

Pilgrimage destination conscience: the search for meaning along the Way of St. James

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Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

Hilpert, Markus, and A. Voth. 2024. "Pilgrimage destination conscience: the search for meaning along the Way of St. James." In *Destination conscience: seeking meaning and purpose in the travel experience*, edited by H. Pechlaner, N. Olbrich, and G. Isetti, 65–77. Leeds: Emerald Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80455-960-420241008>.

Chapter 7

Pilgrimage Destination Conscience: The Search for Meaning Along the Way of St. James

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Abstract

Pilgrimage is a special form of conscious travel – maybe even the most conscious one – and therefore, awareness is one part thereof. As a result of this quality, which is gaining importance in Western society, pilgrimage is currently experiencing a renaissance (but not just for religious or spiritual reasons). No other pilgrimage route can be compared to the Camino to Santiago de Compostela in terms of numbers of pilgrims, popularity and fascination, and with around half a million pilgrims, the city broke its record again in 2022. The focus of this essay is the following question: is there a ‘Destination Conscience’ in relation to the Camino, and if so, who creates and uses it, and does it change over time? In terms of methodology, existing scientific studies are re-analysed and the results of field studies by RWTH Aachen University evaluated, in order to examine the contributions made by various stakeholders (travellers, local population, tourism providers, institutions, etc.) to the development of a possible ‘Destination Conscience’ pilgrimage. Through personal interactions and cultural exchange, they develop common values and a common awareness. On the other hand, these different expectations and changing perspectives also lead to conflicts and misunderstandings. The example of the Camino shows that ‘Destination Conscience’ is not a state but a process, and change is an essential part of this quality.

Destination Conscience, 65–77



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doi:[10.1108/978-1-80455-960-420241008](https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80455-960-420241008)

Keywords: Pilgrimage; Camino de Santiago; sustainable tourism; over-tourism; massification; image

Journey Conscience: The Spirit(s) of the Way of St. James

Travel, tourists and their holidays have changed in many ways in terms of their expectations of the destination and the way they visit places or sights. Today, many tourists feel that simply visiting places is too superficial, and so, increasingly more of them are instead looking for alternative, deeper and more authentic experiences. Very often, superficiality is not countered by more sensations; it is much more about touching the local reality of the destination – as well as the hope that this experience will touch one's own self.

One reaction to this growing demand for authenticity, meaning and conscious travel is the increasing pilgrimage along the Way of St. James, the Camino de Santiago (Lois-González & Santos, 2015). This is a Europe-wide network of pilgrimage paths, each leading to Santiago de Compostela. The beginning of the pilgrimage to the tomb of the apostle St. James is suspected to have been first trodden in the 9th century, while in the 11th century, Santiago de Compostela became one of the most important Christian pilgrimage destinations alongside Jerusalem and Rome. Since the 1980s, the Way of St. James has gained renewed popularity, and in 1987, the Council of Europe classified it as a 'Cultural Route'. At that time, around 3,000 pilgrims were counted per year; however, in 2022, over 438,000 were officially registered in Santiago de Compostela (Fig. 7.1). Moreover, together with all those pilgrims who only walk part of the way somewhere in Europe, there were well over half a million who experienced the route in 2022. Numbers are especially high in Holy Years, when the day of St. James (25th

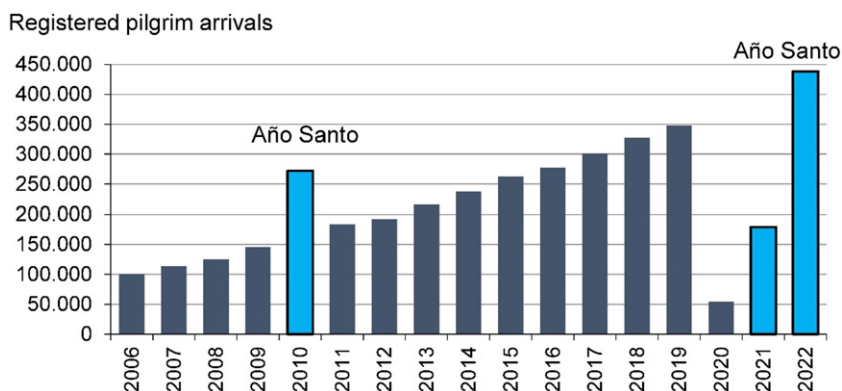


Fig. 7.1. Increase in Pilgrim Arrivals in Santiago de Compostela (2006–2022). *Source:* The authors. *Data:* Oficina de Acogida al Peregrino, Santiago de Compostela.

