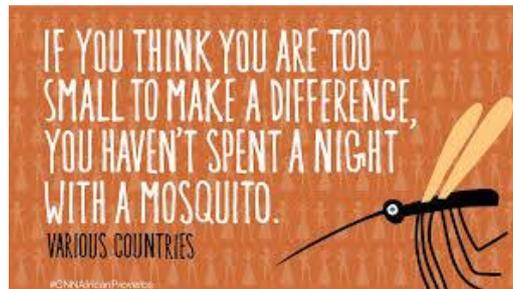
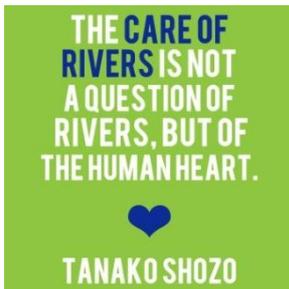




## 'Santiago for Pristine Water' - Paul's Journey



On 7 November 2015 Paul Whittering undertook an epic solo cycling trip of 2194 kms from Swindon, England through France and Spain on the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage route to create awareness of the Groot Marico River and its catchment and to raise funds to assist Mmutlwa wa Noko in our quest to protect this special area.

How did this journey - which started in Groot Marico, North West Province, South Africa and ended in Galicia, North West Spain - come about? Paul came out to Tara Rokpa Centre for just short of 3 months to cook and to attend a month of teachings on meditation. On the last day of the retreat I gave a heartfelt talk about the importance of our river and catchment and its magical source, the Marico eye, the threats facing it and the urgent need to protect this river system. Paul responded to this plea by committing to his ride. He had taken a swim in the eye and it had a major impact on him.

This is an excerpt from the 'Swindon Advertiser', one of the local English newspapers which featured Paul's journey: 'Since swimming in the Eye and hearing about the threat to its future as a clean water resource Paul has taken it upon himself to support Mmutlwa wa Noko, a charity protecting the ecosystem.

"You hear something terribly sad and it gets you right in the solar plexus. I felt like I had been hit. I just thought 'bloody hell'. It really made an impact on me." He added: "I swam in The Eye and I have never been anywhere quite so amazing. The water is so cold too, while everything around it is baking hot".

This is what Paul wrote about his journey:

" I set off on November the 7th 2015, wobbling and teetering my way along the Gloucestershire lanes. The bike laden with, as it turns out much in the way of unnecessary things, amongst which a very expensive Swedish tent, camping equipment that never got used, a folding guitar and a 25 key midi keyboard controller for music making when the mood took me. But of course when you are on the road there is little time for that. When at the end of a long days cycle finally you alight, accommodation having been sought and a hearty meal wolfed down, sleep beckons. And then you do it all again the next day.



My clothing for the trip



Things as it turned out I could have left at home for the most part

My departure was delayed by a month due to an eye infection that required a small procedure, and though the weather gods were kind to me in France, they took no mercy when having traversed the Pyrenees, I found myself in mid December working my way along the lonely Camino across the northern Spanish plains. Although flat as a pancake, the altitude stays at around 800 meters above sea level for a good 5 days, and let me tell you, it was cold. Very cold. Freezing fog enveloped me, the extremities, my feet and hands, despite being swaddled were achingly cold, the tip of my nose, a small damp cold thing attached to my face. My moustaches formed icicles.



Me after a gruelling 5 hour ascent after passing into Spain, Pyrenees



Wonderful old Renault 4, once ubiquitous, now somewhat scarce

There were few fellow camino followers at this time, one of the reasons I decided to do it out of season, but of those doing it, a significant portion hailed from South Korea. Apparently, if you are doing a gap year, having a career break or taking stock, if you are Korean you do the St James's way, the Camino to Santiago in Galicia.



View through the window, hostel,  
St Jean Pied de Port, France



Memory board, hustle, Nubiri, Spain



Panorama, Aquitaine, France

Through France, I stayed in French homes, via the Warm Showers network - a Couchsurfing thing for cyclists, and this was wonderful. That strangers are prepared to open up their homes to one, offering a bed and sustenance, and most importantly friendship, is at the most wonderful thing. Moreover it gave me the opportunity for me to practise my French. A memorable night nearing Spain, I stayed with a Fireman and his girlfriend, we had a good meal, and I found myself completely part of the conversation enjoying the frequent jokes and stories, my Englishness had faded and despite his thick southern accent I was able to understand almost everything.



A selfie with another lovely host, Troy Midi, Pyrenees, France



A typical lunch

In Spain when on the Camino proper, I stayed exclusively in the hostels provided for by the Catholic church for the pelegrinos (pilgrims). These can be lovely quirky spaces, one was in the rafters of an ancient church that perched in the square of this lovely hilltop town. But they can be institutional and rather cold with dormitories commonly having 100 hundred beds. Kitchen facilities are often limited to a sink and microwave. I discovered that a reasonable pasta meal can be produced using only a microwave!

As I left the plains and headed into the hills of Galicia, things got warmer but wetter. This corner of north western Spain juts out into the Atlantic ocean, and the reason that it is so verdant, is that it rains. A lot. And so it was that I heaved my soggy self into Santiago - the completion of the journey, delighted and yet a little sad that it had all come to an end. I found the pilgrims office in the ramparts of the wonderful old city, and presented my pilgrim carnet to the man at the desk- this is a booklet that you get stamped as often as possible along the camino - in bars, and hostels mostly as proof of the journey and all its pit stops. Whereupon I was presented with my certificate. My name is written in Latin 'Paulum'. I had been the sixtieth pilgrim to arrive at the pilgrims office that day. In the summer, incredibly, the numbers swell to 2000.



The mountains of Eastern Galicia and a Galician chicken of which there are plenty roaming about!

I learnt much about the friendliness and kindness of strangers on this trip. I learnt about my own endurance, and perseverance, something that I feel tallies well with the output of Mmutlwa Wa Noko and their gargantuan efforts they go to to protect the Groot Marico river and those that depend on it. I was delighted and amazed at the generosity of friends and family alike who donated to the cause. And at last after countless set backs, both bureaucratic and technological, MWN I am delighted to say have received the funds raised into their account. For my part, it has been a wonderful thing to help Jeanne Kemack and her team keep going with the important work they do."



A Santiago eatery where I had a rather greasy meal    The magnificent Gothic cathedral Santiago de Compostela

In the 7 years since Brian Sheer and I started Mmutlwa wa Noko there have been many challenges and stresses. We have also had many wonderful ,encouraging and heart warming experiences, but none more so than Paul's immense effort , generosity and kindness on behalf of our community.



Thank you is so inadequate!

Warm regards and best wishes to all of you,  
Jeanne

For more info see our website: [www.mwnoko.co.za](http://www.mwnoko.co.za) especially the page entitled 'Santiago' and follow us on Facebook.