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## **Production of a Modern Forest Esthetic in the Republic of Georgia:**

### **Numbers in Narratives of Burning Woods and Burning Wood**

A respectable English-, Russian- and Georgian-language online daily *Civil Georgia* reports that on February 3, 2009, Georgian acting Minister of Economics Lasha Zhvania told lawmakers present at a parliamentary session on foreign affairs and European integration that Georgia needed “to re-brand” itself as a tourist haven. The background of this statement is that, according to the National Investment Agency, there is an 80% drop in foreign tourists arriving to Georgia in 2008 compared to the high numbers of over one million visitors in the peak year of 2007 (“Tourism...”).<sup>1</sup> The current precipitous drop in foreign tourism after years of steady increases is an obvious result of the August 2008 war with Russia over a breakaway territory of South Ossetia, a war in which hundreds of people were killed, hundreds of buildings were bombed and burned, and hundreds of acres of forest were set on fire.

From my personal two-week visit to Georgia in September of 2008, it is clear to me that a drop in foreign tourism means a practically 100% decrease in attendance for one of the largest European national parks—the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park (BKNP). Under normal circumstances, more than 90% of its visitors are from foreign countries (pers. interview Enukidze; Lomsadze; Mrevleishvili). This is in contrast to the USA, for example, where an inverse relationship holds true, and 90% of visitors of national parks are citizens of the USA. The numbers seem to demonstrate that in Georgia, generally speaking, there is a low level of interest in wilderness and forest wilderness in particular. Yet, in a somewhat of a paradox, Georgia has one of the most extensive systems of national parks among the former Soviet

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, somewhere in that 80% decline is a group of a dozen University of Washington students from the Seattle campus; they were supposed to visit the Republic of Georgia in late summer of 2008 and finished not going to the country as the University administration was wary of the hostilities and a persistent presence of Russian forces and Russian mines in some of the regions.

republics and in the world in general and is considered a success in wilderness preservation worldwide with 4-7% (depending on a report) of its territory designated as protected lands—the feature that attracted me to studying Georgia as a country of wild forests in the first place.

The August 2008 war brought forth even more complexity in Georgian attitudes towards the country's nature. Upon my arrival to the capital of Tbilisi, I encountered what seemed to me an irrational interpretation of the forest fires that most likely had been set by the retreating Russian forces (Bahrapour A12). Whenever I would say that I wanted to visit the BKNP, people's response was that I was too late, that there was nothing left to see there because it ALL had been burned by the Russians and had I not heard? There would follow a mournful paean to the beauty of the sacrificed forests. I count close to forty people, academicians and janitors, book-sellers and fruit-sellers, journalists and taxi-drivers, young and old—all responding in the same way. When I would attempt to argue that no more than 2% of the forest had been affected and practically none in the National Park itself, according to my calculations based on the park acreage and areas burned as reported by the media, usually politely but firmly I would be told that my information was incorrect. If I insisted, people often would get angry and agitated. There I was, an outsider, who by definition could not know, arguing with them, insiders directly affected by the events. I would quickly cave in and say that if so, I wanted to document the devastation, a position that would meet with an immediate and enthusiastic approval, in which my outsider status would just as immediately acquire value because the world needed to know about the ecocide—the word that was, if not coined, then put in circulation at the time. Few had doubts that I would find anything but scorched earth in place of the National Park.

The intensity of the expressed feelings could have been ascribed to just coming out of the stress of invasion. How strong and important the narrative of the burned down forest continues to be, however, can be demonstrated by very heated assurances that only 2% of the forest has survived that I received from a group of journalists from all over the Republic of Georgia visiting Seattle at the end of November of 2008. The magical 2% flipped its meaning, from 2% damaged to 2% survived. Moreover, this was

after an official statement by the Park on the Internet confirming that it was open to the public with no more than 10 ha of the park's almost 70,000 ha was damaged by the fire ("Message..."). The conviction these Georgian media professionals held was particularly striking because among them there was a woman from a town next to the BKNP. She did not participate in our conversation originally. Only after I questioned their assertions did the journalists ask Laura Gogoladze, the chief editor for newspaper *Chemi Kharaguli* (*Our Kharagauli*) for clarification. After she spoke and apparently confirmed in Georgian my position that the forest was still there, the subject was dropped with a puzzled shrug. Remembering what passions it ignited in Tbilisi, I chose not to press further. What struck me that the group must have not found it necessary to ask the journalist from Kharagauli originally about the relative scale of the damage even though they had had exchanges with her about how horrified they were at the sight of the fires on TV and how awful the behavior of the Russians dropping incendiary bombs from helicopters had been—the people had a sense of absolute knowledge that made perfect sense to them.