August) falls on Sunday, and after interruptions to travel restrictions caused by the global pandemic, pilgrimage recovered rapidly in the extended ‘Año Santo’ 2021–2022.

The Europe-wide network of numerous routes leading to Santiago de Compostela is constantly growing, thus making it extremely difficult to calculate the total length of all signposted ways (Fig. 7.2). Pilgrims consider the city of Santiago a destination, as well as the Way itself and the regions through which certain routes pass. The traditional trail from the Pyrenees to Santiago, known as the Camino Francés, is still the most frequented, although the flow of pilgrims is increasing even faster on other routes.



Fig. 7.2. Map of the Pilgrimage Routes of Saint James in Europe.
Source: The authors. Data: IGN (2017).

The Way of St. James is often associated with the expectation of more conscious experiences and a unique resonance (Lois-González & Santos, 2015). Culture and nature, traditions and history or religion and spirituality contribute to this notion in various ways. Additionally, very personal experiences and small everyday moments along the Way of St. James often lead to a more conscious form of travel. Conscience is related to one's own values, and pilgrimage is valuable in the truest sense of the word. Both social and religious values are decisive for the (sometimes very different) behaviour of pilgrims (Brumec, 2021); however, values also determine the behaviour of providers along the Way of St. James, such as hostels, restaurants and shops. Pilgrimage as a special form of travel generates and requires a special range of goods and services, characterised by typical virtues, qualities and values. These values associated with the pilgrimage route – as a network of actors, places, experiences and paths – create an image that raises very different expectations for every individual. All in all, however, this image generates the unique myth of the Way of St. James and the fascination that accompanies it – and perhaps also specific 'Destination Conscience'.

What is the purpose of 'Destination Conscience' anyway? Even more precisely, because the Camino is a complete journey, what is the purpose of 'Journey Conscience'? Can it be a compass of values for pilgrims or a key to a genuine and deeper understanding of the Way of St. James? Furthermore, for tourism providers, could 'Journey Conscience' be a guideline for destination management organisations (DMOs) and other tourism stakeholders seeking to develop credible experiences? If so, 'Journey Conscience' would probably require a strong narrative for the Camino de Santiago, which offers alternative approaches to tourism, religion and spirituality. In turn, this type of tourism could also be an opportunity for religious institutions to bring their messages and values closer to people (Sammet & Karstein, 2021).

A pilgrimage is not just about arriving at a destination; the path itself also motivates pilgrims (Hafner et al., 2012), albeit these motivations have changed over time. While religious motives traditionally dominated, profane reasons are often also important today (Duda, 2014; Marine-Roig, 2015). Many scientific studies on pilgrims along the Way of St. James have examined, for example, motives and expectations, socio-demographic structures, financial expenditure or interactions with locals. Santos (2021) provides a good overview of the current state of research. Spatial differences and changes in pilgrimage over time are also the focus of many scientific studies. However, depending on the method, location or time, these studies sometimes arrive at different results. There are also increasingly more interesting studies on the provider side, analysing, for example, their marketing strategies and the effects of the Way of St. James on destinations. The local population living along the Way should be considered as well (Pechlaner, 2017). Recent studies have addressed the role of local initiatives, DMOs and other tourism stakeholders, and so, based on the findings of such scientific work, this essay asks the following questions:

- Are there typical values, behaviours or virtues associated with pilgrims of St. James?
- Is there specific ‘Journey Conscience’ attached to the Camino?
- Who constructs, generates, propagates and consumes the ‘Journey Conscience’ of the Camino?
- Does the ‘Journey Conscience’ of the Camino change?

Who Changes Who in the Network of Pilgrims, Locals and Sites?

