

Rewilding the Carpathians: bison reintroduction, environmentalism and new forests

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At the RCC, I am currently working on my book project, *The Forest Never Ends: Timbermen, Mafias and Bison in the Postsocialist Carpathian Mountains*. The book reveals the grassroots stories that shape contemporary Carpathian forests, communities, and personal life-worlds in the post-socialist period. It explores layers of interconnected human relationships and changing ecologies. The monograph takes the reader through different areas of the Carpathians and explores a large cast of characters, from timber barons to lumberjacks, from foresters to regional politicians, from European bison to feral dogs. As an interdisciplinary project, it is situated at the confluence between anthropology, history, and political ecology. The monograph will be the first in the field of environmental humanities dedicated exclusively to the Carpathian forests.

During the fellowship I will focus on the third part of the book, which documents the transformation of the Carpathian forests from areas of intense timber extraction into areas of exotic wilderness, exclusive places of rewilding and species reintroductions.

Carpathian forests have recently been rebranded as the last bastions of untouched nature, a European Yellowstone, habitats and corridors for wildlife, ‘the last intact forest landscapes’, primary forests, virgin forests, ‘hotspot region for biodiversity and endemism’—labels which come with entangled bureaucracies, touristic commodification, and human use restrictions. The forests, which have been cared for and spared from modernity from socialist through to contemporary times, having been only partly managed for timber extraction, gain new value as untouched nature and as a space for the reintroduction of near-extinct species. These are the forests of the future, as envisaged by conservation initiatives, the forests in which people and their ‘destructive’ practices have no place. Yet they are forests layered with human histories.

In my research, I focus on a particular area of the forest where a rewilding project is on-going, the South-Western Carpathians, the focus of numerous conservation initiatives. This rewilding project has re-introduced the European bison, a species that once roamed Europe but became extinct in the wild. This project was aimed not only at the reintroduction of a species, but at replenishing an entire ecosystem, and at developing a new experimental vision of nature.