The Head of Sustainable Development Agency in the Georgian Ministry of Environmental Protection offers a national character explanation—Georgians as particularly emotional people (E nukidze, pers. interview). This is a prominent view and can be even less charitably expressed as done by some NGOs in Georgia itself who say that "the Georgian culture is hysterical (Nizharadze as quoted in Areshidze 279)." Images of forests aflame still regularly shown on Georgian TV as late as in October undoubtedly have been burned into people's minds. But other images of the war have been shown as well—I have not encountered any irrational numbers (irrational in a non-mathematical sense) in tales of how many people were killed, or buildings destroyed or ships sunk. Only the forest, apparently the most mysterious entity in their land, has been described by Georgians with the hyperbole of mythic proportions.

To me these discussions of burned out/not-burned out woods seem to offer a chance to understand not so much the narrowly defined cultural aspects of Georgia but to witness a process of a modern forest esthetic production with insights into how ideology in general informs practice and

participates in production of meaning. In this paper, I offer an analysis of Georgian attitudes towards forest by referring to historical and current contexts. I identify important forces participating in the shaping of modern attitudes towards forest, such as political and economic situation in the country and ideological pressures, under which Georgia has created its system of national parks. I argue that a Western philosophy of wilderness is promoted by organizations, such as the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) involved in financing the parks. I also identify important players in Georgia itself, those groups that are the object of wilderness education and those groups whose very livelihood is directly influenced by the current deep ecology-oriented policies of the government that depends on foreign funds. From such a context, I speculate on Georgia's chance of developing its own more humanist esthetic of forest wilderness.

Georgia is an ancient nation of five million people that covers a land of about 70,000 square kilometers at the east end of the Black Sea. It borders Russia on the north, Azerbaijan on the east, and Turkey and Armenia on the south. The territory supports a high degree of biodiversity with over 100 different types of landscapes and 23 physical geographic regions (Richards 208). The Greater Caucasus Mountains bounds it on the north and the Lesser Caucasus on the south. The north-south-oriented Likhi Range divides the country into roughly equal areas of Western, and Eastern Georgia. The capital of Tbilisi is in Eastern Georgia. The mixed coniferous and deciduous forest of the BKNP is centrally located in Western Georgia, also known as Imereti, on the western slopes of the Likhi Range.

Georgians are proud of the variety and beauty of their country. A Georgian origin story tells us that in the beginning no people had a land of their own, and so, because of that, there were some problems among different peoples. So God summoned all of them to assign lands to different nations. But Georgians, as usual, were having a party and so came late. By the time they finally arrived, God already had given all the lands in the world away. But Georgians told God that they were late because they had been drinking to God's health, and so God hemmed and hawed, but felt compelled to give Georgians something. That something was a little piece of land that He originally had put aside as His own private

estate because it was the most beautiful and the most productive land in the world that had every possible kind of the most pleasurable nature in the world, from the subtropical sea shore to the alpine mountains. Ever since then, all the other peoples envious of the fertility and beauty of Georgia have been trying to conquer this paradise.

This narrative is often repeated as a part of a traditional toast to the country at festive gatherings, both in the country itself and among small Georgian communities of expatriates throughout the world. Different aspects of the story get unpacked, depending on the toastmaster's agenda for a given toast, but themes of abundance as beauty are reworked over and over: fields, gardens, orchards, vineyards, mountain slopes dotted with sheep bringing milk and wool, the sea and rivers full of fish, forests full of game, oak timber for building and burning wood for staying warm in winter; even the very stones are perfect for building shelter—and one indeed sees most beautiful stone masonry throughout the country—and the water is the tastiest, and the innumerable springs, streams and waterfalls are the most beautiful in the world... Listening to these toasts, one indeed gets an impression of Georgia as a *ferme ornée* of God.

In the best of most Western traditions, the stress is very much on the perfection of cultivated and cleared-of-forest lands. Archeological analysis of soils on low mountainous plateaus demonstrates that, while climatic conditions would have favored forests, instead anthropogenic grasslands have occupied the southern territories of Georgia for the last 6,000 years (Maruashvili et al. 126). While the people themselves call their land Sakartvelo from the name of one of the tribes in the east of the country, the Western name for the country—Georgia—is believed to be a derivation from a Greek word for agriculture (it is the same root as in Virgil's poetic agricultural treatise *Georgics*); that is, ancient Greeks are presumed to refer to the country as The Cultivated Land. Early modern Europeans continued to see it that way too. Sir John Chardin who visited the country in the 1670s writes,

Georgia is as fertile a country as any can be imagin'd, where a man may live both deliciously and very cheap. Their Bread is as good as any in the World; their Fruit is delicious and of all sorts. Neither is there any part of Europe that produces fairer Pears

and Apples, or better tasted, nor does any part of Asia bring forth more delicious Pomegranates (189).

He proceeds with descriptions of delicious and easy to digest meats, fish and fowl and concludes by saying “we may truly say there is no country where a Man may have an Opportunity to fare better than in this (189).”