There have been hostels, restaurants and hospitals along the Way of St. James since the Middle Ages, and to this day, local inhabitants benefit from the economic stimulus provided by pilgrims. These economic effects are of regional economic importance because the trail mainly leads through rural and structurally weak areas, so pilgrims enable the local population to earn additional income. Most stay in private guest houses, boarding houses, pilgrim lodgings or other simple accommodation options. Especially in such small hostels, interpersonal relationships often develop, and pilgrims are treated as guests and not as customers. The Camino not only brings together people from different cultures, but the smaller hostels in particular also offer short but intensive relationships, which is appreciated by many hostel owners. For the vast majority, economic factors are not the only motivation to run a hostel ([Seryczynska et al., 2021](#)) because in addition to overnight stays, there are several other points of contact with pilgrims. The local population also benefits from the additional income from food or services ([Lois-González & Santos, 2015](#)), and so, the pilgrimage route is thus also a place of cultural encounters, where both locals and pilgrims alike influence each other.

With the increase in the numbers of pilgrims, however, newer types of pilgrims have emerged, and consequently, their values and motives have changed. Official statistics still confirm a very high proportion of those who are religiously motivated (43%) – or at least religiously or culturally motivated (50%) – but motivations are much more complex and do not fit into rigid statistical categories ([Pereiro, 2019](#)). The numerous surveys of pilgrims indicate that – depending on the scientific study – between 20 and up to almost 50% of travellers are religiously motivated, but more secular motives, such as enjoying the landscape or having an adventure or a cheap holiday, dominate nowadays. For this reason, the literature also speaks of the ‘secularisation’ and, in view of the increasing numbers of pilgrims, ‘massification’ of the Camino ([Rucquoi, 2019](#)). However, studies with in-depth interviews also reveal that many people walk the Way of St. James, for example, to initiate a new start in their lives or to deal with a crisis ([Kurrat, 2019](#)). The Camino as a form of ‘self-therapy’ ([Moulin-Stozek, 2019](#)) thus becomes a unique experiment in finding meaning and orientation.

Accordingly, there are certainly pilgrims along the Way of St. James with exclusively religious motives (e.g. penance, piety, veneration of saints), and there are also travellers with purely profane interests (e.g. self-discovery, culture, sport). However, for the vast majority, both secular and spiritual reasons (more or less)

play a role (Lois-González & Santos, 2015), resulting in a multi-motivational journey of ‘touripilgrimage’ (Pereiro, 2019). The combination of these two motivations makes the Camino twice as valuable: in a postmodern society, religious offerings such as pilgrimage are no longer exclusively symbols of a spiritual conviction but can also be interpreted in a more profane way, for example, as cultural heritage, a therapeutic method or a sporting challenge. Nonetheless, the sacred components of a destination can also be experienced in a touristic sense. For most travellers along the Camino, the assumed boundaries between religion, culture, self-discovery and sightseeing are therefore permeable. This has changed the Camino, but the Camino also changes pilgrims, in that their experiences may result in changes to their personal hierarchy of values, i.e. there is often a value shift towards welfare and the interests of others (Brumec, 2021). Consequently, it could be concluded that the Camino leads to greater consciousness of the pilgrim community.

Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, Between Journey Conscience and Overtourism

Walking the Way of St. James is generally regarded as a sustainable form of tourism, but its economic, social and environmental effects depend on the dimension of pilgrimage flows, as well as on the specific characteristics and capacity of destinations. In addition to the focus on sustainability, conscious tourism also includes ethical aspects concerning the interactions of all involved stakeholder groups, namely the experiences of travellers, local hosts as part of society, entrepreneurial activities and public institutions (Castillo et al., 2020). According to this definition, conscious tourism is beneficial for the coexistence of the local community and visitors, brings together natural heritage and cultural heritage and enhances spiritual values over material values.

The Camino connects people, as well as the cities and villages along the Way, in a landscape characterised by a striking concentration of a rich cultural heritage that consists not solely of sacred elements (Casco & Molinero, 2018). The growing recognition and popularity of the cultural route is resulting in more efforts to maintain this heritage and provide services, which in turn strengthens the attractiveness of the route as perceived by different types of pilgrims and other travellers. However, the lack of consideration of the Camino in some large-scale infrastructure projects with significant impacts on the landscape raises doubts as to whether there is ‘Camino conscience’ among planning authorities. On the other hand, Galicia and other regions also provide funds for ongoing improvements along the route.

