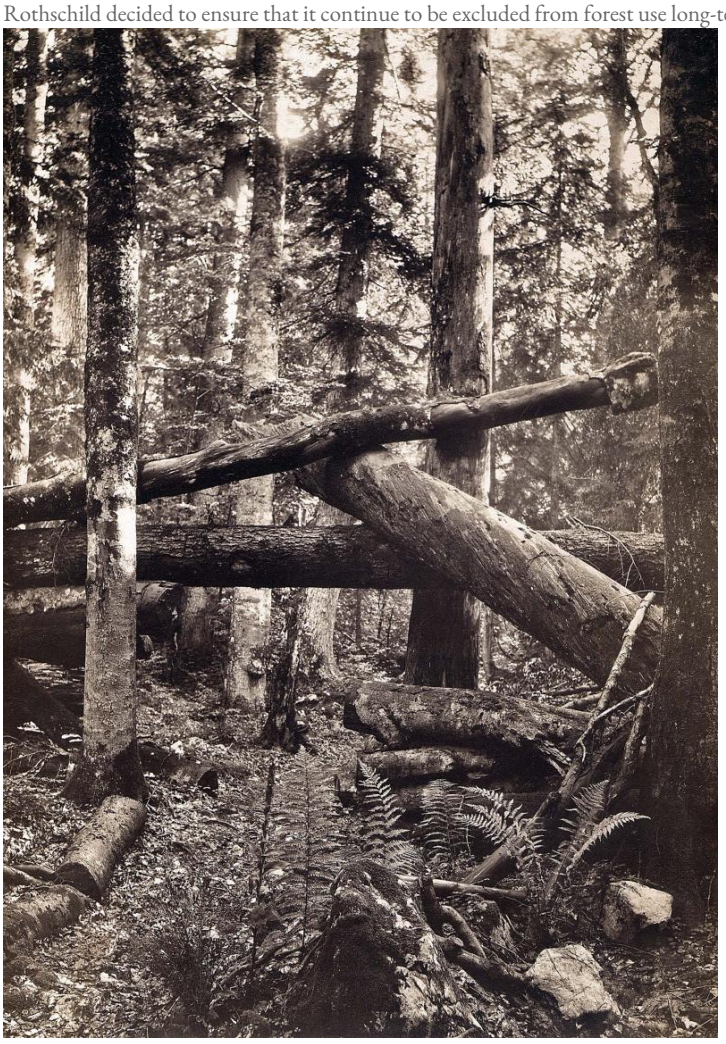
Rothschild's Wilderness: How a Primeval Forest Survived the Timber Industry

Bernhard E. Splechtna and Karl Splechtna

Summary

Urwald Rothwald is an old-growth forest of 400 ha located in the Limestone Alps of Lower Austria. It is now within the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Wilderness Area Dürrenstein. The article describes the exploitation history of the area to explain why the forest was able to remain intact for many centuries. Probable reasons include legal disputes over land use between monasteries. In 1875 Albert Rothschild decided to ensure that it continue to be excluded from forest use long-term.



Historical photograph of typical scenery in the Urwald Rothwald taken by Albert Rothschild or his son Alphonse around 1890 (exact date unknown).

The photograph was taken by Albert Rothschild or his son Alphonse around 1890 (exact date unknown).

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When Albert Rothschild came to visit his summer and hunting residence in Holzhüttenboden, the first thing was to saddle his horse and ride to his favorite place named "Goldplatzl" (Golden Place) within his beloved hunting ground in the now called "Urwald Rothwald." Here and there, even today, the remains of the riding paths that were created for him can still be seen within this primeval forest located in the Northern Limestone Alps, a mere two-hour drive from Austria's only megacity and capital, Vienna. He had bought the land from an industrial forest company in 1875 and had decided—as the wealthy landlord he was—that the remaining 420 hectares of wilderness had to be left alone and saved from forest use. He was not only a keen hunter but also a nature lover and a pioneer of photography. Without him, the precious piece of wilderness would have been lost. But why did this forest persist untouched through time, while almost all other forests in similar elevation had been exploited for the iron industry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries?