The first native geographer, Prince Vakhushti, who published two atlases of the country in the 1730s-40s, also stresses the abundance and clearly makes a connection between the goodness and openness of the land and the beauty of the land. Describing territories in the vicinity of the capital Tbilisi, he writes,

The country produces all kinds of grains,... the fruits... are good and abounding,... most of the flowers grow wild in the woods and on the mountains, and in certain localities the scent of the lilies pervades both the mountains and the plains... the rivers are many and great, and of rapid current; the springs are beautiful, delicious and health-giving; the lakes are good and full of fish (Vakhushti 76).

The esthetic of plentiful, cultivated and civilized land prevails in the country to this day. Asked what the most beautiful landscape in Georgia is, the overwhelming majority of Georgians responds with examples of cultivated valleys. The Alazani Valley with medieval city walls in the middle distance and a backdrop of the Caucasus Mountains on the horizon took the prize in my informal census in Georgia in the fall of 2008.

While obviously in a state of change now, attitudes towards forest have been lacking in enthusiasm. For example, when Vakhushti wrote about Western Georgia in the eighteenth century, he made the following statement prejudiced in favor of an open land, “...the woods hinder a man from seeing the beauty of the country, and, indeed, seen from the height of a mountain—Imereti seems like a vast forest without any kind of habitation (339).” Since 2003, on a number of hikes through woods of

Western Washington with a few Georgian expatriates living in Seattle, I have heard their contrasting views of forests in the Republic of Georgia to those in the US. In Georgia, according to them, nobody goes to forest for recreation. Forest is for poor people to cut trees, to hunt for food and to collect wood, berries and mushrooms. These educated and professional people, hiking in Western Washington originally at my invitation, have noted a contrast between the American association of forest visiting, on the Pacific Coast at least, with high economic and social status versus the Georgian association of forest with poverty and low social class. This analysis by the Georgian Seattleites was confirmed to me by Jaba Lomsadze, a guide at the BKNP and by Miriam Mrevleishvili, a deputy head of an agency at the Ministry of Environmental Protection when I asked them for what they thought was the reason for low attendance of the Parks by Georgians themselves (pers. interviews).

I also observed a forest-as-a-dump attitude as well on a scale unimaginable to most Westerners. In Borjomi, the perimeter of the National Park and even the first mile on the trail that we took was thickly covered by trash, mostly plastic and cardboard packaging. This situation is not unique to the vicinity of the National Park, most roadsides in Georgia are littered with trash, but the scale of forest dumping is much greater than in other landscapes. When at the Park headquarters I asked about their littering situation, the Park blamed shepherds who were allowed to use the grounds to move their herds from one pasture to another (Lomsadze pers. interview). The trash I observed, however, was of municipal character, laundry detergent boxes, Western style refrigerator food trays and an assortment of plastic bits and pieces—as if garbage collectors from the city brought it all regularly to the forest. With a lack of littering laws or their enforcement in Georgia, dumping anywhere would be practical; there seemed to be a moral imperative among the population to take the refuse to the least valuable landscape—the woods, unpopulated and seemingly infinite.

The majority of Georgians resides in urban centers and agricultural areas; with 71 persons per square kilometer, Georgia is one of the least populated countries in Europe (United Nations 3; Gachechiladze 47). It is clear that the dense urban majority does not share Western attitudes towards

forest wilderness as landscapes of great beauty worth visiting, admiring, treasuring and preserving. Except in the current war, for many Georgians forests are not something they think or talk about at all because most Georgians are simply concerned with the basics of survival. Roderick Nash says in his iconic *Wilderness and the American Mind* that “environmental preservation remain[s] a full stomach phenomenon (359).” Nowadays Georgia is anything but.

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Georgian economy, which was based on a variety of agricultural products such as citrus, tea, tomatoes, grapes, meat and dairy, wine-making, mineral water-bottling and tourism, was one of the strongest among the republics, and the standard of living in Georgia was bettered only by the Baltic republics. Georgia, God’s farm and the miracle of agricultural abundance in the USSR, lost the market for its produce when agricultural products from the rest of the world became available to the former Soviet republics, cheaper and easier than the Georgian fare. With no other industry developed and with no oil, gas or other raw materials to sell or to use, the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) fell 80% by 1995. Hyperinflation, ethnic conflicts, political strife, civil wars and high crime rate contributed to the persistent economic depression. By 2004 Georgia’s GDP still was 55% lower than in 1989 (Metreveli 4; Gachechiladze 106; Christophe 185).

