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3 Europe and its Environmental Other(s): Imagining Natures for "Global" Conservation

Abstract Conservationists working in international organizations have often ascribed meaning to European nature by comparing it with geographically distant environments. Over the past century, the tropics have played a prominent role in these cross-geographical comparisons – serving as Europe's environmental other. This chapter argues that the dichotomy between European and tropical nature has influenced conservation discourse in various ways. For a long time, it has contributed to the marginal position of European nature in international conservation imaginaries, which have usually focused on the supposedly wilder tropics. In the conservationist narratives of some institutions (such as the Council of Europe), European nature gained a more prominent place, but without questioning the dichotomy between Europe and the rest of the world. In these contexts, the idea of European environmental exceptionalism has helped to build identity, looking for the 'European genius' in the rural environments produced by the continent's civilization. More recently, cross-geographical comparisons have been mobilized to support initiatives to rewild the continent. Here, geographically distant primeval nature served as a model for what could be 're-stored' in the European context.

Keywords environmental other; tropics; wilderness imaginaries; rural landscapes; rewilding

In 1928, the British novelist and philosopher Aldous Huxley published an essay entitled "Wordsworth in the Tropics". In the essay, Huxley took issue with the conception of nature as promoted in the work of the celebrated romantic poet William Wordsworth. More specifically, Huxley opposed the idea that "Nature is divine and morally uplifting". In Huxley's view, Wordsworth had mistakenly come to such a conclusion because he had only experienced "the Gemütlichkeit, the prettiness, the cosy sublimities of the Lake District". "A voyage through the

Note: I like to thank Simone Schleper, as well as the editors and the reviewers of this handbook for their comments on earlier versions of this chapter. The research for it was sponsored through the VICI project 'Moving Animals' (VI.C.181.010), funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO).

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https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110669213-004

tropics", Huxley added, "would have cured him of his too easy and comfortable pantheism". If only Wordsworth had traded Europe for the jungles of Malaya or Borneo, he would have experienced the "diversity and utter strangeness of Nature". Such jungles were indeed not only "marvellous", "fantastic", and "beautiful" but also "terrifying", "profoundly sinister", "foreign, appalling, [and] fundamentally and utterly inimical to intruding man". Huxley wondered whether "in the damp and stifling darkness, among the leeches and the malevolently tangled rattans", Wordsworth would still have hailed nature's "divinely anglican character".[1]

Among the many things that are striking in Huxley's argument, one is certainly the rhetorical power of cross-geographical comparison. In the essay, European landscapes only appear as "well gardened", "tamed", and "temperate" by contrasting them to faraway and "occasionally diabolic" rainforests. The nature of Europe in general, and the Lake District in particular, receives meaning and value by being compared with its environmental other. The tropics, Huxley suggested, show nature's true character: its "disquieting strangeness". The European landscape, to the contrary, has nothing on offer but "a work of art".[2]

Huxley's literary strategy was neither original nor limited to the toolbox of essayists. For centuries, authors of various kinds have given meaning to landscapes, environments, and ecosystems through cross-geographical comparison. In many instances, such comparison has become crucial to the ways in which these landscapes, environments, and ecosystems are experienced, understood, valued, and dealt with. In this chapter, I will explore the mechanisms of such cross-geographical comparison by focusing on one context in which they have held particular sway: the world of non- and intergovernmental conservation organizations that define themselves as "international". Conservationists, of course, have been pre-eminently involved in assigning value to nature. Furthermore, the international conservation circuit has always been dominated by men (and some women) who – unlike Wordsworth – are well travelled and, thus, hold a privileged position to make cross-geographical comparisons.

International organizations for the protection of nature have been established from the 1910s onward, growing in size and importance as the twentieth century proceeded. For a very long time, Europeans were clearly overrepresented in these organizations, but in spite of this, they certainly did not devote excessive attention to European nature. Rather, their work concentrated on remote wildernesses that captured their imagination as more authentic and genuinely "natural". This imagination about distant others, however, fed back into the approaches they developed when they did zoom in on European landscapes. Whether the far-off wilderness became a model or an antithesis, it would certainly inform ideas about how to think of nature in Europe. This chapter follows

the logic of these two forms of imagining. Firstly, it looks into the (European) imaginaries of the (non-European) environmental other. Secondly, it discusses how, from the early twentieth century to today, comparisons with far-off wildernesses have impacted on the understanding and valuing of Europe's own nature.

Obviously, the leading actors in the conservation organizations discussed here were Europeans of a particular kind. Most of them hailed from Western Europe. Many, furthermore, operated from cities that, until the mid-century, were at the centre of colonial empires. A majority of them shared a distinct social and educational background – belonging to cosmopolitan upper-middle classes and having received academic training, typically in the natural sciences. As will become clear in this chapter, all of these aspects mattered for the ways they imagined both Europe and its environmental other.

This chapter is ultimately about ideas rather than practices. It focuses on the discursive framing rather than the actual managing of nature, on imaginaries rather than policies. Yet, the two are, of course, not entirely separable. Conceptualizations of nature, its meaning, and its value self-evidently shape practices of protection and management. This makes cross-geographical comparisons of particular importance. They not only fulfil a literary function but also have performative power. As such, these comparisons are integral to decisions about which nature to protect and how to protect it. European nature, this chapter suggests, is not only figuratively but also literally constructed through its others.

