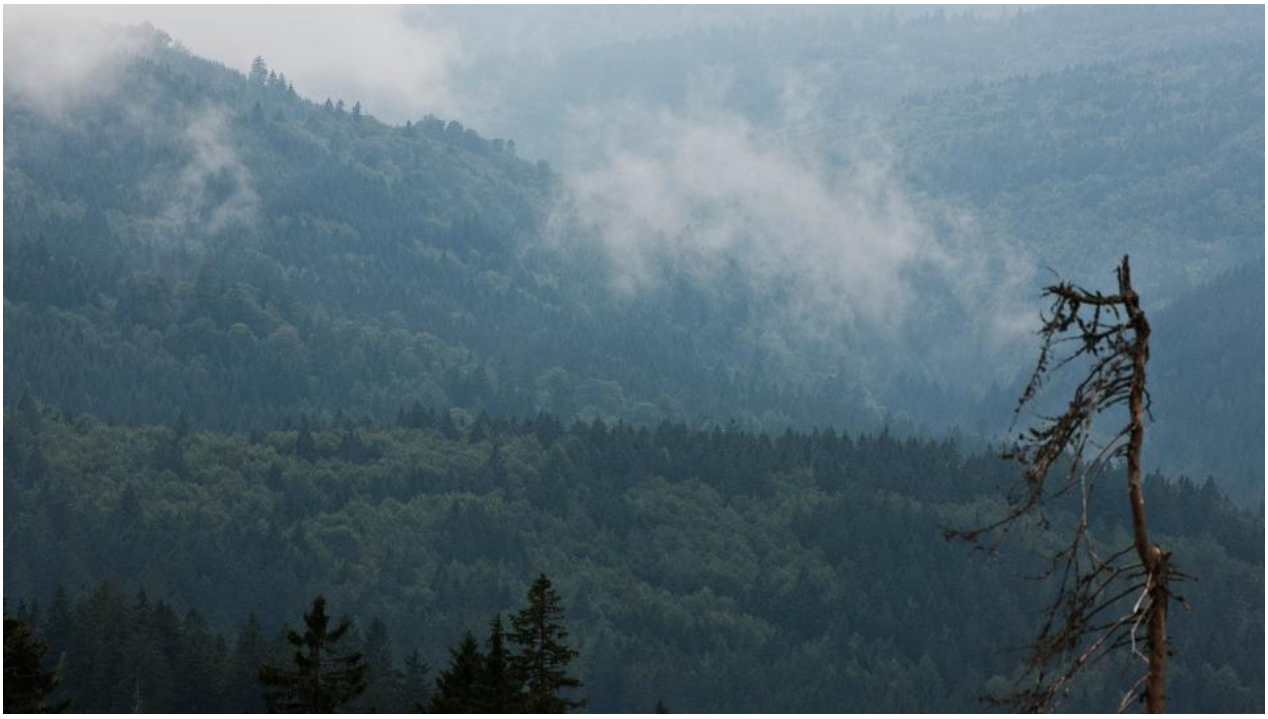
A Laboratory for the Implementation of "Wilderness" in Central Europe—The Bavarian Forest National Park

Bernhard Gissibl

Summary

The Bavarian Forest National Park was created as Germany's first national park in 1970. With its management strategy to "let nature be nature", the park has become a key site for the development of new understandings of "forest wilderness" in central Europe. Together with the adjacent Šumava National Park in the Czech Republic, it forms a laboratory for transboundary conservation across the former borders of the Cold War.



View over the Bavarian National Park

Photograph by Herbert Pöhnl

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License .

The Bavarian Forest National Park, situated in South-Eastern Germany along the border with the Czech Republic, was established as the country's first national park in October 1970. Extended in 1997 to its present size of 243km², the park comprises a densely forested low mountain range of an average height of 600–1456m.

