from human and animal 'enemies', shaped this model of conservation.⁵⁸

The parallels between Minsmere and the Donana were also evident of Axell's vision of the remaking of the landscape. He placed great emphasis on creating new artificial landscape features, especially water holding depressions around dry islands 'like the Minsmere scrape'. Two 'RSPB-type hides, holding 8-9 observers, should also be built overlooking the new scape'. Alongside the new artificial pools and hides, he suggested that there should be a better control of cattle and the culling of deer and boar on the reserve to address the problem of over-grazing which was threatening the viability of the important cork oaks in the parkland. The oaks were crucial nesting sites for the herons and spoonbills that were such a feature of the reserve.⁵⁹

During his two months visit, Axell was able to begin work on his plan, completing one hide, making a diversionary road around the herony to limit disturbance, and adding 'keep out' signs to sensitive parts of the reserve. Progress on the plan was slow, however, with work delayed by problems with getting wood and in creating the embanked lagoons and new wells.⁶⁰ Max Nicholson, however, was pleased with the progress and confident enough in Axell's report to reassure Peter Conder that IBP funds were available for a second visit by Axell to the Coto Donana in the spring of 1967. In a letter to Peter Conder in August 1966, Nicholson also revealed that Peter Scott had proposed using funds from the WWF British national appeal to pay for new hides and notice boards at the Donana reserve.⁶¹

Scott's vision of the Donana

Peter Scott had also been giving some thought to how to manage the potentially large number of visitors that might come to the reserve. His ideas fitted with Valverde's conception of the Coto Donana reserve as fundamentally a private scientific research station that gave some limited access to the general public. Scott's solution was to propose the creation a small modern zoo at or near the entrance to the reserve that would provide, as he put it, 'at least 2hrs of interest or enjoyment [...] at all times of the year without damage or disturbance to the reserve itself or its wildlife'.⁶² The zoo area would include enclosures of captive local animals and aviaries for local birds. There would be an exhibition space and lecture hall for talks and films, a shop, and cafeteria/restaurant. Toilets and a car park would be provided, with a high observation tower overlooking the reserve also being created. Observation hides close to the other facilities overlooking pools 'specially

baited to bring ducks and other birds close to observers' would complete the experience. The aim, for Scott, then, was to leave visitors 'with a feeling of having seen the reserve and many of its animals and plants. In fact, they will not have been more than 200 metres into it and will have no opportunity to spoil or disturb any of the vulnerable parts of it or its endangered rarities'. 'By these means', as he concluded, 'access to the central parts of the reserve can be very strictly limited to scientists, a small number of photographers and a few VIPs'.⁶³

Scott's proposal, as he conceded, owed much to the 'interpretative services' provided in US national parks and developed at the Wildfowl Trust (WT) by Scott himself in the UK. In fact, his plan for the entrance to the Donana owed much to the development he had undertaken at the WT's Slimbridge reserve. It was a model of a nature reserve that found favour with J.A. Valverde and was partially realized with the creation of enclosures for local animals around the Palacio at the centre of the reserve. Axell's more ambitious plan, however, was not so fortunate and fell foul to the lack of money effecting the running of the reserve. It was abandoned in 1967. The next time Axell saw the Coto Donana in 1978 the beach area to the south the reserve boasted a collection of what he called, with a degree of moral disapproval, 'hippie huts' and mixed nude bathing'.⁶⁴ The growth of mass tourism in southern Spain, facilitated by relatively cheap air travel, had brought the 'noisy (and permissive) hordes' to this cherished nature region and Axell's concerns reflected a familiar moral geography of conservation in which the proper way of being in the landscape emphasised restrained and reserved nature watching.

The crisis of the Coto Donana

In the years between Axell's two secondments birdwatchers from Britain, as well as the USA and Holland, did visit the Coto Donana. Whilst they continued to be struck by the beauty of the area, many returned with tales about the poor management of the reserve and frustrations in seeing the area's birdlife.⁶⁵ The dissatisfaction of international birdwatchers found its way to key supporters of the Donana in WWF. In a letter to Luc Hoffman in October 1971, Guy Mountfort described how J.A. Valverde, the reserve's director, had received 'hundreds' of complaints, the majority concerned with the 'limitations of access'. Others offered 'disquieting statements about the management of the reserve'. A letter from British birdwatcher Richard Price was typical of these concerns. Price painted a picture of a reserve that was not well-managed and difficult to access from a visitor's point of view. There were no paths or trails, walking was restricted to the immediate vicinity of the Palacio, and the hides that there were had no floors. Moreover, the caged animals, including lynx, wolves, and birds of prey, cut against his hoped-for experience of this celebrated nature reserve. Price noted the critical comments left by visitors in the visitor's book, with one French birdwatcher suggesting that the Coto 'was more like a prison than a reserve'. Price suggested that 'better facilities for serious observers [could be provided] without disturbing the wildlife at all along British lines'.⁶⁶