First of all, it is located in a truly remote place between the modern-day provinces Lower Austria and Styria, a border that goes back centuries. During most of the regencies of the houses of Babenberg and Habsburg (from 975 to 1918), these provinces were two independent duchies. The area surrounding the primeval forest was the only part of the Duchy of Austria that drained towards Styria. Together with the flat terrain in the lower parts of the primeval forest, this was a major obstacle for the transportation of wood using gravity and water.



View from the Dürrenstein summit (1,878 m above sea level) southward, towards Styria, illustrating the remoteness of the area today.

Photo by Paul Splechtna.

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In the immediate vicinity of the Urwald Rothwald, we find another interesting historical piece in the puzzle of

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why it remained undisturbed for so long: three different creeks, all of them named "Lassing." This situation caused legal battles over the correct border between Austria and Styria and between the neighboring monasteries Gaming and Admont, that continued for 337 years. Starting in 1332, the land around the primeval forest belonged to the monastery in Gaming, together with 30,000 hectares of property endowed by the Habsburg Duke Albrecht II. The conflict with Admont concerned hunting and grazing rights, as forestry did not play a role at that time. In 1689 the dispute was settled by an agreement to alternate the right of use annually between the monasteries; i.e., the rent for grazing was shared.

Land Owner	Era spanning from... – to...	Area of primeval forest cut	Exploitation rate ha/yr
Carthusian Monks	1332 – 1782	530 ha	1.2
Governmental Administration	1782 – 1825	650 ha	15.1
Earl Festetits de Tolna	1825 – 1869	950 ha	21.6
Industrie AG	1869 – 1875	150 ha	25.0
Rothschild family and descendants	1875 – now	20 ha	0.1

History of land ownership, area of primeval forest cut, and exploitation rate per year during each era. Information from old forest records and maps. Note the different lengths of periods. "ha" stands for hectares.

Table by Bernhard E. Splechtna and Karl Splechtna.

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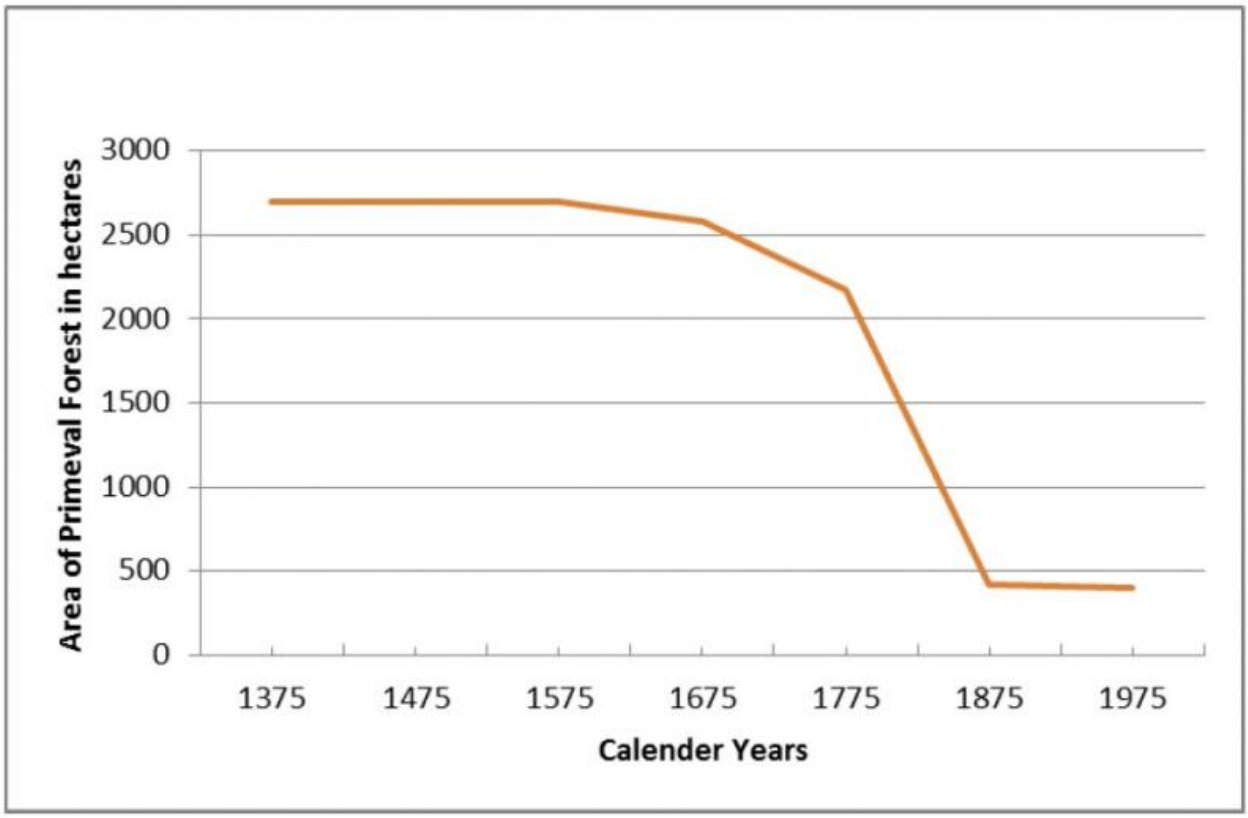

