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Besprechung / Review

Kunz, W. 2016: "Species Conservation in Managed Habitats. The Myth of a Pristine Nature". – Wiley-VCH, Weinheim: 273 pp. – ISBN: 978-3-527-33845-0.

Werner Kunz is a biology professor at Düsseldorf University specialised in genetics. Since his retirement, he is coming back to his "scientific roots" and is focusing on field biology, mostly working with butterflies and birds, and has become a well-known person as a vehement conservation biologist. In his newest book on this topic, he is not afraid of breaking with some of the beloved views of many conservationists and is not shying away from controversial discussions for reaching the important goal of conserving as much of the world's biodiversity as possible. In this context, he is radically breaking with some important myths of what pristine nature is, with particular importance for biodiversity conservation in Central Europe.

Pristine nature of cause is the tropical rainforest in Amazonia and the Savannah in East Africa, but not the calcareous grassland in Central Europe; this is a habitat exclusively produced by human land-use in the past. However, it is exactly these man-made habitats that are of highest conservation priority in Central Europe. These, if scientifically analysing their origin, unnatural open and semi-open areas have attracted many species to Central Europe coming from different directions, mostly from the Mediterranean and from the East, resulting in unique and highly diverse habitats with a composition of species found nowhere else in the world. Conservationists often call these habitats semi-natural, but they are simply the result of the traditional non-industrialised agricultural use of a poor past in Europe with famines and often in great misery. In Central Europe, it should be these "semi-natural" habitats that should be of conservation priority, not because they are "real" (i.e. pristine) nature, but because of the world-wide uniqueness of these landscapes. In this context, the author is also commenting on four terms: nature conservation, environmental protection, species protection and animal protection. Many politicians and even conservationists often mix up these four terms, which all mean something very different. The incorrect use of these terms often leads to misunderstandings in practical conservation activities and might be one of the reasons for the undamped or even still accelerating loss of biodiversity in Central Europe.

The author also addresses the irrational emotional relationship of Germans with forests and the often observed equalisation between forest and nature, culminating in the terminus "Deutscher Wald" as place of desire in the romantic literature. However, most of the Central European forests are far from pristine forests, but are monotonous tree plantations and hence not really different from arable field with monocultures, just with longer harvesting cycles. Furthermore, most of the romanticised forests in Germany of the past were not closed forests, but more an open park landscape of intensive use, e.g. by wood pasture, coppicing, fire wood use, etc. Finally, even the mostly destroyed pristine forests of Central Europe in most animal and plant groups by far do not reach the diversity and species richness of the man-made semi-natural landscapes with their flower-rich meadows and pastures intersected by hedge rows and small patches of opened forest stretches.

Werner Kunz is mercilessly addressing all these important truths and is giving a large number of well selected examples for all of his hypotheses. Based on these well documented assumptions, the author discusses why "the progress in the environmental protection measures of recent decades has hardly stopped the decline of many endangered species", a central phrase presented already at the beginning of the first chapter. Part of the author's prognoses for the biodiversity of Central Europe is not optimistic: We never will get the diversity of the past back as we never will go back to pre-industrialised agriculture, and even ecological "green" agriculture will only help endangered species marginally. Furthermore, Werner Kunz is not laying too much hope into the "traditional" nature conservation strategies. The author is thinking in a much more radical way. The most important refugia for the communities of the traditional agricultural landscapes of Central Europe nowadays are military training areas, set-aside coal mines and other areas radically not having anything in common with the pristine nature of this region.

Summing up, this is an important book pointing mercilessly at the deficits and general misunderstandings in conservation. The author is uncovering many myths of what pristine nature is or even not is, and what this means for biodiversity conservation, particularly in Central Europe. This book therefore should be obligatory for politicians in the field of environmental politics, and I also hope that many conservationists (professionals and amateurs) will read it and hear Werner Kunz's plea for the conservation of the man-made, but unique and highly species rich Central European landscapes.

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