Georgia continues to have a staggering poverty rate of more than 60%; and while 37% of the active workforce is actually employed, only 3.5% of them earn a salary that surpasses the officially established monthly subsistence minimum of \$59 (Christophe 186). 68% of population rates its economic situation as extremely low (Gevorkian 92). Compounded by a non-existent social safety net, with Georgia scoring the lowest of all of the former Soviet bloc countries on an index of social cohesion, the situation of most Georgian citizens is difficult and unpredictable (Knell and Srholec 46). Rural Georgians resort to subsistence farming, and urbanites to selling their labor abroad; 25% of workforce is estimated to have left the country (Christophe 186; Gevorkian 93). Average annual remittances from mostly illegal workers heading to Russia, Turkey and Germany are estimated to amount 18% of the GDP; that is Georgia leaves

far behind such icons of labor-exporting countries as Mexico, the remittances of which amount to less than 2% of its GDP (Christophe 187).<sup>2</sup>

In general, the state of forests is not on Georgian mind preoccupied with concerns of day-to-day survival. The highly-profiled August 2008 war burned a total of 1,160 ha of forest (“Joint...” 2). It is not surprising that a considerably larger forest fire in Abastumani (in the west of Georgia) in 2006 and a comparable one in Tusheti (in the north-east of Georgia) in 2007 did not at all register with most Georgians. Statistical data requested from the Georgian Ministry of Interior by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) indicate that 1,586 ha of forests have been affected by fires in 2006 and 688 ha in 2007” (“Joint...” 6 and 27). It is possible that there was no media coverage for the earlier fires and what little information was available on the Internet at the time of the fires was not likely to reach many people in Georgia, where, according to Gevorkian, only 3% of the population has access to the net (91). In fact, some people’s narratives of the 2008 fire to me included statements that Georgia had never had a forest fire with such ad lib explanations as the country’s unique climate lacking droughts, or special care taken of forests, or few people living in the woods.

Obviously the stress on those fires that were set by the enemy played a role in highlighting the 2008 events in Borjomi region as part of the rhetoric of the war; however, even among fires resulting from military actions, there was a differentiation in assigning importance to the events. Other forest fires that had started as a result of air raids near a resort town of Kojori not far from Tbilisi, or near the city of Kaspi and the city of Gori, the site of the Russian invasion, received little attention by the Georgian or international media. From a rickety train going through Gori, Georgian peasant women kept pointing out to me patches of burned forest of stunted pines and telling me that some wheat field had been burned also, the latter information I could not confirm but have no reason to doubt, and I find the lack of coverage for

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<sup>2</sup> This statistic may be misleading, however; while Mexican laborers are overwhelmingly in low-paid occupations, it appears that a considerable share of Georgians working abroad are better paid professionals.

the burned wheat fields particularly interesting in light of Georgian traditional orientation towards agriculture. I can find only one document in English that refers to those other forest fires; it is the report by a joint mission of the OSCE and the UNEP to Georgia to assess environmental impact of the recent conflict in the country (“Joint...” 2-3).

Why has so much attention been focused specifically on fires in the Borjomi forests, especially the ones in the Borjomi Gorge and Ateni Gorge? I am convinced the answer lies in the recent history of Georgian forests and in the some seventeen year-long history of the country’s current National Parks system.

In spite of antiquity of its agriculture and the demonstrated predilection for open land, Georgia has always been a forested country. In great contrast to Western Europe, which was mostly deforested by the Middle Ages, even today more than 40% of the Georgian territory consists of a variety of dense forests (United Nations 1). Referring back to the origin story of Georgia as a God’s pleasure farm, it is logical in the narrative that there are no mineral resources of importance there. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, aside from being a transit country for the Caspian oil, timber export seemed to be the only viable economic strategy for Georgia. As a result, “[r]ecent intensive timber harvesting activities [both legal and illegal] were unprecedented in the history of the country [and t]o exacerbate this situation, a sharp reduction of the imports of fuel was compensated by illegal harvesting of fuel wood by the population (Metreveli 6).” “It is estimated, though unconfirmed, that 40-50% of Georgia’s forests have been cut” by 1993 (Richards 211).

With all the extractive activities, Georgia could have been presented as destined to become as deforested as Denmark. In the narratives of the time, even a 2% loss of the forest cover could have been easily projected as 2% only of the cover left. Stressing the rhetoric of loss and scarcity, the World Wide Fund for Nature also known as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) stepped in and got itself busy with its

conservation programs in the Caucasus that have resulted in creation of a number of national parks in the region on the basis of the old Soviet nature reserves. The BKNP is the first and the largest of the projects.

The WWF's web site presents its origins as a result of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Conservation International (CI) realizing that they "were desperately short of funds." An answer to this shortage of funds was the creation of the WWF as an international fundraising organization with headquarters in Switzerland ("History"). As a fundraiser, the WWF has been a success. For example, almost \$1.5 billion available for conservation in 2002 in the world went to the WWF and its sister organizations the IUCN and the CI (Chapin 22). The WWF has been a donor and a broker for Georgian conservation since 1992.