Gissibl, Bernhard. "A Laboratory for the Implementation of "Wilderness" in Central Europe—The Bavarian Forest National Park." Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (2014), no. 4. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society.
https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/5856.
Print date: 25 November 2026 18:08:57

Together with the adjacent Bohemian Forest National Park (cz. Národní park Šumava, under national park status since 1991) in the Czech Republic, it preserves the largest area of continuous forest in Central Europe.

Remnant pockets of original forest meant that the area was considered particularly suitable for a nature reserve ever since the increase in conservationist sensibilities of the late nineteenth century. The imperial annexation of Czechoslovakia by the Nazi Regime in 1938 spawned concrete plans for the demarcation of an expansive "Bohemian Forest National Park" which were ultimately thwarted by the Second World War. However, propositions for a national park on the German side of the border resurfaced when the Iron Curtain isolated the eastern and the western half of the Bohemian Forest ecosystem.



Historical illustration of the "primeval" Bavarian Forest

Historical illustration by Karel Liebscher [1874?]

PUBLIC DOMAIN This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Public Domain Mark 1.0 License .

In the middle of the 1960s, local and regional governmental initiatives to attract tourism to an underdeveloped rural backwater combined with German conservationists' long quest for a substantial reserve. This time, the moral weight and media leverage of celebrity conservationist Bernhard Grzimek provided the campaign with vital momentum and public appeal. Convinced that a national park in the area was the last chance to give an increasingly urbanite society an encounter with the "original" nature of the German past, Grzimek originally envisioned the introduction of elk, bear, bison, and wolves into what was until then largely a sustainably managed forest. This proposal, derived from his experience with national parks in East Africa, sparked year-long controversies with the forestry service and parts of Germany's conservation establishment. Ultimately, the proposed "original" fauna was relegated to gated compounds.

Gissibl, Bernhard. "A Laboratory for the Implementation of "Wilderness" in Central Europe—The Bavarian Forest National Park." Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (2014), no. 4. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society.
https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/5856.
Print date: 25 November 2026 18:08:57



Mountain-top with dead trees after bark-beetle infestation

All rights reserved © Bavarian Forest National Park

The copyright holder reserves, or holds for their own use, all the rights provided by copyright law, such as distribution, performance, and creation of derivative works. https://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en .

The predominant focus on tourism and regional development resulted in an initial lack of conservationist purpose in the park. A heavy windstorm in 1983 was to become the decisive watershed for the evolution of a consistent management philosophy. The park administration left some 90 hectares of the fallen timber to rot and opted to no longer interfere with natural processes in the core zone of the park. “Let nature be nature” became the new guiding principle, an approach that was severely challenged when the rotting wood became infested by bark beetle (*Ips typographus*) in the wake of further windfalls during the 1990s.

The beetle not only threatened cultivated forests outside the park border but also resulted in vast areas of dead trees with little aesthetic appeal for tourists and locals alike. In addition to preventive measures against the insect’s further spread, the Park Service responded to the outcry by improved public communication, conveying a different image of the beetle not as a pest but a vital keystone species for the natural cycles of coniferous forests.

Gissibl, Bernhard. “A Laboratory for the Implementation of “Wilderness” in Central Europe—The Bavarian Forest National Park.” Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (2014), no. 4. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society.
https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/5856.
Print date: 25 November 2026 18:08:57



Dead trees in the Bavarian Forest

All rights reserved © Bavarian Forest National Park

The copyright holder reserves, or holds for their own use, all the rights provided by copyright law, such as distribution, performance, and creation of derivative works.
https://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en .

