

THE HISTORY OF POLISH ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION MOVEMENTS

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Abstract

This article aims at presenting European readers with the history of Polish environmental protection movements; it is an attempt at showing their originality and uniqueness within Europe and the world. Despite the formal non-existence of Polish statehood (until 1918), and the Iron Curtain after World War II (until 1989), Polish environmental protection movements were resilient and energetic. World-class environmental acts have been passed, national parks and nature reserves have been created, and international initiatives for the protection of Earth have had their local response and participation. The discussion focuses less on modern times, as the nature of environmental actions nowadays does not differ significantly from actions taken up in other countries. One of the conclusions that can be drawn from the history of Polish environmental protection movements is that suppressing civil rights has the opposite effects, i.e. condensation and strengthening of such drives (the Solidarity period in Poland under the Communist regime).

Key words: *Polish environmental protection movements, national parks, nature reserves, natural monuments, environmental movement, social movement, protest movement, ecological awareness, Poland, history*

Die Stimme der Natur lässt sich nicht überschreien [1].

Christoph Martin Wieland

Omnia (...) quae secundum naturam fiunt, sunt habenda in bonis [2].

Cicero

The Essence of Considerations of Polish Environmental Protection Movements

This article has several main goals. Firstly, to present European readers with the specific nature of Polish environmental movements. Secondly, by portraying their history to illustrate the fact that, despite the Iron Curtain, ecological ideas reached Poland. Thirdly, to advance a thesis based on these considerations that ecological ideas are transnational and reach societies despite political barriers. Fourthly, the history of Polish environmental protection movements should bring some light to a certain relation, namely that suppressing civic rights has the opposite effect, i.e. it leads to their condensation and strengthening.

Preliminary considerations should include the definitions of social movements that the environmental movements are a part of. Social movement is a set of actions aimed at implementing structural changes – in order to modify or create new social structures [3]. The priority is the willingness to introduce changes. As Piotr Sztompka claims, social movements are the most important causal entities of social changes and structural transformations of society. It is hard to unambiguously prove if social movement activists have a goal set from the very beginning that they strive to achieve. They are definitely about the change, but is not certain if they have a clear vision of this change. In social movements, there are two important aspects: the manner of joint action and the methods of confronting the outside world or political opponents.

In order to prove the aforementioned theses, it is necessary to present the history of Polish environmental protection movements. To ensure clarity of the presentation, it is worth to divide the history of Polish initiative for environmental protection to symbolic stages. Definitely, contemporary times were given the least attention in the article. There are simple reasons for that: thanks to the

Schengen Area and the freedom to move, thanks to the universal access to information and globalisation, contemporary Polish environmentalists function not locally, but globally, collaborating with other activists. Therefore, it is not necessary to show their actions for protection of Earth as something unique, as they are part of a global tendency. People are analysed from the perspective of his or her immersion in the world. It does not matter what his or her country of origin is. Indeed, ecological ideas are timeless.

The Historical Beginnings of Polish Environmental Protection

Some researchers – like Walery Goetel – point to outstanding Polish achievements in environmental protection from many centuries ago. It is indicated that as far back as at the beginnings of Polish statehood, i.e. in the times of Bolesław I the Brave (967-1025), coniferous forests had some forms of protection. King Ladislaus II Jagiello (c. 1352/1362-1434) banned excess cutting of yew trees, limited hunting for deer, boars, tarpans and moose, and defined hunting seasons. Other Polish kings – Sigismund I the Old (1467-1548), Stephen Báthory (1533-1586), Sigismund III Vasa (1566-1632) – issued decrees aimed at protecting selected animal species (e.g. beavers or fish) [4].

Specific visions of environmental protection in Poland have their beginnings in the 19th century. Even at this point of considerations, the thesis advanced in the introduction about the universal and transnational nature of ecological ideas is visible. It is noticeable that the first environmental protection initiatives were formed in Poland at the same time as in the rest of Europe. As far as Europe is concerned, as early as in 1815 Swiss Environmental Society was founded (with time transformed into Swiss Environmental Protection Association). Also other organisations were formed in Europe: German Bird Protection Society (founded in Gera in 1885), League for the Protection of Nature (Belgium), League for the Protection of Natural Monuments (Italy), Association for the Protection of French Landscapes.