At this point, it is necessary not only to analyse how pilgrims experience and perceive the Way but also to detect possible differences between the perceived and the projected image, in order to adapt the marketing strategies of destinations along the Way (Andrade & Caamaño, 2016). Indeed, the professional marketing campaign for the Xacobeo, i.e. the celebration of the Holy Year (1993, 1999, 2004, 2010, 2021–2022), has changed over time and merged with the promotion of

the Galicia region as a tourist destination. The Xacobeo provides a strong incentive of promoting the Way of St. James, the city of Santiago and Galicia, but it depends on the coordinated action of a great number of social groups, enterprises and public institutions and on their changing organisational structures (Álvarez et al., 2010). Ultimately, the Holy Year, as a time-limited but periodically staged ‘signature event’ (Hilpert, 2022), not only promotes awareness but also leads to a sharp increase in visitor numbers (Fig. 7.1). The presentation of Santiago de Compostela in marketing campaigns and in the media highlights its importance as a destination for pilgrimage and urban tourism. However, this mediated image is fixated on the attractiveness of the historic city centre and disregards the residents and their social reality (Escudero-Gómez, 2013).

The intensive promotion of tourism and the rapid growth of pilgrimage flows have meant that pilgrims as well as inhabitants increasingly perceive the last stages of the Camino Francés and the city of Santiago as overcrowded. Many local actors already recognise signs of overtourism in Santiago de Compostela, but they perceive them in different ways, very often depending on seasonality (Lopez et al., 2019), in that the numbers of tourists in hotels and other forms of accommodation are highly concentrated in the summer months (Fig. 7.3). In 2022, Santiago registered more visitors than ever before. After concerns about the future of tourism during the global pandemic, the debate about massification started again: is overtourism challenging the spirit of the Camino and the harmonious coexistence of residents and visitors? As an example in this regard, residents along the last kilometre of the Camino have protested against the inappropriate behaviour of pilgrims, resulting in posters indicating a ‘decatalogue of good practice for the end of the Camino’ being placed at strategic points along the streets (Vilas-López, 2022). In addition, locals appeal for more consideration and understanding – a behaviour that should be a fundamental part of conscious

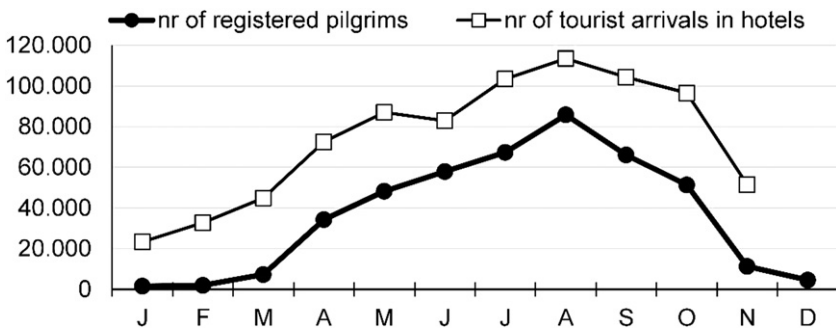


Fig. 7.3. Tourist Arrivals in Hotels and Number of Registered Pilgrims in Santiago de Compostela 2022. *Source:* The authors. *Data:* Oficina de Acogida al Peregrino, and INE.

tourism. Meanwhile, regional politicians celebrate the record number of pilgrims at the end of the Holy Year and desire more records in the coming years.

Rapid changes in the numbers and composition of travellers on the Camino raise many questions. Do people who are less guided by religious-spiritual motives tend to report their journey and present themselves more than others via electronic media, thereby contributing to a further change in the motivational structures of travellers on the Way of St. James? Does the shift towards motives of cultural tourism and sports lead to a loss of Camino conscience? Are influencers and the urge for self-promotion leading to Caminos looking more and more like long-distance trails or themed tourist routes? The frequent boasting about completing particularly long stages of the route in the shortest possible time has nothing to do with the spirit of the Camino. How do electronic media platforms influence travellers' behaviours along the route? Moreover, Galicia had to take measures to curtail the spread of the improper practice of pilgrims throwing away or burning their shoes and clothes at Cape Finisterre, at the western end of the route.

