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Schwartz, Katrina Z. S.

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Wild horses in a ‘European wilderness’: imagining sustainable development in the post-Communist countryside

Katrina Z. S. Schwartz

Department of Political Science, University of Florida

When the Soviet Union and its satellite regimes collapsed, they bequeathed to successor states an unexpected dual legacy: an outsized, backward agrarian sector on the one hand and a wealth of undeveloped nature, rich in biological diversity, on the other. Popular perceptions of the region centre on nightmarish images of environmental devastation, but environmentalists on both sides of the former ‘Iron Curtain’ are increasingly recognizing the unintended benefits to nature of Communist underdevelopment. Eight of the post-Communist states have now consummated their long-awaited ‘return to Europe’, but as they begin a new era as European Union members, they confront a critical developmental challenge. Faced with declining agricultural prospects and growing Western interest in Eastern nature, what to do with a large and underemployed rural population and an ever-expanding area of marginal farmland? This article contributes to a growing literature on the political ecology of post-Communist transformation in the ‘Second World’ through a case study from Latvia. At Lake Pape, the Latvian program office of WWF International has implemented a Western-funded project in ecosystem restoration and eco-tourism promotion involving introduction of wild horses in a remote but ecologically rich coastal wetland area. I explore diverse Latvian responses to the polysemic Western narratives of sustainable rural development and biodiversity conservation that have been borne into Eastern Europe along with Western aid monies. Local mediation of these narratives is shaped by the struggle between competing ‘agrarian’ and ‘internationalist’ understandings of national geography, identity and developmental destiny that have structured cultural and political discourse since the emergence of Latvian nationalism 150 years ago.

In July 1999, 18 Polish-bred semi-wild horses were shipped to Latvia from the Netherlands and released onto a tract of overgrown meadowlands in a remote province on the Baltic Sea coast. The horses had been brought to Latvia by a group of Dutch environmental consultants to help restore the Lake Pape¹ coastal wetland ecosystem. For the Dutch team, this moment heralded a small but meaningful achievement in a larger battle to create ‘wilderness’ in Europe: to carve out places where large wild animals roam freely and natural processes function with minimal human interference, on a continent thoroughly subdued centuries ago by agricultural cultivation, industrial development and human settlement. For the Dutch group’s local

partners at the recently established Latvian program office of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF International), the arrival of the horses was an opportunity to stimulate a sorely needed national dialogue among Latvians about the meanings of rural landscapes, the relationship between Latvians and nature and the contours of rural development in the post-Soviet era. But for another major Latvian conservation organization, the Latvian Fund for Nature, the introduction of the *Konik polski* signified that 'an enormous territory [had] been taken out' of the Latvian landscape: that the nationally iconic Latvian farmer had been driven off the land, to no good purpose, by 'animals of fairly bizarre genetic origins'.

Embracing the premise that regional and global phenomena cannot be fully understood without examining their impacts in particular localities,² this article explores the exporting of the narratives of sustainable rural development and biodiversity conservation from Western to Eastern Europe, through the story of the wild horses of Lake Pape. The Pape case illustrates in microcosm the challenges of protecting nature and promoting development in the post-Communist countryside, not only in Latvia but throughout Eastern Europe. This region inherited an ambivalent rural legacy from decades of Communist misrule. Popular perceptions of Eastern Europe centre on nightmarish images of environmental devastation, but less widely known are the unintended benefits of socialist underdevelopment: the vast wetlands of Romania's Danube Delta; the 8100 brown bear roaming the Carpathian Mountains; or the world's densest population of black storks nesting secretively in Latvia's 'northern rainforests'.³ Indeed, as environmentalists on both sides of the former 'Iron Curtain' are increasingly recognizing,⁴ the East European countryside boasts a wealth of relatively untouched nature that supports biodiversity resources far exceeding those of West European states.

But it is also home to millions of farmers, whose productivity is far lower – and population share far greater – than those of their Western counterparts. Dealing with this rural legacy represents a vital, if relatively underexamined, dimension of these countries' efforts to integrate into global and regional economies and institutions. The challenges of integration are particularly pressing for Latvia and the other seven East European countries that finally consummated their long-awaited 'return to Europe' by joining the European Union (EU) in its first wave of eastward enlargement in May 2004.⁵ With the end of Communist-era subsidies for agriculture and with dubious prospects for future EU support, what is to be done with large and underemployed rural populations and expanding areas of marginal farmland? And on the flipside, given growing Western interest in Eastern nature, can biodiversity be used as a resource to promote rural development?

Since the early 1990s, Western aid donors – especially EU and member state institutions – have been promoting the sustainable rural development paradigm in East European countries to prepare them to face these challenges. As legions of critics have noted, however, sustainable development is a profoundly ambiguous and contested notion, and one whose implementation lacks widely accepted blueprints. Unlike, for example, the so-called 'Washington consensus' on structural adjustment and privatization, there is no similar consensus (even among donor countries and institutions, let alone among recipients) on what sustainable development should actually look like in

practice or even on how to define biodiversity.⁶ Western Europe is no exception: even as it has been exporting sustainability, the EU has been gripped by debates over how to reform its own system of rural supports, which is widely perceived as bloated and ineffective. European notions of sustainable rural development thus vary widely, from subsidies for ‘traditional’ farming to radically post-agrarian wilderness creation.

One important thread in the complex, transdisciplinary endeavour of political ecology has drawn attention to the ‘creation, legitimization and contestation of environmental narratives’, and to the ways in which control over those narratives translates into power over land and natural resources.⁷ Scholars have shown that when wealthy donors provide environmental aid to developing countries and regions, they simultaneously impose their own narratives of nature and of humans’ place in it. These narratives are typically legitimized through what Philip Stott and Sian Sullivan call the ‘Big Talk’ of the natural sciences⁸ and/or through appeals to Romantic aesthetic values, and they often conflict with indigenous understandings and histories. As James McCarthy observes, extralocal understandings of nature ‘backed up by purchasing power are transforming environments around the globe, often to the detriment or against the will of local users’.⁹ By examining local resistance to these powerful international narratives, political ecologists have sought to ‘open some space for local “voices”’.¹⁰ At the same time, many of these studies have illuminated the divergent views of individuals *within* local communities and sought to advance a ‘non-essentialising of “local actors”’, as Stott and Sullivan put it.¹¹

While most of the political ecology literature to date has focused on the Third World, a small but growing literature on the post-Communist ‘Second World’ is beginning to trace the genealogy of environmental narratives in Eastern Europe, and to examine the impacts of both Western aid and the ideological, technological and structural legacies of Communism on the reshaping of nature management and environmental practices.¹² I hope to contribute to this research project by exploring competing Latvian responses to the polysemic Western sustainability and biodiversity narratives that have been borne into the country along with Western aid monies. I argue that local mediation of these narratives in Latvia is shaped by historically rooted notions of place and identity. Latvian efforts to implement sustainable rural development cannot be adequately understood without examining the struggle between competing understandings of national geography, identity and developmental destiny that have structured cultural and political discourse since the emergence of Latvian nationalism 150 years ago.

The founding fathers of Latvian nationhood imagined their homeland as a ‘bridge between East and West’, and Latvians as traders and cosmopolitan ‘middlemen’. During Latvia’s first, abortive period of independence in the 1920s, however, this outward-looking vision was supplanted by an inward-looking discourse of Latvians as a ‘nation of farmers’ and the homeland as an agrarian landscape of labour. As I argue at greater length elsewhere, these two narratives – which I call ‘*liberal internationalism*’ and ‘*agrarian nationalism*’ – constitute the discursive poles that have structured intransigent debates about Latvian destinies for generations.¹³ Agrarian nationalism largely retains the discursive hegemony that it achieved in the 1920s, with the sponsorship of the newly independent Latvian state; to this day, it continues to inform the majority

of Latvians' visions of nationhood, rural development and nature stewardship in the post-Soviet era. But some individuals in influential positions – including the staff of WWF-Latvia – have attempted to undermine this agrarian hegemony, articulating an alternative narrative that recalls nineteenth-century internationalists' notion of Latvia as a landscape of openness and transit. Latvians at both ends of the discursive spectrum have selectively appropriated different pieces of powerful international environmental narratives in defence of their competing responses to the challenge of post-Soviet rural development. Agrarians have pinned their hopes to future EU support for 'traditional' farming, and to tourism based on ethnographic heritage and the pastoral agrolandscape. Internationalists, in contrast, have radically reimagined Latvian nature in terms of global biodiversity values, transcontinental flyways and wilderness tourism.¹⁴ As a new post-Communist countryside is being shaped, questions of control over nature and rural land are framed by the interplay between Western paradigms and local contestations of nature and nation.

Confronting rural development on the road to Europe

When Latvia won independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, a majority of the population expected that agriculture would form the basis of the country's economic recovery, as it had (at least in popular memory) during the first brief period of independent statehood (1918–39).¹⁵ Explicitly seeking a 'renewal of the traditional Latvian way of life',¹⁶ parliament enacted the post-Communist region's most radical agrarian reform, disbanding most collective farms and directly restoring nearly all pre-Soviet private landownership rights. As a result, tens of thousands of Latvians – including many city-dwellers – reclaimed their ancestral homesteads and many ventured into the risky realm of private farming. The 1990s brought brutal economic dislocation and restructuring, however, and agriculture fared particularly poorly. Production collapsed dramatically, and trade liberalization (swift entry into the World Trade Organization was a top priority of Latvia's liberal governments in the 1990s) let in a flood of cheaper imports, reducing many small farmers to subsistence conditions or driving them out of business altogether. Agriculture's share of gross domestic product plummeted, while that of the service sector mushroomed. At the same time, however, the rural share of Latvia's population has remained stable at just over 30 per cent throughout the post-Soviet period and the proportion of people nominally employed in the agrarian sector still hovers at around 18 per cent.¹⁷ The farm sector is no longer capable of gainfully employing so many people, though, and hidden agricultural unemployment levels may be as high as 50–60 per cent.¹⁸

Latvia applied to join the EU in 1995, opened formal accession negotiations in 1998 and was officially accepted as a candidate in October 1999. While Latvia's leaders consistently identified membership in the EU (and NATO) as their central foreign policy goal, a majority of rural dwellers have viewed this prospect as a Damoclean sword. The huge subsidies enjoyed by European farmers will never be equitably shared with the poor cousins from the East, they justifiably fear, and joining the common market will

inevitably shrink agricultural employment, concentrate landownership in fewer (and perhaps foreign) hands and drive still more small farmers off the land.

