

Global Nature, Multispecies Approach and the Ecological Restoration of the Danube

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The research project I propose to conduct, as a Fellow of the Rachel Carson Center, is a volume that examines critically a number of ecological restoration projects carried out in Serbia, Bulgaria, and Romania along the lower Danube and the delta. Despite its focus on the lower Danube wetlands, the volume has broader aims and includes examples of ecological restoration along the entire Danube. Moreover, this analysis considers these projects to restore the ecological systems of the lower Danube as part of the global discourse and actions that seek to ‘heal’ rivers as a tool to mitigate climate change. The volume engages with a theoretical perspective known as multispecies ethnography, which emphasizes the entanglements between humans and other living things such as insects, plants, and animals. Proposed by several anthropologists such as S. E. Kirksey, S. Helmreich, C. Lowe, A. Tsing, and U. Münster, the theory examines the encounters between humans and other species which generate mutual ecologies. This theoretical position offers a third way as an alternative to the dichotomy between those who advocate the need for dams, dykes, and similar ‘thick artefacts’ (W. E. Bijker) in order to control floods and use water as a renewable energy in the context of global warming, and those who advocate the dismantling of dams and the restoration of rivers to their status before large-scale and harmful interventions occurred. These two opposing groups are also found in the countries of Eastern Europe.

The debates about and measures to restore heavily damaged rivers began a few decades earlier in the west than in southeast Europe. Ecological restoration of the Danube began after 1990: the first ecological restoration project was implemented between 1993-1994 in the Danube Delta under the supervision of the WWF Germany. The same NGO supervised other restoration areas on the Danube in Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia. WWF and other European NGOs exported their knowledge, technology, and expertise to countries in eastern Europe bordering the Danube (and other rivers, such as Dnieper or Prut). Ecological restoration in eastern countries unfolded at the same time as other larger politico-economic processes such as agrarian reform (land and forest restitution to historical owners), politico-institutional restructuring, and the emergence of large agricultural entrepreneurs fiercely opposed to ecological restoration programs. This context gives these programs a specificity that cannot be found in other parts of the world where ecological restoration programs were implemented.

This research is innovative in several respects. This is one of the very few works that critically examines the ecological restoration projects in Eastern Europe. Besides Monica Vasile (2018) who worked on the reintroduction of bison in the Romanian Carpathians and Mihnea Tanasescu discussing a rewilding project in the Danube Delta (2017) to my knowledge there are no similar, let alone similar and comparative, works in international academia. Secondly, this work engages theoretically with multispecies theory, which may show a way out of the current heated debate between those who advocate tearing down large infrastructure (dams, levees, irrigation, and drainage pipe systems) and those who wish to retain it. Thirdly, the book discusses the movement of knowledge, ideas, technologies, and experts between the west and the east and the way in which eastern countries have adapted international practices to their own interests and needs. Finally, I show that ecological restoration is a complex political, economic, and cultural process that involves multiple actors (human and nonhuman), scales (from local to global), ideas about nature, technologies, property rights, economic interests, and biological, geophysical, and hydrological issues.