

REVERSING ORDERS:

FORESTERS AND THE LOCAL IN POLAND'S BIALOWIEZA FOREST

An NCEEER Working Paper by

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Executive Summary

Political and economic changes have often led to change in forest resources by new groups. Foresters acting in the name of the new state have tended to be agents that act on behalf of the state to nationalize the periphery. In the postsocialist border and forest politics of eastern Poland, state foresters altered the prominence of their nationalist images in the Bialowieza Forest in three important ways. 1.) They downplayed their historic role in nationalizing the periphery. 2.) They create new allegiances with the Belarusian identified local population and 3.) They referenced neighboring Belarus' preferential management of what is often called "Europe's last primeval forest." I present both an environmental history and an ethnographic account of relations between foresters working for the state, a wide array of biologists, NGO's, journalists and other conservationists whom I will label conservationists, and "local" people. My paper argues that foresters could deterritorialize their operation, at least rhetorically, because of the scaling up of conservationists, who viewed and promoted the forest as national, European and global heritage. Discourses about community-based and sustainable forestry further prompted foresters to defend and represent local interests against those of conservationists, including biologists living and working in the forest. The transcendence of cultural differences by foresters marks an important and novel component of the postsocialist period.

Introduction

Poland's Bialowieza Forest became a symbolic icon of Europe's primeval nature in the years following the political and economic changes of 1989. Polish conservationists seized opportunities triggered by the changes to draw attention to the threatened remaining old growth within the forest, eighty-three percent which is commercially logged (47,500 ha) and seventeen-percent of which is a national park (10,500 ha) with a strictly protected zone (4,700 ha). The image of the forest propagated at the international and national level of conservation discourse was a pristine landscape of swampy ancient trees and a free-roaming bison population; In other words, what one could see in the strict preserve. At the international scale the message of a threatened logged forest got lost to the more evocative message of a pristine forest so that foreign visitors often had no idea the forest was not all protected as a national park. From the local point of view a large part of the transboundary forest stretching into neighboring Belarus had been logged and replanted by resident woodcutters under the direction of State Forestry for nearly a century. Polish State foresters radically reshaped the way they and the Bialowieza forest would be perceived in the two decades following the democratic changes stemming from 1989. Whereas Polish foresters working for the state formed their organization as a nationalist cause in the 1920s they grew to reactively defend the local rights to resource extraction and development against national interests and even represent minority Belarusian interests in a "we the people" populist fashion. As the forest became more symbolic of pristine threatened nature at the national and international scale foresters used the opportunity to de-emphasize their nationalist past and unify the local into a multi-cultural set of political actors who could challenge forest management.

This paper contributes to debates about the role of the forester in nationalizing and controlling resources and people in the periphery. I argue that Polish state foresters were able to

strategically amplify the importance of the sovereignty of the local because of the scaling up of conservationists (Franklin 2002, Igoe 2004, Peluso 1993, Lowe 2006) but also in light of global forestry discourses about community management of forests and ecological forestry management (Menzies 2007, Carr and Halvorsen 2001, Brosius et al. 2005, Tsing and Zerner 2000, Hackel, 1999). The Bialowieza case offers an important opportunity to question many assumptions about the periphery, the local and how postsocialist Europe offers a specific set of historical circumstances for evaluating control of natural resources.

While clearly part of continental Europe, postsocialist Europe represents the historically underdeveloped and peripheral parts of Europe, an “almost” or “not quite” “west,” where the term “peasant” still has deep cultural meaning (Leonard and Kaneff 2002) given a very fast transition from near subsistence agriculture in the 1990s to participating in globalized agricultural markets, and in the case of Bialowieza, globalized tourist and ecological discourses.¹ As Larry Wolfe points (1994) out “eastern Europe” is an invention of “western Europe” or the opposite can also be said of citizens from the eastern side of the proverbial iron curtain as Svetlana Boym (2001) might add. Starting from the idea of Europe’s periphery and demonstrating how Bialowieza has long been important at various scale of nation and empire this paper shows how Polish state foresters overcame ethnic social divisions between Belarusian and Polish residents to converge a divided history into a shared present of external repression of the local. Paradoxically the “opening up” of the Bialowieza Forest in a postsocialist era marked by changing relationships to the state has meant that foresters tried to disassociate the forest from its powerful international image of a strictly preserved national park. In the process it appears that foresters deterritorialized the forest from the nation as conservationists claimed the forest in the

¹ Globalized timber markets, while also an important point of analysis, are not within the scope of this study. Upon reports from forestry officials wood was processed within a two hundred mile radius by Polish companies and used within Poland.

name of the nation and Europe. (Clearly the forest remains in control of Polish State Forestry). The post-socialist specifics of this case emerge in how actors conjure and imagine the local, the nation and foresters' representation of the state some two decades after the first free elections in Poland.