1 Preserving the Other

For a long time, scholars working in the tradition of Edward Said have used the concept of otherness to describe European imperialist representations of non-Western cultures.[3] Since the 1990s, however, cultural geographers and historians have broadened the concept, devoting growing attention to the othering of non-Western natures. With their research, they have shown that various geographical spaces could serve as an antipode of Europe's natural environment. Europe's counter-image could be found, for example, in the "empty" Arctic tundra, or in in the "strangeness" of North America's Rocky Mountains.[4] Most studied, however, is how, since the fifteenth century, "the distinction between temperate and tropical lands" has become "one of the principal manifestations of environmental otherness in European thought".[5] The European explorers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries constructed the New World as an alien land and its nature as both opulent and dangerous. The travel writing of later centuries by the likes of Alexander von Humboldt and Charles Darwin only reconfirmed this ambivalent "tropicality" (see figure 1). They stressed not only

Figure 1: Alexander von Humboldt is one of the influential authors whose work constructed "the tropics" as Europe's environmental other (Eduard Ender, Alexander von Humboldt und Aimé Bonpland in der Urwaldhütte, Berlin, Akademiearchiv/BBAW P/BON-1053).

the grandeur and diversity of tropical nature but also its wild and chaotic character, putting all this in strong contradistinction to what they had observed in Europe. Thus, the idea of the tropics' environmental otherness, developed and reinforced over centuries, became strongly entrenched in Western culture by the nineteenth century. In many ways, it still resonates today.[6]

The encounter with the environmental other has been crucially important in the development of ideas about nature in Europe. Most notably, it played a critical role in the rise of conservationist thinking. Historian Richard Grove has shown how the ecological destruction of tropical island "Edens" (as the author calls them), raised early environmental consciousness among the eighteenth-century European scientists who witnessed the consequences colonial capitalism had on the ground.[7] Others have noted how the new imperialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries intensified both the ecological impact of the colonial economy and the cultural anxieties it generated.

An imperial conservationism took shape, which, alongside the spread of civilization, saw the preservation of at least some of the last patches of "untouched" wilderness as a core duty of European rule. Social-evolutionist conceptions of history buttressed these ambivalent ideas of civilizational self-regulation. Social evolutionism implied that Europe was the spearhead of modern civilization, whereas "primitive" non-European populations and landscapes were remnants of a distant past. Such a "denial of coevalness", to use the phrase of Johannes Fabian, was crucial to the discourse of the imperial societies for fauna preservation that were established around 1900. The rhetoric of these societies focused on presumably "empty" and "primeval" landscapes and the charismatic mammals these landscapes contained. Ironically, it turned the European "civilizers" into the stewards of the "natural museums" that remained untouched by civilization.[8]

The old colonial imaginaries still reverberated when, in the early twentieth century, "international" organizations for nature protection were founded in Europe. This was the case for the short-lived Consultative Commission for the International Protection of Nature, set up by the Swiss naturalist Paul Sarasin in 1913, as well as for the International Office of Documentation and Correlation for the Protection of Nature (later the International Office for the Protection of Nature), established in 1928 under the leadership of the Dutch insurance agent Pieter-Gerbrand van Tienhoven. Sarasin, strongly influenced by his expeditions to South-East Asia, focused his attention on what he saw as the vanishing wildernesses at the world's fringes.[9] Apart from the Arctic regions, he singled out Africa as a continent where animal populations and their supporting ecologies had remained "almost untouched since prehistory". Given the extension of these last surviving majestic ecosystems, Sarasin stressed that their protection preferably took the form of "large-scale reserves".[10]

Van Tienhoven perpetuated similar visions in the interwar years. He aimed at internationalizing the management of natural resources in the colonies – or "those wild countries", as he called them on fundraising tours.[11] Just as Sarasin, he believed most of the remaining "primeval" nature could be found in the imperial periphery, where approaching modernity constituted an imminent threat. In 1931, in a letter to his preservationist friend Harold Coolidge, Van Tienhoven warned about the extent of potential future destruction: "In the wonderful world of tropical climate in which are to be found the Primates, the Giraffes, the Rhinos, the Elephants, the Antelopes, a loss of unfathomable deepness will be felt when all those species are gone for ever."[12]

Within these imaginaries, sub-Saharan Africa took a central position. The pessimism with regard to this continent was partially informed not only by modern extinctions, like that of the bluebuck (1800) and the quagga (1883), but also

by the paleontological record. Palaeontologists, such as the American Fairfield Osborn, indicated that several continents had already experienced an extinction wave that wiped out most of their large charismatic mammals in earlier geological epochs. In 1920, he wrote: "We palaeontologists alone realize that in Africa, the remnants of all the royal families of the Age of Mammals are making their last stand, that their backs are up against the pitiless wall of what we call civilization."[13] Increasingly, the environmental other was understood to be in need of urgent protection.

In the interwar years, the international conservation network probably came closest to realizing its ideals of such protection in one specific African colony: the Belgian Congo (see figure 2). Two subsequent directors of the International Office for the Protection of Nature, Jean-Marie Derscheid and Victor van Straelen, combined that function with the directorship of the Congolese Albert National Park (and later the Institute of the National Parks of Belgian Congo). Operating from Brussels, they actively shaped the management of Congolese nature along the ideals of the international nature protection movement. In their view, the national park was to be a "natural laboratory" of "pristine" nature run for and by scientists – an ideal that legitimized the evictions of substantial groups of the indigenous population. An exception, however, was made for Twa hunter-gatherers (or "Pygmies", in the parlance of the day), which could be framed as an integral part of the "primitive" ecosystem.[14] This type of management echoed earlier calls of Sarasin, who had explicitly pleaded for the inclusion of *Naturvölker* [Natural peoples] – "the noblest of all free living natural creatures" – in schemes of global nature protection.[15]