Pilgrims appreciate hospitality and encounters with people on the Camino, and they are grateful for their experiences and report them accordingly. Many experience support and friendly people along the way, and they like to give something back, perhaps on another pilgrimage or by participating in activities arranged by pilgrim associations in their own region. Experienced pilgrims, for their part, have recognised the increasing popularity of the Camino Francés and thus chosen other routes for further journeys. Empirical studies show an overall high level of pilgrim satisfaction, but they also reveal concerns about increasing massification and a loss of the Camino Francés's identity (Martín-Duque & Morère-Molinero, 2019). However, the impression of overcrowding on the path is very subjective and depends on individual preferences and different motivations. While some pilgrims seek tranquillity and distance away from people, others enjoy contact and exchange with fellow travellers. Others avoid the last 100 km of the busy Camino Francés and opt for a 'bypass' to reach Santiago via an alternative route. In the debate about the carrying capacity of the Camino Francés, there have been calls to increase the minimum distance of 100 km that pilgrims must walk to obtain the 'Compostela'. Such a decision has been rejected by Galicia, but it would favour the region of Castilla-León, where they hope to welcome more pilgrims setting out. Current dynamics affect the Camino conscience of pilgrims and local stakeholders. While, on the one hand, there is a quest to recognise traditional hospitality on the Camino as an intangible cultural heritage, on the other hand, some actors in the accommodation sector are calling for a reduction in low-cost public hostels based on donations. Of course, offering different types of accommodation is quite reasonable because they correspond to a differentiated demand and increase the added value of the Camino.

The numbers of pilgrims on the main route, the Camino Francés, are still rising, but statistical data reveal the diversification of routes (Fig. 7.4). The popularity of the Portuguese Way of St. James is growing rapidly. In many regions of Spain, pilgrimage associations and public initiatives promote the

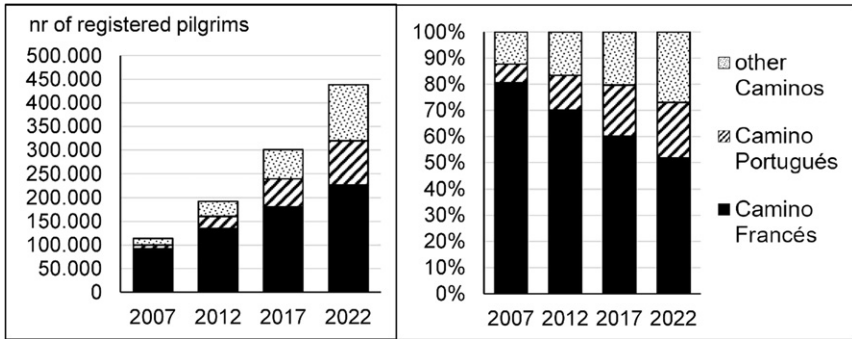


Fig. 7.4. Increase in Pilgrimage to Santiago and the Diversification of Routes. *Source:* The authors. *Data:* Oficina de Acogida al Peregrino, Santiago de Compostela.

recovery and signposting of routes to Santiago de Compostela, even from the south of the country.

Destination Conscience on the Local Level

One of these newly emerging, recovered pilgrimage routes is the Mozarabic Way of St. James, the Camino Mozárabe, which starts in Almería, in the south-eastern corner of Spain and about 1,400 km from Santiago de Compostela. From the Mediterranean coast, the path leads up to the mountains, passes along the Sierra Nevada to the city of Granada and continues via Córdoba up to Mérida, where it meets the Vía de la Plata. The ‘Mozárabes’ (Christians living under Islamic domination in the south of the Iberian Peninsula in the Middle Ages) used the route for pilgrimage to Santiago. At present, pilgrims are again walking the hitherto little-known path, mainly in spring and autumn (Fig. 7.5). Particularly, experienced pilgrims choose the Camino Mozárabe, with a seasonality very different from that of tourism on the Camino Francés and on the coast of Almería.

