

Nature conservation – different traditions and cultures



In Germany nature conservation still seems to be an exercise for do-gooders. The debate on reasons and motivation for engagement in nature conservation is mostly insufficient and it seems as if nature conservationists are just bearing a societal debt. This obstructs the view on the potentials of nature conservation activities and organizations for the forming of a civil society.

My first picture is from about 1955. It was taken in East Germany. We see two adult men and four children, three of them are boys.

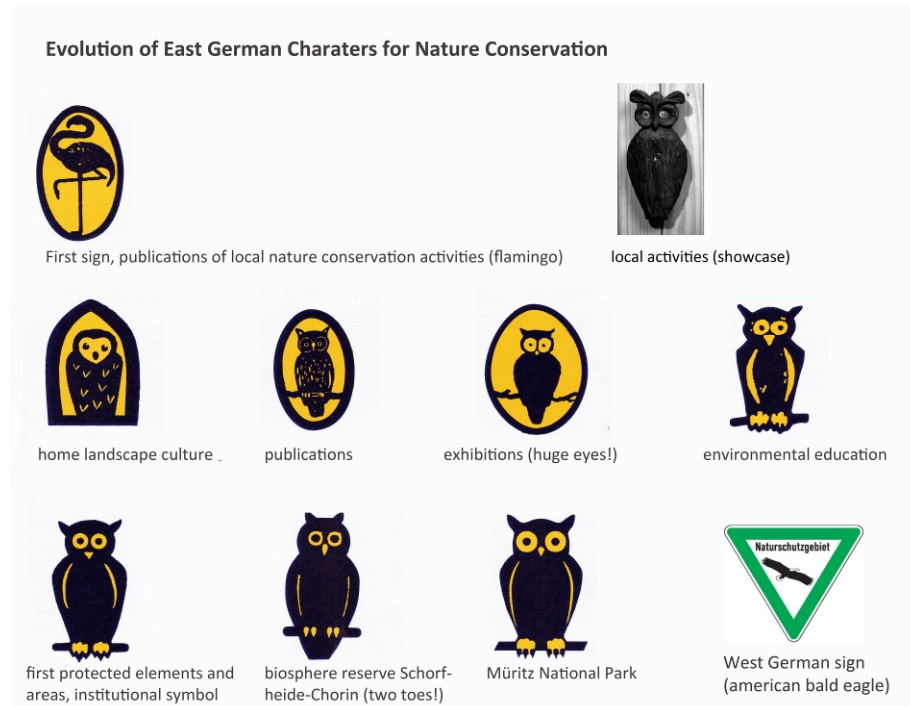
One of the boys is putting a sign on a pine tree. He is Gerd Ohnesorge, son of the man with the hat, Hans Ohnesorge. Hans was the director of the local museum in Bad Freienwalde. He came from a conservative political movement background and had nothing to do with the communists in East Germany. He went to church and was involved in local history. He also created a geological trail in his village. His son Gerd later became a famous nature illustrator.

The man whose back we only see is Kurt Kretschmann. He is one of the most important nature conservationists in Germany who died a couple of years ago, honored by the government and many nature conservationists in Germany. He came from the reform movements in Germany; he was a convinced vegetarian, an engaged pacifist, a war deserter, an enthusiastic practitioner of nudism, a gardener and garden reformer and a communist.

These completely different men went with the children into the woods – to do what? To put a sign on a tree that indicates protection, I presume of the valley below, but maybe they also meant the tree. However, they had no official permission to do that, they just did it.

The picture gives us an impressive example of the historical power of engagement for the local nature and the undifferentiated – you could also say holistic - situation in the nature conservation movement 60 years ago. Quite different cultural traditions came together, just to reach out to something in their surroundings.

Their action seems a little anarchistic, but without any doubt it was striking – and it was indeed the beginning of a successful history. The only similarity between both men was their passion for their home country. For them there was no difference between natural and cultural resources, it was all their beloved landscape.



What is the sign they are putting up? It is an owl, and they had formerly used it just as a symbol for their local campaigns. Back then it was carved from wood for a small showcase. I received this first owl from the widow of Hans Ohnesorge.

