

## Wilderness [1935]

Of the several papers forthcoming from Leopold's three-month trip to Germany in 1935 to study German methods of forestry and wildlife management, "Deer and Dauerwald in Germany" and "Naturschutz in Germany" are the best known. Of them all, however, this undated, handwritten draft of a speech is the most evocative and intimate. It is less about wilderness, or even wildness, than about its absence in Germany. This realization haunted Leopold and strengthened his determination to avoid the same fate in America. His German audience would have recognized his reference in the last sentence to the *Erlkönig*, a figure from German folklore immortalized in a poem by Goethe.

To an American conservationist, one of the most insistent impressions received from travel in Germany is the lack of wildness in the German landscape.

Forests are there—interminable miles of them, spires of spruce on the skyline, glowering thickets in ravines, and many a quick glimpse "where the yellow pines are marching straight and stalwart up the hillside where they gather on the crest." Game is there—the skulking roebuck or even a scurrying *Rudel* of red-deer is to be seen any evening, even from a train-window. Streams and lakes are there, cleaner of cans and old tires than our own, and no worse beset with hotels and "bide-a-wee" cottages. But yet, to the critical eye, there is something lacking that should not be lacking in a country which actually practices, in such abundant measure, all of the things we in America preach in the name of "conservation." What is it?

Let me admit to begin with the obvious difference in population density, and hence in population pressure, on the economic mechanisms of land-use. I knew of that difference before coming over, and think I have made allowance for it. Let it further be clear that I did not hope to find in Germany anything resembling the great "wilderness areas" which we dream and talk about, and sometimes briefly set aside, in our National Forests and Parks. Such monuments to wilderness are an esthetic luxury which Germany with

its timber deficit and the evident land-hunger of its teeming millions, cannot afford. I speak rather of a certain quality which should be but is not found in the ordinary landscape of producing forests and inhabited farms, a quality which still in some measure persists in some of the equivalent landscapes of America, and which we I think tacitly assume will be enhanced by rather than lost in the hoped-for practice of conservation. I speak specifically to the question of whether and under what limitations that assumption is correct.

It may be well to first inquire whether the Germans themselves, who know and love their rocks and rills with an intensity long patent to all the world, admit any such esthetic deficit in their countryside. "Yes" and "no" are of course worthless as criteria of such a question. I offer in evidence, first, the existence of a very vigorous esthetic discontent, in the form of a "Naturschutz" (nature-protection) movement, the equivalent of which preceded the emergence of the wilderness idea in America. This impulse to save wild remnants is always, I think, the forerunner of the more important and complex task of mixing a degree of wildness with utility. I also submit that the Germans are still reading Cooper's "Leatherstocking" and Parkman's "Oregon Trail," and still flock to the wild-west movies. And when I asked a forester with a philosophical bent why people did not flock to his forest to camp out, as in America, he shrugged his shoulders and remarked that perhaps the tree-rows stood too close together for convenient tenting! All of which, of course, does not answer the question. Or does it?

And this calls to mind what is perhaps the first element in the German deficit: their former passion for unnecessary outdoor geometry. There is a lag in the affairs of men—the ideas which were seemingly buried with the cold hard minds of the early-industrial era rise up out of the earth today for us to live with. Most German forests, for example, though laid out over a hundred years ago, would do credit to any cubist. The trees are not only in rows and all of a kind, but often the various age-blocks are parallelograms, which only an early discovery of the ill-effects of wind saved from being rectangles. The age-blocks may be in ascending series—1, 2, 3—like the proverbial stepladder family. The boundary between wood and field tends to be sharp, straight, and absolute, unbroken by those charming little indecisions in the form of draw, coulee, and stump-lot, which, especially in our "shiftless" farming regions, bind wood and field into an harmonious whole. The Germans are now making a determined effort to get away from cubistic forestry—experience has revealed that in about the third successive crop of conifers in "pure" stands the microscopic flora of the soil becomes upset and the trees quit growing, but it will be another generation before the new policy emerges in landscape form.

Not so easily, though, will come any respite from what the geometrical mind has done to the German rivers. If there were only room for them, it



would be a splendid idea to collect all the highway engineers in the world, and also their intellectual kith and kin the Corps of Army Engineers, and settle them for life upon the perfect curves and tangents of some "improved" German river. I am aware, of course, that there are weighty commercial reasons for the canalization of the larger rivers, but I also saw many a creek and rivulet laid out straight as a dead snake, and with masonry banks to boot. I am depressed by such indignities, and I have black misgivings over the swarm of new bureaus now out to improve the American countryside. It is, I think, an historical fact that no American bureau equipped with money, men, and machines ever refused *on principle* to straighten a river, save only one—the Soil Conservation Service.

Another more subtle (and to the average traveller, imperceptible) element in the deficit of wildness is the near-extirpation of birds and animals of prey. I think it was Stewart Edward White who said that the existence of one grizzly conferred a flavor to a whole county. From the German hills that flavor has vanished—a victim to the misguided zeal of the game-keeper and the herdsman. Even the ordinary hawks are nearly gone—in four months travel I counted only \_\_\_\_\_. And the great owl or "Uhu"—without whose vocal austerity the winter night becomes a mere blackness—persists only in the farthest marches of East Prussia. Before our American sportsmen and game keepers and stockmen have finished their self-appointed task of extirpating our American predators, I hope that we may begin to realize a truth already written bold and clear on the German landscape: that success in most over-artificialized land-uses is bought at the expense of the public interest. The game-keeper buys an unnatural abundance of pheasants at the expense of the public's hawks and owls. The fish-culturist buys an unnatural abundance of fish at the expense of the public's herons, mergansers, and terns. The forester buys an unnatural increment of wood at the expense of the soil, and in that wood maintains an unnatural abundance of deer at the expense of all palatable shrubs and herbs.

This effect of too many deer on the ground flora of the forest deserves special mention because it is an illusive burglary of esthetic wealth, the more dangerous because unintentional and unseen. Forest undergrowth consists of many species, some palatable to deer, others not. When too dense a deer population is built up, and there are no natural predators to trim it down, the palatable plants are grazed out, whereupon the deer must be artificially fed by the game-keeper, whereupon next year's pressure on the palatable species is still further increased, etc. *ad infinitum*. The end result is the extirpation of the palatable plants—that is to say an unnatural simplicity and monotony in the vegetation of the forest floor, which is still further aggravated by the too-dense shade cast by the artificially crowded trees, and by the soil-sickness already mentioned as arising from conifers. One is put in mind of

Shakespeare's warning that "virtue, grown into a pleurisy, dies of its own too-much." Be that as it may, the forest landscape is deprived of a certain exuberance which arises from a rich variety of plants fighting with each other for a place in the sun. It is almost as if the geological clock had been set back to those dim ages when there were only pines and ferns. I never realized before that the melodies of nature are music only when played against the undertones of evolutionary history. In the German forest—that forest which inspired the *Erlkönig*—one now hears only a dismal fugue out of the timeless reaches of the carboniferous.