Because of the economic collapse in Georgia, "[c]redits and grants received from [foreign] donors still form the main part of income to the country's budget (Metreveli 4)." The WWF is one of Georgia's important contributors. According to the organization's brochure *WWF in the Caucasus*, even by a conservative estimate based on the list of projects, more than \$10,500,000 has been allocated to various programs and national parks in Georgia, of which at least \$2,500,000 were specifically allocated for the BKNP in the period between 1992 and 2007 with the German Bank for Reconstruction (KfW) supplying the funds (WWF backcover). A big portion of that money is dedicated to educational activities aimed at fostering love for woods in children (Lomsadze pers. interview).

Perhaps even more importantly, the WWF has been a facilitator for Georgia in its debt-for-nature-swap signed with the Paris Club in 2004 (Paris Club press release). According to this agreement, the obviously unable to pay Georgia gets its external debt restructured at a considerable discount essentially for a promise of conservation in return. The total stock of Georgia's debt at the end of 2003 was estimated to be just shy of \$2 billion (IMF document dated May 14th, 2004, published on the IMF web site [www.imf.org](http://www.imf.org)). From the numbers above, it is clear that conservation and protection of projects specifically identified by the WWF is a big business for Georgian government and that it is this very

business that finances much of the government's operations. It is not surprising then that in 1995 there was an original cooperative dream with the WWF of devoting 30% of Georgian territory to protected status in seven national parks (Richards 209). In 2003, the Minister of Environment committed Georgia to putting a still unprecedented 20% of its territory into protected status by the year 2010 (Adeishvili Slide 3). Essentially, for Georgia, selected forests, such the BKNP have become a commodity that is being sold over and over again and much more profitably than selling it as timber. The BKNP, not surprisingly, later got tied with the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline that now skirts the Park on its south border—the only other Georgian commodity of importance. Additionally, very ostensibly caring for nature, in a form of a national park creation, for example, presents to the rest of the world an image of Georgia as an enlightened state with a complete set of signs of modernity. It thus ensures Georgia's attractiveness to global trade and business, somewhat ironically exclusively through foreign funds brokered by the WWF.

A threat to such a high-profile forest is taken much more seriously than to a timber forest or to a wheat field. When the fires started in the Borjomi region near the BKNP, a slew of statements was produced by the government. For example, politically savvy accusations against the Russians of an attempt “to create an ecological catastrophe in the country” sent to a number of international and foreign banks, such the World Bank and the German Bank (KfW), and not only to numerous international NGOs, such as the WWF and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), were issued by the Ministry of Environment (“Statement...”). The statements were about the very holdings of those very financial organizations. The BKNP would be expected to be recognized immediately by the foreign financing agencies, mobilizing them against the Russians.

Within the country, the government statements, seen as uncontroversial and alarming at the same time, were readily expanded by the media, even the non-government controlled media. For the domestic public that for the most part was unaware of the connections between the forests and the financing of the current regime, an ostensible lack of internal political associations with the alarms of the forest fire in

Borjomi perhaps seemed like a fitting locus for expression of deeper war time anxieties. The conceptual naturalness of the forest allowed a respite from a lack of a locus of political trust in their difficult lives. The fires allowed the government to tie the emotional upheaval that people were experiencing because of the war with the rhetoric of forest scarcity. The phrase “national park” started expressing that value-added characteristic of the commodified forest. With references to virgin forests, endemic species and singular habitats, the forest was presented as rare, unique and beautiful in contrast to the mundane forest not greatly valued in the Georgian culture. The word “relict” too entered the everyday vocabulary in Tbilisi; with all the people around me obligatorily referring to relict forests, I had a feeling that their use of “relict” was not as of a specific scientific term but more as of a poetic word, alliterated and therefore, even semantically connected with “reliquaries” and “religion.”

Two competing forest views, one traditional, that of a forest as a landscape of little value, and the new one, that of a forest as a rare and valuable site, all of a sudden were in circulation at the same time. A way to reconcile both was to allow a mental obliteration of the rare and valuable forest in an inferno in its entirety, something easily done with the aid of many TV images of burning woods. That allowed for the conceptual image of the lost forest to stay precious, while it did not disturb the general concept of a forest as a pedestrian entity. My hypothesis is that for many people, after all, busy with their daily survival, it was an easier mental adjustment than to reform their views of forest in general, resulting in the puzzling phenomenon of mass belief that the entire forest is burned in the Borjomi region. I believe that gradually the idea of a forest saved will start making its way into the consciousness of wider urban public in Georgia with the notion of its value conserved.

I should point out that while acknowledging a great financial interest of the Georgian government in the Borjomi forests, I do not doubt that there is a sincere appreciation of the forest among employees of the Ministry of Environment or among Georgian employees of the WWF Caucasus whom I met in Tbilisi. As idealistic as it sounds, they seem to have a true desire to give “a gift to the Earth” in the words of a

former Minister of Environment Malkhaz Adieshvili (Slide 3). By this small segment of Georgian middle class, Georgian wilderness is seen as a great gift capable of benefiting the entire world.