Periphery

Rare nature's "survival" in eastern Poland symbolizes a deep historic link for Europeans. Over the course of several centuries empires and settlers cleared the mixed hardwood forests that once spanned across medieval Europe. Bialowieza is not only a remnant of ancient woodland but touted as "Europe's last primeval forest," a wet lowland complex of fen, forest and meadow. Scholarship on protected areas and "pristine" nature has taught us that it is precisely the modern that conjures up pre-history (Neumann 1998, Braun 2002, Ranger 1999, Beinart and Coates 1995, MacKenzie 1990, Anderson and Grove 1987, Crandell 1993). Robert Pogue Harrison (1992) proposes that the concept of civilization has created a myth of traumatic separation between Europe and sylvan prehistory. Forests, especially ancient forests, offer a kind of universality so that prehistory in forests supports origin stories of the nation. Outbreaks of passion and love for "timeless nature" occur at moments when the nation is on a fast path to modernize. Poland sits at such a juncture, as do many formerly socialist nations of East-Central Europe.

While Communism was much more known for its ineffectiveness in environmental protection (Manser 1993, Gille 2007, Hicks 1996, Petryna 2002); such as forests destroyed by acid rain, the Chernobyl nuclear accident, soils contaminated by heavy metals, and polluting industries belching dioxides into the sky, these failures of communist modernity, (failed in the

sense that they didn't 'properly' modernize *and* they caused health and environmental catastrophes) also had several unintended benefits for nature. Europe's last primeval forest "survived" in postsocialist Poland at the eastern-most edge of today's European Union.

The forest provided conservationists and Poles more broadly with symbolic capital to leverage against their western counterpart's claims that they were not properly modern. Poland, as with many postsocialist, "underdeveloped" countries that joined the European Union since 2004 possessed some of the best biodiversity sites in Europe and these have become nation making tools that consolidate national pride through international attention on nature. Bialowieza contained species long extirpated from the rest of Europe, including all eight species of woodpecker, and most symbolically, a free roaming bison population, almost synonymous with the name Bialowieza. If Poland could protect this outpost of rare European nature it meant that they had the history, resources and etiquette to think and act at a Europe-wide scale.

The conservation "agenda" is generally depicted as benefiting all of humanity. Conservationists within Poland, widely linked to European and global conservation groups, want Poland to be perceived as exceptional for preserving Europe's last low land old growth under difficult historical circumstances where Poland has sought to define itself as central to Europe and European democracy rather than peripheral to it (Blavascunas 2008).

Europe's own peripheries, including much of Southern Europe, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, and Eastern Europe developed a different kind of alter ego, and alterity, in regards to Europe (Hechter 1999, Herzfeld 1987:69) and thus towards "natural" area. Largely those alter egos rested not in an "exotic" other, as with colonial sites of outstanding natural value, but in a familiar "other," a Europe "as it once was" category. This secondary category is what keeps people in Bialowieza working with and against each other to rid the region of its peripheral status

on the one hand and to turn the survival of rare nature into “progress” on the other hand. Survival of something that marks the past points to its retardation in the present (Gellner 1988:170). That which survives is not really fit to survive, which is what makes something a relic and not the dominant practice in a perceived “normal,” “modern” Europe. It is within these two positions, Bialowieza as a primeval European relict, and Bialowieza as a backwards outpost in need of development and democracy that foresters operate.

The specificity of a different kind of historical experience, an experience irrevocably altered by state socialism in the twentieth century, and the longer period of dividing Eastern Europe between the more and less developed parts of Europe, makes this part of the world an important place for thinking about the frames used for analyzing community knowledge about forests and foresters’ control over resources. That the state is not a postcolonial state, as with much of the scholarship about foresters and resource control, and that the state seeks its means of legitimacy both with and in opposition to Europe and the European Union means that state agendas are plural and cause conflicts over the very definition of natural European forests.

Neither foresters or conservationists held a unique view of the forest. They have all been attempting to foster the notion of a unique forest that survived. Yet, these two broad constituencies possess distinctive ways of seeing the same forest as something different.

Foresters see the forest as a premier example of a well-managed biodiverse woodland, which needs forester’s care. Conservationists see the forest as a European relict managed without logging, thinning and planting. Foresters and conservationists share the language that forest region has to be an object of sustainable development for the local people. They reach into the same environmental history. The difference is that foresters no longer emphasize their role in nationalizing the periphery and highlight their stewardship of the forest and multiple cultures.