Poland at this time was erased from the map of Europe. Nevertheless, there was active environmental protection movement. Polish lands had been partitioned by three countries: Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary. Due to this partition, it was difficult to organise a pro-environmental movement throughout the formerly Polish lands. Especially that the partitioners were afraid of any Polish social initiatives. The issues of environmental protection were not excluded from this approach. The partitioners suspected that the Poles might try to resurrect independent Polish state. It is certain that these types of actions favoured shaping national awareness, which was not something the partitioners would agree to. Environmental protection movement on the formerly Polish lands naturally nursed memories of the nation and its heritage, therefore, it was considered dangerous – as it fanned patriotic sentiments. The most strict bans on any types of organisations were in force in the German and Russian partitions. On these lands, even Polish economic organisations were not allowed to be formed. Things were different in the Austrian partition, where in the late 1800s Polish lands gained relative autonomy. Therefore, in this partition, environmental protection movement was developed definitely earlier and it had the most distinct characteristics. This was the result of this relative freedom, but also of the natural location of this area of the partition, which covered places of very high natural value, i.e. the Tatra Mountains and the Carpathian Mountains. The Austrian partition's environmentalists' initiative led to the idea of environmental protection of the Tatra Mountains, the Pieniny Mountains and the Beskid Mountains, aimed at protecting fauna and flora of these areas. The goal was to – following the example of the American Yellowstone – create a national park in the Tatra Mountains.

This concept was finalised in 1873, when one of the oldest climbing organisation in the world was founded – the Tatra Mountains Society [5]. The Tatra Mountains Society in Krakow (as it was finally called) associated Poles from all three partitions. The main tasks of the Society included promoting tourism in the Tatra Mountains, for which purpose mountain shelters were built and mountain trails established. In 1876, the annual magazine “Pamiętnik Towarzystwa Tatrzańskiego” was first published.

In 1903, a new initiative was taken up – Tourism Section of the Tatra Mountains Society (with time changed into Mountain-Climbing Club). Its tasks included promoting tourism, spreading fondness for

mountaineering and providing easier access to the Tatra Mountains (goals shared with the Tatra Mountains Society). Also this organisation started to publish its own magazine entitled “The Tatra Mountains Climber” - a periodical dealing only with mountain-climbing. One of the patriotic decisions of the Society was to pass an act not to acknowledge the names introduced in the Tatra Mountains by German and Hungarian climbers.

Environmental protection was also one of the goals of the Sightseeing Society founded in 1906 in the Russian partition. This social organisation was taking care of the Holy Cross Mountains.

An important event from the point of view of safety was the foundation of the Tatra Volunteer Search and Rescue in 1909.

Environmental protection activities at this stage comprised promoting knowledge of the beauty of the homeland by means of tourism. It was aimed at raising interest in the various regions of homeland.

The turning point in the early history of environmental movements was the year 1913, in which, after an intense discussion concerning the construction of rack railway to the peak of Świnica, it was decided that the main goal of the Society was going to be protection of the Tatra Mountains. This idea was born under the influence of the danger of the Tatra Mountains being destroyed along with its fauna and flora. In 1918, after Poland regained its independence, the Society changed its name to the Polish Tatra Mountains Society. In 1950, the Society merged with the Polish Sightseeing Society and formed one organisation: Polish Tourism and Sightseeing Society.

The World War I put a break in the activities aimed at protecting the homeland’s nature. During the war, there were some inevitable warfare damages sustained. However, after the war ended, the care for regained homeland restarted with new enthusiasm.

The Interwar Period

By the end of 1919 efforts aimed at saving the European bison were taken up. The administrator of the Białowieża Forest, which was the place for the intended restoration of the European bison, was professor Jan Jerzy Karpiński. In 1929, he finalised the idea of introducing zoo specimens of the European bison into the forest, which enabled the restoration of the species.