Meanwhile, in Western Europe itself, the daunting challenge of eastward enlargement has intensified perceptions of an already urgent need to reform the EU's costly and cumbersome system of agricultural price supports, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). As European conservationists have convincingly demonstrated, output-based subsidies have caused biodiversity loss through agricultural intensification (increased use of chemicals and fertilizers, wetlands drainage, river realignment, conversion of marginal land into agricultural production and so on). On the flipside, many conservationists argue that 'traditional', non-intensive farming practices play a positive role in supporting biodiversity. Because most of Europe's land has been shaped by centuries of human use, current plant and animal populations largely depend on the 'semi-natural' habitats created by traditional farming. As agricultural productivity and surpluses have continued to grow, Europe's increasingly urbanized and affluent citizens have rallied to the cause of preserving Europe's traditional agrarian landscapes. Over the last two decades, therefore, the European countryside has been reimagined as a site no longer primarily for agricultural production, but rather for providing environmental, aesthetic and recreational amenities.¹⁹

This 'post-productivist transition'²⁰ has generated a host of new buzzwords. Programmes have been devised for encouraging 'low-impact' or 'high nature-value' farming practices and promoting 'diversification of the rural economy' (i.e. non-agricultural forms of income generation, such as rural tourism). Many environmentalists have called for rural income support to be detached from agricultural output and for farmers to be subsidized directly for their role as 'stewards of the countryside' and 'guardians of the landscape'. In theory, such a 'greening of the CAP' could simultaneously protect threatened habitats and preserve the peopled 'landscape with figures'²¹ that many Europeans cherish. Sceptics question, however, whether sufficient funding and political support can be mustered to implement a thorough 'greening' of rural policy.²² And more fundamentally, some European environmentalists reject the 'high nature-value farming' strategy on both ecological and economic grounds. They argue instead for taking as much agricultural land as possible out of production altogether and replacing farming, 'traditional' or otherwise, with 'management for natural processes'.

Internal disagreement about the meaning of sustainable rural development has not prevented Western Europe from exporting the paradigm to the East. Since the earliest years of the post-Communist transition, Latvia and its neighbours have been awash with foreign assistance for the environmental sector. The lion's share of this aid has been directed at preventing cross-border pollution, but a substantial portion has been targeted at biodiversity conservation and sustainable development.²³ In Latvia, environmental officials have declared 'harmonization' of Latvian legislation with global and European norms their top priority, and have dutifully produced the requisite strategy documents and action plans acknowledging the importance of sustainability and biodiversity. A host of international treaties on sustainability and biodiversity have been swiftly ratified.²⁴ The World Bank introduced a small-credit line in 1998,

supported by various EU-funded pilot projects and a parliament-approved Rural Development Program, to promote diversification of the rural economy. At the level of rhetoric, in short, Latvian officials have been quick to 'talk the talk' of sustainability and biodiversity.

Yet in Latvia, as anywhere else, devising ways to achieve sustainability and diversification on the ground is much harder.²⁵ Not surprisingly, there has been wide disagreement over how to implement these Western notions, and this disagreement has been structured by the tension between Latvia's competing agrarian and internationalist discourses. Like any ideal type, of course, the agrarian–internationalist binary attempts to simplify a complex reality. Agrarianism and internationalism do not represent hermetically isolated or internally uniform camps, but rather discursive positions along a continuum, and there is considerable shifting along the axis by individuals. Nonetheless, this construct does provide analytical leverage on a very real division in Latvian public discourse, and one which is often commented upon by Latvians themselves.

Duelling discourses of place and identity

Poised astride major terrestrial and maritime trade routes and enjoying the year-round seaports of the Gulf of Riga, the territory of present-day Latvia has for centuries been the target of multiple and overlapping foreign colonizations: ruled and fought over, since the Baltic crusades of the twelfth century, by the Holy Roman Empire, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Swedish Crown, the Baltic German feudal nobility, the Russian Empire and, finally, the Soviet Union. During the National Awakening of the 1850s, the majority of Latvia's seminal nationalists embraced this cultural hybridity and openness to international flows as the incipient nation's most valuable assets for lifting itself out of feudal penury. These 'New Latvians' linked the nation's developmental destiny with its historic role as a crossroads or 'bridge between East and West', and insisted that Latvians would prosper not as peasants but as seafarers and cosmopolitan 'middlemen'.

After defending a shaky independence from Germany and the Soviet Union in 1918, however, Latvia, like the other new post-imperial nation-states created by the formerly dominated 'small peoples' of Eastern Europe, was swept by a wave of populist 'peasantism'.²⁶ The new bourgeois ruling elites saw a landed peasantry as the best bulwark against the threat of Soviet Bolshevism as well as the domestic socialism that had dominated Latvian political leanings since the turn of the century. The government thus promptly enacted a radical agrarian reform, distributing small parcels of land to as many Latvians as possible with the explicit aim of creating a 'nation of farmers'. The agrarian reform was accompanied by a discursive linking of the national 'character' to peasant values and labouring on the land. The hard-working family farmer as the quintessential Latvian citizen, and the dispersed solitary homestead as the quintessential Latvian landscape, were celebrated in the arts, in public spectacles and in a new open-air ethnographic museum.²⁷ Closeness to nature was identified as a central

element of Latvian-ness, but it was a closeness obtained through the labour of agrarian cultivation.

The agrarian nationalist discourse continued to be reproduced even under Soviet rule through official promotion of folklore and ethnic heritage, subsidization of a very large agricultural sector, semi-official tolerance of private plot farming and dissident practices such as a crypto-nationalist landscape protection movement. To this day, the dominant Latvian notion of national identity remains that of the 'nation of farmers'. As a Latvian sociologist puts it, 'it would be difficult to find another self-reference within Latvian culture that is as capacious and enduring' as that of the 'peasant culture' or 'nation of farmers'.²⁸ Likewise, the dominant construction of homeland remains the agrarian Heimat: a cultivated landscape of labour or ethnoscape (to borrow Anthony D. Smith's evocative term) that mutually constitutes and is constituted by the Latvian national character and serves as a reservoir of national history and ethnographic uniqueness.²⁹ Like the landscape of hedgerows and thatch-roofed villages for the English, for most Latvians this cultivated ethnoscape is indisputably the iconic Latvian landscape: a landscape of solitary farmsteads graced with majestic, carefully tended oaks and maples; of 'old country parks and arboretums, protected millponds, ... old field systems ... , winding roads and various other features created by human hands, which vividly demonstrate the history of the relationship between humans and nature' (see Figure 1).³⁰



FIGURE 1 Latvian homestead (photo: Katrina Z. S. Schwartz)

As in 1918, today many Latvians – arguably most – believe that the survival of the Latvian nation depends on keeping rural space ‘filled up’ with Latvian dwellers. Indeed, today the agrarian orientation derives special potency from the post-Soviet demographic context: in 1998 ethnic Latvians made up only 55.5 per cent of a population of just under 2.5 million, and even less in the major cities, with the remainder comprising a mixture of mostly Russian-speaking Slavs. Haunted by the spectres of demographic annihilation and a potential fifth column of non-Latvian residents, many Latvians defend the relatively ethnically homogeneous countryside as ‘the last and only refuge of the Latvian people’.³¹ In private conversations and in the media, Latvians from all walks of life lament the wrenching liberalization that has forced many families to abandon their farms, or at least to shrink production to tiny subsistence plots. Politicians, poets and former collective farm workers alike mourn the transformation of the countryside into a landscape of abandonment: of fields grown over with the brush bitterly referred to as ‘Latvian cotton’, dotted with rotting barns and the picked-over skeletons of abandoned collective farm buildings. Land abandonment strikes directly at the heart of agrarian nationalism by threatening to destroy the agrarian ethnoscape that reifies the linking of nation and homeland.

The emptying of the Latvian rural landscape is symptomatic of land surplus: apart from the fertile central regions, most agricultural land presently has little or no market value, and much land has no owner or claimant. Unlike Western Europe, Latvia presently lacks a wealthy urban stratum willing and able to support farmers as ‘guardians of the landscape’. In order to keep people in the countryside, therefore, value must be created in an economically devalued rural space. In confronting this challenge, Latvian environmental professionals have embraced the narratives of biodiversity and sustainability, as noted above, but they have typically filtered them through the prism of nature as agrarian ethnoscape. If for agrarian nationalists in general, farmers are the truest Latvians, then for agrarian-minded conservationists, farmers are also the best stewards of nature. Indeed, agrarians see nature values themselves as deriving from the agro-landscape, for in Latvia, as in most of the European continent, current biodiversity resources reflect centuries of human use. Out of the array of policy ideas imported from the West, thus, agrarian conservationists have shown the greatest enthusiasm for the prospect of high nature-value farming subsidies, hoping that an eventual ‘greening of the CAP’ will help Latvians prevent and reverse the abandonment of farmland.