From Royal Hunting Ground to National Forest of Redemption

When nations apply scientific forestry they commit themselves to visions of progress (Rajan 2006, Scott 1998, Sivaramakrishnan 2003, Lowood 1990), in all the teleological sense of that word. Progress often means moving peasants off the land, away from notions of communal property, into schemes for improving productivity in the forest. Much ethnographic scholarship on this topic has looked closely at the role of foresters in the colonial and postcolonial settings of the global south (Peluso 1992, Andrews 2002, 2009) where there is a constructed notion of a sovereign local (Hecht and Cockburn 1990, Raffles 2002) and a very different experience of the social category peasantry (Taussig 1980, Blavascunas 2008, Hetherington 2011, Esther Kingston-Mann 1999) living in villages. Within this scholarship the sovereign local often knows the forest much differently than the forester (Scott 1998) or the laborers brought in by the state, which make up a more malleable form of labor than the long established local population (Peluso 1992).

Anna Tsing's convincing argument that local knowledge has always had to come into friction with universal knowledge has marked an important theoretical advance in this debate (2004) and can be applied in situations where either foresters or conservationists act at different scales to manage resources. Accordingly, local knowledge co-produces universal knowledge through a conflictual engagement on the ground. In Bialowieza local knowledge is frequently constructed as Belarusian, given the ethnic minority that dominates the region, but also as "village," "autochthonous" and in opposition to national and international misconceptions about the forest and the people who live there (Blicharska et.al 2010).

Community empowerment and community managed forests are also globally circulating categories that inflect at the level of local politics in Bialowieza. Foresters have courted the

guidance of western development experts to maintain their power over the resource and influence over interpretations of the local. When locals are viewed in a transitional phase in development it helps foresters retain power. Local's Belarusian "otherness" has been triggered partially by Europe's last primeval forest existing on the border with Europe's "last dictator," Alexander Lukashenko (Blavascunas 2007), a point I will return to briefly.

The always unrealized goal of development in postsocialist Europe is rooted in a long resource history where Belarusians were long excluded from participating in commercial logging before being essential to an identity of the Bialowieza forest as logged "by and for local people." Given the forest's long royal history and then prominence in a newly reborn Polish state it would be hard to demarcate a sovereign local knowledge though for the forest has perhaps been too central in meaning for various empires and states.

A royal history of hunting situates the forests' value first and foremost in a national mythology. The forest is sacred and not cleared for agriculture, a point that foresters and conservationists share. In recorded history royal protection of the Bialowieza Forest began in 1409 when King of the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth, Wladyslaw Jagiello, set off on an 8 day hunt to supply game for his retinue at the battle of Grunwald, a historical event coinciding with the Christianization of the last pagan outposts of Europe (Samojlik 2005:9). From then on, various elites with some connection to the Polish state (a multi-ethnic unit for much of its existence) continued to use the Bialowieza Forest as an exclusive hunting reserve and local inhabitants were given titles to their land directly from rulers and expected to guard the forest in return. From the end of the eighteenth century until the outbreak of World War I the rights of the larger Polish landowners were increasingly encroached upon in a Poland partitioned by three larger powers, Prussia, Austro Hungary and Russia.

Russians took over large forested estates where it was in vogue for each Pole to showcase

the scientific forestry management of these estates (Schama 1995:45-60). Czar Alexander further subdued the landed Polish gentry by shutting down the forestry school in Warsaw, known as a bastion of discontent and organizing for the Polish national cause in 1832 after a failed Polish insurrection against Czarist Russia, an event with great resonance even in contemporary Poland (Schama 1995:64).

Beginning in 1915, after six-hundred years of royal protection from logging, occupying German forces systematically cut the forest for the first time in its history. Moved by the unprecedented damage in a post-war visit, Polish botanists called for Poland's first national park in the area of Bialowieza. The newly formed state of Poland granted only a small parcel of the forest (45 square km) as a strict nature reserve in 1921, while the rest was slated for management by the newly formed Polish State Forestry. Unable to organize a wide-scale commercial forestry operation in the early post-war days, Polish State Forestry contracted timber production to the British firm, the Century European Timber Corporation. In the years 1916-1922, foreign operators cut over one-third of the total forest area of what today is Poland and Belarus, leaving a job of forest restoration for the returning Polish foresters (Kossak 2001:391-407).

Polish foresters needed as much timber as they could to produce revenue for the new state, drained from the Polish Soviet War (1919-1921) in which Poland felt it had to move its borders as far east as possible to contain the Soviet's territorial ambitions. Instead of relying solely on the local Belarusian speaking population, many under the influence of Bolshevik ideology and members of the Western Belarusian Communist Party, ethnic Polish foresters hired labor from Central Poland (Nikitiuk 2004). Worker colonies sprang up in many pockets of the forest with make-shift housing for the newly arrived men and Polish Catholic Churches to serve their spiritual and doctrinal needs. They joined a small minority of Polish Catholics that had lived in the area during the Czarist period.

