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ONLY IN SILENCE CAN ONE HEAR PROPERLY

Prof. Dariusz J. Gwiazdowicz talks about how we can appreciate nature more when we visit forests and about “ecohypocrisy.”

Why are people so keen on spending time in forests? Does the experience resemble going to a desert island – somewhere we can lose ourselves?

DARIUSZ J. GWIAZDOWICZ: Direct contact with nature is soothing and relaxing. In today's world, when we are constantly in a hurry, we feel an acute need to spend time somewhere we can regenerate

physically and mentally. Forests are perfect, since they are known to have health benefits. This has come to the fore in recent years with the boom in dendrotherapy. Forests are also fascinating due to their extensive structure, featuring myriad trees and other plants, mammals and birds. All this stimulates our senses and makes us want to look at, listen to, smell and touch things around us. This makes forests far



more attractive on average than, say, fields, which are aesthetically far more uniform.

Has it always been this way? Has people's attitude towards forests evolved as societies have developed?

In the early days of human history, people tended to see forests as places of shelter and source of food. They

were certainly more hospitable than the tundra, where hunting conditions were difficult and few of the plants were edible. In those days, hunts played an important social role as a communal activity. Hunting parties drove the development of language and communication, and allowed participants to hone their tools, weapons and trapping skills. They were also a source of creative inspiration and a foundation of prehistoric

painting – humankind’s earliest artistic pursuit. Proficiency at hunting and the necessary equipment were not enough to be successful; you also needed a dose of luck to track and approach prey and deliver a killing blow without sustaining injury or, worse, getting killed. And since such “luck” was important, it had to be encouraged through prayer, pleading and magic. In turn, this gave rise to specific rites, hunting lore and the first seeds of religion.

However, in the wake of the Neolithic revolution, humans learned to cultivate plants for food and domesticate animals as livestock and protection, bringing about a dramatic change in their relationship with their environment. The human lifestyle increasingly

rope; however, this is incomparably different to the way we engage with forests today.

I would go so far as to say that the development of human civilization went hand in hand with societies leaving forests further behind. Today, we seek peace and quiet in the great outdoors as an escape from the noise and stress of our everyday, largely urban lives. In a way, this even applies to ubiquitous consumerism: we are increasingly seeing products labelled as “organic” or “ecological,” implying their higher quality. What’s more, the main goal of hunting today is no longer entertainment, as was the case until as late as the last century, but managing populations of wild animals to limit any damage they may cause to human settlements.

Has this shift in our attitude to forest been reflected in culture?

Of course. Forests have served as an inspiration over the centuries, but there was a lot of variety depending on the given artist’s approach to their art. One of my favorite artists, Albrecht Dürer, who lived and worked at the turn of the sixteenth century, believed that truth was hidden within nature. Nature was the foundation and the starting point for his art. In contrast, Michelangelo believed that beauty of nature is not what’s important; in his view, the artist’s goal was to create art as a new quality and nature simply serves as a means to this end.

I think today we are faced with a different problem. People go for a walk in a forest, but when asked what they saw or heard there, what kinds of birds they spotted, they have no answers. I’m mainly talking about people who choose forests as somewhere to go for a run because the surface is kinder on their joints than concrete, and they run wearing earphones. I think that the majority of visitors to forests think of them as somewhere to relax, but they don’t seek any deeper aesthetic inspiration from them.

Do you think people seek solace in spending time in forests, but in doing so they actually exploit them?

We already talked about the beauty of forests, but this is a subjective term, difficult to define. We all have different tastes, and not everyone sees beauty in nature the same way. I would struggle to convince many laypeople that a tapeworm or roundworm are beautiful creatures. There’s no doubt that a galloping horse makes for a tremendous sight, but toads? Not so much. In this context we should definitely strive to be more sensitive and to look at the natural world through an artistic perspective. It is important for us to evaluate how we perceive the world around us and develop attitudes helping us enjoy aesthetic experiences.