Like all hegemonic discourses, agrarian nationalism has made it hard for many Latvians to think outside its parameters and to imagine any other future for Latvia than as a ‘nation of farmers’. But within the ranks of environmental and development professionals, an outspoken minority has sought to undermine this hegemony, often by consciously appropriating the internationalist language of pre-1918 nationalists. For them, Latvia’s land surplus, together with Europe’s post-productivist transition, represent an opportunity for more radical change: for detaching the value of land from farming and linking it, instead, to global norms

and markets for nature as a reservoir of biodiversity. Since the first visits of German bird-watching enthusiasts in the late 1980s, Latvians have realized that, in the realm of biodiversity, they have something to offer the West. Undrained wetlands and wet forests, as well as miles of seacoast protected from development by Soviet-era military restrictions, support healthy populations of many species now rare or endangered in Western Europe, including lynx, otter, lesser spotted eagle and an 'internationally significant' population of black storks (Figure 2).³² As a new form of capital, internationalists believe, biodiversity has the potential to generate economic wealth, if marketed to environmental aid donors and to the growing ranks of Western eco-tourists. While Western Europeans are not eager to import traditional agricultural goods from Latvia, much less to subsidize their production, they are potentially quite willing to 'import' Latvian nature via ecotourism. This prospect has encouraged today's internationalists to welcome the opening of Latvia's nature and countryside – and not just her cosmopolitan cities and seaports – to international flows, and to imagine Latvians once again as middlemen in the East–West trade in nature. I now return to the wild horses of Lake Pape to examine how Latvians in one locality have embraced different strands of the Western sustainability narrative in their efforts to preserve the agrarian vision of Latvia's future or to advance an internationalist alternative.



FIGURE 2 Abandoned farm building with storks (photo: Mara V. Kore)

The Lake Pape project: agrarian ethnoscape or 'European wilderness'?

As the physical interface with the outside world, the Baltic Sea coast has historically been Latvia's chief portal for international flows of ideas and goods. The Soviet regime, hostile as it was to internationalism in the westerly direction, cordoned off the entire coastal region as a militarized border zone. Nonresidents were denied entry, and travel between towns and villages within the zone was restricted and unpleasant even for residents. It is fitting, then, that in the post-Soviet era the Baltic coast became the site of Latvia's first major foreign-sponsored environmental aid project. The multilateral, World Bank-facilitated Liepaja Environmental Project, approved in 1994 and launched in early 1995, set out not only to reduce pollution discharges into the Baltic Sea but also to protect biodiversity and promote sustainable development throughout the coastal region. Project components included demonstration of integrated management planning for two local sites. One of these sites was Lake Pape, located in the remote rural township of Rucava,³³ hugging the Lithuanian border in the south-western corner of Latvia (Figure 3).

Lake Pape made for an ideal demonstration site, combining poor socioeconomic indicators – economic decline, sparse settlement, very low and declining population density – with high nature values. The relatively small project territory (273 sq km) contains a diverse range of ecosystems, including a large coastal lagoon (Lake Pape

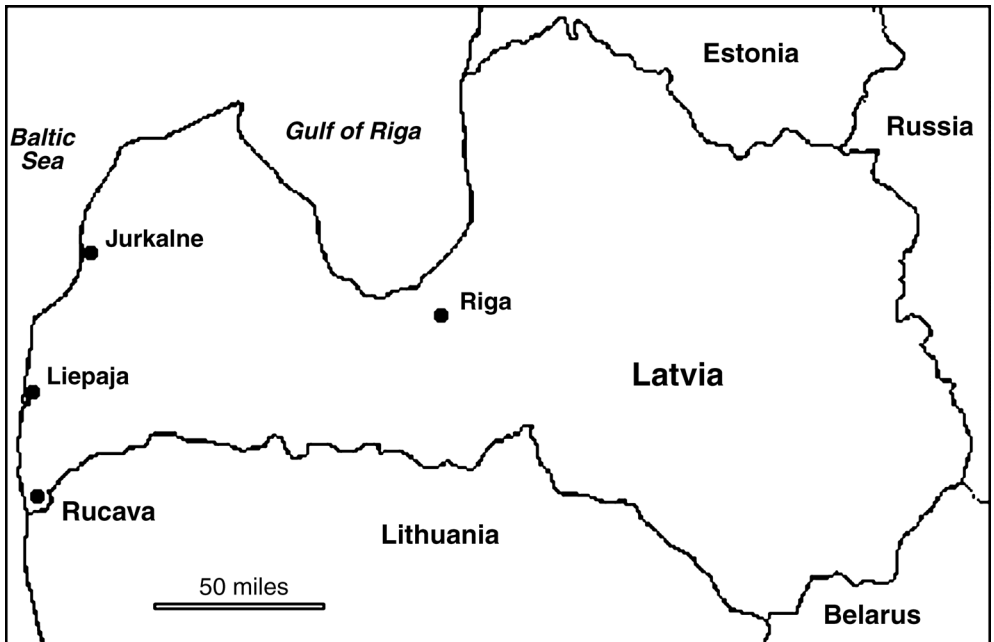


FIGURE 3 Latvia (map: Michael Selover)

–see Figure 4) with coastal wetlands and reedlands, sand beach with shifting dunes, high peat bog, wet meadows, alluvial forest and streams. Wet birch and alder forests, along with pine and spruce forests on higher ground, provide habitat for many large mammals, including moose, elk, deer, wild boar, beaver, otter, raccoon dog and wolf. Lake Pape is also a major bottleneck on the Baltic portion of the East African-European-Arctic migratory flyway. According to the project planners, the area is ‘one of the most important coastal wetland ecosystems in Latvia and ... an internationally significant area of nature conservation concern’.³⁴

Agriculture and cattle herding appeared in the Lake Pape area in the 1600s and for centuries helped to maintain a diverse range of habitats, especially for water birds. Wetland ecosystems remained relatively untouched, although some dams and sluices were built to regulate water levels for flood control and agricultural purposes. Soviet rule brought agricultural collectivization and intensification, including heavy chemical use and extensive drainage of wet meadows and forests, thereby ending the synergy between farming and biodiversity. In order to regulate water levels for drainage and

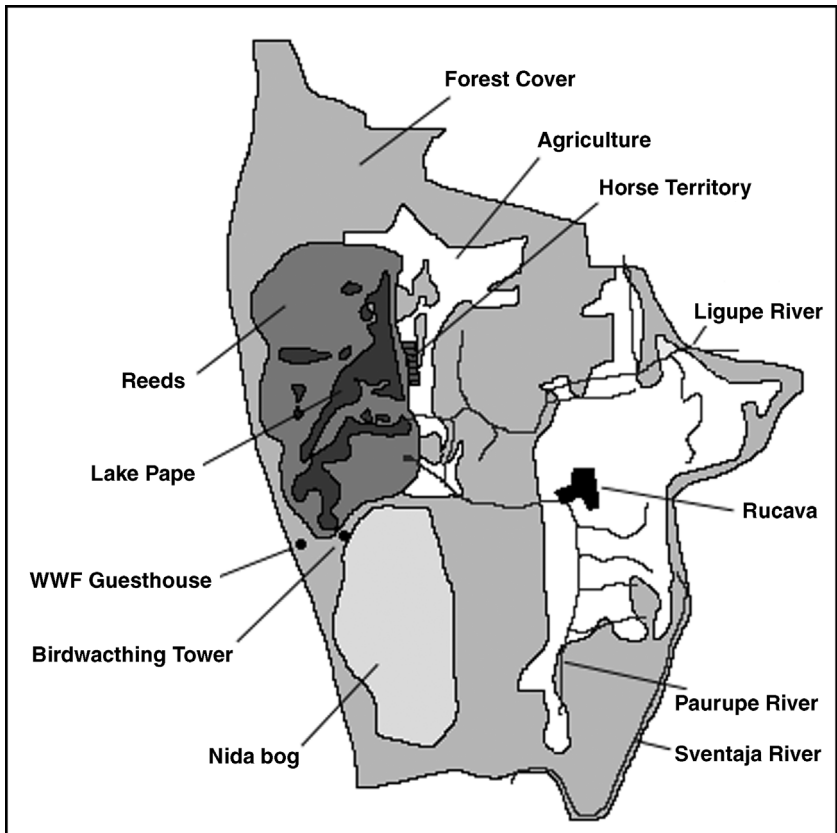


FIGURE 4 Lake Pape ecosystem (map: Michael Selover)

reed cutting, sluice gates were upgraded and Lake Pape's two small contributory rivers were redirected to bypass the lake and discharge their water directly into the sea. The ecological consequences of these actions were profound: the water table dropped drastically, the meadows dried out, the lake silted up, reed cover increased many-fold and the population of water birds declined due to loss of habitat and food. The onerous restrictions of the closed military border zone meant that nature was often left relatively untouched, with ambivalent ecological consequences: while some areas benefited, biodiversity in meadows, for example, suffered from the absence of grazing pressure.

In 1940 the Rucava area was relatively prosperous, but this status had been reversed dramatically over the course of Soviet rule and post-Soviet transition. The human population was decimated by deaths and emigration during the second World War and then by deportations in the wake of collectivization. From a 1930s high of 5000, by the 1990s the population had dwindled to 1890, or seven persons per square kilometre. Collective farms were virtually the only source of employment during the Soviet period, but these were liquidated after independence and their inventory seized by the well-connected few. The close proximity of Lithuania, with its cheaper subsidized agricultural products, and the poor transportation links to Liepaja and other Latvian population centres, made marketing local produce a largely insurmountable challenge. Soil productivity is low, moreover, and there were no local processing facilities. Thus, most area farmers had relapsed to subsistence conditions. As the lack of economic opportunity drove more and more young people out of the area, the population was ageing rapidly.