At the same time that Polish foresters returned to Bialowieza, their knowledge was shaped with and against that of field biologists extolling the uniqueness and endangerment of the forest. Field biologists at the Forest Research Institute, a special organizational unit of State Forestry, quarreled with foresters from the start of their relationship. Among cataloguing and studying the unique plant communities in the forest biologists at the Institute also worked to reconstitute Europe's last wild bison populations using individual bison from zoos throughout Europe. World War I had set a path of destruction not only for the old trees, but for the bison as well, with the last Bialowieza bison, which was also the last free roaming European bison, shot by a poacher in 1919. Zoologists and botanists operating at the Institute carved independence through their science, providing professional supervision of the Bialowieza National Park when it was first formed in 1932 and guiding the reintroduction of bison in the interwar period.

World War II halted both forestry and biology as Germans and Russians occupied the forest once again. Germans protected the entire forest from logging, mostly by way of Herman Goering's vision to turn the entire Bialowieza Forest into his private hunting reserve. Goering's vision never materialized. He spent much of the war avoiding the forest for fear of partisan attacks. And the Soviets utilized their Belarusian connections in WWII, calling upon local Belarusians to send the Polish foresters and other intellectuals to Siberia or work camps further east without continuing logging operations. When the war ended the Yalta agreements split the forest between the Soviet Union (modern day Belarus) and Poland. Historians speculate as to why the border was drawn through the forest after WWII with few satisfactory explanations. The result on the Polish side was that ethnic differences were to be "officially" put aside. Those who felt Belarusian were given the opportunity to immigrate to the Soviet Union, as only a few of them did (Wysocki 2010, Wierzbicki 2007, Mironowicz 2007). Significantly, the Belavezha Accords officially ending the Soviet Union were signed in the Belarusian part of this forest in

1991. Borders, democracy, and the line between east and west have long been mapped over the forest complex.

As a highly symbolic part of the Polish-Lithuanian Empire, the Russian Empire, the Polish state, and even the Soviet Union the peripheral status of the forest has long symbolized a rule at the center. The history of importing laborers to supplement and sometimes supplant resident villagers stretches back to the days before the forest was commercially logged. For example, seventeenth century potash operations enlisted Catholics from Mazowsze region. Jewish merchants facilitated much of the trade between mills, foresters and inhabitants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Functionaries and administrators for royal hunts have also been long integrated into local culture. Thus it becomes hard to separate local culture from state control of the forest or provide any evidence that locals are somehow purely Belarusian. Yet what is clear is that the main concern of Polish state forestry in the 1920s, at its inception that is, was central control over a region that had long belonged to Russia and to build a disciplined plan of state forestry.

State forestry located its national headquarters in Bialowieza in 1921 to reclaim the forest for newly reborn Poland. Foresters acting on behalf of the new nation built *Polish* structure and stability into the Bialowieza periphery. The forest was both capable of producing revenue for the new state and cementing the expertise of the forester at the local and national level.

Polish state foresters embedded their expertise as forest restoration in the interwar period. It is worth repeating here that occupying *Germans* in WWI and thereafter the *British* under the Century European Timber Company clear cut the forest without any form of replanting rather than Poles. In interwar Poland and postwar Poland industrial production methods of monocultural rows of spruce and pine began to cover some of the area. Half of the logged forest today is a multi-species, multi-storied forest with old growth making up twenty-percent of the

stands (Niedzialkowski et. al 2012:2), the other half are coniferous plantations. “Natural forests” and “natural stands” became the center piece of forestry within Bialowieza with the Forest Research Institute conducting research on the specificity of these stands.² However, Polish foresters altered stands to create marketable species growing straight timbers, drained and channeled forest rivers into canals, drying up “natural” habitats, and kept the forest floor free of dying and dead timber.

Aside from forestry in the twentieth century there was also a small tourist industry. The socialist state chose to develop tourism for workers adding a modest concrete hotel in the 1960s where the Czar’s 120 room palace had formerly stood, a historical landmark damaged by Germans as they fled the Soviets in 1944, and then dynamited to a bare patch in just before the hotel went up in 1964. Workers visited the strict reserve national park and the bison breeding reserve. And school groups probably outnumbered worker tourists, at least in recollection of inhabitants.

Agitation to expand the national park began in the 1980s when both foresters and biologists approached the Polish State about new management rules (Falinski 1992). In the early 1990s biologists and their conservationist allies had a new international forum for criticizing foresters and forestry, which had the affect of changing and charging the meaning of the local in ways previously unimagined and laying the ground for new postsocialist ideas about tourism and forestry.

Building the local

What changed in Bialowieza and Poland was how residents and citizens thought of the nation as modern, and thus democratic. With discourses about European reunification in the

² (<http://www.lasy.gov.pl/zakladki/aktualnosci/puszcza-bialowieska-fakty-i-mity>).

