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Extended Paper Abstract

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Title: The Forest that Points Backwards and Forwards in Time: Civilizational Talk in Poland's Bialowieza Forest

The most deeply represented trait of Poland's Bialowieza forest is its primeval character. Roots of alders reach their way out rust colored bogs. Towering spruce and oaks grow to their upper height limit to create perches for eagle owls or three-toed woodpeckers. Imagining this forest only as a non-human collaboration is not difficult under the present historical circumstances where tourists arrive expecting a forest outside of time and history.

However, a key feature of this "primeval" woodland is its conception in civilizational thought. Intellectual historian, Robert Pough Harrison reminds us that forests shadow civilization, becoming an object of loss and desire as we place tree-covered wildlands forever outside of ourselves.<sup>1</sup> The cultural anthropologist's responsibility to that call of otherness is to find the most cherished cultural assumptions that keep people at a distance from the other, which, in the case of Bialowieza takes the form of a discussion about "eastern" and "western" spheres of influence in the forest's ecology.

The forest serves as a kind of mythical boundary between east and west in a current debate over whether or not to expand the Bialowieza National Park into an area now commercially logged. Foresters, scientists, rural inhabitants, and intellectuals imbue the forest with meaning to advance their respective causes of forest use and protection. Much of that meaning is entangled in a specific post-communist politic that also plays heavily on the Polish and Belarusian ethnicities of the people who live there

Ecological scientists insist on the uniqueness of the forest as the basis of their critique against forest mismanagement. For them it is the last primeval forest, the last wild, low-land old-growth in all of Europe, the remainder of a type of nature that once stretched from the Urals to the Atlantic. Only due to the civilizing acts of Polish royalty and western science was the forest conserved til this day. For foresters the the woodland serves as the basis for rural development that will also advance the needs of the Belarusian minority. Rural backwardness can be eliminated under a wise-resource use model that also advances minority rights. They draw heavily on internationalist idioms of sustainable development and cultivate the boundaries of who is local. And yet another group, made up of librarians, teachers, journalists, museum workers and others, invest the forest with a mystical eastern quality, rejecting the nationalist manipulations of both foresters and scientists, and linking forest protection to democracy in present day Belarus.

This paper explores the ethno-environmental politics of the forest, paying attention to how actors employ rhetorics of scale. The first part of the paper provides a bit of selective history to set the stakes of civilizational talk in motion. Here I give a background of antagonism and cooperation between the regions inhabitants, with much attention played to ecological scientists and their role in the community. I look at how residents include and displace one another in the forest's history. The second part describes how civilizational talk is deployed with an attention to values. How are people talking about the forest as a space of nature with concepts drawn on the imaginary line of east and west, and the third part discusses how and why cultural differences within the forest region are in the grip of the limited concept of civilization.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Pough Harrison. 1992. *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*. The University of Chicago Press. Chicago.

The paper concludes by outlining the convergences between these different actors, arguing that seeing the forest only as “primeval” obscures the human history that resigns the woodland as a space prior to history. Yet by showing the newly constructed identities in the forest debate it becomes possible to think of civilizational value hierarchies as an artifact themselves in the near present.