At the same time, we must make sure we continue promoting education, since without expanding our

Albrecht Dürer,
“Bearded Saint in a Forest,”
ca. 1516, Albertina, Vienna,
Google Art Project,
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shifted from nomadic to settled, and forests gradually became something of a hindrance to tilling the soil so as to grow grain. Woodlands started to be seen as dangerous places harboring hostile powers and terrifying beasts. Ancient Greeks and Romans saw the natural world in general, and forests in particular, as the antithesis of culture; of everything created by humankind. One of the main goals they frequently set themselves was introducing order to the world around them, and forests simply did not fit in with this ideological view. Hunting became a form of entertainment for aristocratic or financial elites. Of course there were also communities who lived in forests and based their lives around making the most of what they had to offer, especially in Central and Northern Eu-

knowledge and understanding of natural processes, being sensitive to the beauty of nature is simply not enough. Nature means life, but it also means death, frequently violent. We often forget that everything that is alive has to die – sometimes killed by predators, sometimes at human hands. We find it nigh on impossible to talk about death; we abhor it. It is absent from school curricula, and we tend to pretend to children that it does not exist. Poland is the only country which has banned children from participating in hunting, even though it is widely accepted elsewhere around the world. I have heard proposals to impose an age limit on visitors to natural history museums, to prevent children from being traumatized by seeing taxidermized or dissected animals. Natural history museums the world over are thronged by children and young people, yet Poland seems to be headed in the opposite direction. I would like to stress that in order for us to have a deep insight into the natural world, we need sensitivity as well as knowledge. On the flip side, knowledge without sensitivity is just as unhealthy, since it could lead to excessive pragmatism. I strongly believe that we should build our relationships with forests on the foundations of sensitivity and knowledge. There are many publications which intertwine scientific understanding and artistic perception of the natural world. Forests are a particularly interesting example, seeing as they provide a rich source of emotions as well as being a source of timber. Where and how can we learn about nature?

It's relatively simple – there are plenty of excellent books on the subject. Prof. Jerzy Wiśniewski and I have co-authored a book on the aesthetics of forests, in which we encourage readers to notice beauty in the natural world, to discover that nature is beautiful in and of itself. When you examine a butterfly's wings closely, you will see the arrangement of scales and how they reflect sun's rays; when you learn why this happens, you open a door on a whole new level of knowledge.

Learning about nature is even more simple. You just need to read a book or magazine, watch a documentary or go to a meeting organized by a university or a science association. It's more difficult to learn to appreciate the beauty of nature. You need to adopt an active attitude and aim to learn as much as possible from your visits to the forest; to notice and remember as much as possible. We must fully tune into our senses, but for that we need silence. Only in silence can one hear properly. So when you go for a walk in a forest, take it easy, walk slowly and be mindful of what goes on around you. You'll be able to notice and hear things you've never experienced before. Maybe you'll feel how the ground changes under your feet because the forest floor crunches differently. We are all attuned to different things, but developing our aesthetic perception is not easy.

In order to perceive and understand forests fully, do we need to change something within ourselves?

In recent years, we are increasingly seeing how many of our expectations are at odds with one another. On one hand we want our creature comforts: we want to drive our cars on motorways and stay permanently connected with our mobile phones. But to maintain this level of progress, we automatically have to change our environment. Interference in the natural environment is a problem shared by humankind as a whole, not just companies building motorways. We are comfortable living among growing consumerism, and we are happy with it. On the other hand, however, we want to have a sense that we are surrounded by untouched nature and that it is being protected. And these two desires are separated by a massive rift. The question is what we can do to fill it. On a day-to-day basis, we can span it with bridges and crossings, for example by introducing legislation to certain spheres of the economy or devising protection programs for certain species, but even this is wrought with problems. I think the most important aspect is changing our way of thinking. The vast majority of people are in agreement that the environment should be protected, but they also think someone else should be in charge of this. It's worth considering our level of acceptance. Say, you have a nice house and a neatly trimmed lawn, so you don't want sparrows roosting in the eaves or weeds growing in the garden. You reject their presence, and you think that someone else should be concerned with protecting these species.

This problem of maintaining high living standards and an expectation that the environment is being protected fuels the concept of ecohypocrisy. An example could be a celebrity appealing for a ban on hunting even though they drive a car with leather upholstery, or someone campaigning for curbs on the felling of trees, from their weekend hideaway in a log cabin with a wood-burning stove. This kind of hypocrisy means it is easy for us to justify our behavior to maintain our comforts. Social media and advertising increasingly rely on emotional messages. It is as effective on children as it is on adults, as described by Konrad Lorenz. A celebrity may post about a supposed proposal to cull wild boar, accompanied by a picture of cute piglets, and a wave of online outrage immediately follows. Thousands of people are compelled to simply forward the headline without verifying whether the information is true. In order to protect the environment, we must follow a different path. We must not let ourselves be manipulated or get carried away by negative emotions. Let us all improve our understanding of the natural world, so that next time we are in a forest we see it in a whole new way.

INTERVIEWED BY DR. JUSTYNA ORŁOWSKA