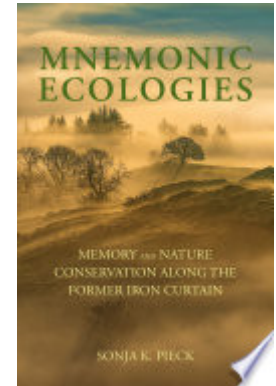


Sonja K. Pieck. *Mnemonic Ecologies: Memory and Nature Conservation along the Former Iron Curtain*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2023. 280 pp. \$45.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-262-54616-4.



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The German Green Belt is an ambitious conservation project and idea that aims to protect land from the Baltic Sea to the Thuringian Forest, stretching along the “ground zero of the Cold War,” the border that split Germany between West (FRG) and East (GDR) between 1949 and 1990 (p. 106). As disruptive and often violent the border and its maintenance were to people, it allowed for the (re)emergence of great biological diversity, as “border installations offered microstructures” to wildlife and as cleared and patrolled sections of land allowed for new vegetation assemblages to take root, such that “technology meant to intimidate, maim and kill [people] received an entirely different interpretation, and was repurposed in the interests of the living” (p. 41). In this telling, “nature’s conquest over the Cold War” offers a compelling, triumphant narrative and case for conservation here (p. 42).

Sonja K. Pieck has written a thought-provoking and at times very moving book. The shared

importance of nature and unique ecosystems drew hundreds of people together again from both sides of the border in the months following the collapse of the socialist regime. Novel species and new natures had returned and developed along “no-man’s-land” unexpectedly: when people moved out, nature moved back in. But what to do when people are allowed to move back in again? Negotiating this question is at the center of Pieck’s book; conservation, she argues, is being pushed and challenged to think about how trauma that “wound[s] places along with the people in them” should be accommodated within conservation’s goals and processes for there to be long-term viability and support to projects and initiatives (p. 27). The book examines the relationship between memory and conservation and the intertwining of both through memorialization. This memorialization can be social, relational, or material, where “memorials and monuments are material mnemonic devices” that “appeal to others to remem-

ber.” Participating in these memorializations is “part of a politics of healing” (p. 28).

Pieck’s early chapters provide a useful overview and insight into how conservation is an intervention or an ongoing series of interventions that are a culmination of decisions and trade-offs about what landscapes “should” look like and contain. This means that what conservation *is* looks different depending on where one stands along the old German border. Some parts of the Green Belt are being allowed to “re-wild,” with reeds permitted to regrow to establish wetland for the retention of water, for the sake of birds, and for insect diversity. In other places, these same processes of succession are prevented: forest is clear-cut or trees felled to maintain or reestablish meadows and grasslands, as conservationists strive instead to realize a vision of the “rural idyll” (*Heimat*). These differences and decisions show how conservation always works within “layered landscapes,” where humans, plants, insects, and wildlife have histories. Narrating these relationships is a pivotal part of conservation’s work. Deep, often continuing, contestations focus on which species and whose histories and stories get protected, memorialized, and told, as well as how and for how long. This book makes a case throughout for these decisions to be made more explicit.

Depicting conservation as an inherently political activity, or as about “more than” nature, is not new: the last few decades have given rise to a burgeoning literature and scholarship on exactly this topic. Indeed, local German criticism and resistance to the Green Belt initiative are very telling, as they reflect local discomfort with conservation’s goals and priorities, which are too often experienced as imposed and out of place. The example of Eichsfeld’s farmers and their response to the Green Belt—resistance—is a telling one. Local people’s lack of inclusion in original conservation planning led to mass protests, with perceptions that conservation was a new form of exclusion akin to the border regime. A stakeholder from the

Elbe biosphere reserve presented this point eloquently. “People live here with a special historical experience: first the ‘red,’ then the ‘green’ expropriation ... that is immediately equated. The people here are very sensitive regarding their freedom to act and own property” (p. 147). Farmers in the Eichsfeld region were “triggered” by conservationists’ need for land, after decades of their own dispossession. In this case, conservation appears as an external interest group competitively interested in local resources rather than a desired land use activity or outcome.

Conservation has also had to contend with questions over its goals and priorities, particularly as “conservation could easily lead to a de-historicisation of the landscape, greenwashing of a traumatic past, and facile escape from Germans’ collective burden to remember” (p. 60). Pieck outlines a post-World War II transition from a conservation rooted in ideology to one of empiricism. This more “scientific environmentalism” veered away from a *Heimat* vision of the countryside to one that relied on species counts and scientific rationales, where conservation was not justified using the vocabularies, histories, place attachment, and imaginations of people living within these areas (p. 72).

These dynamics and features of conservation narratives mirror ongoing broader dynamics related to the environmental and climate sectors in Europe today. These contestations stem, in part, from environmental policies imposing unequal burdens and consequences on some individuals and businesses, as well as a lack of agreement around the (often isolated) goals of these policies. One farmer articulated to Pieck that conservation not only was imposed “from above” but also came with judgment, an ideology that branded farmers as “bad” and conservation as “good,” where there was a problematic distance between the realities of everyday farming and conservation visions. Taking these criticisms on board, conservation advocates of the Green Belt are prioritizing inclusive

approaches to their plans. In many ways, this book inadvertently outlines how the conservation sector is in a bind: by leading with calls for justice, participation, and inclusion and recognizing the importance of places to identities, its embrace of democratic processes means that “the people” may decide not to support conservation at all. Conservation is left—again—on the sidelines within an ever-urbanizing, extracting, consuming political economy. Setting land aside for biodiversity or for memorializing imposes limits on what can be done with it, with few immediate or perceived direct rewards (where individual interests in reestablishing private property regimes are supreme), meaning that conservation is forever resisted, dismissed, or crowded out. In many ways, the idea of incorporating “mnemonic ecologies” as integral to the conservation project complicates, expands, and also potentially further dilutes the sector’s goals.

Pieck’s wonderful book thus grapples with issues that are unfortunately becoming relevant again and again, in landscapes old and new. The ecological devastation of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the mines still to be cleared from the Yugoslav war, and the Colombian or Cambodian postwar landscapes that Pieck also outlines mean that landscapes with violent histories within living memories are not phenomena of the past. Pieck calls for attention to a raft of considerations to be “taken seriously” in the work of conservation planning and doing, from emotions to nature’s agency, to work out a “new conservation ethos.” This would mean that conservation must be “embedded in a larger meaning-making effort connected to values, identity, and emotion,” recognizing that “local and national identity, the anxieties of modernity, and the reactions to a shifting political and economic order” inform our responses to prioritizing nature conservation in whatever form (p. 80). This book captures the complexity and the learnings from such an endeavor.

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