In my conversation with the current Head of Sustainable Development Agency at the Ministry of Environmental Protection Revaz Enukidze, who is a physical geographer and a cartographer by training, the notion of global impact has been clearly stated. Enukidze sees the primary function of the protected territories and national parks, in particular, to be the prevention of soil erosion and water pollution, conservation of water tables and amelioration of climates, both locally and globally. He sees Georgian protected territories as having a world-wide importance in slowing down global climate change (pers. interview).

In that respect, there appears to be no philosophical differences between the WWF and the Georgian government. While most criticisms of coercing a country into conservation usually center on curtailments of the country's industrial development by a forced abstention from resource exploitation, Georgia, originally severely limited in its opportunities for such resource exploitation, is a natural for the WWF. In fact, the WWF has a great partner in Georgia that allows the organization an experimentation in conservation on a grand scale, reminiscent of the 1920s and 1930s industrialized agriculture experimentation by American agricultural reformers in the Soviet Union with Stalin providing vast tracks of land and buying American powerful equipment as described by Deborah Fitzgerald (157-183).

The WWF-promoted Western middle class full-stomach view of wilderness as a pristine unpopulated space is the ideal to which the BKNP aspires and with which it succeeds greatly. After the din, heat, cigarette smoke and constant body contact of the capital, hiking through the silence, coolness, freshness and solitude of the forest was a practically religious experience and the highlight of my visit to Georgia. My husband and I spent an entire day without meeting a single person in the woods—an incredible luxury that cannot be easily had even in the national parks in the USA. From the park literature and website, it is clear that a five-day trip just as easily can be an experience of being alone on the planet

(Chikhradze and Steinmetzer Map of the BKNP; [www.nationalpark.ge](http://www.nationalpark.ge)). After we left the trash at the trailhead, the only hints of human presence there were two mares with a young colt pasturing in a glade and a puzzling metal pipe that ran along the trail for about half its length and that bothered me for a while interfering with my fantasy of being the only person in the world.

I realize the produced nature of my forest appreciation. I have been taught to appreciate solitude. In contrast, for most Georgians, being alone is a defective state, while an ideal state is companionship, centered on food and wine. A Georgian feast is a cultural experience and the main reason that, according to most Georgians, tourists come to their country.

More and more of the educated Georgian elite, however, are aware of the difference and treats the awareness as a sign of sophistication. To acknowledge, if not actually share, a Western need for solitude that a forest can afford is a sign of education and class. Jaba Lomsadze, a guide at the BKNP, a local boy himself, in our conversation obviously connected his own interest in the forest with his degree in the German language and literature—there perhaps even was a whiff of the German Romanticism in his references to the woods—but he also put a subtle stress on his higher educational level than that of most of his local contemporaries who, according to him do not come to the forest if they cannot hunt or log. In the Lagodekhi National Park, another forest in Eastern Georgia that I visited, all the guides were educated as lawyers and spoke German as well. The crucial ability to speak a foreign language decides who gets a job at a National Park and who does not, not only because of all the foreign tourists in the Parks but because through those languages a new esthetic of the forest becomes available to the middle class. English is the most prominent language at the parks' headquarters and on the trails, all of which have signage in Georgian and English, and sometimes in English only.

To fully appreciate the impact of the presence of English in the national parks, I would like to stress the importance of the language for a Georgian sense of nation. Sakartvelo, as Georgia refers to herself in the native tongue, has been defined as a territory where the Georgian language is spoken and

used for worship since the X century (Gachechiladze 19). How obligate the connection between language and nation is for Georgians, perhaps, can be illustrated by a remark of a peasant woman on a train that I took heading to the BKNP from the capital of Tbilisi. On a sweltering afternoon, dressed all in black and wrapped in a shawl tightly stretched across her forehead, she was a picture of a traditional regional figure from the Eastern province of Kartli. Dressed in a colorful T-shirt and shorts with a multitude of pockets, I was a figure from anywhere in the West. When she learned that I was an American, the first thing the woman pointed out was that the USA did not have a language of its own. She, of course, was referring to the English language as properly belonging to England. She seemed to be friendly, rather pro-American, and angry at Russians for the war, so her remark was truly linguistically oriented. The English language, as a *lingua franca* for the world must have felt to be a language of placelessness to her. Especially since my English-Georgian conversation with her was mediated through an interpreter, as anecdotal as it was, later it underscored to me how all the signage in English at the park might impart a paradoxical meaning of placelessness and lack of belonging to the place when seen by Georgians, especially if a Georgian who made it to the park most likely would be a Georgian who knew that the trails and the visitor center were built with German and Swiss money.