Soviet rule profoundly transformed the cultural landscape as well as the local ecology and economy. Those farming families not deported were relocated from dispersed farmsteads and hamlets to village centres. Many were housed in shoddily built, unattractive low-rise apartment blocks, which remain today as decrepit testimonials to the Soviet vision of proletarianizing the countryside. The fishing hamlets were emptied, too, as coastal fishing was prohibited by military restrictions. The countryside around Lake Pape (Figure 5) thus classically exemplified the post-Soviet landscape of abandonment: overgrown fields; deserted, crumbling farmsteads; the skeletal remains of collective farm outbuildings, long ago stripped of any valuable materials.

Such were the challenges faced by the Lake Pape management planning project, funded by the government of Denmark and carried out jointly by WWF-Denmark and the Latvian programme office of WWF International. Established in 1993 under the leadership of the young forestry scientist Ugis Rotbergs, WWF-Latvia is staffed by Latvians and, until 2002, was supported entirely through project funding from international donors, primarily West European governments and WWF National Organizations.³⁵ The planning team concluded that without a fundamental reversal in nature management practices, within twenty years Lake Pape would most likely be completely overgrown with reeds, leading to profound loss of biodiversity. They articulated two imperatives for preventing this loss: '1) Maintain and improve the biodiversity of the area, with emphasis on restoration of the Lake Pape Ecosystem; and 2) [Restore] the local economy and business structure through sustainable development based on local characteristics and [strengths].'³⁶



FIGURE 5 The landscape of abandonment (photo: Katrina Z. S. Schwartz)

Some measures were implemented during the first phase of the project. The contributory rivers were de-channelized to restore the natural flow of water into and out of Lake Pape. Modern reed-cutting machinery was purchased, enabling local residents to earn income from the export of reeds (popular as a roofing material in Denmark and Germany) while also helping to increase the lake's open water. Activities were undertaken to promote ecotourism as a central aspect of the area's future economic development, including construction of a bird-watching tower on the lake and some modest visitor facilities. Project staff persuaded two local families to open bed-and-breakfast operations. Toward the goal of building local capacity for economic diversification, a credit union was established and adult education courses were offered – and widely attended – in tourism, foreign languages, business and basic computer skills.

Wild horses and 'nature development'

In a second phase, WWF-Latvia director Rotbergs solicited funding from WWF-Sweden for a feasibility study on ecosystem restoration through grazing of the wet meadows. When his search for a contractor to carry out the study took him to the Netherlands, Rotbergs met a team of environmental consultants engaged in an unconventional

restoration strategy known locally as 'nature development': an approach rooted in a radical reinterpretation of Europe's ecological history.

In recent years, Dutch ecologists have argued that the European mosaic landscape of forests and open spaces was initially created not, as traditional accounts would have it, through human agricultural interventions, but rather through grazing by wild herbivores in the pre-agricultural era.³⁷ Recent research indicates that grazing by a full hierarchy of herbivores is critical to maintaining vegetative diversity in a mosaic landscape.³⁸ This full hierarchy, they argue, was present in pre-agricultural Europe. The familiar moose, deer, elk and beaver were vastly more numerous, not to mention the now-extinct tarpan (wild horse) and aurochs (wild ox) and the near-extinct wisent (European bison). Armed with this iconoclastic theory, Dutch conservationists have questioned the mainstream European commitment to preserving 'traditional' agro-landscapes. While low-impact farming practices do help preserve many species, they argue, these practices endanger others through habitat fragmentation, and they maintain artificially static landscapes. Moreover, they are a very costly way to achieve conservation goals. Pursuing an alternative strategy, nature developers in the Netherlands since the 1980s have been taking marginal farmland out of production to create networks of large (by local standards, at least) nature areas. These efforts have included pioneering work in the introduction and de-domestication of large grazing mammals. Several herds of the *Konik polski*, a small Polish horse that is the closest living descendant of the extinct tarpan, have been released in nature development territories, as have several bovine species.³⁹

Despite the reservations of his donors at WWF-Sweden, who had anticipated a more mainstream approach based on 'low-impact' grazing of domestic livestock, Rotbergs persuaded them to hire the Dutch team. The Dutch feasibility study identified the Lake Pape area as an ideal site for restoration, as a large area featuring little human activity and an already high diversity of fauna:

Large grazers such as elk, red deer [moose], roe [deer], beaver and wild boar are still present in low densities, and of the large predators, the lynx, fox and wolf still hunt. A large and relatively undisturbed high peat moor covers parts of the area. A relatively small number of people live around the lake. The soil is only marginally suitable for agriculture and forestry and many farms are unoccupied. [...] This area is large enough to lodge all large indigenous mammals (both grazers and predators). The most important species are already living there and can, when protected, reach their natural densities.⁴⁰

The Dutch team proposed completing the full pyramid of natural grazers by introducing first de-domesticated horses and eventually cattle and bison. These additions would make the Lake Pape area a nearly 'complete' ecosystem: except for the brown bear, which requires a larger territory, all of the large mammals that dwelled in this region in the pre-agricultural era would be present. The Pape area would thereby become unique in the European context, as the Dutch study noted: 'A nature area where nearly all of Europe's fauna of large grazers and predators live is rare, even on a European scale. It may serve as a pilot area for similar projects in Europe where agriculture is withdrawing.'⁴¹

In July of 1999, eighteen Konik horses were released into a fenced-in, 250-hectare territory around Lake Pape, leased by WWF from local landowners (this phase of the project was funded by WWF-Netherlands and the Large Herbivore Initiative, a European network founded by WWF-International). The small, hardy, sandy-grey horses (Figure 6) share key traits of their tarpan forebears that help them to survive in the wild.⁴² The Dutch team thus predicted that the Koniks would adapt to their new environment and thrive and reproduce with little or no human assistance, belying local fears that the horses would succumb to starvation, thin ice or poaching. The horses would re-establish grazing pressure on the meadows around the lake, thereby enhancing biodiversity at vastly less cost than the agrarian alternative of subsidizing small farmers to keep dairy cattle. Eventually the fences would be removed and the horses would roam freely, coming into unmediated contact with predators and fully integrating into the larger natural system, which ‘actually covers the whole of Latvia and Lithuania’.⁴³ Ideally, the unfenced horses would some day encounter bears from Estonia, too. Mirroring the ongoing transformation of the European continent into a borderless polity, Lake Pape would become part of a borderless state of nature.

The introduction of Konik horses was intended as the first step toward creating what the Dutch team called a ‘new wilderness’: ‘a large unbroken area where natural processes can take place with the least possible disturbances’.⁴⁴ Human activities – mowing, reed cultivation, manipulation of water levels – were to be kept to a minimum. Eventually the sluice gates controlling Lake Pape’s tidal flows would be



FIGURE 6 Konik horses at Lake Pape (photo: Katrina Z. S. Schwartz)

eliminated. Along the Baltic shoreline, too, human efforts at stabilizing and controlling nature would be halted, giving free rein to nature's constant flux and dynamism. Reversing the generations-old, heroic Latvian tradition of 'battling the shifting sand dune', the pine groves planted decades ago to combat erosion would be cut to restore the 'characteristic ecosystems which have become very rare along the coasts of the North Sea and the Baltic'.⁴⁵ The Baltic shoreline would creep slowly inward; winds would once again blow drifts of sand about, forming small dune lakes and covering whole forests. Agriculture would be banned from the lowlands around Lake Pape. Professional fishing, which disrupts the marshland food chain, would also 'die out with the last fisherman'. The landscape would be shaped not by human cultivation, in other words, but by the natural disturbances of erosion, flooding, herbivory and so on.

For the Dutch team, Lake Pape was interesting primarily because it possessed biodiversity resources unique in the European context, and the horse project was important insofar as it contributed to an international conservation agenda (in particular, to recent efforts to restore populations of large wild mammals throughout the Eurasian continent⁴⁶). Hence the title of the project's feasibility study: 'Restoring a European wilderness'. Likewise, according to the study, ecotourism development was important first and foremost insofar as it could meet a (West) European need: 'The urbanized society in Europe feels the need for places where wilderness can be felt, where man-made regulations are held aloof, where rivers take their own course and where animals live their own lives within their own social orders'.⁴⁷ To make the landscape more wild or natural, in other words, meant also Europeanizing or globalizing it: that is, replacing local agrarian cultural and nature values with the extralocal values ascribed by Western conservation policy, ecological science and ecotourism. The horses of Lake Pape richly symbolized this globalization of the ethnoscape: Polish horses imported from the Netherlands to Latvia by a global conservation organization in order to replace agrarian cultivation and restore a 'European' ecosystem, toward the ultimate goal of creating a borderless 'new wilderness'.