Within the WWF, there was considerable concern about these problems with the reserve. The organisation had both invested heavily in it and was closely identified with it. Guy Mountfort spent three days in the autumn of 1971 inspecting the reserve for WWF and investigating the complaints. He noted the problems with public access and suggested that Valverde was contributing to these problems being 'quixotically adamant against increased public access'. Valverde's enthusiasm for breeding captive animals and what Mountfort called the 'odd zoo' he maintained on the reserve was also the source of unfavourable views from visitors.

As well as noting these problems with the management of the reserve, Mountfort was also troubled by the rapid changes happening in Andalucía.⁶⁷ Drainage for agriculture around the reserve was taking water from it and had already left one of the important lagunas dry. Pressure from tourist development was also impinging on the reserve. A 3 km stretch along the coast represented the first phase of proposed urban development and Mountfort feared the Donana

would be cut off from the sea by this building. The new resort that had been built at Matalascenes 'could scarcely be more hideous and more totally lacking in amenity planning'.⁶⁸

As pressure on the region grew from planned development and agriculture, the Spanish government reorganised its conservation bodies. The park came under the authority of ICONA, a department of the Ministry of Agriculture, whilst Asociación para la Defensa de la Naturaleza (ADENA), an affiliate of the WWF, was established to work with the Biological Station in the Coto Donana. Senior figures in the WWF, amongst them Max Nicholson and Luc Hoffman, began to lobby the Spanish Minister of Agriculture to improve the management of the park. Nicholson visited the Donana in May 1976 to meet with the new director of the reserve, Javier Castroviejo and to press for better cooperation between ICONA and ADENA in managing the different parts of the national park. Out of this lobbying and discussion came ideas for a new master plan for the reserve. The process of getting the plan drafted, however, was not straightforward, not least because the new director of the Coto Donana, Castroviejo, was – at least in the eyes of Luc Hoffman and the WWF – resistant to outside help.⁶⁹ Nicholson's characteristic response was to suggest that Castroviejo visit Britain to learn how to deal with the running of a reserve.⁷⁰ But Nicholson also, with the support of ICONA, proposed inviting American national park planners to help with the shaping of 'interpretative services' in the Coto Donana National Park.

The management master plan and the shaping of an 'Instructive Landscape'

Between October 1977 and May 1978, a four-person team led by R.D. Sparrowe and consisting of experts from the US National Park Service, Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, The Forest Service, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service visited the Coto Donana three times. They undertook a review of the park's resources and how these might be managed with a view to assisting ICONA in developing a new master plan for the reserve. This masterplan, in the view of Sparrowe and his team, should 'preserve the integrity of the diverse ecosystems of the Donana National Park as an integral part of Spain's natural heritage and as an ecological reserve of international significance'.⁷¹ The unique 'ecological phenomenon' of the area had intrinsic value, but also afforded the opportunity for research to be undertaken on the inter-relationships of the three ecosystems that made up the park – the coastal dunes, the shrubland, and the marismas – together with offering a wider public 'important recreational, esthetic (sic) and educational value'.⁷²

This attention to the value of the park as a site of both new scientific research and a space for nature tourism and conservation education ran through how the US team set out their advice to the Spanish authorities. As those within the WWF before them had argued, the US team emphasised the importance of the Donana as an internationally significant resource and not simply of value to Spain's natural heritage. This rested in part on the role of the park as a major stop-over on the flyways of Europe's migratory birds. These migratory birds were, as the report suggested, 'a truly international resource', and the countries of Europe needed to 'work together to conserve and manage [them]'.⁷³

