

# The Wild Heart of Europe

BY TILL MEYER, HANS KIENER, and ZDENKA KRENOVA

According to Wallace Stegner, American novelist and historian, the outstanding value of wilderness lies in the “visceral satisfaction of knowing that the planet retains a strong, wild soul.” In central Europe this metaphor finds an equivalent in the motto the “Wild Heart of Europe.” This slogan was recently coined for a newly designated wilderness area, located on the border of two nations and shared by two national parks in the Bohemian Forest: the Bavarian Forest National Park in Germany and the Šumava National Park in the Czech Republic (see figure 1).

For millennia this medium-altitude mountain range has been characterized by the same ecosystems, the same habitats, and the same array of species. Then came the Cold War and with it the Iron Curtain, which divided up Europe for 45 years (1945–1990). It severed the personal and cultural lives of millions of people and also brought an end to east-west migrations of some of its wildlife, particularly large carnivores and herbivores such as lynx (*Lynx lynx*) and red deer (*Cervus elaphus*).

Most other species of wildlife—mostly animals that do not depend on large home ranges—were not impeded by human-made terrestrial obstructions. They flourished because the Cold War’s demarcation line had created a safe haven from human disturbances by leaving breeding sites undisturbed for some species for decades, such as the black stork (*Ciconia nigra*), European otter (*Lutra lutra*), corn-crake (*Crex crex*), and capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*).

In December 2007, the Schengen Treaty of the European Union (EU) came into effect, allowing free travel across European borders. In anticipation of the demands from local communities and tourism (see *International Journal of Wilderness*, August 2008), the directors of the Šumava (see figure 2) and the Bavarian Forest National Parks came to together on March 13, 2008, to prepare joint management guidelines for a core area of about 15,000 hectares (37,050 acres). Recently, this cooperation between the two national parks peaked, as a mutual system of wilderness trails finally was agreed upon and officially marked for public use on July 14, 2009.



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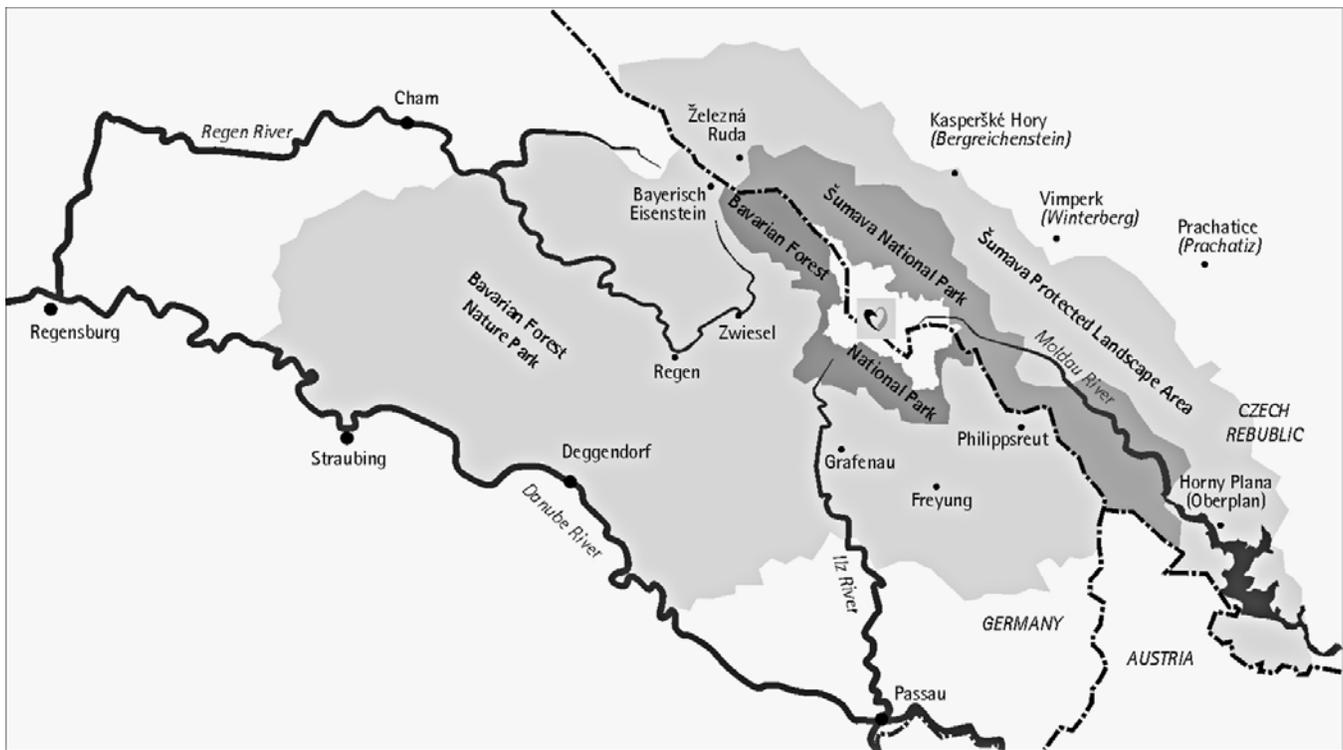