For flyers in the first years after the war Kretschmann chose a flamingo - because it was nice, until somebody told him there are no such birds in middle Europe apart from in the Zoos.

However, the owl wasn't an official sign at all. It was transformed for different purposes until it was used to officially stand for nature protection issues.

By the way, in West Germany they chose a white head sea eagle – it is a bird that only exists in America as far as I know. Nobody could explain to me why they didn't use a bird of their own local nature. I presume it was just because of the iconographic acceptability of the white head.

Today both signs are used in Germany, because both former East and West German countries could decide which to use on their own. The eagle seems to impress a sovereign advice; the owl with their tall eyes seems to appeal greater on the conscience of the people. If there is a correlation to the styles of politics in the different German countries, it has not yet been looked at in research but it would be interesting to know.

What is the situation in the German nature conservation today? It is totally different from the 1950s. We find strong organizations gaining in political power as well as local initiatives. The whole field had completely broadened. It is very unlikely that Hans Ohnesorge and Kurt Kretschmann would act together again unless if there is a strong regional perspective for both.

Let me describe some of the traditions, cultures and movements that are important in Germany today. The enumeration will be incomplete and there will be only ideal types that can be mixed in reality, but it is just to lead into a discussion.



There is, for example, a widely accepted fascination in nature as wilderness.

Wilderness projects arose in the 1990s after the Russian army and the other occupying forces in Germany abandoned their huge military training areas. Foundations came by thousands of hectare land. One of their deputies gave me an interview at that time and he characterized this process as a revolutionary situation: "Every 200 years the land is newly dispensed; we now have a truly historical moment! "

However, these areas offer possibilities for natural processes that had been completely removed from Germany. The wolf is coming back, open deserts develop anew in a free succession; the land is colonized by rare plant and animal species.

Nature Conservationists like Michael Succow or Horst Beutler wrote nice pictured books about these new possibilities and they described large scale nature processes as the best opportunity for reaching an ecological turn in middle Europe's society.

This movement was very successful. There were also ecologists and people in the cities that were fascinated by the idea of new wildernesses. The federal government committed itself to achieving at least 2 percent of wilderness land in Germany – it sounds rather small but for the completely used and formed landscape of Germany it is not bad. And Brandenburg gave some of their huge Russian Military areas completely to a governmental nature conservation foundation.

On this picture you see a military training area near Jüterbog. It shows also the professional complication of these areas, because the dune and heath land structures are mostly favored under nature conservationists but they are going to vanish in free plant succession. So there is a debate on how these structures may be retained with wilderness strategies.

On the other hand the inhabitants of the concerned regions have their obstacles. They usually seek the potentials of regional economy and tourism – the idea of wilderness itself does not have such a strong appeal for them. We made surveys in these regions and they showed that it would be quite an achievement if they just could accept the wilderness within their villages.

That's why I'd say there is a potential for an environmental society from the wilderness perspectives but it is mostly not local, it is more a thing for passionate supporters from the cities. And I didn't find a way to tie it to a region. That leaves a lot of open-ended questions for its future.



A second push for large area nature protection efforts rose in the same decade in the East German brown coal mining fields. Their restoration during GDR times often failed, so there were large derelict areas left in 1989. They became interesting for nature conservationists because of the pioneer succession occurring there.

To make an example I chose a photo of Heinz Sielmanns Naturlandschaft in Wanninchen, a former brown coal area in Lower Lusatia in South Brandenburg. The whole mining area has about 6000 ha, more than half of it is under nature protection.

Heinz Sielmann was a famous animal and nature photographer and filmmaker. He established a foundation for nature protection projects. As Holger Belz probably knows better than I do, wilderness in the sense of nature processes is quite important for the Heinz Sielmann foundation, but the Sielmann team in Wanninchen would hardly use the word *wilderness*. This is partly to avoid conflicts with the residents.

In contrast to the wilderness-followers they tried to design a new landscape; they wanted to create the best conditions for a diverse nature development. That's why for example they work together with the restoration enterprise and agree to the immense transfer of soil in the restoration process.

There are a lot of people in Germany interested in the genesis of these new landscapes who are also donating money for it. So there is again a link between people and nature conservation.

