Abstract

On May 1, 2004, eight formerly Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe consummated their long-desired “return to Europe” by joining the European Union (EU). While popular perceptions of the east European environment center on nightmarish images of pollution hotspots, Communism also bequeathed a wealth of relatively untouched nature that supports far more biological diversity than can be found in Western Europe. The enlargement represents a biodiversity bonanza for the EU, but millions of humans inhabit the post-Communist countryside, too, tending cultural landscapes rich with local and national meanings. EU accession has thus raised profound questions about post-Communist nature management. Should priority be given to biodiversity conservation at the continental scale, or to maintaining peopled landscapes and traditional land-use patterns? This article examines the confrontation between global
and local understandings of nature through a case study of two Western-supported initiatives in national park management in Latvia in the late 1990s. Some Latvians, seeing hope for national development only through an internationalist embrace of globalization and regional integration, appropriated the Western narratives of biodiversity and rural economic diversification. But others resisted these narratives as threatening to agrarian notions of the value of rural landscapes: notions rooted in a potent agrarian discourse of national identity. What internationalists saw as a savvy embrace of the globalization of nature, agrarians denounced as a sort of self-imposed neo-colonialism.

Keywords
Latvia; Political ecology; National parks; National identity; Nature; Biodiversity; Landscape; Post-Communism; Agrarianism

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