Defending the ethnoscape: a 'museum of ancient Latvianness'

Many Latvians, however, including many environmental professionals, have been deeply sceptical about globalizing the ethnoscape as a strategy for either nature stewardship or rural development. I have described elsewhere how agrarian opposition by both national environmental officials and local residents defeated two Western-funded initiatives to shift national park management away from protecting the ethnoscape to protecting biodiversity. And a WWF-sponsored campaign to radically reshape Latvian forestry policy in keeping with international principles of sustainability and liberal notions of governance, while ultimately successful, met with sustained and vitriolic agrarian resistance at all levels of the forest science and management establishment.⁴⁸ In a memorable headline summing up his contempt for biodiversity-

oriented forest management, a venerable forest scientist declared: 'Lichens are not our greatest national treasure!'⁴⁹ Other environmental professionals have been less overtly hostile toward the liberal globalizing agenda, while nonetheless remaining deeply committed to an agrarian vision of nature management and rural development. As the ecosystem inspector for the Liepaja region put it: 'I can't believe that Latvia will turn into one big fallow, for we are, after all, a nation of farmers Either Latvia will be connected to agriculture, or else it will be the end'.⁵⁰

One outspoken critic of the liberal approach, and of WWF in particular, has been Janis Priednieks, formerly board chairman and currently project director for the non-governmental, quasi-academic Latvian Fund for Nature (*Latvijas Dabas Fonds*, or LDF). Founded in 1990 by biologists from Latvian academic and research institutions and supported by project funding from the Latvian government, the European Union and West European governments, the LDF is Latvia's leading organization in the preparation and implementation of protected area nature management plans. For Priednieks, the chief threat to biodiversity in Latvia was the loss of farmland, and the best hope for protecting biodiversity was eventually to secure EU subsidies for low-impact farming. Weighing in on the Pape horse project, he categorically rejected the strategy of management for natural processes:

I believe that in the rural landscape it would be economically most efficient to subsidize agriculture, because first of all, the farmer will feed himself and his family, he will maintain the landscape and something will be left over to sell. . . . Purely as a biologist, I am far from pleased that animals of fairly bizarre genetic origins are being imported entirely unnaturally into Latvia, and here you could even raise objections in terms of the Rio Convention [*prohibiting introduction of exotic species-KS*]. . . . In the long-term perspective, I think it would have been better to subsidize the local farmers to keep [domestic dairy cattle]. Because now an enormous territory has been taken out. Those animals, for all I know they could very well be dangerous. . . . That territory under [nature] management – maybe it's inexpensive, but at the same time people can't go in there. [The horses] can't be used for food, they don't produce milk, the meat will never be certified – it is of genetically unknown origins. So I'm far from pleased about this kind of management. Whereas if a person can feed himself, keep a cow, mow and herd, and if he gets subsidies for setting up a normal toilet, shower and room for some tourists, I think that will cost the least and in the long run bring the greatest gain.⁵¹

Some of Priednieks' claims were factually inaccurate. As a descendant of the tarpan, which is known to have lived in the territory of Latvia, the *Konik polski* is not an exotic species, and its genetic origins are well documented. Far from being excluded from the project territory, people have been encouraged to visit (though preferably in the presence of a guide). As these fairly significant errors of fact suggest, he was speaking not 'purely as a biologist' but also as an agrarian nationalist. From the agrarian perspective, sound nature stewardship could only be rooted in the age-old experience of the traditional Latvian farmer. To expel the farmer from his land was not only ecologically suspect but fundamentally anti-national, for it signified that Lake Pape had essentially ceased to be part of Latvia: 'an enormous territory has been taken out'.⁵²

Priednieks welcomed ecotourism as a nature-friendly component of rural development, but he saw it as entirely dependent on farming: 'The grazing of dairy livestock is the foundation of Latvia's rural diversity, and I think also of rural tourism to a large

degree.' In his vision of Latvia's rural future, tourism might at best be a supplementary activity – and one based less on wetlands and wild horses than on traditional farms and their semi-natural environs. The principle aim of sustainable rural development, in his view, should be not to create 'European ecosystems' but to preserve Latvia's agrarian ethnoscape. It was this vision, and not that of the Dutch nature developers, that was shared by most residents of the Lake Pape area, who saw their landscape's sovereign value in its ethnographic heritage.

If Latvian ornithologists recognize Lake Pape as one of the country's key migratory hot spots, then Rucava township has long been renowned as a sort of living ethnographic museum. Already in the late 1800s, a visiting Latvian cultural figure described Rucava as 'a museum of ancient Latvianness'.⁵³ Throughout the dramatic upheavals of the twentieth century, the area's geographical remoteness, reinforced in the Soviet period by the compulsory isolation of the closed military regime, helped preserve the ethnographic fabric of life in Rucava 'as if in a pickle jar', as one local resident put it. Left largely to their own devices, Rucavites reportedly continued to wear their region's traditional folk costumes on special occasions as late as the 1960s. In the 1990s, while Lake Pape was being penetrated from overseas by the new narratives of sustainability and biodiversity, local schoolteachers and other enthusiasts were at the same time quietly beginning to rediscover the local cultural heritage. Digging through archives and interviewing survivors of the pre-Soviet era, they chronicled the area's ancient history and archaeology and recorded a wealth of information about local folk practices and about the cultural ethnoscape: traditional names of natural objects, homesteads, vanished hamlets and so on.

In 1994, local heritage enthusiasts formed the non-governmental Rucava Nature Fund (RNF). From the outset, 'nature' for the RNF signified, more than anything, nature as ethnoscape. In their brief Rucava almanac, for example, the RNF weighted the cultural landscape equally with the natural environment and celebrated the historically synergistic relationship between farming and ecology in the agrarian spirit of Latvian-ness-as-closeness-to-nature:

Rucava township is wealthy not only with natural diversity. Anyone who has been there [...] immediately notices how nature itself is inextricably bound up with the human dwellers, with their harmonious environmental sense, with their employment and way of life, their traditions of building and everyday life. Precisely this harmoniously created, and still preserved, human living environment is one of the most valuable elements (perhaps even as valuable as the natural diversity) of the heritage of Rucava township.⁵⁴

Along with detailed descriptions of the local geology and ecology, the Rucava almanac included chapters on cultural history, with descriptions of ancient ritual groves and stones, folk arts and crafts and vernacular architecture.

For RNF members and many other local residents, protection of this cultural heritage represented not simply an idle hobby or fond memory, but also a developmental vision. Thus Gunta Timbra, town librarian and RNF co-founder, maintained that local development should 'spring from cultural history'. In her imagined future, residents would practise traditional local crafts and would keep Rucava folk costumes and 'not be shy about wearing them in public'.⁵⁵ In the fall of 1998, Rucava received EU funding

to promote local tourism development. The project leader proposed promoting Rucava as ‘a place that speaks to people through people’, and Rucavites attending an early project meeting enthusiastically endorsed the idea of basing tourism on local ethnographic traditions and everyday life. Their suggestions included organizing contests for the best-tended farmstead and offering tourists opportunities to try their hand at farm labour. In the minds of many Rucavites, this vision of heritage tourism directly conflicted with the Dutch vision of wilderness-based ecotourism. For them, the untrammelled nature that aroused such enthusiasm among Western visitors was nothing more than worthless ‘jungle’, unfit for human enjoyment unless redeemed through cultivation. As one meeting participant contended, the tourism plan should focus on ‘acquainting tourists with our culture and traditions, instead of with that undergrowth. . . . There’s no fun in tramping through those brambles!’

Disadvantageous soil and market conditions notwithstanding, most Rucavites shared agrarian conservationists’ commitment to agriculture as the engine of local development. Confronted daily with the grim realities of poverty and subsistence farming, however, they tended to be more pessimistic than the LDF’s Jānis Priednieks about the prospects for this strategy. ‘It will be disastrous if the fundamental employment in the future will not be agriculture,’ declared heritage activist Timbra, yet she also predicted unavoidable rural depopulation: ‘I have no illusions about the future for my children in our township. . . . We have only one way to go – completely to the city.’ Biology teacher Ināra Rūce, another RNF founding member, held out the slim hope that the new global value of nature would be able to fill the post-farming economic void: ‘We will have to be able to earn from nature, because very few will be able to earn from agriculture.’ But she, too, endorsed the agrarian notion that the ‘purest Latvians’ are country folk: ‘Ultimately even city-dwellers say – “we come from the countryside.” The best roots and the best thoughts come [from the countryside . . .]. The farmstead *is* the Latvian lifestyle, mentality. But we are forced [to abandon it].’ Ruce feared that by abandoning their ethnoscape, Latvians would eventually lose their very Latvianness. ‘It’s a shame, but I don’t know if we will still exist in a hundred years – Latvians who know they are Latvians.’⁵⁶

WWF: globalizing the ethnoscape on behalf of the nation

Against this entrenched agrarian belief in farmland preservation as the key to nature protection, local development and Latvianness, the Dutch team’s local project partners at WWF-Latvia championed an internationalist alternative. In articulating their dissenting vision, Rotbergs and his small staff – young Latvians trained in environmental studies and forestry – enthusiastically drew upon the Dutch reinterpretation of European natural history, and more generally upon the ‘new ecological paradigm’ that views natural systems as fundamentally shifting and dynamic. The current Latvian agro-landscape, with its particular ratio of open land to forests and wetlands and its particular constellation of species, they argued, represented only one moment in nature’s shifting mosaic, and one that need not necessarily be enshrined as a

conservation target. Moreover, subsidizing small-scale traditional farming is a costly approach to conservation and thus not sustainable in the long term even for the affluent EU, much less for a poor country like Latvia. Thus rural development project director Mārtiņš Rēķis rejected the agrarian vision on both economic and ecological grounds:

Latvia currently has too much agricultural land... Here the land quality is not high enough, the infrastructure is not good enough, nor the resources; the distance, transportation, all the costs are enormous. It is simply not cost-effective to increase production here, to produce for export... I would guess that the total agricultural land could be reduced at least by half. Even if, of course, it goes against the rural – that is, the 'Latvian' – lifestyle. Concentration of the rural population should be promoted... It's the story about the little old lady in the middle of the forest. Do we need 10,000 little old ladies struggling out there, and the mail carriers struggling, and the [state electric utility] struggling, and the bus drivers struggling to drive those horrible roads, so that she can live there another ten or twenty years? They should be encouraged to concentrate. And if someone wants to go back to live in the forest, then let him pay for it himself... From an environmental perspective there is nothing at all good about people living there; they fragment the landscape, build roads and so on.⁵⁷

