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Of Forests and Time: Reworking Communist and Peasant Pasts in the Bialowieza Forest

My book is an ethnographic account of “primeval” woodlands on the Polish side of the Polish/Belarusian border. The Bialowieza Forest is frequently touted as Europe’s last lowland old growth forest, known for its free roaming bison, old oaks, and wolves. Less known is its history of commercial logging and the intense debates to define which compositions of plants and animals belong there. These complex forest conflicts are told through attention to debates about the forest’s past. Loss and desire are part of the experience of being in Bialowieza, for both tourists and inhabitants, where the primeval past comes to life with visions of an abundant, modern future. And layered in between the primeval past and the visionary future are contests between locals, biologists, tourists, and foresters who wrestle with which ethnohistories should define the woodland; what the legacy of the communist past means for protection and use of the forest; where the Czarist and German history fits; and how to commemorate the Jewish Holocaust, if at all?

In this book I argue that political ecology needs to be attentive to how notions of romantic nature have survived the socialist era, and how they are now being reproduced in political post-socialist struggles over memory, land, and economy. I look at the ways various people deploy different pasts, determining which are celebrated, or festered, and interpreted to fit resource agendas.

The research project draws on more than 15 years of visits and living experiences in the Bialowieza Forest region. In addition to the Rachel Carson Center the project has been generously supported by the Switzer Foundation, the Fulbright-Hays Program, the Ford Foundation, the Kosciuszko Foundation, the National Council for East European and Eurasian Research, CEC Artslink, and a Boren Fellowship.