The revitalisation of this historical route offers opportunities for the enhancement of the rich cultural heritage of many small municipalities. In collaboration with the [Asociación Jacobea de Almería-Granada Camino Mozárabe](#) (hereafter ‘Association’) and the municipality of Alboloduy, a research group at the RWTH Aachen University studied the evolution and local effects of this pilgrimage route on cooperation and rural development in the province of Almería, combining surveys among inhabitants, pilgrims and tourists, with interviews directed at public institutions and local stakeholders (Voth, 2020). The Camino Mozárabe is becoming an element in territorial articulation and the strengthening of local identity. In cooperation with municipalities, members of the dynamic Association and local volunteers not only make great efforts to

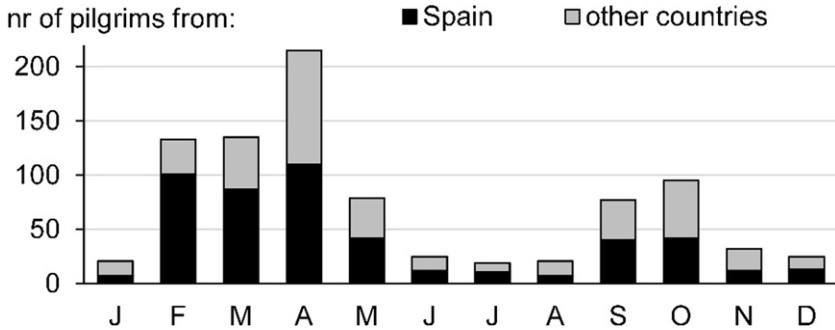


Fig. 7.5. Seasonal Pilgrimage on the Camino Mozárabe From Almería in 2022. *Source:* The authors. *Data:* Asociación Jacobea Almería-Granada Camino Mozárabe.

signpost and maintain the path, but they also create and disseminate a Camino conscience. In villages, the number of hostels founded and maintained by the Association has increased, as well as the number of pilgrims. The demand from increasing numbers of visitors helps to maintain services that are important for residents (Guil-Soriano & Voth, 2021). The municipality of Alboloduy in particular is very active in terms of promoting the Camino and implements many activities successfully. With the objective of favouring conscious tourism, the municipality has organised campaigns to raise awareness and stimulate the participation of local people, including all age groups, with special projects directed at primary schools. Inhabitants nowadays demonstrate a high level of knowledge about the Camino and like to welcome pilgrims, who in turn enjoy the hospitality and come into contact with people along the way. The village museum displays an exposition about the Way of St. James and the local pilgrimage route, and special information days and gastronomic events of the Camino are organised on a regular basis. A large scallop shell was painted in the middle of the town hall square, symbolising the local community's commitment to the Way of St. James.

Summary: Is There a Camino Conscience?

There is a trend towards more conscious travelling and an increasing desire to experience destinations in a more authentic way. Pilgrimages as a whole – and the Camino in particular – benefit from this trend. The image and the myth behind this unique pilgrimage path generate specific expectations, patterns of behaviour and perhaps also a special 'Destination Conscience' among not only travellers but also local actors. These characteristics of a destination (Santiago de Compostela as well as the pilgrimage route itself) are the result of exchange and experience, of interaction and communication. In this regard, it is necessary that locals and pilgrims come into contact with each other, and that the pilgrimage route

becomes a place of cultural encounters. Locals and pilgrims influence each other here, but only a conscious tourism (including not only sustainable but also ethical requirements) is beneficial for the fertile coexistence of the local community and visitors.

Many studies demonstrate that the motives of pilgrims have changed over time. However, it would be far too short-sighted to claim that religious reasons are less important today and profane reasons (sport, nature, culture, etc.) play a more important role. Rather, in a postmodern society, there are completely new combinations of the religious and the secular. Not only is this changing the Camino, but the Camino is also changing travellers. Surveys of travellers along the route note a value shift towards welfare and a greater awareness of others. However, the lack of consideration of the Camino in some infrastructure projects with massive impacts on the landscape makes it doubtful that such a Camino conscience also exists among planning authorities. Likewise, in the marketing campaigns of Santiago de Compostela, it is debatable whether all stakeholders are sufficiently and consciously considered. Problems of massification and over-tourism challenge the harmonious coexistence of locals and visitors, and contradictions relating to conscious tourism become obvious. Ultimately, changes in the numbers and composition of travellers could threaten the spirit of the Camino, and the current Camino conscience could become a victim of the increasing numbers of persons who are less guided by religious-spiritual motives. The consequences of such changes are of course assessed differently. There are pros and cons, losers and winners, places that suffer and others that will thrive. In any case, the Camino conscience is not a state but a process.

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