A subtle reminder through the language that the forest belongs not only to Georgians is extended by a quote from an American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The landscape belongs to the person who looks at it.” Together with Latin names for local trees, the quote is carved both in Georgian and English on an interpretive trail aimed at younger children and located next to the BKNP headquarters, which are actually in the city itself rather than in the national park and are referred to by the somewhat confused local people as a museum. The interpretive trail quote negates claims on the forest from people who live off the forest and who collect fuel wood there.

Overwhelmingly, rural Georgia is heated by burning wood. As a result, there is a perception that “[t]he most immediate threat to Georgia’s forests is the harvesting of fuelwood (United Nations 99). The United Nations report on Georgian Environment continues to say, “[a]t present, nearly 60% of the annual

forest harvest (or about 720,000 cubic meters) is unrecorded fuelwood (99).” Especially since the “unrecorded” nature of the numbers is noted, it is not clear how the numbers are collected by the Ministry of Environment and by the WWF.

Given how sparsely populated rural Georgia is and the closeness of the Ministry of Environment with the WWF, the organization whose commitment to small local populations has been questionable, I am suspicious of the alarmist numbers (Chapin 17-31). The WWF approach to conservation appears to be rooted in an anti-humanist philosophy of deep ecology. “We seek to be the voice for those creatures who have no voice,” says the WWF (“Vision”). The reference, of course, is to animals, from which human animal is excluded, except for exoticized and fetishized “native” living in a state of nature. The anti-humanist position is not just theoretical but informs policy and practice. In Georgia, the poorest and the least represented population seems to be most negatively affected as a result. At the BKNP, according to the guide Jaba Lomsadze, who actually seemed uncomfortable with that particular portion of the interview, local people are allowed to collect dry wood; the biggest enforcement efforts, however, are not against poachers but against people cutting trees for fuel (pers. interview). No data exists, as far as I can tell on what is really happening with fuel wood harvesting, though opportunities for research are definitely available as I could see from my personal experience.

After spending the night in Borjomi, at 6 am in the morning, while my husband was still getting ready, I walked out of our hotel right into a large city park and proceeded to explore the grand allée, a fountain, a set of stairs climbing up, a new railway station, a new church (sic!), a playground, a little eatery... Of course I had to stop and smile and wave at an old, dark little man in a hemispherical felt hat they still wear in Svaneti in the north-west of Georgia and traditional black clothes they still wear in Imereti villages. He was sawing a huge, obviously fallen branch into smaller pieces on a lawn.

The man became agitated and started nervously telling me something in Georgian and hitting the branch with his saw, demonstrating to me that the branch was dry. “Dry, dry, dry,” I could finally

understand him repeating the word over and over. Even from the path where I stood, I could see his Adam's apple going up and down on his thin neck. Apparently, dressed for a hike, and not in high heels like most Georgian urban women, I looked vaguely uniformed to him and perhaps he took me for a new kind of agent looking for tree-cutting perpetrators. He calmed down a little when I hurried to tell him in Russian that I was an American tourist. I asked this man, who himself looked dried up with age, whether he was cutting wood for heating his house. Still angry at me for scaring him, he grumbled in his heavily-accented Russian that, of course, it was for heating his house, winter would come, all American tourists would leave (a note of sarcasm), and it would be very cold. I asked him whether he was allowed to collect dry wood or even cut trees in the National Park. I think he became suspicious of me again; that might have been too specific a question. He just vaguely shook his head and proceeded with his work. Feeling somewhat guilty and with a sense that I messed up on an opportunity to actually find out something about what was going on with fuel wood in practice, I wished him all the best and left for my magical journey to the Lomis Mta—the Lion's Mountain at the National Park.

Even a sympathetic, on the whole, to local populations OSCE/UNEP report sometimes resorts to the logic of suspicion and hostility towards wood-gathering and wood-logging people in Georgia. Talking about immediate salvage issues in the burned areas, from experience in other nations, it warns against allowing salvage logging on the grounds that “[t]he local population could get the impression that after (setting) a fire legal cutting would be allowed[; and c]onsequently intentionally set fires could be expected in the coming years (“Joint...” 4).”

As the report further points out and as any Georgian forester would know, there is, however, a considerable danger in leaving such large areas of damaged forest in place because weakened singed trees, if not removed, will not be able to mount a defense necessary to prevent a bark beetle infestation. As breeding nurseries, such trees will result in mass outbreaks of the insects, the sheer numbers of which would be able to overcome resistance of healthy trees in the surrounding areas in the following breeding cycles. In 1999, close to 4% of the forest in Borjomi area was destroyed by bark beetles infestation

theorized to originate from a fire-damaged patch of trees (Lomidze 28). That is twice the area affected by the August 2008 fires.