1990s came new opportunities for Poland to show that it was not only part of Europe, but in some cases superior to it. Successful nature protection became a strategy for highlighting Polish culture. Conservationists who spoke of the forests' European and international importance spurred a campaign asking the nation who owned the forest. Celebrity Poles added their personage to the campaign, including journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski, known for his accounts of revolutions in third world countries. Nobel laureate and UC Berkeley Professor Czeslaw Milosz contributed a now famous article (1992) comparing the forest to Krakow's Wawel castle in terms of its importance to national culture.

International attention also flourished in the postsocialist period. The BBC, French and Japanese television, among others, sent film crews and journalists to chronicle the primeval natural history of the forest all repeating the phrase "Europe's last primeval forest" at the beginning of every report. And the forest has appeared in more than one best selling book as a first chapter setting the stage for ideas about notions of primeval and European wilderness, such as British historian Simon Schama's treatise (1995) "Landscape and Memory" and American Alan Weissman's NY Times listed best selling book (2007), "The World Without Us." These books and countless such articles and media coverage abroad gave Polish conservationists more fodder to press their case about the importance of the forest at scales beyond the local.

By 2010 Polish conservationists ran with globally circulating ideas about a European primeval woodland. They strategized about how to bring European-wide nature protection laws, such as NATURA 2000, to bear on forest management. They coined their national anti-logging campaign, *Ty Decydujesz* ("You Decide,") inferring that local control was not appropriate for national and world heritage.³ By 2010 Greenpeace Poland and several other environmental groups sponsored a petition to take control of the forest out of local hands, gathering more than

³ <http://www.tydecydujesz.org/>.

500,000 Polish signatures. By spring 2012 a compromise wrought by the Polish Environmental Minister promised scaled-back logging and millions of dollars in central monies for the local community to develop sustainable community infrastructure such as solar heating, new ‘green’ certified schools, and sewage treatment plants.

Local people certainly possessed no official rights to the forest. Yet they felt emboldened to speak of what was theirs. “I have a *right* to what’s mine,” locals often repeated to me referring to the dead timber lying on the forest floor, trees which they had planted when working for State Forestry. They further elaborated that “pseudo experts,” meaning the conservationists who forced new rules requiring certain amounts of dead timber to lie on the ground, falsely interpreted the forest ecosystem that foresters simply knew better.

After several assertive attempts by conservationists to expand the national park over the whole forest, foresters acting in the name of local people, convinced politicians in 2000 to amend the Nature Conservation Act in Parliament. The amendment required acceptance by all affected local and regional authorities in the matter of creating new nature preserves. It had the effect of halting the creation and expansion of all nature preserves in Poland after the 1990s saw eleven new national parks in Poland and dozens of small municipal and private nature preserves.

A rowdy protest catalyzed the law and marked one of the first public assertions that foresters cared about Belarusian identity. After the Polish environmental minister visited Bialowieza in the year 2000, outlining how the area would all become a national park under “The Contract for the Bialowieza Forest,” foresters organized protests. Locals held signs in Polish and Belarusian naming particular biologists as the cause of their poverty. They threw eggs at the environmental minister. Biologists and their allies found it hard to believe that locals were capable of such organized political action and accused foresters of orchestrating the event.

That watershed protest marked an important turn in the region’s resource politics. The

protest was the first to join the interests of local Poles and Belarusians in opposition to the conservationists' agenda. The line between Polish and Belarusian or Catholic and Orthodox had long been clear and often antagonistic. People who spoke Belarusian, or rather a close dialect referred to locally as "pa naszymu" (our own language), often referred to Poles who immigrated in the twentieth century as *nawalodz*, translated to me as "the scum that grows on animal bedding" but more directly as "newcomer." Almost no Belarusians could be found in the upper levels of forestry and none of them within the National Park or biological institutes. In the 1990s conservationists linked the Belarusian character of the area to a "love of communism" as well as supposed cronyism rampant within State Forestry as evidenced in the gifting of a forest cottage to Prime Minister Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz in 2001, just as his leftist party, SLD supported the 2001 law on the protection of nature (*sic* local control).

Conservationists tried to celebrate Belarusian culture in its timeless character by highlighting local agricultural homesteads and ornamented cottages rather than any actual political history, which was too divisive for tourist promotions. One example of biologists attempts to cultivate a renewed local identity was a program called "Kraina Zubra," (Bison Land) an EU Life grant that chose a regional architectural motif of carved ornaments to link protection of bison with regional "multi-culturalism." Other conservationists formed groups such as Towarzystwo Ochrona Krajobrazy (Society for Landscape Protection), which also attempted to use an ideal of historic landscape, multiple languages, and regional culture in combined focus with nature protection more broadly, but certainly not a place where foresters and their supporters could be found.

If the postsocialist era shook up resource allegiances because of global discourses about imperiled forests it also reterritorialized a forest in the name of Belarusian identity. Belarusian identity experienced a revival in the mid 1990s led by identity conservationists from nearby

towns, such as Hajnowka and Bialystok. Several identity conservationists joined foresters in protest against the park expansion. An expanded national park would destroy the Belarusian minority's chances for democratic development by locking them into a reservation like "Indians," people told me.