Against the cherished notion of farmers as the bedrock of both national identity and good nature stewardship, Rēķis argued that living on traditional dispersed farmsteads and working up the land should be an expensive luxury indulged in only by the affluent few. Although heretical in the Latvian context, his critique drew its strength from the broadly neoliberal, market-oriented agenda of WWF International,⁵⁸ and it partook of a venerable tradition of environmentalists viewing rural primary producers as 'vestigial, ... marginal, backward, and inefficient'.⁵⁹

WWF-Latvia thus sought to shift humans' role in the Latvian landscape away from the traditional labour of agrarian cultivation to the post-productivist work of management for natural processes. As they saw it, rather than struggling quixotically to squeeze profits from the comparatively disadvantaged agricultural sector, Latvia should capitalize on its abundant resource: sparsely populated land, rich in globally valued biodiversity. Stuart Franklin has described how in the 1990s environmental activists (operating both domestically and internationally) campaigned for the cessation of all extractive uses in Poland's Białowieża Forest in order to defend a mythologized notion of a closed, 'primeval' forest.⁶⁰ It should be noted that, unlike this Polish case, neither WWF staff nor the Dutch team drew upon the Romantic trope of 'pristine wilderness' in articulating their vision for Lake Pape. Instead, they wielded the 'big talk' of the natural sciences, appealing to paleo-ecological research and the idea of 'natural processes' to legitimize their notion of a 'complete ecosystem'. Rotbergs did not claim that the 'new European wilderness' was more 'natural' or authentic than the agrarian alternative. Rather, he explicitly acknowledged its socially constructed nature, frequently pointing out that ecological restoration always requires its implementers to choose a point of reference toward which nature is being 'restored', and arguing that the currently existing agrarian reference point should be debated on its merits rather than simply accepted a priori as superior.

At Lake Pape, WWF hoped that the wild horses would not only provide a valuable ecological service as grazers, but also help spur local development by attracting ecotourists. Whereas the Dutch consultants believed that ecotourism efforts should focus on attracting European visitors, however, Rotbergs wanted to prioritize attracting Latvian tourists. He parted company from the Dutch on this point because, although he endorsed their globalizing agenda, he did so first and foremost to serve a national purpose: namely, to change the way Latvians think about nature and development. Indeed, Rotbergs aptly illustrates the fact that the alternative discourse, although I call it liberal '*internationalism*', is still very much a discourse *within* the national project of imagining a better future for Latvians in Latvia, and a future in which Latvians are the primary shapers of their own destinies. Already as a forestry student in the early 1980s, Rotbergs could not resist turning his intellectual gaze abroad: by his own account, he was dismissed from a doctoral programme for spending too much time in the library reading Western scientific journals. Outspoken and blunt, he has consistently drawn passionate criticism for his iconoclastic, Western-looking agenda. WWF's aggressive sustainable forestry campaign, for example, won him enduring infamy as a Western stooge and enemy of the people within the mainstream forestry establishment.⁶¹ And yet his very willingness to endure this sustained hostility for the sake of advancing a vision of how Latvians should steward their natural wealth and improve their prospects marks him as a nationalist, just as the nineteenth-century New Latvian promoters of transit and openness were nationalists.⁶²

Underlying Rotbergs' efforts at Lake Pape and elsewhere was a commitment to keeping Latvians living and working in the countryside, albeit no longer primarily as farmers. 'I think this imbalance in Latvia between the countryside and [the capital city of] Riga is completely unacceptable, this breach in development is terrible,' he insisted. The crisis of rural development should be vigorously debated nationwide, he believed, and he himself had many ideas to contribute to such a debate: massive investment in rural education, job training programmes, tax incentives to promote extra-urban investment, deconcentration of government facilities to the provinces and so on. But sadly, he lamented, political and cultural leaders had failed to promote any such national discussion on the fundamental question of 'where we are going': 'We have no intellectual leader. We should have had some respected person or some kind of process, or gotten together some kind of organization, a Club of Rome or what have you – that would be beautiful'.⁶³

The Lake Pape project was important for Rotbergs not just as an ecological and recreational resource for jaded, over-urbanized Westerners, but primarily because – in the absence of a 'Club of Rome' for Latvian rural development – it provided a forum for fostering what he saw as a much-needed national dialogue. He acknowledged that 'you can't make some enormous public opinion campaign with the horses alone'. Thus WWF was seeking funding for an ambitious 'capacity-building' project to prepare regional residents and authorities to be active participants in, rather than passive objects of, development planning within the accelerating EU accession process. This effort was to include educational and

demonstration activities in sustainable farming and forestry, energy efficiency, tourism, small-business management and administration of EU programmes. Nevertheless, the horse project represented a first step in teaching Latvians to look beyond the limits of the agrarian paradigm and to see relatively 'wild' nature as a new kind of developmental asset. Rotbergs did trumpet the horse project as an advance for continental biodiversity protection, and he was well aware that Latvia's internationally recognized biodiversity resources were his strongest selling point when competing for donor funds. Yet he embraced this globalization of the Latvian countryside as ammunition in the national battle to overturn the hegemonic agrarian discourse of Latvian place, identity and developmental destiny.

Conclusions

At Lake Pape in the late 1990s, Latvians articulated differing visions both of the endpoint to which the natural landscape should be 'restored', and of the 'local characteristics and strengths' that should form the springboard for sustainable development. On the one hand, local heritage enthusiasts, like many professionals at the regional and national level, were passionately committed to restoring a peopled landscape shaped by traditional farming and cattle herding. They hoped that somehow, with help from agri-environmental subsidies and heritage tourism, the ethnographic values of the Rucava ethnoscape and the hard agrarian labour of its residents might revive the local economy. On the other hand, WWF-Latvia sought to restore a pre-agricultural landscape and erase the generations-old, synergistic relationship between ecology and traditional farming – or, as the agrarians would have it, between ecology, farming and Latvianness. Much as the internationalists among Latvia's nineteenth-century National Awakeners sought to emancipate the nation from feudal bondage by reclaiming an ancient seafaring legacy and by tapping into the burgeoning markets and railways of the vast Russian Empire, so WWF hoped to reanimate the post-Soviet countryside by restoring pre-agricultural natural processes and by engaging global markets for biodiversity and 'European wilderness'.

Students of the aid process in post-Communist countries have observed that the agendas of East European NGOs often reflect tactical responses to international funding opportunities.⁶⁴ But in the Lake Pape case, I have argued that historically rooted local discourses – and the competition between them – played a more decisive role in determining policy stances. The Dutch 'nature development' strategy, after all, was not presented to WWF-Latvia by donors. Rather, Rotbergs found the Dutch team himself and convinced his recalcitrant Swedish donors to hire them. Both WWF-Latvia and the Latvian Nature Fund compete for funds from international donors, and the pursuit of funding alone cannot explain their radically different agendas. Nor can it explain the zeal with which Priednieks of the LDF excoriated the horse project, nor that with which WWF has consistently promoted post-productivist alternatives to the agrarian conservation and development agenda. WWF's highly successful sustainable forestry

campaign, for example, centred on management for natural processes and attacked entrenched notions of the forest as a cultivated landscape managed for maximum yield and park-like *Ordnung*. (Priednieks was implacably hostile to this campaign as well.) In true internationalist spirit, the campaign heralded growing global markets for green-certified wood products as central to Latvian forestry development. Indeed, WWF identified the reform campaign itself as a potential developmental asset. Billing its sustainable forestry demonstration site as a unique resource 'for the promotion of sustainable forestry through the entire central and east European region',⁶⁵ WWF has marketed Latvia to aid donors as a 'model country' for the export of sustainability, thus positioning Latvia as a middleman between the financial resources of the West and the natural resources of the East.

At the time of this writing, the Konik horses have survived their fifth winter at Lake Pape, adapting successfully to a harsher climate and much greater predation than in the Netherlands. As was hoped, they have required little human assistance and drawn little overt opposition from local residents. Auspiciously for WWF, the herd's first foal was born on 18 November 1999 – Latvian Independence Day. When I returned to Rucava in June 2002, the horses had multiplied to 44 and appeared to be fulfilling their ecological function of enhancing biodiversity in the wet meadows through natural grazing pressure. Some 2000 tourists had visited thus far that summer, including several international groups (journalists from the Czech Republic, Austria and even Canada; plenty of German motorcyclists; one Dane on a moped). Since my last visit, at least one more local resident had made the post-productivist leap: the full-time overseer and guide for the horse territory, hired in 1999 by WWF, had spent the previous seven years farming on her parents' land and had worked in Soviet times as an economist on the collective farm. In 2004, she recorded over 12 000 officially registered visitors to the territory.

WWF-Latvia is continuing to promote the development potential of Lake Pape as wilderness. In 2004, it secured the establishment of the Lake Pape Nature Park, where it has developed a range of amenities including an information centre and guest house, 35 kilometres of interpretive trails, primitive campsites, boat launches and a bird blind on the lake. That same year, the last missing pieces of the Dutch planners' pyramid of grazers were introduced at Pape: wild cattle in February and European bison in June. Rucavites have not actively resisted these efforts, but WWF staff continue to lament their own inability to persuade residents to take on a more active role in developing the site's income-generating potential.⁶⁶ Local defenders of the agrarian *Heimat*, for their part, have not yet articulated a strategy for maintaining a working agro-landscape and making economic development 'spring from cultural history'. It remains to be seen whether either developmental vision can actually succeed in reviving the moribund post-Soviet countryside, and with what consequences for nature and people. And in the aftermath of EU accession, as small-scale planning and demonstration projects increasingly give way to major subsidy programmes and infrastructure development, it also remains to be seen how much Latvians will retain autonomy to contest the meanings of sustainable rural development on their own terms.