Figure 1—Map of the Bavarian Forest National Park in Germany and the Šumava National Park in the Czech Republic.

The creation of the new trans-boundary wilderness between Germany and the Czech Republic is more than a considerable conservation achievement, since it also coincides with the 20th anniversary of the end of the Cold War and gives this wilderness designation a special connotation. The challenge is not only to open nature for nature, but also to allow “natural forces and processes to predominate” (as phrased by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature [IUCN] (Dudley 2008, p. 14)) for the Protected Area Category 1b, Wilderness). At the same time wild nature needed to be made accessible for people, who should—according to the Protected Area Category 1b—have the opportunity to experience such areas. This objective makes many conservationists cringe, because the area in question holds populations of some of the rarest and most endangered species in central Europe. At the same time, local politics and business vowed that they would not tolerate rigid patronization any-

more, even if it was in the name of a good cause such as conservation.

Therefore, the designated wilderness area in the Bohemian Forest has lately become quite a political battlefield of competing interests. The mutually agreed upon German-Czech trail markings on July 14 now mark the détente between the different interest groups. The area is now seen as a special opportunity zone for the Czech Republic and Germany to demonstrate mutual responsibility for appropriate management of wilderness in Europe.

The year 2009 saw plenty of opportunities to encourage the discussions about what is meant by appropriate management of wilderness in Europe. The frequency of relevant events that took place in only 12 months was remarkable:

- The seminar “Wilderness as a Cultural Task” (December 2008), which took place in the Bavarian City of Freising—a hundred miles west of the Bohemian Forest—

summed up the cultural challenges of wilderness conservation in Germany.

- In January 2009, the congress “The Appropriateness of Non-Intervention Management For Protected Areas” in the Czech village of Srni provided many examples of the successful propagation of natural processes in different protected area situations in central Europe.
- In May 2008, in Prague, the Czech capital, the conference called “Wilderness and Large Natural Habitat Areas in Europe” was held by the European Commission and the Czech Republic during its EU presidency. This convention came up with concrete recommendations for the accommodation of wilderness in the systems of nature protection in Europe.
- In October 2009, the Bavarian Academy for Nature Conservation and Landscape Preservation hosted

a national conference, with a focus on “Wilderness and Sustainable Use in the Bavarian Forest National Park.”

### Cultural Landscapes

All of this invites skepticism. To some the mere idea of wilderness in central Europe might seem a bit of a far-fetched misnomer or a blatant exaggeration. Indeed, the face of central Europe’s landscape had been shaped by civilization much longer than on some other continents. Ever since the Neolithic age our ancestors have carved their livelihoods out of their natural surroundings. Unlike in North America, this process took a long time—several thousand years—as

it gradually turned wilderness into cultural landscapes. More often than not, this cultivation created biodiversity rather than destroying it. Many species of wildlife, such as the roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), European hare (*Lepus europaeus*), pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus sp.*), grey partridge (*Perdix perdix*), and quail (*Coturnix coturnix*), owe their wide distribution in central Europe through the mid-20th century to the human-made opening in the tree canopy for clearings created for small-scale farming. Then, as industrialization, land use, and timber famine progressed, the relationship of central European people toward nature changed. More often than not, cultivation of land turned into exploitation.