Such sentiment gave rise to conservationists finding family resemblances between local attachments to socialism and neighboring corrupt Belarus, ruled by dictator Alexander Lukashenko. Conservationists stereotyped Belarusians in Bialowieza as a "beaten-down" and "passive" people easily coerced by the foresters' and Lukashenko's logic. The monument in front of the Orthodox Church bore the inscription "to the heroes of socialism." Conservationists suggested a Belarusian identity that was akin to Homo Sovieticus, deeply rooted in their place history, and representative of their "out of touch" attitude toward a global culture of environmentalism. Conservationists often remarked about how the streets were still named after local Bolshevik supporters, such as Olga Gabiec. Gabiec was detained in interwar Poland for leading the illegal Communist Party of Western Belarus whose main goal was to join Polish lands with the Soviet Union.

Few residents of Bialowieza crossed to Belarus anymore, losing contact with relatives since the pre-war period. Residents watched Belarusian television programs and frequently commented on how life in Belarus was more stable than in modern Poland. Residents on the Polish side, even some with an ethnic Polish identity closely kept tabs on how well managed the Belarusian side of the forest was. The anti-park lobby provided links on its website to a Belarusian television reporting on how poorly managed the Polish side of the forest was, with dying dead trees lying on the ground.⁴

When foresters contested conservationists' representation of local people as susceptible to

⁴ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZJ0Lyq_OMk&feature=player_embedded&noredirect=1

authoritarian rule, they inscribed local people as a mild-mannered minority in need of paternal care. Bialowieza carried “democratic” traditions *because* of foresters’ ethos. Foresters evolved a representation of themselves as a transhistorical power that never lost their independence, even during the socialist era, never invoking conservationists’ accusations that they supported undemocratic local culture. In fact they saw themselves as instrumental in protecting local minority interests against the anti-democratic conservationists. Foresters too had received international trainings on topics like community-based forestry, organized for example by the US Forest Service exchanges with Poland in 1998 and sustainable development monies streaming from the Danish Environmental Ministry in 1999.

One senior forestry official explained how democracy and forestry tradition worked in Bialowieza by contrasting Poland with neighboring dictatorial Belarus.

“In Belarus (on the other side of the transboundary Bialowieza Forest) you can have this big national park because the residents of that side of the forest all work in the park, but here in Poland we have residents, ordinary people. Those are people who have rights given to them to settle directly from the Czars. On what principles could we take those rights away from them? We could change that situation but that would be Communistic. There is a proverb in both Polish and Russian, *ciszej jedziesz, dalej będziesz* (One can go further if they remain quiet)”.

“Maybe we will find a method of protecting the forest that will quiet everybody. We don’t know how to do that, but we can’t do this in a spirit of conflict (with the local people). In Communist time you could have created this park, and no one would have disputed it. But now things are different and you must speak up to get what you want.”

Foresters earned the loyalty of local people not because they could provide them with jobs in the postsocialist era but because they spoke as defenders of the local and importantly used the power they acquired through actual appointments to local municipal councils or in tight alliances with those controls to control to support local people’s rights to access the woodland. Moreover they began to talk about the right to develop local people’s private property abutting the national

park. And for the many ethnic Polish laborers that were brought in throughout the twentieth century these people had the opportunity to purchase housing that had previously belonged to the state at very reasonable prices. Many of these houses were also in desirable locations, at the edge of the forest in some cases, which made them successful bed and breakfast operations with the tourist boom, which I will explain shortly.

What is striking in this forest conflict is the ability of things European and things Belarusian to command the present and future space of the forest while neglecting explicit attention to the ethno-historical and class histories that constituted the resource debate. The locally shared history of Bialowieza is one where people have not forgotten the past where the Polish state divided Poles and Belarusians throughout much of the twentieth century. Yet it is clear that a new shared identity is emerging where “local people” express encroachment by national and global interests that talk about “their” forest as threatened and offers “them” opportunities to sustainably develop. In the process, ethnicity, while present, is subsumed to a shared oppositional experience even as a Belarusian identity movement could be linked to the forestry agenda. Moreover the effects of that development have provided locals training and small loans to open tourist businesses. While not all, most local people have risen to a middle class standard of living.

New Wealth and Allegiances

There was something highly teleological about development of postsocialist Europe (Kingston-Mann 1999), especially its rural parts where modernity represented the ultimatum of reforming the backwards countryside into something that resembled a west European standard of living (Cope 2007, Buchowski et.al 2001). Eastern Europe has long been projected as the “underdeveloped” part of Europe, where its elite populations were killed off during WWII and

replaced with unsophisticated villagers, or where there were still too many villages and rural inhabitants. In 1989 Poland for example, forty percent of the population lived in the countryside. The European Union's Common Agricultural Program offered Poland and its farmers only partial subsidies until it could reduce its number of farmers (Dunn 2003).