Notes of paternalism in the joint report of the OSCE/UNEP mission, evident in the suggestion that the local population may be tempted to set fires, is present in the report's assessment of the level of knowledge in setting insect pheromone traps for bark beetle monitoring among the scientists of the BKNP ("Joint..." 6). Yet Georgia has had spectacular achievements in forest entomology that include the development of the most successful biological control against a species of bark beetle that devastated European forests in 1970s and 1980s and that is the state of the art still from Turkey to the Great Britain (Kobakhidze et al 205; Tvaradze 51N). Therefore, recommendations of the report that the Georgian Forestry Service "should be provided with the necessary expertise" seem to be unwittingly ironic ("Joint..." 6).

Paternalism is just one aspect of the Western attitudes to the Third World and countries of the former Soviet Union that is a symptom of a lack of social justice in the wilderness policy promoted by the WWF. As a result, following the WWF suite, issues of social justice do not appear to be entering the developing forest esthetic in urban Georgia even though there is a long tradition of forest commons in the country. The eighteenth-century King Vakhtang VI's *Law Codex* summarizes many centuries of laws by stating that there are three things to which everyone has inalienable rights: water, pasture and forest (translator gloss explains that the word for forest is the same as the word for fuel) (Vakhtang 146). During Vakhtang's VI's , the total population of mostly rural Georgia was about a million people; currently about two million live in rural areas (Gachechiladze 26 and 46). It can be argued that because the rural population of Georgia has not increased tremendously since the time of Vakhtang VI, the traditional regime of thinning and logging is a sustainable practice, the very practice that has produced the forests so greatly admired today. It is possible that the harsh treatment of people who make their lives bearable by collecting fuel wood for heating is unnecessary or even harmful to the ecosystem as deposits are not balanced by withdrawals. Unfortunately, it seems that the mindset of total conservation, which is

promoted by the WWF, simplistic and expedient for fundraising, has not spurred any serious research in human/forest-interaction ecology of the region and has not resulted in a new more humanist paradigm of a national park.

If Georgia, however, is not planning on reneging on its commitment to putting 20% of its territory into protected category, it needs an environmental policy that is more people-oriented than it has been shaping so far under the tutelage of the WWF. Conflicts with local populations over forest resources are relatively minor currently because the National Park territories are inherited from the Soviet nature reserves, areas where nobody was allowed to live. As the National Parks expand, how they deal with occupants of those territories will depend on their philosophy of wilderness. Treating wilderness more as a cultural landscape may be a more practical and just solution than following the deep-ecology wilderness ideal.

I am heartened, however, by some indications of Georgian independence. In modernizing themselves according to Western standards as they understand them, Georgians have proven to be resistant in some matters of wilderness representation. For example, when signs of human presence, such as over-ground drinking water lines at the BKNP, the very metal pipes that bothered me on the Lomis Mta trail, were found objectionable by some Western wilderness design specialists, the BKNP officials made a decision to keep the lines because such arrangement was less destructive to the wildlife than creating underground lines as had been suggested by the foreign advisors (Lomsadze pers. interview). I think that additionally, in practice, Georgians interpret numerous signs of human presence in their forests, from ruins of medieval castles to abandoned homesteads to small clearings for grazing horses or sheep, as natural and enriching features. Perhaps because of their admiration for cultivated inhabited lands, their definition of wilderness incorporates human history and current human activities much more comfortably than the WWF ideal. With their forest esthetic still in flux, there is a hope that the best features of all the worlds will unite in their views of the woods.

In summary, in my narrative of firs and fires, numbers tell stories, the Babel of tongues clarifies, and issues of civil society and social justice crop up like forest mushrooms after a rain, or like bark beetles after a forest fire, or like NGOs after a color revolution. I rely heavily on statistics available in the literature but, I hope, also demonstrate how ideology frames use of those numbers, my ideology included. Training my lens on material and emotional investments of national and international public and officials in Georgian forests, I demonstrate that the narratives of the fire spun, crafted and mass-produced at home and abroad are part of production of a new Western-oriented forest esthetic. The new esthetic is being produced by commodification of Georgian wilderness, which is sold to rich Western ideologues of deep-ecology conservation and to foreign tourists seeking a solitary commune with nature. The new esthetic based on the Western imaginary of wilderness allows Georgia “to brand” its forests for foreign touristic and conservational consumption, as paradoxical as that last apposition may seem.

With an amazing system of National Parks created in the country, I recognize that the WWF has achieved a great good in Georgia; I have, however, great misgivings about Georgia’s position as a state greatly dependent economically on the WWF and even greater misgivings about anti-humanist deep-ecology philosophy of the WWF that Georgia seems to feel obliged to accept. I demonstrate the resultant privileged nature of certain forests, such as the BKNP, and the resultant underprivileged position of certain social groups, such as the rural poor living in forested mountainous areas around the BKNP. My hope that by understanding the process of wilderness commodification and production of its modern forest esthetic, Georgia may be more inclined to continue to search for a new forest esthetic, the one with greater social parity and more comfortable with the idea of man in the landscape.

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