The tropics, and sub-Saharan Africa in particular, clearly took on a special place in preservationist imaginaries of unspoiled wilderness. Other parts of the world, however, could fulfil similar functions. The Arctic islands of Spitsbergen, for example, were the focus of Sarasin's (failed) attempt to create a first "European reserve" that could serve as "a large museum of Arctic nature".[16] The great outdoors of the North American West, likewise, could function as a counterpoint to Europe's civilized landscapes. For instance, the Berlin zoo director Lutz Heck, both a National Socialist and an important player in the international nature protection network, found an environmental other in the Canadian landscape while he was on an expedition for the zoo in 1935. Decades later, he still remembered how he entered this "virgin land full of the enchantment of untouched nature which works so powerfully on us in this over-urbanized age". Canada's "Wild West", he added, resembled "the primeval state of our homelands before they were transformed by man". Lutz Heck believed that across the Atlantic he had encountered the Europe of a deep past, still populated by large mammals and characterized by majestic landscapes. In such imageries,

Figure 2: The Albert National Park in the Belgian Congo was actively managed to match imaginaries of a humanless and timeless wilderness (Postcard, 1930s, personal collection).

Canadian nature was not unlike African wilderness: it enabled Europeans to travel in time by travelling through space.[17]

While the interwar circuit of international nature preservation focused much of its attention on non-European Edens, the hubs in its own networks were in (Western) Europe. Admittedly, some Americans, such as the aforementioned Coolidge and Osborn, played significant roles, but the large majority of its most active members were Europeans. Not surprisingly, imperial capitals such as Paris, Brussels, and Amsterdam were most important in this respect. Such urban centres constituted the antipode of the far-off wildernesses the preservationists sought to protect. At the same time, they also comprised the cities where scientists accumulated knowledge of such wildernesses, alongside the dead and living organisms that sprung from them. The people active in international preservation societies and committees were often closely associated with these imperial accumulation projects, either through natural history museums and zoos or through their private collections and menageries. The fascination with disappearing primeval nature that drove preservation efforts equally propelled the desire to collect the animals and plants that resided there.[18]

Both the mental and social constellation of early twentieth-century international organizations advocating nature protection proved to have a long-lasting

influence. While World War II shook up conservation circles, it also reconfirmed much of its networks and inclinations. Founded in 1948, the International Union for the Protection of Nature (IUPN; later the International Union for Conservation of Nature, IUCN) visibly built on its interwar predecessors. It was no coincidence that its first secretary-general was the Belgian Jean-Paul Harroy, whose major credentials included management of the national parks of Belgian Congo. The Union's first executive board was, furthermore, clearly dominated by Europeans, who took up eight out of twelve positions (or even nine, if one would include the director of the Lima Natural History Museum, who, despite residing in Peru, was a French national). Most of these board members were naturalists associated with universities, national parks, or natural history museums. Virtually, all of them had colonial travel or work experiences.[19] It should be of no surprise, then, that the Union perpetuated the colonial gaze that characterized its interwar precursors.

Within the global aspirations of the IUPN, there was clearly a special place for the distant and romanticized environmental other. A good illustration of this can be found in *Destruction et Protection de la Natur*e (1952), published by the then vice president of the IUPN, Roger Heim. In the book, much cited within the Union, Heim took stock of the state of tropical nature worldwide. As a well-travelled naturalist of the Paris Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, he could illustrate his story with personal experiences from the colonial empires stretching over Africa, Asia, and Oceania. Through the book's pages, it becomes clear that tropical nature held a strong but ambiguous appeal for Heim: "Like the indigenous woman, she is fragile, delicate, incomprehensible, astonishing and complex in her physiognomy."

The fact that Heim used the image of a (native) woman to represent tropical nature was, of course, no coincidence. The metaphor repeated the well-worn cliché of the ambiguous seductions of the tropics. In line with long literary traditions, tropical wilderness was not only described as "chaotic", but also as having its own kind of "harmony" and "freedom". Apart from wild and free, the woman incarnating the tropics was also "fragile" and, thus, in need of the protection of a (male) saviour. Indirectly, Heim seemed to be writing about himself – as well as about the almost exclusively male leadership of the IUPN. When discussing European landscapes, to the contrary, Heim did not need the metaphors of female seduction and fragility. Nature on the European continent, he indicated, was "shaped according to Man's will" – "like a field". Looked at through the eyes of the tropical traveller, it could hardly be considered nature at all. [20]

Such imageries of nature mattered for the actual functioning of the IUPN/IUCN, as they clearly had an impact on the geographical prioritization of its projects. Much of the early missions of the Union's staff ecologists concerned tropical

Asia and Africa. Moreover, its most high-profile scheme during the first two decades of its existence was the Africa Special Project (1960–1963), which was set up to convince the leaders of soon-to-be independent countries of the importance of the Union's approach to nature protection. This at least partially explains why, in the mid-century, Western conservationists increasingly framed African wildlife as an important natural resource, crucial for the provision of both meat and tourist revenue. In this way, they linked the conservation of wildlife resources in the Global South with an emerging agenda of global development.[21] At the same time, however, the Africa Special Project clearly also stemmed from a concern within the Union's leadership that political chaos in the wake of decolonization might destroy the last remaining majestic, yet fragile, Edens on the African continent. After all, it is not hard to see that many of them worried that Western conservationists would lose access to (and control over) the places they considered to be the most "untouched" in the world.[22]

