

Submitted Abstract

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First Author First Name Last Name	Iris Oberklammer
Submitting Author First Name Last Name	Iris Oberklammer
Correspondence	iris.oberklammer@boku.ac.at
Co-Authors >> E-Mails will be not listed	Gratzer, Georg
Organisations	BOKU - University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna, Austria
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Abstract

Primary forests and old-growth forests are currently receiving increased attention. While the role of such forests in terms of species conservation is increasingly acknowledged in view of the current biodiversity crisis, their potential for carbon storage and thus mitigation of the climate crisis is discussed controversially. The new EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 calls for strict protection of 10% of EU land cover including all remaining primary and old-growth forests. This sparks new interest in where such forests are located and how they can be characterized or identified. However, current primary forests are the results of (positive and negative) selection processes of the past: only forests that were considered worthy of protection or unworthy of utilization (or both) are remaining in natural or semi-natural states today. These selection processes have been shaped by cultural construction of ideas and concepts. One of these cultural constructions is the concept of primeval forests. We traced back the evolvement of the German word “Urwald” (primary or primeval forest) from the early 19th century until the 1930s to discuss how primeval forest concepts affect remaining unused forests in the present. For this, we studied descriptions and definitions of “Urwald” in encyclopaedias and forestry journals from the 18th century onwards. The term Urwald first appears at the beginning of the 19th century. The first lexical description of the term was found in Meyer (1840-1852). There, primeval forest is described in the context of tropical forests, thus originating from the colonial view of exotic wilderness. Early mentions of “Urwald” in forestry journals also refer to forests outside Europe and mourn the loss of their existence in Europe. During the second half of the 19th century, descriptions of Central European Urwald appear more frequently in the records. Common attributes of these forests are a high deadwood presence and giant stand-dominating trees, as well as the relative (or perceived) absence of past human intervention. Natural disturbances are frequently perceived as agents destroying these forests that subsequently lost their conservation status. We illustrate the cultural construction of primary forests with two examples from forests in the Alps and the Carpathians that were partly converted to managed forest based on the loss of such constituting characteristics. Based on our findings, we argue that awareness of the historic evolvement of concepts and ideas referring to nature can help reflect and improve decisions regarding the future of European forests.