This process found an early witness in Aldo Leopold, one of the North American pioneers of wilderness protection. At the end of his three-month study trip to Europe in 1935 he observed that: Wilderness did not only vanish from the continent’s surface but also from humans’ minds and experiences. And we can add: for hundreds of years. It was mostly due to the long and gradual process of cultivating wildlands that the idea of wilderness had largely vanished from central European consciousness—much earlier and probably more thoroughly than to the average American mind. Americans adored frontier heroes such as Daniel Boone, and even found pleasure in readings



Figure 2—Šumava National Park. Photo by Till Meyer.

authors such as John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, and Aldo Leopold. Central Europeans during the same period had no stake in true wilderness simply because they had no place of reference upon which to build a cultural relationship toward wildlands.

and gave rise to a rich variety of literature by authors such as Karel Klostermann, Josef Váchal, Adalbert Stifter, and Alfred Kubin. It was men such as these who helped central Europe retain a wilderness heritage of its own.

mighty powers and dynamics of the Moldau River as it springs from the Šumava hills and becomes a wild river and finally a mighty stream. These strong melodies could not have been created in a disenchanted world of well-tended commercial forests and regulated rivers.

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But there were exceptions: a few regions in central Europe have remained where climatic and geomorphologic conditions would always limit land use. One of these places—the most extensive outside the Alps and the Carpathians—is the Bohemian Forest, lately also termed the Greater Bohemian Forest Ecosystem by some. It encompasses an area of roughly 5,000 sq km (1,930 sq. mi.), and this landscape belongs to three nations: Germany, Austria, and the Czech Republic. Even though some farming communities and small industries (mainly glass-making) have subsisted in the area, claiming their share of logging and grazing, much of the terrain was too rough for wholesale exploitation. In the beginning of the 20th century, modern forestry took bigger areas and intensively logged parts of the area, thereby changing the composition of tree species to predominantly spruce (*Picea abies*).

However, quite a few patches of old-growth forest, peat bogs, and old meadows survived. Thanks to landowning aristocrats such as Earl August Buquoy and Prince Johann Adolf II zu Schwarzenberg a few tracts of virgin forest (*Urwald*) were set aside in 1838 and in 1858 respectively. These places always found admirers

It was not only men who defended the *Urwald* of the homeland. One outstanding representative of literate wilderness affinity for this area was Emerenz Meier, a female author and poet: “I grew up as a child of the free forest. Wild animals were my friends ... and as I embraced the bosom of the earth, I swore that I would never ever tolerate the shackles of a master ... I am the free child of the free forest!” Like many of her contemporaries during the 19th and early 20th centuries, Emerenz Meier later immigrated to the United States. The quote above identifies Emerenz Meier as a true child of her times. The 19th and early 20th centuries were to a great degree marked by repression and social and political unrest. Also, during the same period, the fascination with nature and landscape rose distinctly. Often the longing for freedom and wild nature were expressed in one breathe. It is quite plausible that the early fascination with wilderness in North America during the 19th century had some of its roots in the central Europe.

Perhaps one of the best-known pieces of art to come from this region is the brilliant composition “Vltava” (“The Moldau”) by the Czech composer Bedřich (Friedrich) Smetana. This symphonic poem describes the

### Changes in Forest Vegetation

In June 2008, the authors were joined by The WILD Foundation board members Charlotte Baron and Vance Martin for hikes through the Bohemian Forest. Locations such as Höllbachspreng (Hells-Creek-Gorge) provided enchanted forest scenery with babbling waterfalls accompanied by gnarled trees, mossy rocks, and lush fern coves. Other scenes stopped somewhat short of being a fairytale idyll: large groups of dead and dying trees—bereft of all foliage and most of the bark—provided ghastly imagery at first sight. The remains of the trees were still standing with their shiny naked trunks reflecting the morning sun. Other trees were laying topsy-turvy on the ground in various stages of decay. As some of bark that still remained could easily be peeled from the trunks, it showed the telltale tracks of the Spruce bark beetle (*Ips typographus*). Evidently the beetle attacks had occurred quite a while ago, because the regeneration had set quite well with many sizable sapling trees growing on the decaying trunks (see figure 3). Not only were young spruce and an occasional silver fir (*Abies alba*) encountered, but also European beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) mountain maple (*Acer sp.*), and mountain ash (*Sorbus aucuparia*). In addition, dense thickets of blackberry (*Rubus fruticosus*), carpets of bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*), and clusters of fireweed (*Epilobium angustifolium*) created a rich understory.