From the 1980s onwards, scholars of various disciplinary backgrounds have questioned the truthfulness of the established environmental imaginaries in which faraway lands were envisioned as containing vast expanses of empty wilderness. These scholars argue that many of the landscapes that travelling Europeans interpreted as "wild" were in fact substantially shaped by human presence. While European conservationists understood local farming, the grazing by domestic livestock, and the use of fire as threats to nature, these practices were in fact often *constitutive* of the "Edenic" landscapes they encountered. Furthermore, in several regions of Eastern and Southern Africa, the European colonizer interpreted the relative emptiness of the landscape as a timeless natural condition and a relic of a deep past, whereas in reality it could be ascribed to recent demographic impacts of slavery and rinderpest. Such misinterpretations, in turn, informed preservationist policies that aimed at separating nature from (indigenous) human populations. These policies, finally, reified the idea that "true" and "unspoiled" nature could only be found in the non-European landscape. [23]

In many respects, international organizations institutionalized the dichotomy between a cultural Europe and a natural other. Apart from IUCN's mid-century conservation projects, the World Heritage scheme of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), launched in the 1970s, offers a case in point. In her analysis of the genesis of the World Heritage List, Andrea Rehling has shown how UNESCO's expert committees approached the selection of cultural heritage sites and of natural heritage sites in quite different ways. Whereas the former needed to exemplify "authenticity" and represent "local" cultures, the latter had to be "integral" and provide "universal" examples of global ecosystems. The result was not only that more cultural sites than nat-

ural sites were nominated, but also that (at least originally) the latter tended to be non-European ones. Two of the first selected natural World Heritage Sites, the Galápagos Islands and Yellowstone National Park, came to serve as prototypes for further selection.[24] Both covered expansive areas. Both also had an iconic status as natural laboratories and places of wilderness. Both, lastly, shared histories of resettlement and evictions of local populations in order to establish such a status in the first place.[25] Their UNESCO label once again reconfirmed a European preconception that true nature concerns expansive, timeless, and humanless places that are far away.

In the second half of the twentieth century, especially from the 1970s onwards, Europeans gradually lost their dominant position in global conservation. This partially had to do with the ascendancy of North American conservation science and the US dominance of newly established environmental non-governmental organizations, as well as with a gradually growing prominence of representatives of the Global South in organizations such as the IUCN and UNESCO. Since the 1980s, furthermore, conservationists partially abandoned the traditional wilderness rhetoric for a discourse that centred on biodiversity.[26] These developments certainly complicated ideas of environmental otherness, but without making a clean break with the past. While international conservation organizations now concentrate on "biodiversity hotspots" and "ecozones" and use new surveying technologies in selecting them, their focus remains largely on pristine and unpeopled areas, most of them situated in the Global South. In line with a very long history, the mental geography of global conservation remains very uneven indeed.[27]

2 Differentiating Europe

Imageries of the environmental other not only shaped the interaction of international conservation organizations with non-European landscapes but also clearly fashioned the ways these organizations thought about and dealt with nature in Europe itself. While the prominence of wilderness ideals prioritized non-European environments for urgent protection, Europe was certainly within the purview of international conservation as well. In conceptualizing conservation action in Europe, then, two strategies stand out. The first consisted in stressing Europe's distinctiveness by highlighting how intensive and age-old human activities had shaped its landscape. The second, to the contrary, involved projecting distant Edens back on the European continent and thus looking for (and occasionally creating) landscapes that reflected wilderness ideals. The two opposing strategies, of course, generated highly diverging ideals and practices.

The first strategy, which consisted in differentiating Europe from the rest, had old roots. From the late nineteenth century onwards, several European countries witnessed the rise of national and regional nature protection organizations that sought to preserve pre-industrial rural landscapes. The more influential among these included the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or National Beauty in the United Kingdom (founded in 1894), the Société pour la Protection des Paysages de France (1901), and the Bund Heimatschutz (1904) in the German Empire. Upholding nostalgic images of a past rural idyll, such organizations typically represented the landscapes they sought to protect as “gentle” and “harmonious”, rather than “wild” and “dangerous”. Additionally, in a nationalist or regionalist logic, they tended to tie the natural landscape to human history – instead of separating human activities from a timeless wilderness. In this historicizing approach, the protection of human-shaped Arcadian scenery, consisting of meadows, fields, or heathland, easily blended in with the preservation of built monuments. Furthermore, unlike the logic of wilderness protection, the national and regional preservation societies founded around 1900 did not necessarily focus on the grandiose or the extensive. Preservation initiatives could single out a scenic rock, a hedge, or a particular tree.[28] Such a focus developed in self-conscious distinction of what was happening overseas. In 1909, Hugo Conwentz, director of the highly influential Prussian Central Institute for the Care of Natural Monuments *(Staatliche Stelle für Naturdenkmalpflege in Preußen)*, distanced his approach explicitly from the American tradition of extensive national parks. Not only did he believe it was “quite impossible to make reservations of land of such considerable area in any part of Central Europe” but he also indicated that a focus on small-scale “natural monuments” would be “more suited to the purpose in view”.[29]

To some extent, the international organizations for nature protection founded in the early twentieth century took over the Arcadian interests of national and regional preservationist societies. This should not be a surprise since there was quite some overlap in membership, with the national and regional societies often having representatives in international bodies. All this notwithstanding, a crude division of labour took shape in which the first specifically focused on local culturally mediated landscapes and the second specialized in “untouched” wilderness overseas. This was, for instance, very clear in the work of Van Tienhoven, who strongly engaged in several Dutch preservationist societies, apart from his work for the International Office for the Protection of Nature. In the first institutional context, he focused on protecting expansive rainforests and charismatic mammals such as orangutans; in the second, he devoted much of his attention to heathland, country estates, and windmills. Cultural landscapes, so it seemed,

were tied much closer to the logic of the nation-state (or the region) than the uninhabited wilderness.[30]

