

On September 28th, 2019 after stepping off the plane from Casablanca, Morocco, I traveled to Girona to meet with FireShepherds, an international group of pastors involved with wildfire risk reduction through traditional land use practices. As climate change increases the social, ecological, and economic costs of wildfires, integrated fire management (IFM) has emerged as the innovative approach in a new paradigm. IFM is based upon rural social engagement and land use being crucial components, and FireShepherds represents a professional program aimed at improving this link. When I arrived in Girona to begin my time with the FireShepherds, I knew nothing of the world I was stepping into, but I would come to understand the significance this project represents.



The group of FireShepherds I joined consisted of members from Portugal, Mexico, USA, Germany, and Spain, and we would travel together for the next five days. The first stop we made was to Agullana, where we heard from shepherds, firefighters, and researchers. The site of several fires, we learned about how the fires had progressed through the area, driven by westerly winds flowing towards the Mediterranean Sea. Researchers discussed the post-fire ecology and how fire-adapted species resprouted quickly, restoring the fire risk promptly. Shepherds listened to one another on the finer details of post-fire grazing rotation. Knowledge and experiences were being exchanged all around me.

Later that day we met with a shepherds who had defended his property in the last conflagration. He described the experience of being totally alone against the flames. Luckily the grazing he had done near his home reduced the fire behavior enough to prevent it from being consumed.

That evening we traveled to a communal slaughterhouse to learn how a community collaboratively maintains an important resource. During this stop we discussed the collaborative mechanisms necessary to ensure that the slaughterhouse can be self-sustaining while allowing equal use among local parties. We also discussed the specifics of the functions of the

slaughterhouse. That night we enjoyed the beautiful views of L'Escala.



On September 29th, the first order of the day was a grazing site of a Fire Flocks. This site was a strategic area identified by GRAF as a priority area for fuels reduction. Areas such as those adjacent to roads and intersections were selected so that firefighters would be able to access these quickly in the event of a wildfire. The grazing would help reduce the fire behavior and allow firefighters to secure an “anchor point” for further operations. This prompted discussions about who owns the land versus responsibility, and whether shepherds should be compensated for work completed route to strategic areas. Throughout the trip I noticed that each stop served to promote learning, but it also incited discussion which benefited the experience of everyone.

Increasing the experience was clearly an objective of the trip as the next two stops included a beautiful lunch and leisurely kayak. This allowed people to rejuvenate and continue learning.

Following the kayak, our group traveled to La Cellera de Ter to hear from researchers and civic leaders about the accomplishment of a park area and how grazing was used as a political tool. This gave us insight into politics surrounding grazing projects and how the leaders maneuvered the political landscape to achieve their goal.

Opinion piece written by Harrison Raine (PCF Volunteer 2019)

After spending the evening in a gorgeous Catalanian manor, Can Caballé, we began the next day with a visit to Montserrat Natural Park. The Life Montserrat project serves to maintain a wildfire fuel break through the use of grazing. The project is not yet self-sustainable, but provides a significant strategic area for firefighters in the event of a wildfire.

Next, we traveled to La Segalla to learn of an ecological goat milk farm where goats openly graze a high fire risk area. The area clearly had burned numerous times in recent years and the operation was intended to reduce the overall fuel load. The goats certainly had their work cut out for them as the area was large and the vegetation was high, ready for another burn.

That evening we visited the beautiful town of Tivissa, where we would go on to learn about the management of Serra de Lleberia. On our final day, we would hear from firefighter and managers about prescribed burns as well as wildfires. They would explain how vegetation dynamics can prime an area for a high severity burn, and how grazing can help reduce these dynamics. They spoke of a resurgence of people on the land, and the need to create a mosaic of land-use. FireShepherds have a crucial role to play, they told us.

Overall, the important takeaways from the trip were how all parties on the landscape need to be involved in land management when accounting for wildfires, the desire to learn exists among these bodies, and it's crucial that we understand and communicate with one another.