

Communities in Transition: Protected Nature and Local People in Eastern and Central Europe. By Saska Petrova. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014. 158 pp. Bibliography. Index.

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Despite the European origins of the wilderness idea, European natures have occupied a relatively marginal place in critical social science scholarship on protected areas. At the same time, the Chernobyl disaster made contamination the dominant image in popular perceptions about the natural environments of the formerly socialist world. However, a recent wave of scholarship that includes Saska Petrova's *Communities in Transition: Protected Areas and Local People in Eastern and Central Europe* demonstrates that postsocialist ecologies are about more than just degradation, and that nature protection in Central and Eastern Europe refracts the global history of conservation practice in novel ways.

Saska Petrova's book is a geographical study of the relationship between local communities and administrators in the Pelister National Park in Macedonia, and in the Šumava National Park in the Czech Republic. Using evidence from surveys, interviews, regulation, and policy documents, Petrova analyzes the ways in which place attachment and the economic opportunities parks provide affect whether residents have positive or negative attitudes about the parks' existence. Petrova argues that contrary to the dominant image of local communities as obstacles, victims or opportunists found in nature conservation literature, people residing near the two parks were pragmatic in their engagement with administrators, and were able to exercise themselves as political subjects. Despite residents' disagreements with managers, and their hazy understanding of managers' responsibilities, they displayed a strong sense of the park as "home" and never questioned the value of the parks' ongoing existence.

The first five chapters of *Communities in Transition* set the stage for the two case studies. These chapters review literatures on the history of nature conservation, the relationships between parks and local communities, and environmental policies during socialism and after its demise. Chapter 2 brings together scholarship on the importance of treating communities as complex and differentiated, the significance of place attachment in grasping people's relationship to protected areas, and the social construction of "wilderness." Chapter 3 situates national parks in a global history of conservation that emerged in the context of colonialism and Europeans' obsession with natural history and hunting. Petrova underscores that although "the national park" is a global category, its enactment in particular places takes unique and specific forms as a result of local and regional histories. Chapter 4 forms the conceptual core of the book and develops the argument that local residents in the two national parks were neither obstacles, victims, nor opportunists. Instead, they engaged pragmatically with administrators in order to improve stewardship over parks' natural landscapes and to create opportunities for making a living.

In Chapter 5, the book's final contextualizing chapter, Petrova helpfully reminds the reader of socialism's paradoxical environmental impacts. On the one hand, centrally planned economies were resource intensive and often highly polluting. On the other hand, they facilitated the conservation of forests – often through the creation of security zones along the Iron Curtain.

The impacts of EU environmental policy and broader decentralization initiatives have also been mixed. While EU accession policies helped lower pollution levels and conserve biodiversity, economic liberalization has frequently enabled powerful entrepreneurs to seize resources from conservation areas or to reduce their size.

Chapters 6 and 7 analyze data about the two case studies that include overviews of park regulation, forest ecologies, and residents' responses to standard survey questions. Whereas communities in Macedonia's Pelister National Park are mainly composed of self-employed retirees, people residing near the Czech Republic's Šumava National Park are younger and have higher paid employment. Nevertheless, in both cases residents not only displayed a high degree of ancestral ties to their region, but also overall support for the existence of the park in spite of disagreements with park managers over how to manage forests. For example, conflicts emerged between local residents and the Šumava park administration because of managers' decision to take a non-interventionist approach to a bark beetle infestation in line with broader European rewilding initiatives. Petrova also discusses governance issues such as the way in which the Pelister Park was able to informally incorporate elements of participatory management despite having an inflexible management structure, a characteristic that she argues is typical in Central and Eastern European parks.

The value of this study lies in the details of the two case studies and in the author's effort to situate Central and Eastern European parks in a global history of conservation and in the critical social science literature on protected areas. Scholars who study parks in the former socialist world will find material with which to think comparatively about the demographic composition of rural communities, residents' ideas about forest stewardship, and the degree to which parks afford rural residents economic opportunities through ecotourism. In contrast to stories of antagonism and dispossession that predominate in the political ecology literature on protected areas in the global south, Petrova's material provides examples of how communities for the most part coexist peacefully with parks. However, despite the fact that local people are the focus of Petrova's study, communities are represented in the text primarily in terms of their demographic features (age, employment) or in the form of uncontextualized interview extracts. Consequently, because survey data is not supplemented with descriptions of social relationships and interactions, the reader learns very little about the character of residents' pragmatic engagements with park administrators and landscapes.

The author's goal of situating nature protection in Central and East Europe in a global, rather than regional, history is to be commended. However, Petrova could have devoted more attention to tracing the interconnections between global and regional histories during and after socialism rather than simply juxtaposing them. For example, it would have been interesting to learn about whether Soviet models of nature protection were introduced into the Czech Republic in the socialist period, and if so, how they interacted with pre-war approaches. Finally, given Petrova's concern with mapping power relations, more engagement with literatures about the political economy of postsocialist agrarian change (on issues of property relations and informal politics) would have enabled her to provide a more robust explanation for *why* the relations between these parks and peoples display the dynamics they do.

This book will be of interest to scholars conducting research on protected areas, environmental management, and socio-ecological change after the end socialism.