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# “Masters in Our Native Place”: The politics of Latvian national parks on the road from Communism to “Europe”

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### Abstract

On May 1, 2004, eight formerly Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe consummated their long-desired “return to Europe” by joining the European Union (EU). While popular perceptions of the east European environment center on nightmarish images of pollution hotspots, Communism also bequeathed a wealth of relatively untouched nature that supports far more biological diversity than can be found in Western Europe. The enlargement represents a biodiversity bonanza for the EU, but millions of humans inhabit the post-Communist countryside, too, tending cultural landscapes rich with local and national meanings. EU accession has thus raised profound questions about post-Communist nature management. Should priority be given to biodiversity conservation at the continental scale, or to maintaining peopled landscapes and traditional land-use patterns? This article examines the confrontation between global

and local understandings of nature through a case study of two Western-supported initiatives in national park management in Latvia in the late 1990s. Some Latvians, seeing hope for national development only through an internationalist embrace of globalization and regional integration, appropriated the Western narratives of biodiversity and rural economic diversification. But others resisted these narratives as threatening to agrarian notions of the value of rural landscapes: notions rooted in a potent agrarian discourse of national identity. What internationalists saw as a savvy embrace of the globalization of nature, agrarians denounced as a sort of self-imposed neo-colonialism.



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## Keywords

Latvia; Political ecology; National parks; National identity; Nature; Biodiversity; Landscape; Post-Communism; Agrarianism

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The author is a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Florida. This article is based on a year of ethnographic field research in Latvia in 1998–1999, supported by a Fulbright-Hays Fellowship for Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad, an IREX Pre-Doctoral Fellowship, and a University of Wisconsin Vilas Graduate Fellowship. Write-up support

Doctoral Fellowship, and a University of Wisconsin-Madison Graduate Fellowship. Write-up support was provided by a MacArthur Global Studies Fellowship, an ACLS East European Studies Dissertation Fellowship and a postdoctoral fellowship at Columbia University's Harriman Institute. Versions of this case study appear in [Schwartz, 2001](#), [Schwartz, in press-a](#). The author wishes to thank Kathryn Hendley, Mark Beissinger and Robert Kaiser of the University of Wisconsin for their support and guidance on the larger project from which this case study is drawn. Invaluable feedback on this article was provided by my postdoctoral colleagues at the Harriman Institute (Hilary Appel, Victoria Frede, Rebecca Neary, Ethan Pollock and Olga Shevchenko), participants in the November 2004 Mellon-Sawyer seminar at Cornell University's Institute for European Studies and the Polson Institute for Global Development, and two anonymous reviewers.

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