Promoting public understanding of the region's ecological significance was key for Sparrowe and his team and so allowing access to the public supported by educational and recreational facilities was of paramount importance. Through these 'interpretative services' – be that lecture theatres, information boards, printed guides, signage, trails and observation hides – a fulfilling experience could be provided and a 'conservation ethic' developed, particularly amongst the Spanish people.⁷⁴ This meant being bolder about increasing recreational access. Whilst Sparrowe and his team argued that visitors should be focused on the 'most ecologically resilient parts of the park', they envisaged a substantial increase in those wishing to visit the reserve. With all the infrastructure of interpretive services, including as permanent visitor centre, they argued that a 'properly designed and operated reserve could cater for 400,000 to 500, 000 visitors each year,

‘providing a high-quality park experience in a carefully controlled setting’.⁷⁵ These were projections of much higher visitor numbers than Bert Axell’s more restricted conception of public access. The US report placed great stress on the importance of the new visitor centre at Acebuche in shaping this positive visitor experience. The centre would provide ‘the big picture, giving visitors an introduction to what he may see for himself [...] exhibits, slide presentations, environmentally orientated arts and craft shows, films, talks, workshops and conferences’ would all shape the visitor experience, help manage their expectations, and foster a concern for the environment.

Whilst the US park planners led by Sparrowe were visiting the Donana and developing their master plan for the Spanish conservation bodies, Bert Axell returned to the park to begin work on a project with ICONA in March 1978. Across three more extended visits through 1979, 1980, and 1981, Axell undertook extensive landscape redevelopment and conservation management. This provided him with the opportunity to fully implement the ideas for the Donana that he had begun to develop in the late 1960s, bolstered this time by the parallel thinking of the US parks planners. Axell worked next to the Laguna Acebuche, about 1.5 km north of the entrance of the biological station and the location chosen by ICONA for what Axell described as ‘their main prestige show place [...] visitor research centre’.⁷⁶ The lake or laguna was landscaped to attract birds and to have 6 hides placed on a raised bank around it.⁷⁷ Axell added new islands and cut channels so that ‘from the hides secretive birds can be seen feeding’.⁷⁸

The work begun in the spring of 1978 also included the construction of the visitor centre. This, like some of the hides, used local building materials and styles of construction to reproduce traditional Andalusian architecture. In keeping with this tailoring of the buildings to the local style, Axell sought to reduce the amount of interpretive signage and markers to convey what he called a ‘pleasantly natural’ landscape. As he indicated, ‘Acebuche should be able to function with only the minimum of apparent artificiality and should efficiently manage its visitors’ paths and trails without coloured route markers, arrows and prohibitory notices’.⁷⁹

As the new design of the reserve took shape, it combined these key elements of Axell’s approach: to bring birds close to visitors by placing observation hides overlooking new artificial lagoons, using planting to encourage birds to show themselves to visitors and to offer an instructive and educational experiences for these human visitors. The trails and hides would manage human movement and the visitor centre would in turn function as a ‘honey pot’, as Axell called it, to keep tourists away from the biological reserve and other sensitive parts of the national park.⁸⁰ As such it offered a way of mixing access for a lay public with the protection of the scientific research at the heart of the Coto Donana.⁸¹

Conclusion

Bert Axell’s conservation work, and that set out in the US Masterplan, sought to shape an ordered and stimulating encounter with the birdlife of the Coto Donana national park. Trails, signage, information boards, and leaflets guided birdwatchers’ movement through the landscape and sought to mould their experience of it. This emphasised not just the value of the area as a nature region but also encouraged a controlled way of being in the landscape. This was notably defined against more exuberant recreational pleasures (Axell’s mixed naked swimming or holidaymaking culture) and was shorn of the violence of sporting encounters with wild birds exemplified by Chapman. Whilst there may have continued to be sporting elements in the pursuit of rare and exciting birds and the material devices of bird watching, like the bird hide, owed something to shooting butts and cover, the culture of landscape fostered by Axell and the US parks planners aimed to promote a different styling of the human with the avian.⁸² The shaping of the landscape in the masterplan and Axell’s management both emphasised a visual apprehension of the avian wonders of the reserve, one shaped through a particular style of observation. Ideally seated in a

bird hide, arms resting on a shelf and viewing manipulated landscapes through a viewing slit or window, the human watcher was taken out of the landscape. With wild birds brought relatively close to the hidden spectator birdwatchers were encouraged to observe the spectacle and intimate drama of wild birds performing before them. At the same time, observing through a bird hide created a phenomenological distance between the human watcher and the birds, reproducing a distance between the human and the avian. In this organisation of watching other embodied sensory relations to wild birds were suppressed or marginalised. The imperative was to watch and wonder.⁸³ The visiting public could, of course, subvert this programmatic way of being in the landscape. Axell was appalled to learn from a visiting RSPB colleague that ‘people walked along the top of the big-screen banks [at Acebuche] and even sat on top and in front of hides and there was no control of the movement along the open areas opposite hides’.⁸⁴