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Notes

¹ Pronounced *PUH-peh*.

² See e.g. D. Massey, 'Questions of locality', *Geography* **78** (1993), pp. 142–9.

³ As Petr Pavlinek and John Pickles note, the considerable political and media attention given to environmental 'hot spots', such as the highly polluted 'black triangle' of coal-fired power plants on the Czech–German–Polish border, 'have given rise to a widely held and publicized view of environmental devastation across CEE': a view that overlooks 'the protected natural areas that still cover an estimated 30 percent of the area of CEE'. P. Pavlinek and J. Pickles, *Environmental transitions: transformation and ecological defence in Central and Eastern Europe* (London, Routledge, 2000), p. 41.

⁴ In September 2002, for example, WWF-Austria sponsored an international conference in Vienna, 'Enlargement enriches the EU', on the prospects for rural development and biodiversity conservation in the East European candidate countries.

⁵ The accession countries are the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, as well as Cyprus and Malta.

⁶ Indeed, one analyst 'produced a ten-page listing of the most common definitions used in the decade of the 1980s'. S. Baker, M. Kousis, D. Richardson and S. Young, 'Introduction: the theory and practice of sustainable development in EU perspective', in S. Baker, M. Kousis, D. Richardson and S. Young, eds, *The politics of sustainable development: theory, policy and practice within the European Union* (London, Routledge, 1997), p. 5. Sustainable development has been denounced as 'a convenient ... expression of political correctness, ... sufficiently vague to allow conflicting parties, factions and interests to adhere to it without losing credibility'. D. Richardson, 'The politics of sustainable development', in Baker *et al.*, *Politics of sustainable development*, p. 43. For a nuanced analysis of the genesis, meanings and uses of the concept of biodiversity, see D. Takacs, *The idea of biodiversity: philosophies of paradise* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

⁷ P. Stott and S. Sullivan, 'Introduction', in P. Stott and S. Sullivan, eds, *Political ecology: science, myth and power* (London, Arnold, 2000), p. 1.

- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- ⁹ J. McCarthy, 'First world political ecology: lessons from the Wise Use movement', *Environment and planning A* **24** (2002), p. 1286.
- ¹⁰ Stott and Sullivan, 'Introduction', p. 5. See also e.g. R. L. Bryant and S. Bailey, *Third world political ecology* (London, Routledge, 1997); and R. Peet and M. Watts, *Liberation ecologies: environment, development, social movements* (London, Routledge, 1996).
- ¹¹ Stott and Sullivan, 'Introduction', p. 6.
- ¹² See e.g. B. A. Cellarius and C. Staddon, 'Environmental nongovernmental organizations, civil society, and democratization in Bulgaria', *East European politics and societies* **16**, (2002), pp. 182–222; S. Franklin, 'Białowieża Forest, Poland: representation, myth, and the politics of dispossession', *Environment and planning A* **34** (2002), pp. 1459–85; Pavlinek and Pickles, *Environmental transitions*; C. Staddon, 'Localities, natural resources and transition in Eastern Europe', *Geographical journal* **165** (1999), pp. 200–08; A. Tickle and I. Welsh, eds, *Environment and society in Eastern Europe* (New York, Longman, 1998); and D. Turnock, 'Sustainable rural tourism in the Romanian Carpathians', *Geographical journal* **165** (1999), pp. 192–9.
- ¹³ In my doctoral dissertation ('Wild horses and great trees: national identity and the global politics of nature' (doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2001)) and in a book manuscript currently under review, I trace the construction, contestation and reproduction of these two discourses from the 'national awakening' of the 1850s through to the present day. Evidence for the displacement of initially powerful internationalist narratives by agrarian nationalism from the 1920s onward was gathered during two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Latvia, in 1995–6 and 1998–9, and during a brief visit in June 2002. Along with observation in numerous policy-making settings, I conducted some 160 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with government officials in the environmental, agricultural and forestry sectors; conservation advocates; local authorities and activists in rural townships; private landowners; logging executives; ecotourism promoters and providers; and international consultants. Ethnographic data are supplemented by a broad sampling of primary written sources, including the writings of seminal nineteenth-century national entrepreneurs, canonical Latvian literary texts and periodical literature from the 1920s up to the present.
- ¹⁴ I presented an early version of this argument in 'Nature, development, and national identity: the battle over sustainable forestry in Latvia', *Environmental politics* **8** (1999), pp. 99–118.
- ¹⁵ V. Liepins, 'Baltic attitudes to economic recovery: a survey of public opinion in the Baltic countries', *Journal of Baltic studies* **24** (1993), p. 193. Agriculture was ranked first as the 'main basis for economic development' by 68% of respondents in Latvia.
- ¹⁶ A. Boruks, *Zemnieks, zeme un zemkopība Latvija: no senākiem laikiem līdz mūsdienām* [Farmer, land and agriculture in Latvia: from ancient times to the present] (Riga, Gramatvedis, 1995), p. 393.
- ¹⁷ Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, *Chief economic indicators 2002* (Riga, Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2002), p. 6. Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, *Statistical yearbook of Latvia 1998* (Riga, Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 1998), p. 54.
- ¹⁸ Latvian State Institute of Agrarian Economics, *Latvijas lauksaimniecība 1998: politika un attīstība* [Latvian agriculture 1998: policy and development], Working Papers 7/1999 (Riga, Latvian State Institute of Agrarian Economics, 1999), p. 116.
- ¹⁹ See e.g. S. Baker *et al.*, *Politics of sustainable development*; G. Beaufoy, D. Baldock and J. Clark, *The nature of farming: low intensity farming systems in nine European countries* (London, Institute for European Environmental Policy, 1994); H. Buller, G. Wilson and A. Holl,

- Agri-environmental Policy in the European Union* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000); H. Clout, 'The European countryside: contested space', in B. Graham, ed., *Modern Europe: place, culture and identity* (London, Arnold, 1998); Commission of European Communities Directorate General VI/A1, *Towards a common agricultural and rural policy for Europe: report of an expert group* (Brussels, European Commission, 1997); and D. McCracken, E. Bignal and S. Wenlock, eds, *Farming on the edge: the nature of traditional farmland in Europe* (Peterborough, Joint Nature Conservation Committee, 1995).
- ²⁰ B. Ilbery and I. Bowler, 'From agricultural productivism to post-productivism', in B. Ilbery, ed., *The geography of rural change* (Harlow, Longman, 1998).
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 102.
- ²² e.g. C. Potter and P. Goodwin, 'Agricultural liberalization in the European Union: an analysis of the implications for nature conservation', *Journal of rural studies* **14** (1998), pp. 287–98.
- ²³ In Latvia, this aid has been provided by a range of bilateral, intergovernmental and non-governmental donors, including PHARE (the EU's aid programme to Eastern Europe), UNDP, the UN- and World Bank-administered Global Environmental Facility (GEF), WWF International, Birdlife International and the governments of Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden.
- ²⁴ To name the most important: the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat, the Convention on International Trade with Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats and the Rio Convention on Biological Diversity.
- ²⁵ For wonderful accounts of how Western aid projects require East Europeans to adopt 'project-speak', and of the frequent disconnection between local realities and the lofty abstractions of promoting 'development' or 'civil society', see M. Bruno, 'Playing the co-operation game: strategies around international aid in post-socialist Russia', in S. Bridger and F. Pine, eds, *Surviving post-socialism: local strategies and regional responses in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union* (London, Routledge, 1998), pp. 170–87; and S. Sampson, 'The social life of projects: importing civil society to Albania', in C. Hann and E. Dunn, eds, *Civil society: challenging Western models* (London, Routledge, 1996), pp. 121–42.
- ²⁶ On the rise of 'peasantism' in the interwar period and its roots in the nineteenth-century 'discovery' of folk culture and peasant virtues, see I. Banac and K. Verdery, eds, *National character and national ideology in interwar Eastern Europe* (New Haven, CT, Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1995); T. Hofer, 'The creation of ethnic symbols from the elements of peasant culture', in P. F. Sugar, ed., *Ethnic diversity and conflict in Eastern Europe* (Oxford, ABC-Clio, 1980); G. Ionescu, 'Eastern Europe', in G. Ionescu and E. Gellner, eds, *Populism: its meaning and national characteristics* (New York, Macmillan, 1969); and K. Stauter-Halsted, *The nation in the village: the genesis of peasant national identity in Austrian Poland, 1848-1914* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2001).
- ²⁷ See Schwartz, 'Wild horses and great trees', chs. 2 and 3. On the discursive role of the ethnographic museum, see A. Purs, 'Latvians as an imagined community', paper presented at the Third Annual Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities, New York, 16–19 Apr. 1998. For an account of the role of an open-air ethnographic museum in shaping both national and local identities in Sweden, see M. Crang, 'Nation, region and homeland: history and tradition in Dalarna, Sweden', *Ecumene* **6** (1999), pp. 447–70.
- ²⁸ D. Beitnere, 'Vai latvieši ir tikai zemnieki?' ['Are Latvians only farmers?'], *Karogs* **11** (2002), p. 153.

