

Homecoming to defend our Soil: last chapter of our personal Sustainable Odyssey

By Davide Colombo

“There must have been fog that morning. The seagulls and sea terns, always storming over the sea, rested motionless in their spots carved in the naked stone of the coastal maritime cliff. They saw the white sails approaching timidly toward the sandy shores. The keel, struck forcefully by the waves, forced the stream to curve and adapted the water to welcome the black profile of the boat’s aged wood. Salty foam sprang into the air, spreading its scent all around. There were no rowers. Only a figure stood near the white flag, using the rudder to steer towards the sand, aided by the strong winds always present during these months. The seagulls probably didn’t flinch at the sight of a new boat; they were more interested in the fishermen’s boat, fully loaded with fish, shells, octopuses, and calamari. An easy meal for them when they left the cliff together, seeking their retribution as the guardians of the Isle of Ithaca. The sea terns were different. They never missed the opportunity to spot a sailor. During their migrations from isle to isle, their eyes had been nurtured with the images of maritime routes and



Homecoming to defend our Soil: last chapter of our personal Sustainable Odyssey

By Davide Colombo

boats full of rowers. Generations of fierce travelers had built an ancestral link with all species accustomed to travel. The terns liked to distinguish themselves from the seagulls. They preferred to build their nests in the windiest parts of the cliff—a place too harsh for the seagulls, but peaceful for the terns, far from their noisy neighbors. They knew how to spot a real traveler by instinct. Like an orchestra, the first rows of birds began to fly from the cliff, starting from the bottom. In the blink of an eye, the sky was filled with white and black spots. The Isle was opening its arms to welcome back the King. The solitary spot on the bow was occupied by the figure of a man. Strong hands gripped the wood's edge—calloused hands, scorched by salt and war, with fingers hardened by handling ropes and swords. His sleeves were adorned with two golden bracelets, enriched with stones and opals. He took off the bracelets that would not have gone unnoticed among the peasants of the isle. He also noticed the pearls around his neck and the uncommon belt Calypso had given him—items he had completely forgotten about. She had insisted that a prince should return with all honors to his dominion, so why should a king be treated less? But he cast them into

2



+39 3466537350

davide.1492a@gmail.com

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/davidecolombo1492/>

easysustainabilityngo.org



Homecoming to defend our Soil: last chapter of our personal Sustainable Odyssey

By Davide Colombo

the sea as well. He had to pass unnoticed to fulfill his duty. Another war awaited him. Another enemy. But this time, the enemy's spears were not in some distant land beneath Troy's walls. The threat was in his own home. His wife was in danger, his son, his father. As soon as the boat neared the shore, he jumped into the water, and immediately, the scent of his land overwhelmed his senses. He could smell the olive oil from the hills, the oregano and fennel from the forests, the sage from the rocks near the sand, and the scent of beach hollies all around him. Even though he stepped through the water to the shore immediately, he lost all sense of time in that whirlpool of perfumes. His land—finally, after twenty years. Ithaca, his dominion, his soil, his life.”

Reading a lot in my youth, I couldn't help but be fascinated by Odysseus. Master of tricks and tactics, full of pride and self-esteem, bold and always one step ahead. Page after page, reading the Iliad first and the Odyssey after, I was astonished by all the



Homecoming to defend our Soil: last chapter of our personal Sustainable Odyssey

By Davide Colombo

adventures of this Greek king. He battled against and alongside Diomedes, wrestled Ajax, advised Agamemnon, beat Achilles in a footrace, and won the trust of his soldiers, sparing them the humiliation of losing a ten-year war through the idea of the wooden horse. He was Athena's protégé, Poseidon's target, losing all his men to the sea—devoured by monsters like Scylla or transformed into animals by Circe's magic. As a child, it was impossible not to feel a sense of belonging, or at least a desire to belong to something similar to him. What child wouldn't want to be the smartest or the strongest? Near the end of the book, after the Calypso episode, riding the enthusiasm of his recent encounters, I was expecting a grand return home. But my expectations were completely dashed by the final chapters. He managed to return home, to Ithaca, which he had long dreamed of, where he could finally embrace his Penelope. And what did he find? A desolate land, with usurpers at his door—sons of his own land who wanted to steal his throne, drink his wine, and feast in his halls. I didn't understand why I felt so sad. I had read the darkest moments of his journey with less affliction, and I was so sure I would feel more relief when he returned to his