Despite the continuing legacy of the sketched division, international nature conservation did develop a gradually expanding interest in European landscapes after World War II. When, in 1951, the IUPN held its first technical meeting, it chose the protection of nature in "densely populated countries" as its focus, an expression that, for both the conference's organizers and attendees, just seemed to refer to Western Europe. The meeting revived a traditional focus on cultural landscapes by linking it to the concerns of post-war landscape planning and theories of plant ecology. Dutch and British ecologists such as Victor Westhoff and Max Nicholson, respectively, took the lead by indicating how human activities had shaped Western Europe. They argued that its landscapes hardly contained the so-called climax vegetation (or the final stage of the succession of plant associations) but did maintain interesting forms of "semi-nature". The latter term was used to refer to areas in which anthropogenic factors such as mowing, burning, or pasturing had halted the normal succession of associations, resulting, for instance, in heath- or moorland.

Yet, IUPN ecologists embraced this artificiality. Natural conditions, they argued, were impossible to attain in Western Europe, where large wild herbivores had gone extinct, dikes kept out the floods, and forest fires were suppressed. The semi-nature that replaced it, however, still contained valuable ecosystems, and in the 1950s, ecologists believed the maintenance of these semi-natural ecosystems required an interventionist management. Unlike far-off wildernesses, so they argued, European semi-nature did not need to be shielded from humans. Rather, it called for continuous and careful human interference, supervised by ecologists like themselves.[31]

While in the 1950s European nature became the object of some reflection within IUPN/IUCN, it never acquired a central position in the Union's global projects. It would take the foundation of other institutions as part of the European integration process to engender a true Europeanization of nature conservation. While the European Parliament and, later, the European Community played an important role in this, the initial impetus came from the Council of Europe (CoE). In 1970, the CoE set up the European Nature Conservation Year, with events throughout the year raising environmental awareness across Europe (see chapter 12 by Vetter-Schultheiss). The programme was a promotional success. The heritage scholar David Lowenthal even sees it as the starting point of an institutionalization process that created a "shared sense of patrimony" (see figure 3).[32] Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the CoE indeed strove for such an institutionalization, subsequently setting up the Environment Committee (1962), European Diplomas for Protected Areas (1967), European Environment

Centre for Nature Conservation (1967), and European Network of Biogenetic Reserves (1976). Such initiatives strove for an integration of European nature in the mind, but also for a physical integration on the ground.[33]

Several ideals of nature resonated in the activities of the CoE, but among these, the Arcadian vision was certainly an important one. In 1978, Westhoff explained in *Naturopa*, the journal of the European Environment Centre for Nature Conservation, that "from the Middle Ages until the first half of the twentieth century, semi-natural ecosystems predominated in western and central Europe". He added that "the long-established, historical, agrarian landscapes with their small-scale diversity are indispensable for the maintenance of much of the European flora and vegetation".[34] Westhoff's notion of semi-natural landscapes echoed not only in outward communication but also in the actual selection of sites for the European Network of Biogenetic Reserves, which included areas that "may have been modified to a greater of lesser extent by human activities".[35] The following decades saw a reconfirmation of this choice. The CoE maintained the "semi-nature" concept for its Pan-European Ecological Network (1996), and the European Union borrowed it for its Habitats Directive and Natura 2000 projects.[36]

While semi-nature was ultimately an ecological concept, its focus on human-altered ecosystems also proved popular in other disciplines. The projects of the CoE that focused on European landscapes fostered collaboration with folklorists, ethnologists, architects, and landscape planners, who conceived of "harmonious" landscapes as including traditional villages and architecturally valuable monuments. In such a context, it was only logical that the CoE set up the European Architecture Year (1975) as a follow-up to its European Nature Conservation Year. Meanwhile, authors publishing in *Naturopa* cast traditional human activities in a positive light, whether they resulted in hedges and heathlands, in the landscapes shaped by Alpine transhumance, or in healthy urban ecosystems.[37]

With such a rhetoric, preservationists sought a sense of Europeanness in the diversity of the man-made landscapes that the continent contained. In 1976, for instance, the French botanist Gérard-Guy Aymonin stressed that "mostly home to ancient civilizations, the countries of Europe often display diversity of another kind [than that of its natural landscapes] [...]: that wrought by man on the environment as a result of his manifold activities".[38] In *Naturopa*, the Belgian botanist Albert Noirfalise equally sought the "European genius" in its rural civilizations while discursively linking "the incomparable diversity" of Europe's habitats to that of its "ethnic sub-divisions".[39] Noirfalise's voice, for that matter, was far from marginal in Europe's discussions on nature protection. When, in the