- ²⁹ A. D. Smith, *National identity* (Reno, University of Nevada Press, 1991), p. 64. There is a rich and growing literature on nationalist constructions of landscape, much of it published in this journal. To cite just a few geographically diverse examples: see P. Gruffud, 'Remaking Wales: nation-building and the geographical imagination, 1925-50', *Political geography* **14** (1995), pp. 219–39; J. A. Kasparian, "'We are our mountains": nation as nature in the Armenian struggle for self-determination, Nagorno-Karabagh', in L. Chorbajian, ed., *The making of Nagorno-Karabagh: from secession to republic* (New York, Palgrave, 2001); D. Lowenthal, 'European and English landscapes as national symbols', in D. Hooson, ed., *Geography and national identity* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1994), pp. 15–38; an T. Selwyn, 'Landscapes of liberation and imprisonment: towards an anthropology of the Israeli landscape', in E. Hirsch and M. O'Hanlon, eds, *The anthropology of landscape: perspectives on place and space* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995); J. Bell, 'Redefining national identity in Uzbekistan: symbolic tensions in Tashkent's official public landscape', *Ecumene* **6** (1999), pp. 183–213; Crang, 'Nation, region and homeland'; C. Ely, 'Critics in the native soil: landscape and conflicting ideals of nationality in imperial Russia', *Ecumene* **7** (2000), pp. 253–70.
- ³⁰ A. Melluma, *Latvijas PSR aizsargajamas dabas teritorijas* [*Protected Nature Areas of the Latvian SSR*] (Riga, Zinatne, 1979), p. 11.
- ³¹ M. Birze, 'Vai Latvijai paredzets Irijas variants?' ['Will Latvia go the way of Ireland?'], *Diena* (17 Feb. 1998), p. 13.
- ³² IUCN East Europe Programme, *The wetlands of Central and Eastern Europe* (Gland, Switzerland, IUCN, 1993), p. 22.
- ³³ Pronounced *ROO-tsub-vub* (*ROO* as in *wood*). Liepaja is pronounced *LEA-pab-yub* (*LEA* as in *year*).
- ³⁴ World Wide Fund for Nature, Latvian Ministry of Environment and the World Bank, 'Terms of reference: management plans and programmes for Lake Pape and Jurkalne, Latvia (1994-1997)', unpublished document (1994), p. 3.
- ³⁵ WWF-Latvia was founded as a Representative Office of WWF-International, under the legal auspices of WWF-Switzerland. Because Switzerland is not an EU member state, WWF-Latvia was barred from receiving EU funds. According to Latvian law, WWF-Latvia was not recognized as a Latvian NGO, and was thereby ineligible for tax-exempt status for domestic fundraising, as well as for competing for Latvian government funds, such as grants from the Environmental Protection Fund. In 2002, WWF-Latvia was reorganized as a non-profit public foundation under Latvian law, thus making it eligible to compete for both domestic and EU funding.
- ³⁶ WWF Denmark, *Management plan for Lake Pape Project Area* (Copenhagen, WWF Denmark, 1996), p. 41.
- ³⁷ F. Vera, 'Metaphors for the wilderness: oak, hazel, cattle and horse' (PhD dissertation, Wageningen, Agricultural University, 1997).
- ³⁸ J. Bakker, *Nature management by grazing and cutting: on the ecological significance of grazing and cutting regimes applied to restore former species-rich grassland communities in the Netherlands* (Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic, 1989).
- ³⁹ M. De Vries, 'Large herbivores and the design of large-scale nature reserves in Western Europe', *Conservation biology* **9** (1995), pp. 25-33; D. Strijker, F. Sijtsma and D. Wiersma, 'Evaluation of nature conservation: an application to the Dutch ecological network', *Environmental and resource economics* **16** (2000), pp. 363–78; and S. Van Wieren, 'The potential role of large herbivores in nature conservation and extensive land use in Europe', *Biological journal of the Linnaean Society* **56** (supplement, 1995), pp. 11–23.

- ⁴⁰ W. Overmars, A. van Winden, R. Meissner, W. Helmer and G. Litjens, *Lake Pape: restoring a European wilderness. perception of nature and employment opportunity* (Hoog Keppel, Netherlands, Stroming BV, 1998), p. 7.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- ⁴² These traits include: 'the ability to . . . foal without help, and at an early age; resistance against cold, snow and rain . . . ; the ability to get nutrients from withered grass, or leaves, twigs and barks; a limited milk supply with high nutritional value in combination with a small udder; a physique that is adequate for the wild terrain; alert and confident behaviour; well-developed motherly instincts; the ability to develop a layer of subcutaneous fat and between the muscles in the growing season to get them through winter without having to draw on muscle tissues' (*ibid.*, p. 51). Equally important in ensuring the horses' survival is their social structure. Koniks live in harem groups comprising a number of mares and one leading stallion; mares pass down knowledge about coping with local environmental conditions and predators from generation to generation, as well as when joining new harems. Over time, for example, the Lake Pape Koniks are expected to become increasingly adept at protecting themselves from wolves, which they had not encountered in the Netherlands.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 29.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- ⁴⁶ Dutch conservationists have played an active role in two international networks founded by WWF-International in 1995 and 1998, respectively: the Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe and the Large Herbivore Initiative. See the websites www.largecarnivores-lcei.org and www.largeherbivore.org
- ⁴⁷ W. Overmars *et al.*, *Lake Pape*, p. 57.
- ⁴⁸ Schwartz, 'Wild horses and great trees', chs. 6 and 7.
- ⁴⁹ P. Zālītis, 'Piepes nav mūsu valsts lielākā bagātība' ['Lichens are not our greatest treasure'], *Meža Dzīve* **12** (1997), pp. 16-17.
- ⁵⁰ M. Kaminska, ecosystem inspector, Liepāja regional environmental agency; interview by the author, Liepāja, 13 Jan. 1998.
- ⁵¹ J. Priednieks, Latvian Nature Fund director; interview by the author, Riga, 9 July 1999. Interestingly, in 2002 the LDF introduced five Koniks, donated by the same Dutch consultancy (Stifting Ark) that provided the Lake Pape horses, into one of its own project territories, the Lake Engure Nature Park in a coastal wetland on the Gulf of Riga. But the authors of the LDF's Interim Activity Report for the project express similar reservations about management for natural processes, noting that the Konik introduction was 'not foreseen in the project' and that: 'There is an argument between nature conservationists, supporting natural grazing and semi-natural grazing approaches. In our project we are following the principles of semi-natural grazing, as we think that it is more beneficial for local population. But we also want to keep the other options open and test the approach of natural grazing in Engure. Probably, the mixture of both approaches will be the best solution for Engure': I. Racinska, 'Implementation of management plan for the Lake Engure Nature Park', 15 Sept. 2002.
- ⁵² For a discussion of agrarian local resistance to wild horse introduction in the United States, see J. S. Rikoon, 'Wild horses and the political ecology of nature restoration in the Missouri Ozarks', paper presented at the conference 'Political ecology at home', Rutgers Geography Department, Mar. 2003. The politics of mammal re-introduction is much more intense when carnivores are involved; see A. Brownlow, 'A wolf in the garden: ideology and change in the Adirondack landscape', in C. Philo and C. Wilbert, eds, *Animal spaces, beastly places: new geographies of human—animal relations* (London, Routledge, 2000); and

- M. A. Wilson, 'The world in Yellowstone: science, symbol or politics? Deconstructing the conflict between environmentalism and wise use', *Society and natural resources* **10** (1997), pp. 453–68.
- ⁵³ R. D. Fonds, *Ir tada vieta pie Baltijas juras: Atklāsmes par Rucavas pagastu [There is a place by the Baltic Sea: a revelation about Rucava township]* (Riga, WWF-Latvia and Rucavas Dabas Fonds, n. d.), p. 11.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ⁵⁵ Gunta Timbra, Rucava Nature Fund co-founder; interview by the author, Rucava, 22 Feb. 1999.
- ⁵⁶ Ināra Rūce, Rucava Nature Fund chair; interview by the author, Rucava, 22 Feb. 1999.
- ⁵⁷ Martiņš Rēķis, WWF-Latvia rural development project director; interview by the author, Riga, 4 Aug. 1999.
- ⁵⁸ For a critique of WWF's neoliberal orientation, see K. McAfee, 'Selling nature to save it? Biodiversity and green developmentalism', *Environment and planning D: society and space* **17** (1999), pp. 133–54.
- ⁵⁹ McCarthy, 'First world political ecology', p. 1285.
- ⁶⁰ Franklin, 'Bialowieza Forest'.
- ⁶¹ Schwartz, 'Wild horses and great trees', ch. 7.
- ⁶² Sceptics may wonder whether Rotberg's motivation was not perhaps more prosaic. After all, in poor countries working for international organizations is often one of the most promising paths to personal enrichment, both licit and illicit (see Bruno, 'Playing the co-operation game', and Sampson 'The social life of projects'). In the case of Latvia, however, far more lucrative jobs in the private sector are readily available to someone with Rotberg's qualifications. There are many paths to wealth in Latvia today, but my observations suggest that working for international NGOs is not among the most prominent. Indeed, at WWF the inability to offer competitive salaries has made it difficult to recruit and retain qualified staff.
- ⁶³ Uģis Rotbergs, WWF-Latvia director; interview by the author, Riga, 9 July 1999.
- ⁶⁴ See Bruno, 'Playing the co-operation game' and Sampson, 'The social life of projects', as well as B. A. Cellarius, 'Linking global priorities and local realities: nongovernmental organizations and the conservation of nature in Bulgaria', in K. Paskaleva, P. Shapira, J. Pickles and B. Koulov, eds, *Bulgaria in transition: environmental consequences of political and economic transformation* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 1998).
- ⁶⁵ World Wide Fund for Nature, *Privatisation and sustainable forestry in Latvia: Mežole demonstration project. Final report* (Riga, WWF, 1999), p. 15. By early 1999, the demonstration site had hosted over 100 visitors from Estonia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Russia and Hungary.
- ⁶⁶ See Cellarius, 'Linking global priorities', for a discussion of the difficulties national environmental NGOs in Eastern Europe often face in establishing meaningful collaboration with local organizations and individuals.