Homecoming to defend our Soil: last chapter of our personal Sustainable Odyssey

By Davide Colombo

island. But somewhere deep inside me, I had the feeling that Odysseus might have preferred to face Tiresias in the Underworld again rather than return to a homeland no longer under his control, scorched by strangers and dried up by selfish neighbors. Even after all these years, this part remains the saddest for me. The sense of being a stranger in your own land—seeing it and not recognizing a single piece of soil—was so disorienting to me. As every child does, growing up has helped me understand the struggle in that feeling. Motherland and home are the first places we see, the first ones we live in—the places where we learn to ride a bike, the house of laughter and fun, but also of tears and change. Sometimes, it's that last element—change—that turns everything upside down. Looking to present times I can notice that cities and neighborhoods have been reshaped to accommodate more and more people, growing with the economy and for the economy, driving the environment into a distorted reflection of itself. Cementification, cattle farming, agriculture, climate change, floods, and fires all contribute to the degradation of soil, affecting not just our present but future generations as well. Looking at the current state of soil in modern cities makes



Homecoming to defend our Soil: last chapter of our personal Sustainable Odyssey

By Davide Colombo

me feel like Odysseus when he laid eyes on his beloved land after years of exile—lost in his own homeland, yet with a strong sense of duty to restore and repair it. Discussing soil means putting a critical environmental and biodiversity issue under the microscope. Soil is essential for the life of both humans and nature. Most of our food comes from the soil, which alone should be reason enough to protect it, but there are countless other reasons to defend it. Healthy soil provides us with clean water and fresh air. It also contributes to carbon sequestration, thereby helping to mitigate climate change and increase our ability to adapt to it. As a species, we depend on soil as fish depend on water. It is the very environment in which we live. Soils are fragile resources that must be carefully managed and safeguarded, not just for our own generation but for future ones as well.

In Europe, it is estimated that more than 60% of soil is in an unhealthy state due to unsustainable management practices, pollution, or soil sealing. The European Union has set an ambitious goal through the Horizon Missions: “A Soil Deal for Europe,” or



Homecoming to defend our Soil: last chapter of our personal Sustainable Odyssey

By Davide Colombo

as it is more commonly known, Mission Soil. This mission aligns with others such as “Restore Our Oceans” and “Build Smart Cities,” and in many ways, it can be seen as the completion of these other objectives. The EU Soil mission articulates in different objectives:

- Create 100 Living Labs and Lighthouses by 2030 to promote soil protection and restoration in Europe. This includes developing a transdisciplinary research and innovation program with a social science component to fill knowledge gaps and develop solutions for soil health.
- Launch activities, inspired by lighthouses and living labs under the Soil Mission, to address its specific objectives: reducing desertification, conserving soil organic carbon stocks, stopping soil sealing, and increasing the reuse of urban soil by enhancing soil restoration. These actions may also lead to positive side effects for the environment, such as preventing erosion, improving soil structure by



Homecoming to defend our Soil: last chapter of our personal Sustainable Odyssey

By Davide Colombo

enhancing biodiversity, reducing the global soil footprint, and fostering a self-reliant culture of soil defense within society.

Both objectives are firmly embedded within the broader EU policy framework. Soil plays a central role in the EU's future vision of becoming a climate-neutral continent and is an integral part of the Green Deal strategies. The EU strongly supports the Soil Mission through the establishment of EUSO (the European Soil Observatory) and by fostering synergy with the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to enhance the uptake and effectiveness of actions taken to protect soil.

Living labs are envisioned as collaborative initiatives between multiple partners at regional or sub-regional levels to co-create, test, and monitor solutions to soil-related problems. These labs are designed with specific characteristics:



Homecoming to defend our Soil: last chapter of our personal Sustainable Odyssey

By Davide Colombo

- Users—including citizens, businesses, and institutions—are directly involved in implementing the activities.
- The activities are characterized by co-creation, co-design, and co-development of solutions.
- Multiple approaches to the same problem are employed to identify the best solutions.

Alongside the living labs, lighthouses will be established. These sites will serve as key venues for demonstrating solutions, providing training, and fostering communication. They will be exemplary in their performance, located at individual sites such as farms, forests, industrial areas, and urban green spaces. The lighthouses will guide the living labs, acting as tangible examples of what can be achieved through common practice. As experimentation sites within the living labs mature, they will evolve into lighthouses, showcasing the practical implementation of innovative solutions for soil health. The power of this mission lies in the cooperation between institutions and the



Homecoming to defend our Soil: last chapter of our personal Sustainable Odyssey

By Davide Colombo

multi-actor nature of the project. Through the CAP, Operational Groups (OGs) have been founded under the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI). These groups will benefit from the activities of living labs and will have the capacity to replicate solutions on a larger scale in regions where living labs and lighthouses are not yet present. EU's project has been articulated in three different steps:

- The Introduction and Pilot Stage: This phase took place from 2021 to 2024. Establishing a successful living lab requires thorough groundwork, consistent activity engagement, and strong ownership of the initiative. The EU created two Coordinator and Support Actions (CSAs) to help launch 25 soil health living labs, organized into five projects financed under the 2023 Work Programme. Additionally, a support structure named SOILL-Startup was established to assist with the living lab implementation program.



