

## The politics of *ips typographus* in the Białowieża Forest

This is a story of a conflict surrounding the protection of Białowieża Forest, a big primeval forest on the border of Poland and Belarus. Białowieża Forest is the best preserved and largest forest of remaining primary character in lowland Europe. Several years ago, a large bark beetle (*Ips typographus*) infestation was causing mass dying of spruce trees in the forest. In the autumn of 2015 a plan was developed to significantly increase the cutting and removing the affected trees, in efforts to save the spruce population. The decision by Lasy Państwowe (the General Directorate of State Forests), endorsed by the Ministry of Environment, met with fierce protests



*Dead spruce trees in Białowieża Forest [photo M. Matecki]*

from numerous governmental and non-governmental organizations dedicated to nature conservation, representatives of academic circles, and the general public. The opponents, advocating for passive conservation of the forest (the 'leave it be' mode), criticized the cutting and logging increase, arguing that the spread of the bark beetle is a natural process which occurs in the forest at regular intervals and plays an important ecosystemic role, and that logging would destroy the unique character of the forest. The passive mode of protection had been implemented in the Białowieża National Park, where by 2015 the outbreak of the bark beetle already began to subside. The disagreement soon turned into a huge conflict, with people marching in cities<sup>1</sup> and posting on social media<sup>2</sup>, scientists from around the world sending letters condemning the decision, the European Commission getting involved, people chaining themselves to machinery and getting arrested, scientists from both sides organising contradicting conferences, both sides making films in support of their perspective, etc.

The interesting part was that both sides wanted to protect the forest, they just had different ideas about how and what they were protecting (this is a bit of an oversimplification of this story, because there is a whole lot of other layers, economic, political, religious, and historical, which further situate this story and that need to be taken into account, but there is no space here to talk about them all). It soon became

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<sup>1</sup> For example, *Marsz Entów* (*The March of the Ents*) in January 2016, *Warszawski Marsz dla Puszczy* (*Warsaw March for the Forest*), and *Łódzki Spacer w obronie Puszczy* (*Łódź Walk in the Defense of the Forest*) in June 2017.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Facebook pages such as *Wierzę w Białowieżę* (*I believe in Białowieża*), *Kocham Puszcę* (*I love the Forest*), and *Obóz dla Puszczy* (*The camp for the forest*) gathered thousands of followers.

clear that the conflict went beyond the facts of biology, reaching into the domain of worldview. Indeed, the situation is more clear when approached not so much as divergent diagnoses made by forest conservation experts, but as a fundamental, ontological discrepancy in how the sides of the conflict understand nature, the forest, and ecosystems. The Ministry and the State Forests Directorate wanted to protect the spruces, while their opponents argued the ecosystemic processes were more important, and if that meant less spruces, then that would have to happen.

The aesthetics of the conflict is a good representation of this discrepancy - the two sides propagated different images of the forest. In their materials, the Ministry showed photographs of a green, orderly forest composed largely of young, healthy trees, which were contrasted with images of dead spruces<sup>3</sup>. They even made a very touching film (brilliantly titled “Niemy krzyk Puszczy Białowieskiej” – “The Silent Scream of the Białowieża Forest”) with retired forest guards explaining with tears in their eyes they’d never seen so many dead trees and that something needed to be done, so their grandchildren could see the forest, green and healthy as they’d known in it their childhood. On the other hand, advocates of passive conservation promoted pictures of the forest full of brown, fallen trees, windthrow, and high understorey, with a multitude of bugs and fungi eating away at the dead wood, creating fertile ground for new growth.

I see this conflict as a philosophical clash, where the Ministry, situated within the traditional paradigm, where nature (passive background) and humans (active subject) are separate, and humans are the highest form of being, created in the image of God, see humans as the stewards of nature, responsible for protecting and *conserving* the forest as it was before. On the other side, those arguing for passive protection, situated in the more posthumanist (in the very broad sense) mode of thinking, value the expertise of the mature ecosystem, trusting it to do its thing, and taking a step back. They further argue the ecosystem is never ‘stable’ – it fluctuates, adapts to the changes in climate, ground water levels, etc., and it therefore shouldn’t be policed to stay as it was fifty or a hundred years ago. This is of course a broader argument in the nature *conservation* discourse.

In the end, the mounting pressure (and fines imposed by the EU) resulted in the State Forest Directorate withdrawing the heavy machinery from the forest. But the story is not over – the protesters did not reach their goal, which was for the entire forest to be turned into a strict reserve, so if there is another outbreak (and there is one every five to ten years) the logging may again be increased, restarting the conflict. The narratives of protection remain to be reconciled.

for more information about the conflict:

<https://www.clientearth.org/final-legal-warning-polish-government-prepares-log-bialowieza-forest/>

<http://www.polishwolf.org.pl/bialowieza-forest>

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/may/23/worst-nightmare-europes-last-primeval-forest-brink-collapse-logging>

<http://alert-conservation.org/issues-research-highlights/2017/6/9/europes-last-great-old-growth-forest-faces-the-axe>

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<sup>3</sup> Such imagery was used, for example, during the conference “Puszcza Białowieska — mity, fakty i przyszłość” (“Białowieża Forest—Myths, Facts, and the Future”), held on March 12, 2016 at the Senate of the Republic of Poland.