We created a landscape studio over a period of four years in Wanninchen in the Heinz Sielmann foundation nature park's centre, so we had our own experiences. Because of the creative work it is actually not nature *conservation* but nature *development*. That's why we also expected a high potential for an Environmental society, open-mindedness for discourses on landscape change.

But the situation in the visitor centers binds a lot of energy. My impression was that the main relationship to the people is formed through the everyday business as it often is in Environmental education institutions. And that means to guide groups of school kids and old age pensioners that come to the center in travel busses; so there isn't much scope for a civil environmental society. But this is only a small insight and not the result of an investigation.

Basically I still would say that the construction of new semi - natural areas forms a different civil potential from the wilderness fascination.



The next photo shows Heck cows in Hildburghausen, a breeding back that came close to the aurochs phenotype. They are standing on a wetland that had become gainless for conventional agriculture, so the local nature conservation office started a project with different partners of the region.

The use of mega herbivores in nature protection areas has found a lot of followers in Europe in the last two decades. They also use horses and ponies, wisents, deer and others –Heinz Sielmann foundation does this as well.

It has a lot of functional reasons. They are oriented to the ecology of pre glacial nature in Europe and attempt is made to keep landscape structures open without machines.

But there is a romantic notion in it too. To me there sometimes seems to be an archaic thrill – to stand in the woods in front of a big and wild animal. One of the most engaged agents of mega herbivore projects in Germany always reminds me of a little tiger. He wears a golden necklace and white T-shirts and I fancy finding him deep in the wood with a crossbow.

Mega herbivores are not only used by large landowning institutions and foundations but also by small cooperatives and they often manage to involve farmers that can bring the meat to market in these projects.

And for visitors and tourists the areas might be more attractive if there is a chance to see animals as well.

The pasture land projects usually seem to be an adapted solution for special natural and social situations. There are scopes for different strategies and constructions.

For these reasons I would say that the potential for civil engagement, network thinking and self organized structures is relatively high.



Here you see the leader of the Ruegen Island Biosphere Reserve with a member of the Biosphere rangers.

The number of people-related jobs in nature conservation has increased rapidly in the last decades. Remember the first picture with Kurt Kretschmann? During that time there was only one person in the whole of Brandenburg state employed by the government for nature conservation. Today there must be hundreds and in Germany some thousand.

These actors not only work in administrations with an executive function but also in offices for biosphere reserves, nature and national parks. Their task is to lead guests through the nature, to find ways for the residents to participate in the art of a region, to organize planning processes and so on.

So one should think they are the perfect actors for pushing for a Big Environmental Society. They are in between nature conservation and society, their aim is to enhance nature in society and they have a political mission to achieve.

But in Germany I wouldn't overestimate their potentials. The political mandate for professionals in nature conservation to also build a region in the economic sense, land use and landscape politics is rather weak.

Most of the biosphere reserve areas and nature parks in Germany are still just instruments for nature conservation itself and for the organization of nature tourism.

There seem to be some new approaches in the biosphere region Schwäbische Alb. Maybe in some years I would come to another opinion.



At last I'd like to look back at one of the oldest traditions in nature conservation.

From my point of view it is still one of the most vivid movements in this field – it is the people interested in ornithology, which you just call 'birders'. I think that tells a lot about their character.

For me they're very interesting because they're combining an individual passion with group action and often even political engagement. Often habitats of beloved birds are affected by industrial or traffic building, so things are closely connected there.

Even their communication with scientific research is vivid and the scientists are vice versa not too unworlly, they often share the same passion. In Germany they have unfortunately lost ground and are often disrespected in science policy.

Nature observation, knowledge of the local group structures and a relation to the landscape are often connected and different generations are still involved – old and young people, learning from each other.

For a Big Environmental Society they are my favorite although I see that not all challenges in our landscape development are objected by them. But what I miss in many younger traditions in nature conservation is the connection to the local structures, because I believe that only from these structures can a civil society emerge.

I'm going to stop my list here and suggest that we complete it together, adding special or different movements and traditions from Great Britain.

Afterwards we can discuss their potential for civil societies trying to form their environment.