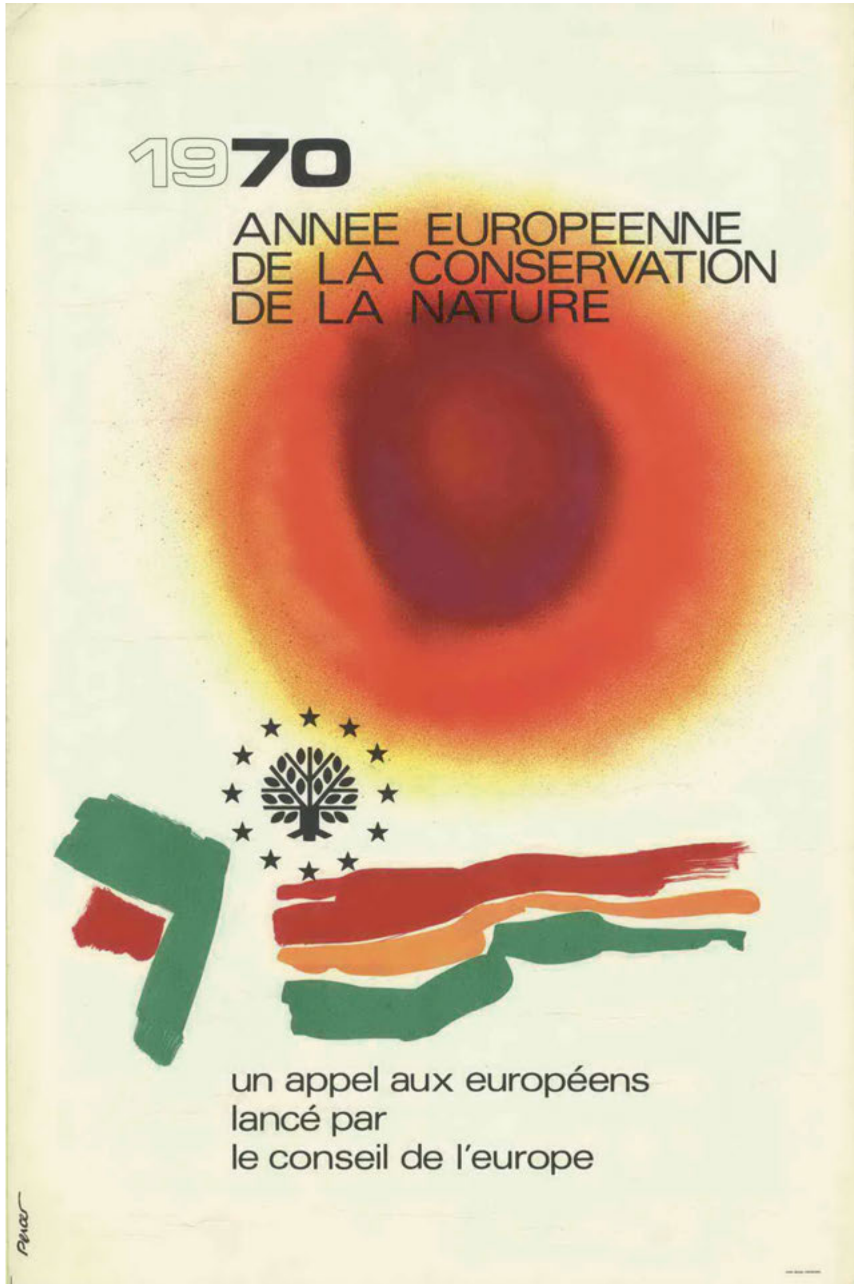

Figure 3: The European Nature Conservation Year (1970) was important in promoting the idea of a shared natural heritage across the continent (Archive Council of Europe).

1980s, the European Community took over the conservation initiative of the CoE, he was the botanist to draft the list of habitat types of the Habitats Directive.[40]

Thus, within the context of European institutions, several players believed nature protection should focus on the diversity of "harmonious" and "historical" landscapes shaped by human civilization. Yet, as historian Aurélie Gfeller indicates, this conception was not always easy to sell on a more global scale. She describes how, in the 1980s, European governments tried to create openness within the UNESCO to accept "aesthetical" Arcadian landscapes (such as the French vineyards) for possible inclusion on the World Heritage List. Building on the momentum, the British actually proposed the Lake District as a World Heritage Site. However, the IUCN experts, who were called on for advice, resorted to global *ecological* standards, indicating there existed more remarkable examples of glaciation and wild fauna elsewhere. On top of that, an insider to the selection procedure later admitted that "the Third World questioned the importance of Wordsworth in world terms". For the time being, the nomination of the Lake District thus ended in failure. Over time the UNESCO increasingly accepted "cultural landscapes" as World Heritage Sites, but it specifically sought to include non-Western indigenous perspectives by refocusing from Western aesthetic notions of harmony to, for instance, religious and archaeological values that could be associated with landscapes across the world.[41]

The British, nonetheless, kept trying to get the Lake District included. In 2017, they finally managed to have the region classified as a World Heritage Site. Amongst other things, the UNESCO website highlights that "the most defining feature of the region, which has deeply shaped the cultural landscape, is a long-standing and continuing agro-pastoral tradition".[42] As such, the UN specialized agency eventually did buttress the old Arcadian ideal of human-managed landscapes, which traditionally had played such a prominent role in differentiating European nature.

3 Importing the Other

The strategy of seeking the value of European nature in its specific humanized character was never the only tactic of the nature protection movement. In parallel, and often in combination with this strategy, some twentieth-century conservationists also tried to emulate aspects of a more untamed and foreign nature on the European continent. Such emulations could take various forms.

The first and probably best-known source of inspiration from overseas was the nineteenth-century Yellowstone model. The Yellowstone National Park was set up in 1872 to protect an expansive mountainscape that lived up to roman-

tic aesthetic ideals of the “sublime”.[43] As Anna-Katharina Wöbse has shown elsewhere, the US model of the national park did catch on in Europe – be it belatedly and often in a somewhat adapted version. In the early twentieth century, both European preservationists and policy-makers were captivated by what Wöbse calls the “spatial Leitbild” that Yellowstone provided, envisaging national parks as “typically large areas, mostly undisturbed by human action, that offered spectacular scenery, abundant wildlife and unique geologic features”.[44] The model proved inspirational in Sweden, where nine parks were gazetted in 1910, and in Italy, where the Abruzzo National Park was founded in 1922 after the American example.