Gissibl, Bernhard. “A Laboratory for the Implementation of “Wilderness” in Central Europe—The Bavarian Forest National Park.” Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (2014), no. 4. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society.
https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/5856.
Print date: 25 November 2026 18:08:57



New forest growing between the national park's deadwood

2013 Herbert Pöhnl

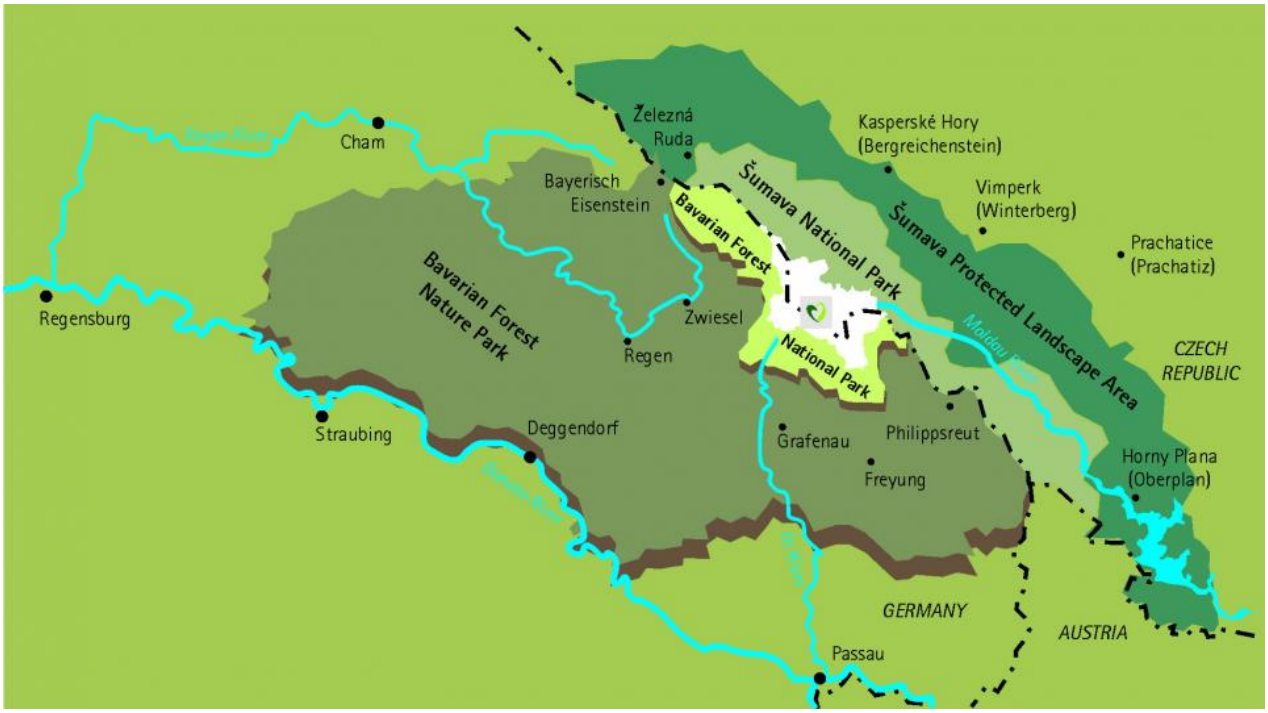
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License .

This practice of protecting processes has made the park a laboratory for new ecologically anchored meanings of wilderness in Central Europe, a site for educating people to embrace a dynamic understanding of their homeland

Gissibl, Bernhard. "A Laboratory for the Implementation of "Wilderness" in Central Europe—The Bavarian Forest National Park." Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (2014), no. 4. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society.
https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/5856.
Print date: 25 November 2026 18:08:57

nature, and the key reference for current controversies over the establishment of further forest national parks in Germany.

The last 20 years have also seen the park emerge into a laboratory of nature uniting nations. Exploiting the opportunities provided by pledges in a number of international treaties—such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Habitats Directive, and the Natura 2000 network—Czech and German park authorities have increased cooperation in park management and set up management guidelines for a joint wilderness area branded as the "wild heart of Europe." These efforts at transboundary conservation vividly illustrate the degree to which the borders, peripheries, and dead zones of the Cold War have been transformed into exciting hotbeds for adapting conservation to the political and social needs of the 21st century.