In the Bialowieza Forest region there is a linear story for many about a poor series of villages that benefited from its proximity to an urban area (Bialowieza is 200 km from Warsaw) and its attractiveness to urban tourists as a vacation destination. Bialowieza, like most other rural areas of socialist Poland was made up of small peasant farms, often less than 2 or 3 hectares each, made even less productive by the presence of poor soils and wild animals frequenting the fields. Ethnic Poles and Belarusians in Bialowieza raised pigs, sheep, and cows in the early 1990s. Most plowed potato and rye fields with draft horses and had vegetable gardens to fill root cellars for the winter. Indoor plumbing at that time was a luxury of visits to urban relatives. And nearly everyone worked in some capacity for State Forestry.

The forest not only supplied full time work for many and seasonal work for most it was also a direct resource for household consumption. Despite official pressures to refrain from poaching, grazing cattle in the woodland and supplementing household firewood supplies with illegal takes, foresters often looked askance as villagers conducted such activities. The forest was a commons throughout the socialist period and before. Only since residents experienced a tourist boom by about 2005 have people largely stopped going to the forest for work and food and fuel. "Forest access" is a talking point that comes up in negotiations about local people and sustainable development, but since the explosion of the tourist industry around 2005, and local people's subsequent rise into the middle class few people even go to the forest to collect mushrooms and berries stating that they are too busy with their businesses to find time.

It seemed possible to sustainably develop Bialowieza in the 1990s when international

attention was drawn to the rare forest and backers such as the World Bank's GEF (Global Environmental Fund) and the Danish Environmental Minister provided financing and expertise to State Forestry, the National Park and the local councils. Beginning in 1998 WWF for instance worked to build better tourist infrastructure encouraging households to convert their homes into agrotourist operations. Many development efforts counted on a local entrepreneurial spirit to overcome obstacles to nature protection.

The models put forth celebrated and showcased the tiny Polish farmsteads at the edge of the great forest where people were supposed to retain their communitarian traditions while also intensifying their individualistic and entrepreneurial initiative. Trainings centered on running a small business and meeting health codes for home stays. Economic growth and tourist growth spurred by early international attention on the region yielded contradictory results. Residents gave up farming. With globalized markets for food it became more economical to purchase staples like milk and meat from the store than to grow their own. Residents ended up purchasing not only their own food, but food fed to their bed and breakfast clients from foreign-owned “hypermarkets” in nearby Hajnowka, such as the German-owned “Kaufland” and the Portuguese-owned “Biedronka.” They remodeled their small wooden cottages into towering three- and four-story accommodations for tourists, much to the chagrin of landscape lovers in NGOs. In tandem locals supported logging the forest and building on protected forest meadows, which abutted the park. These were privately owned meadows after all, and they no longer needed them for livestock. However, European-wide Natura 2000 laws prohibited development on the meadows to the ire of most residents (Grodzinska-Jurczak et al. 2011).

Three large hotel complexes also vied for opportunities to build in the most accessible and attractive locations in the village and in their decorative motifs conjured a non-specific peasant past linked to royal dramas. The Best Western featured the nightclub “The Czar’s Boudoir,” and

another hotel, Soplicowo, named for the manor in Adam Mickiewicz's epic poem *Pan Tadeusz* offered a caged rotunda display of a poacher's cabin, with rabbits in one compartment of the display. Visitors came, many just to attend conferences in the hotels, but even the conferences often had bonfire parties at managed sites in the commercial forest and offered excursions to the strict reserve within the national park.

The booming tourist economy triggered a politically empowered local community. Instead of still working for State Forestry most households had their own business. Nearby town residents were now commuting to Bialowieza to work in the big hotels. The Bialowieza Forestry district an area of some 2500 inhabitants (many of them elderly and retired) employed 150 full time employees in 2011 and hired approximately 50 seasonal laborers as wood cutters. By contrast the tourist industry employed around 500 people, both persons who work for hotels, tourist operators and many of whom own their own bed and breakfasts and other businesses, such as restaurants. Yet ordinary people who became successful business owners saw their interests advanced by state foresters rather than conservationists. The strict protection model was linked to keeping the villages of Bialowieza "village-like," and interpreted as "outsiders" coming in and telling them what to do. Foresters asserted their model for successful economic development as one that supported local rights front and center.