The Swiss equally took inspiration from the Americans when setting up the Swiss National Park in the Lower Engadine in 1914, but they more clearly added their own accents. Rather than catering to tourists as the Americans did, they imagined their park primarily as a place of science. More prominently than their American counterparts, furthermore, the Swiss park managers believed that wilderness was something they needed to *restore*. Starting out from the idea that primeval nature (*Ur-Natur*) had already disappeared in the Alps, they set up management schemes that would bring back the natural state of a pre-human past.[45] It was a variance on Fabian’s “denial of coevalness”. According to many preservationists at the time, non-European wilderness just needed preservation, thus wilfully ignoring and erasing indigenous presence; European wilderness, to the contrary, could only result from active intervention.

Part of the project to recreate wilderness in the Swiss National Park concerned the reintroduction of ibex. This was no coincidence. As Wöbse and Ziemek argue elsewhere in this book, large charismatic mammals became important symbolic markers of wilderness in twentieth-century Europe (see chapter 4 by Wöbse and Ziemek). The breeding and reintroduction of those mammals became a major ambition among European preservationists from at least the 1920s onwards. The projects of Lutz Heck and his brother Heinz – zoo directors in Berlin and Munich, respectively – probably offer the most imaginative and controversial example. Not only were they closely involved in transnational preservation schemes of the European bison, but they also set up experiments to “back-breed” the extinct aurochs and the European wild horse from primitive-looking domestic stock. Notably, Lutz Heck associated these animals with a primeval Germanic past in line with National Socialist ideology. Yet, the projects of the Heck brothers equally built on imageries of far-off wildernesses such as that of the American West or the African savannah, which – much more than Europe’s densely populated landscapes – boasted charismatic megafauna. In this way, schemes aimed at restoring Europe’s wild past also mirrored images of a distant environmental other.[46]

Unlike the imageries of Arcadian semi-nature, of which the Netherlands and England provided iconic examples, the international conservation circuit sought European wilderness mostly in the continent's "periphery". Białowieża forest, for instance, counted as the almost mythical last "primeval forest" of Europe but also Spitsbergen, Lapland, the Carpathians, or some more remote parts of the Alps took on an aura of primitiveness (see figure 4). It was in those regions that, from the 1930s through the 1960s, the most sizeable national parks on the continent were established.[47] After World War II, organizations such as the IUPN/IUCN further stimulated a focus on extensive protected areas. At the first International Congress on National Parks (1962), participants indicated that reserves needed to "be large enough to be self-contained units".[48] Over the following decades, ecosystem ecology and island biogeography reinforced the argument that size was critically important to preserve "undisturbed" ecosystems. Originally, the IUCN had accepted the relatively low minimum size criterion of 500 hectares for national parks in densely populated countries. In 1972, however, despite protest by some European representatives, the Union decided on a universal threshold of 1,000 hectares. The decision contributed to marginalizing an approach that focused on relatively small "natural monuments" to the benefit of a model that centred on more expansive wilderness.[49]

Unlike the IUCN, European institutions such as the CoE did not prioritize "undisturbed" nature. Yet, alongside the promotion of Arcadian landscapes, they equally saw value in peripheral "empty" lands such as the Arctic ("Europe's last vast wilderness") or the Scandinavian and Eastern European "virgin" forests.[50] Both views, of course, could be combined. In 1981, for instance, the leading British conservationist Derek A. Radcliff used an article in *Naturopa* to issue a call to "ensure the protection of a wide range of country, from truly natural kinds with high wilderness value such as alpine mountain systems, through the various types of landscape owing their character in increasing degree to human intervention".[51] Sometimes, however, the logic of Arcadian and wilderness ideals clearly clashed. Adherents of the former, for instance, saw the late twentieth-century depopulation of rural Europe as a threat to the "original" landscape, whereas defenders of wilderness ideals believed the phenomenon offered great opportunities to revert to "ecologies in which man will only be a spectator".[52] And, while some took far-off wilderness as an ideal to be emulated in Europe, others, such as the CoE environmental expert Peter Baum, bemoaned the "disease to visit the national parks of America, Canada and Africa to look for models" as these were deemed unsuited to be applied to "European situations".[53]

While the defenders of Arcadian and wilderness ideals both managed to have their visions translated into directives, plans, and managerial regimes, it

Figure 4: Białowieża forest has often been represented as one of the last remaining wildernesses in Europe, and as such received many international accolades (Adrian Gyrcuk, Wikimedia commons).

was the second group that, from the late 1980s onwards, managed to gain momentum. It did so by partially adapting its message. Scholars such as Henk van den Belt even see a "paradigm shift" in which traditionally defensive strategies of wilderness preservation gave way to more offensive approaches of actively developing "new nature". A generation of young Dutch ecologists, van den Belt shows, played a pioneering role in this reorientation. In a country with just a few small and heavily managed semi-natural reserves, these ecologists developed plans for restoring extensive landscapes where nature could "take its course". The first project with which they managed to convince policy-makers was the so-called Operation Stork. With this plan, presented in the early 1980s, they sought to "renaturalize" river beds by moving dikes further inland, reintroducing species such as beavers and black poplars, and releasing surrogate species for extinct herbivores (such as Galloway cows and Konik horses). In 1990, then, the Dutch government officially launched their National Ecological Network, a land-use plan that had to link up ecosystems across the country and facilitate a "natural" exchange between these systems. The most discussed achievement of the new generation of "nature developers", however, concerned the so-called Oostvaardersplassen – a reclaimed polder near Amsterdam that

was originally destined for industrial development. Neglected during a time of industrial downturn, wild plants and a great number of greylag geese colonized the area. The site management team, under the leadership of the influential ecologist Frans Vera, saw an opportunity to develop a fully natural ecosystem. In order to achieve this, Heck cattle and Konik horses were released in the 1980s and red deer in the 1990s. The hope was that such introductions of ungulates would help recreate a Pleistocene landscape, which Vera conceived of as a park-like mosaic of forests, scrubs, and grassland. While controversial, the project certainly stirred the imagination, and it drew substantial national and international attention (see figure 5).[54]

Figure 5: The Dutch reserve of the Oostvaardersplassen is often represented as a "new wilderness", of which the grandeur is comparable to Yosemite or the Serengeti (Picture: Jac. Jansen, Wikimedia commons).