The attempt to govern the conduct of birdwatchers in the Coto Donana national park contrasted with the relative freedom of movement and ability to study and record birds open to the elite ornithologists such as Guy Mountfort, Max Nicholson, and others who visited the region from the 1950s. Their access to the landscape echoed that of elite sportsmen like Chapman. They did, however, use their privileged access to the area and the recording of its flora and fauna to campaign to protect the Coto Donana as a nature reserve. Their efforts were integral to the building an international campaign that drew upon the expertise from French, Swiss, American, British, and Spanish conservationists. I have shown how they mobilized the practical methods and concepts of ecological science to render the region knowable in new ways and to give it value as a precious wetland ecosystem. Their deployment of post-war conservation science notably generated a different way of representing and seeing the Coto Donana from that produced by the sporting naturalists like Chapman and shaped different ways of being in the landscape from hunters and collectors.

The campaign to save the Coto Donana formed part of the wider post-war internationalization of conservation. Under the auspices of WWF, Northern (European) conservationists exercised effective leadership over conservation projects on the international stage. The protection, reserving, and management of the Coto Donana fitted this larger international story, with Northern European conservationists playing a dominant role in the shaping of the area as a nature region. In doing so, key players within the WWF such as Nicholson, Mountfort and Hoffman positioned the Donana as a crucial region in the migratory flyways of birds which summered in Northern Europe and wintered in sub-Saharan Africa. In making this move, they sought to confer value and significance to the national park as not just a key part of Spain’s natural heritage but as of ecological importance to Europe as a whole. For Nicholson, Mountfort and Hoffman, and the Coto Dona and its birdlife were part of a common European inheritance and the Donana a European landscape of international significance. Their conception of the Coto Donana fed into a larger project from bird conservationists that had begun in the 1950s under the auspices of the International Council for Bird Protection and gathered momentum in the 1970s and aimed to expand the legal protection offered to Europe’s migratory birds. Whilst this campaign focused mainly upon the killing of songbirds in southern Europe, it also included a recognition of the need to protect the transnational ecosystems or habitats which migratory birds depended upon across Europe. This pressure from bird conservation organisations in Britain, Holland, and West Germany led to the adoption of new legal protections for migratory and resident European birds by the nine members states of the EEC in December 1977. It became the Directive of the Protection of Wild Birds in 1979, one of the Commission’s first pieces of environmental legislation.⁸⁵ The legislation was made possible by the conceiving of migratory birds as part of Europe’s shared natural heritage. Like the valuing of the Coto Donana by ornithologists and ecologists since the early 1950s, the EU Bird Directive helped to reimagine avian landscapes on a pan-European, transnational basis and their protection as part of an international chain of conservation promoted by organisations like the WWF.

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for the helpful comments and to Jeremy Mynott, Mike Roper, and Ted Benton for their comments and support.

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- 78 Memo from H.E. Axell, Report Number 2, 27 April 1978, RSPB, 02-18-05.
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- 80 Letter from Axell to Jose M. Mayorga, 11 Feb 1979, RSPB, 02-18-05. See also E. M. Nicholson's notes on the 'zoning' of the reserve, Nicholson 'Zoning', 8 March 1977, RSPB, 02-18-09.
- 81 Letter from Luc Hoffman to Charles de Haas, Director-General, WWF, 1 June 1979; Letter from Nicholson to Mr Portas, Project 964, Donana National Park, Spain, 30 May 1979, RSPB, 02-18-01.
- 82 See Nixon, *Passions for Birds*, chapters 1, 3 and 5.
- 83 See Sean Nixon, 'Watching Birds: Observation, Photography and the 'Ethological Eye'', BJHS, 2024, 57, pp. 1–19.
- 84 Axell *of Birds and Men*, p. 177.
- 85 Jan-Henrik Mayer, 'Saving Migrants: A Transnational Network Supporting Supranational Bird Protection Policy', In W. Kaiser et al (Eds.) *Transnational Networks in Regional Integration* (London, 2010), pp. 176–190.