Even as residents achieved a high level of development as seen in the visible markers of remodeled homes and new cars, local people played-up the notion that they relied upon the forest for their subsistence, as if they were trapped in a former development stage by conservationists. One forester told the BBC that freezing local people could go ask the conservationists why they didn't have fuel for the winter when most local households had converted to highly efficient biofuel furnaces, funded by sustainable development funds from the NFZ (The National Fund for the Environment), and powered by sawdust, wood chips and other "forest waste" that could be

obtained easily by the large forests complex surrounding the Bialowieza Forest (made up of pine plantations).⁵

The dramatic social and economic changes to the region registered in a lament on the part of local people sometimes and a strict guarding of their new privilege. Even as they had considerably more material well being, jealousy ran rampant between neighbors. People remembered a time of collective solidarity when they all went to plant trees together in the forest, gathered on the streets to sing together. Work in the forest became a focal point of how the community had been united.

In turn foresters adopted the language of the local and downplayed their history of working for the Polish nation and against Belarusian identity. While clearly continuing to be part of a much larger nationwide organization state foresters started to blame national and international interests for usurping local democracy. Foresters used language of serving the local and of local traditions. The “local” became a stand-in for anyone not in the higher intellectual or administrative classes (such as scientists or foresters, artists or other big business hotel owners). And locals spoke of the legitimacy of the forester as the ruler and specialist on all matters pertaining to the forest.

“The forester is like the auroch (the ancient progenitor of the domestic cow). He keeps the canopy open for new growth,” one manufacturer of ceramic bison for tourists told me. Or “The forester is the boss and specialist. He should be telling us all what to do with the forest, not some environmentalist who doesn’t have a clue.” The yearning for a rural order with the forester at the top symbolized a hope that foresters, given the right amount of power, free from conservationists’ meddling, could revive a golden age of village unity with continued local possibilities to develop their properties free of restrictions imposed at the national and EU level.

⁵ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/fast_track/9714333.stm

Reversing Orders

Appadurai's dictum (1996) that the "production of locality changes the orderliness of the nation," finds its case in point in the Bialowieza Forest, a place where foresters were once synonymous with Polish nationalism and now seem to be deterritorializing the forest from national interests. While conservationists adopted the language of the nation as a modern nation superior to, but also looking after the concerns of Europe, foresters chose an underdog position, via the Belarusian identity of the local, to retain their authority and position in a shrunken state operation. This is not to say that local knowledge of the forest and a foresters' knowledge were identical, nor that state foresters were no longer agents of the state, but rather that post-socialism confused issues of the nation, the periphery and most important here the forest's identity.

And as for local knowledge, locals were not necessarily looking at the trees as a schedule of areas to be felled or in terms of board feet of saleable timber when they saw the forest or even remembered their days working in the forest. However, the paradigm of a working commercial forest that would maximize a profit from its timber and a forest that needed the forester and his hierarchy of values, including his ecological interpretation of the woodland was espoused at the local level as the local point of view. State Forestry invoked and received a great commitment to its superior forest knowledge from "locals," in a way they never could have done when locals all worked for State Forestry at the same time they tried to "illegally" poach and take wood from the forest, or during the interwar period when Poles and Belarusians felt divided by allegiances in wars.

Such backing of the forester and his model of forestry was possible¹) because local people's values changed. They rarely entered the forest anymore and like most business people grew concerned about how to increase their profits. The forest was largely symbolic of

development ends and the forester's model supported this. 2.) The Bialowieza Forest when presented as a primeval icon of European nature becomes ancestral to the idea of Europe (Herzfeld 1987). In the era where Poland “rejoined” Europe through European Union membership, making Poland’s forested border with Belarus the forested border with Europe’s last dictatorship, European ideals also drove a local rights movement. In a very real way for locals and conservationists foresters appeared less condemning of the socialist past, including local’s participation in supporting Communist rule, and more protective of local people’s rights to develop their private land. While these may seem like oxymorons, in the postsocialist setting the idea of communism is a flexible tool to reimagine circumstances in the present and what it means to be modern is precisely to neutralize the past (Ranger and Hobsbawm 1992). Then the order of the nation is one where Polish state foresters have made themselves more local and have done so only because global opportunities and development projects have also produced the idea of the local.

While it would seem that ecological politics with their concern for a global environment and disappearing forests would be the driver of a deterritorialized forest, it is in fact foresters who have downplayed the importance of the forest for national interests, and international interests. The forest is more a symbol of the nation and larger notion of Europe when conservationists represent it. It is foresters who have conceptualized their “sustainable” form of forestry as transnational, but not international, believing that their connection to Belarus is bound up in a responsible attitude toward forests and people, that forests need foresters and so do communities. Foresters don’t always need to connect across the border to make the case but to reach into the Polish side of the forests’ multi-cultural make up. By doing so foresters appear to be transcending cultural differences that once divided the region and entering into a new era of

democracy and sustainable development. The imagined past of everyone working together productively and peacefully in the forest works as a kind of nostalgia to unite jealous locals in opposition to conservationists' plans to expand the national park, further control the ecological management of the forest, and put an end to logging, and therefore state forestry in the Bialowieza Forest.

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