The presentation of the Oostvaardersplassen project in both the national and international media shows how "new nature" was often sold with old rhetoric. The German magazine *Der Spiegel*, for instance, featured an article in 2001 that presented the reserve as nothing less than a "Serengeti behind the dikes".[55] In 2013, a feature-length film entitled *De Nieuwe Wildernis* (*The New Wilderness*) came out that mimicked the visual language of wildlife documentaries set in distant Edens.[56] In order to copy the original as closely as possible, views (and

sounds) of the close-by highway and railway track needed to be filtered out. It shows that, at least in the imagination, the Dutch landscape could be morphed into its environmental other. In interviews, the director of the film, Mark Verkerk, was quite explicit:

> What we wanted to do with this project is to present the special aspects of nature around the corner in a grand way. To show that it is just as special as the Amazon, Yosemite National Park, or the Serengeti – those grand stars of the world of nature.[57]

Oostvaardersplassen proved inspirational. Following the Dutch example, the non-profit organization Rewilding Europe, launched in 2010, lobbied to give "more room to wild, spontaneous nature" throughout the European continent. While the reclaimed lands of the Netherlands offered a laboratory for such an ambition, the organization saw most possibilities in the newly depopulated areas in Southern and Eastern Europe, where it became involved in releasing large mammals and birds.[58] Using prototypical imagery, its managing director explained in an interview that the ultimate objective of Rewilding Europe was to create "our own iconic natural landscapes, like America has its Yellowstone and Africa has its Serengeti".[59] This endlessly returning cross-geographical comparison was more than just a hollow reference. Ecologists, in fact, closely studied the African example in order to bring its "fire ecology" to European landscapes, stressing how wildfires play a crucial role in "wild" ecosystems. Similarly, they hoped to import an African-style "ecology of fear" in Europe, in which predators influence the ecosystem by inducing fearful behaviour in their prey.[60]

Even tourist companies tried to bring the environmental other closer to home. In 2016, Dutch entrepreneurs started the European Safari Company. On their website, they state that "while the word 'safari' has become synonymous with Africa, we offer equally as wild adventures right here in Europe, from the Arctic north to vast eastern forests and rugged Mediterranean coast".[61] Europe could not just be wild; it could be as wild as Africa.

4 Conclusion

The long tradition of contrasting European with non-European environments has served particular narratives that are, at least partially, deceptive. Firstly, it has stimulated a misreading of the most iconic landscapes that represent the environmental other. While crucial to their representation, places such as the Yellowstone National Park and Serengeti are *not* "untouched" – nor were they at any moment over the past centuries. Creating the illusion of a timeless and human-

less wilderness required the erasure of indigenous populations. More recently, it also required an ignoring of the fact that tourists, park managers, game wardens, and veterinarians continue to clearly leave their marks.

Cross-continental comparison, however, not only led to misrepresentations of non-European landscapes but also has bolstered one-sided visions of European distinctiveness. Europe, of course, is not the only continent with historical and semi-natural landscapes. Yet, the idea of a European environmental exceptionalism helped in identity building, to the extent that some ecologists sought the "European genius" in the rural environments its civilizations had produced.

A third and final misleading narrative was created when still other ecologists aimed to escape European history by returning to a prehistoric wilderness modelled after geographically distant primeval nature. Like its model, the new European wilderness is, of course, neither timeless nor humanless. Also in its rewilded state, European nature is an integral part of the twenty-first-century Anthropocene.[62]

Of course, what European nature should look like in the twenty-first century is still an object of discussion. The Lake District – hailed by Wordsworth for its "beauteous forms" and ridiculed by Huxley for its safe "Gemütlichkeit" – has finally received its UNESCO World Heritage status, but arguments over its "natural" status continue. Traditionally the iconic example of Arcadian nature, it has recently caught the attention of Rewilding Europe. The organization's first project in the Lake District is set in Ennerdale, the place that inspired Wordsworth's poem "The Brothers", and aims at making the region wilder by "relying more on natural processes".[63] Yet, George Monbiot – author, journalist, and rewilding enthusiast – believes much more needs to be done. In 2017, he indicated in *The Guardian* that modern agriculture destroyed everything that was interesting in the Lake District, calling it "a sheepwrecked monument to subsidized overgrazing and ecological destruction".[64] Two years later, he returned to the topic in the same newspaper. He stated:

> In the name of "cultural heritage" we allow harsh commercial interests, embedded in the modern economy but dependent on public money, to complete the kind of ecological cleansing we lament in the Amazon. Sheep farming has done for our rainforests what cattle ranching is doing to Brazil's. Then we glorify these monocultures – the scoured, treeless hills – as "wild" and "unspoilt".[65]

Monbiot's vehement tone indicates that the debates about which nature to protect and how to protect it have far from ended. In these debates, cross-geographical comparisons continue to hold their rhetorical power.

Notes

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