Figure 3—Dead trees and regeneration in the Bavarian Forest. Photo by Till Meyer.

If one looked at a map showing the potential natural vegetation map of Europe—provided by the Federal Agency of Nature Conservation (Weber and Illmann 2008)—one can easily make out the Bohemian Forest as a speck of bluish-green interspersed with tiny dots of purple-blue. These colors stand for mountain coniferous and mixed forest. Curiously this combination of colors also occurs at the rim of the boreal forest in Scandinavia and Russia around the 60th latitude. This phenomenon is due to the fact that the altitude of the Bohemian Forest (up to 1,453 m/4,827 ft. above sea level) provides a cool to temperate climate and plant compositions that corre-

spond to the specific latitude for the forests of the European North.

On a smaller scale—provided by the EU Habitats Directive (European Union 1992) and Natura 2000 (Kiener and Hußlein 2007)—we can distinguish two dozen different habitat types covering quite a wide spectrum, ranging from natural dystrophic lakes, to ponds, bogs, grasslands, and heath, to beech-maple and spruce-fir forests as well as bog woodlands (see figure 4). As these different habitats interlace, they form one of the most threatened mixed mountain systems worldwide, according to a 2008 biodiversity assessment (Weber and Illmann 2008).

The mammals of the area, which are protected according to the EU

Habitats Directive, feature Lynx (*Lynx lynx*), European otter (*Lutra lutra*), and numerous bat species, notably barbastelle (*Barbastella barbastellus*) and Bechstein's bat (*Myotis bechsteinii*). The birds in the area, which are protected by the bird directive, include impressive species such as the black stork (*Ciconia nigra*), capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*), hazel grouse (*Bonasa bonasia*), black woodpecker (*Dryocopus martius*), three-toed woodpecker (*Picoides tridactylus*), and peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*).

However, because the EU Habitats Directive (European Union 1992) aims to promote biodiversity by assuring the long-term survival of the EU's most valuable and threatened



Figure 4. Restored high moor where the iron curtain was removed between Bavaria and the Czech Republic. Photo by Till Meyer.

species and habitats, it differs somewhat from the intentions of wilderness! Remember that wilderness, according to the IUCN 1b, is *not* about protecting certain species. In fact it is 1b that most explicitly of all IUCN categories (Dudley 2008, p. 14) aims “to protect the long-term ecological integrity of natural areas ... where natural forces and processes predominate.” (see figure 5)

In this context it is important to note that in preparation for the 9th Meeting of the “Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity” (held in Bonn, Germany, May 19–30, 2009) many European countries passed a National Strategy

for Biodiversity. The German government explicitly informed their lawmakers (Gov. print 16/7082): “In Germany there will again be wilderness areas (e.g. in National Parks) with natural and undisturbed processes of development” and “Nature should develop according to her own laws on at least two percent of Germany’s territory by 2020.”

Critics of this mandate to protect processes claim that it often contradicts the EU Habitats Directive, as natural succession will eventually put an end to certain preferred habitats of the rare species. The solution to this perceived contradiction lies in the scale applied. On small and isolated

old-growth forest patches and secondary habitats it can indeed happen that rare plant and animal species disappear once regeneration takes over. Larger forests and primary habitats, however, where so called non-intervention management is practiced for a long period will meet the demands of the EU Habitats Directive and often harbor more biodiversity over time. Jörg Müller (2009), zoologist in the Bavarian Forest National Park writes, “Natural forests ... are characteristically dynamic and heterogeneous as a result of natural disturbance regimes, supplying an abundance of structures which enhance biodiversity.”