Reconstructed exploitation of the Forest District Rothwald (3,130 hectares in total), showing the loss of 1,650 hectares of primeval forest over ninety years, from 1782 to 1875.

Graphic produced by Bernhard E. Splechtna and Karl Splechtna.

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In 1782, the monastery in Gaming was expropriated by the first enlightened ruler of the Habsburg lands, Josef II. In the following ninety years, 1,650 hectares of primeval forest were removed, until Albert Rothschild put forest use to a halt. Unfavorable circumstances for timber extraction (terrain, political boundaries, and economic disputes over land between monasteries) helped to postpone exploitation long enough, so that this man with passion and foresight could save the most prominent primeval forest of the Alps until modern nature conservation legislation took over. Today, the Urwald Rothwald represents the origin and centerpiece of the Wilderness Area Dürrenstein (IUCN category I) encompassing an area of 3,500 hectares.

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Medium-sized gap in the primeval forest.

Photo by Bernhard Splechtna.

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Further readings:

- Gratzer, G., B. Vesilinovic, and H. P. Lang. “Urwälder in Mitteleuropa—die Reste der Wildnis.“ In *Silva fera* 1

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- Zukrigl, K., G. Eckhart, and J. Nather. *Standortkundliche Untersuchungen in Urwaldresten der Niederösterreichischen Kalkalpen.* Mitteilungen der Forstlichen Bundes-Versuchsanstalt Mariabrunn no. 62. Vienna: Österreichischer Agrarverlag, 1963.

Related links:

- Website of Wilderness Dürrenstein
  http://www.wildnisgebiet.at/en/startseite.html

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About the authors:

Bernhard E. Splechtna
Bernhard Splechtna holds an engineering diploma in forestry from BOKU, and earned his PhD in forest sciences at the University of British Columbia, Canada, in 2002. He published about forest growth–site relationships and the disturbance history of the virgin forest Rothwald while working as a post-doc at the Institute of Forest Ecology at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (BOKU) in Vienna. He is now employed as a part-time researcher and lecturer at BOKU. His main interests are disturbance history, dendrochronology, and plant ecology, but also the relationship of humans to nature, e.g., the perception of wilderness and biodiversity in society as a whole and in different groups, and other issues related to nature conservation.

Karl Splechtna

Karl Splechtna was born in 1930 and earned his engineering diploma in forestry from the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (BOKU) in Vienna in 1956. He was a forest manager from 1964 to 1993 at the manor of the Rothschild family, which included responsibility for managing the virgin forest Rothwald. In the 1970s he began working towards the goal to secure the old-growth remnant by enlarging the nature conservation area to provide a buffer zone. His nature conservation efforts finally resulted in the EU Life Project for establishing the Wilderness Area Dürrenstein (IUCN category I) in the years 1997 to 2001. As the representative of one party of land owners who had to give up their right of use, he negotiated the nature conservation contracts for compensation payments. In 2003 the Wilderness Area Dürrenstein was officially approved by the IUCN. Since the 1960s Karl Splechtna has also collected historical documents, books, and articles regarding the area and talked to contemporary witnesses. Much of we know about the local history of the virgin forest Rothwald stems from his interest in land-use history.

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