Homecoming to defend our Soil: last chapter of our personal Sustainable Odyssey

By Davide Colombo

- **The Gradual Expansion:** This phase began in early 2025 and will continue until the end of 2026. After the initial creation, the "seeds" of living labs will be shared with other sites across different regions of Europe. Successive calls during this period will focus on addressing gaps in the performance of applied techniques and ensuring that successful methods are adopted more widely.
- **Scaling-up and Mainstreaming:** This is the final stage for living labs. It will follow the expansion phase, consolidating the labs' presence across the territories. The goal is to ensure that these labs continue beyond the Soil Mission's funding period and become self-sustained hubs. The EU's ultimate aim is to create a self-sustaining network of lighthouses that will spread a culture of soil restoration and sustainability, attracting and retaining investment in a sustainable manner.

There are already several projects in the EU related to soil restoration, developed outside and before the specific Soil Mission. It is crucial for these projects to support



Homecoming to defend our Soil: last chapter of our personal Sustainable Odyssey

By Davide Colombo

all activities related to soil defense and help foster a more sustainable culture. In the end, this will pave the way for lighthouses, inspiring change. Some of these projects were established as early as the 1980s and have endured as national and local programs.

With the Soil Mission, the EU intends to integrate all current activities into a more cohesive and articulated plan. Rather than disregarding past achievements, the mission seeks to recognize and build upon the successes of previous projects. Among other initiatives it is important to remember:

- The 2015-2016 People4Soil Initiative: This initiative was launched by EU citizens, NGOs, farmers, and scientists with the goal of raising awareness about the need for a strategic and legal framework to protect soil in Europe as a critical resource for ensuring food security, biodiversity conservation, and mitigating climate change. Although the petition collected 212,252 signatures, falling short of the 1 million target, the campaign was a strong example of cooperation



Homecoming to defend our Soil: last chapter of our personal Sustainable Odyssey

By Davide Colombo

between stakeholders to raise awareness about soil health and marked a step forward in advocating for sustainable soil management in the EU.

- The Eco-Schools Programme: Since 1994, this global initiative has been an excellent model of combined environmental activities. The program encourages students—from preschool to secondary school—to actively care for and protect the environment. Schools involved in these activities can earn the Green Flag, an international accreditation that highlights the efforts of individual institutions. Every two years, schools must repeat the accreditation process to maintain their Green Flag status.

- CARE Rewilding Iceland: Started in 2017, this national initiative integrates soil restoration practices with tourism and educational trips. The Graedir Island project focuses on land reclamation and invites groups and individuals, including tourists, students, and volunteers, to participate in activities like planting trees, restoring ecosystems, and preventing littering. This project



Homecoming to defend our Soil: last chapter of our personal Sustainable Odyssey

By Davide Colombo

fosters a collective culture of soil and environmental protection, engaging both domestic and international participants.

The Soil Mission is one of the EU's most challenging tasks. As a species, we alter the environment to meet our expectations, expanding and consuming resources, often without considering the consequences for the environment. This approach poses a serious limitation to our future existence. Soil cannot be treated as a sacrificial pawn in our quest for civilization, it is the very foundation of life and the cornerstone of our existence. The EU's Soil Mission aims to foster a culture of sustainability, but we must be willing to listen and act on it. Soil over-cementification, unsustainable resource extraction, excessive pesticide use in agriculture, and deforestation—all of these practices that support our excessive lifestyle—need to be reorganized into a more sustainable framework, one that considers the bigger picture. This is the ultimate goal of the Soil Mission: to show us a different path, a path towards long-term sustainability and soil protection. To avoid the fate that Odysseus faced when he returned home,



Homecoming to defend our Soil: last chapter of our personal Sustainable Odyssey

By Davide Colombo

finding a land transformed and unrecognizable, it is crucial to learn more about the Soil Mission. Knowledge is the first step toward meaningful change. If we do not act now, we risk losing the benefits of soil biodiversity and exposing ourselves to greater threats like floods and droughts. By that point, it may be too late to restore the health of our soils. Thankfully, more and more NGOs and publications, like Easysustainability, are actively addressing this issue, alongside national and international organizations. At the very least, we can all make small contributions to support this mission. Start by finding out if there is a living lab in your neighborhood and get involved. Together, let's actively become the change we want to see in the world.