The pressure on biodiversity in forests dominated by spruce (naturally or planted) is shown in events such as the outbreak of spruce bark beetle. As these tiny insects occur in large masses, they are able to kill even healthy trees and open up the forest to a cascade of different organisms. The bark beetle is then followed (in no particular order of appearance) by invertebrates such as common beetles, moths, and ants. Also fungi, slime molds, lichens, and mosses take over and render a mosaic of structures, which in turn provide nesting cavities and a food base for bats and birds. It is important to note that decaying timber makes up a prime fertilization substrate for tree regeneration that in general is more efficient than artificial propagation in commercial forests.

As these correlations became obvious during recent years of research, the focus was extended to biodiversity and climatic change. It soon became clear that naturally occurring mountain forests, which were submitted to the benign neglect of non-intervention management for a long period, could likely provide some valuable solutions for commercial sustainable forestry in a time of change.

## Non-Intervention Management

Against much protest, the Bavarian Forest National Park (founded in 1970) was the first national park in central Europe that allowed “natural forces and processes to predominate” on a greater scale. The true test for non-intervention management came in August 1983, when—within a few minutes—a hurricane took down most of the spruce trees on 175 hectares (432 acres) of the Bavarian Forest National Park. When it was decided to leave most of the timber salvage in the forest, thus making the national



Figure 5. Dark, peat enriched waters flowing through a naturally-occurring meadow, high in Sumava National Park. Photo by Vance Martin.

park susceptible to infestations of bark beetles, a storm public of protest broke loose.

Despite these protests, which mostly came from small, local NGOs, the decision was upheld steadfastly. Thanks to the courage of Hans Bibelriether, the first director of the

Bavarian Forest National Park, and the backing of the Bavarian minister of food, agriculture and forestry, Dr. Hans Eisenmann, more subsequent storm calamities in forests received the benign neglect of non-intervention management. The original idea was, in the words of Hans Eisenmann (1983),

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“to create a primeval forest for our children and children’s children.”

Nobody at that time could foresee the dimensions of first great rewilding experiment in central Europe. It took almost 25 years for Šumava National Park to follow the non-intervention policy of its Bavarian neighbor. When one takes into consideration the fact that Šumava National Park was founded 20 years after the Bavarian Forest National Park, it becomes clear that allowing “natural forces and processes to predominate” in national parks is not a decision that is taken lightly. For many more years it was standard practice on Šumava sites to fight bark beetles by cutting infected trees. Then, after the hurricane Kyrill hit Šumava National Park in January 2007, knocking down about 2,000 hectares (4,940 acres) of forest, the long-time discussion nationally and bilaterally about appropriate management of forests escalated. . As it turned out, the forest, which was hit hardest, was grouped around those clearings, which were created by cutting bark-beetle infested trees.

The tough lesson hit home. During the month following hurricane Kyrill, the cooperation between the two parks improved markedly as mutual management guidelines for the Wild Heart of Europe were developed. This process was accelerated by

the Schengen Treaty in December 2007, when the area suddenly became threatened by uncontrolled trans-boundary tourism. And there are yet more mutual challenges. One is the management of large herbivores and carnivores. Through radio and satellite tracking of red deer and lynx in particular, it became clear that these animals did not care about national borders, let alone national park borders. Lynx for instance could cover home ranges of more than 30,000 hectares (74,100 acres). Here the concept of the Greater Bohemian Forest Ecosystem suggests itself as a matrix for the formidable task of rewilding a cultural landscape.

Before taking this bigger picture into consideration, it must first be demonstrated that mutual management in the newly dedicated Czech-Bavarian wilderness area is working successfully. The Wild Heart of Europe is a very important area for research, public education, communication, and recreation. To prepare the area for the many different needs, a Wilderness Research and Training Center will be established in the village of Kvilda, only a stone’s throw away from the spring of the Moldau River and located in a former military base, where militancy and war anxiety once was bred. As this place still breathes heavily with culture and

history, it is our hope that the relationship between Germany and the Czech Republic finds some light but solid footing in a mutually developed concept of wilderness.

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