

Associative Environmentalism: The Revival of Forest Commons in the Romanian Carpathians

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How have land commons re-emerged in twenty-first-century Europe? What is their encompassing relationship with recent paradigmatic shifts in environmental thinking? How do environmental ethics form, meet, and clash in specific contexts and how do they play a role in associative land management—in the process of commoning? This project will situate contemporary shifts in thinking about human-environmental relations in the context of postsocialist, neo-capitalist economies of Eastern Europe and also in the context of new (yet old) communal property regimes. Specifically, I propose examining emergent forest and pasture commons in Romania, the various ways social actors relate to the land and wilderness, negotiating the balance between the production of resources, and the challenges of nature conservation.

In a global context where “major policy decisions are undertaken with a presumption that individuals cannot organize themselves and always need to be organized by external authorities” (Ostrom 1990), and shared common resources are usually seen as a recipe for tragedy, with free riders ultimately destroying the environment (Hardin 1968), in Romania hundreds of forest and pasture commons have been recreated in the last 20 years. While many Romanian politicians and practitioners depict the commons as unsuited “relics of the past,” or as “cocktails of conflict,” they remain largely unknown as entities of local self-governance and resource management.

My research is devoted to filling this knowledge gap.

Historically, a large number of village commons were registered at the beginning of the twentieth century in Wallachia and Transylvania, for groups of descendants of the medieval free peasantry and for former serfs entitled to communal property rights. Later on, seized as state national assets, commons were dissolved under the communist regime (1948–1990) and only officially regained full recognition in 2000. Scattered data show that currently villages and large “genealogical groups” communally own about 14 percent of forestland in Romania and 5 percent of pastureland. As my research shows, all over the Carpathians there are around 1700 commons. They operate through different regimes of rights distribution, generally reaching decisions through intense deliberation on the part of all members in village assemblies—an important part of the commoning process.

First, the project extensively maps the newly established village commons across the Romanian Carpathians. Simple descriptive data are collected and assembled into a coherent database. How many members do the commons have? What is their material/resource base? What kind of property relations and access rights do they endorse? What are their economic activities? How do they contribute to local livelihoods? How do people participate in the *de jure* collective management? Who is more environmentally friendly? A quantitative survey brings all this information together in a “commons matrix.”

Second, using ethnographic methods, the project investigates a number of representative cases of village commons. The aim is to shed light on the process of commoning, especially on the subjectivities engendered in the political ecologies of woodlands. These subjectivities, “the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects” (Ortner 2005: 31), matter a great deal in a setting where the forest and pastures are managed communally through deliberation and voting processes.

More information, research findings, and fieldwork photos can be viewed here: <http://romaniacommons.wixsite.com/project>