Map of the "wild heart" of Europe: a joint Czech-German wilderness area

All rights reserved © Bavarian Forest National Park

The copyright holder reserves, or holds for their own use, all the rights provided by copyright law, such as distribution, performance, and creation of derivative works. https://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en .

Gissibl, Bernhard. "A Laboratory for the Implementation of "Wilderness" in Central Europe—The Bavarian Forest National Park." Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (2014), no. 4. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society.
https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/5856.
Print date: 25 November 2026 18:08:57

Arcadia Collection:
National Parks in Time and Space

Further readings:

- Chaney, Sandra. *Nature of the Miracle Years: Conservation in West Germany, 1945–1975.* New York; Oxford: Berghahn, 2008.
- Engels, Jens Ivo. *Naturpolitik in der Bundesrepublik. Ideenwelt und politische verhaltensstile in Naturschutz und Umweltbewegung 1950–1980.* Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2006.
- Gissibl, Bernhard. "A Bavarian Serengeti: Space, Race and Time in the Entangled History of Nature Conservation in East Africa and Germany." In *Civilizing Nature: National Parks in Global Historical Perspective,* edited by Bernhard Gissibl, Sabine Höhler, Patrick Kupper, 102–19. Oxford, New York: Berghahn, 2012.
- Kangler, Gisela. "From the Bohemian Forests to the Bavarian Forest National Park—the Change of Meaning of a Wilderness in Europe," In *Cultural Heritage and Landscapes in Europe* [Landschaften: Kulturelles Erbe in Europa], edited by Christoph Bartels and Claudia Küpper-Eichas, 313–30. Bochum: Deutsches Bergbau-Museum, 2008.
- Křenová, Zdeňka Hans Kiener. "Europe's Wild Heart—Still Beating? Experiences from a New Transboundary Wilderness Area in the Middle of the Old Continent." In *European Journal of Environmental Sciences* 2, 2 (2012): 115–24.
- Pöhnl, Herbert. *Der halbwilde Wald. Nationalpark Bayerischer Wald: Geschichte und Geschichten.* München: oekom 2012.

Related links:

- Homepage of the Bavarian Forest National Park
  http://www.nationalpark-bayerischer-wald.de/english/index.htm
- The Bavarian Forest National Park on Protected Planet
  http://www.protectedplanet.net/sites/Bayerischer_Wald_National_Park

How to cite:

Gissibl, Bernhard. "A Laboratory for the Implementation of "Wilderness" in Central Europe—The Bavarian Forest National Park." Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (2014), no. 4. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/5856 .


This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License .
2014 Bernhard Gissibl
This refers only to the text and does not include any image rights.
Please click on the images to view their individual rights status.

ISSN 2199-3408
Environment & Society Portal, Arcadia

Websites linked in image captions:

- https://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en
- https://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en
- https://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en

About the author:

Bernhard Gissibl
Bernhard Gissibl is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Leibniz-Institute of European History in Mainz. Before coming to Mainz, he taught at the Universities of Munich, Bremen (JU), and Mannheim, where he earned his PhD in 2009. His research areas are the history of nature and wildlife conservation in a transnational and global perspective and the environmental history of German colonialism. He is the co-editor of *Civilizing Nature: National Parks in Global Historical Perspective* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn, 2012, together with Sabine Höhler and Patrick Kupper), which investigates how concepts and ideas of conservation traveled across borders to become implemented in differing social, political, and ecological contexts. His forthcoming book *The Nature of German Imperialism: Conservation and the Politics of Wildlife in Colonial East Africa* analyzes the origins and political ecology of Tanzania's wildlife conservation complex as it emerged in the decades of German colonial rule prior to the First World War.

Gissibl, Bernhard. "A Laboratory for the Implementation of "Wilderness" in Central Europe—The Bavarian Forest National Park." Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (2014), no. 4. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society.
https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/5856.
Print date: 25 November 2026 18:08:57