One of the most active Polish environmentalists of the early 20th century was Jan Gwałbert Pawlikowski. He was one of the pioneers of environmental protection in Poland. He believed that regardless of state organisation, which can prove incompetent or inefficient, it is the society’s role to form its own organisation dealing with promotion of the idea of environmental protection along with its practical realisation.

In 1918, the Minister of Education took the initiative to found a state environmental organisation. During the partitions, love to the homeland supported the nation’s hope for regaining its state, so the idea of protecting it was met with eagerness.

In 1920, the State Council for Nature Conservation was founded, and in 1925, a special officer for Nature Conservation with seat in Krakow was appointed.

An important initiative of international nature was the collaboration of Polish and Czechoslovakian scientists and environmentalists aimed at creation of national parks in the Tatra Mountains. These efforts focused on national parks in the areas in which state borders crossed biologically homogeneous regions. In 1932, the first trans-border Polish-Czechoslovakian national park was created. It was the first national park of this kind in Europe. Therefore, it is worth emphasising the role of Poland and Czechoslovakia in ecological thinking in Europe and in caring for natural heritage of the Old Continent (in the same year a similar park was created on the border between the USA and Canada).

In 1928, the League of Nature Conservation was founded. Its main tasks included i.a.: striving for maintaining the original image of the homeland; caring for it not to lose its beauty and typical features of historical landscape. In order to achieve these goals, it was decided that love to the homeland should be inspired by (written) word; that the environmental knowledge of the homeland should be

increased; that societies supporting the League's actions should be created (e.g. hunting, fishing, forestry, sightseeing societies, etc.). In order to realise these plans, it was necessary to collect material means and to buy off natural and landscape monuments. By the outbreak of World War II, the League boasted large membership (almost five hundred people), more than one hundred societies, it had 7 branches and 5 independent circles. What is significant, the League's founders wanted it to become the beginning of environmental movement in Poland [6].

In the Interwar Period, environmental protection movement aimed at creating areas of protected nature, numerous national parks and nature reserves were created (e.g. Białowieża National Park in 1932, Czarnohorski National Park and Wielkopolska National Park in 1931, Tatra National Park in 1938). The valuable landscapes and the natural space of fauna and flora were to be saved at all costs, by creating so called natural monuments, like unusual trees, caves, boulders, etc. It was possible thanks to the act passed by Sejm (the lower house of Polish Parliament) in 1934. At this point it is also worth emphasising the thoroughly European character of the actions taken up by Polish authorities, as this was one of the best acts of those times.

What is significant, in Poland of that time there were initiatives of creating environmental protection organisations of international character. In 1928, there was even the first International Office for Conservation of Nature with seat in Brussels. The Poles engaged in international protection of birds, marine mammals, fish, various animal species.

There is a very important aspect to environmental protection in Poland during the Interwar Period. The circles involved in it were people closely connected to the ruling elite. Thanks to that, legal environmental protection was created, so legislative actions were taken up without first gaining popular support and it was of a primary character [7].

World War II put a break on these environmental activities. The occupants ruthlessly exploited Poland's natural resources. At this time, environmental protection movement went underground [8]. Thanks to its great commitment, two large, specialist, environmental protection and tourism libraries were saved in Krakow. Another initiative for saving Polish environment was sabotaging the decisions of German occupant in order to save a part of Polish forests.

Poland Under the Communist Regime. The Beginnings of Social Environmental Movement in Poland

As soon as World War II ended, environmentalists restored the State Council for Nature Conservation and began reconstruction of destroyed landscapes. The serious approach to ecology was evidenced by a very modern act (considered the best in the world) passed by Sejm in 1949 on environmental protection.

Various social organisations aimed at environmental protection were developing in the Polish People's Republic, as was the country's name at that time. The idea of creating national parks was continued with over 600 nature reserves and several thousand natural monuments of animate and inanimate nature. It was supported by Polish legislation oriented for the protection of plant and animal species.

Even under the Communist regime Poles tried to participate in international movements for the benefit of Earth. Polish scientists, botanists, environmentalists, geologists e.g. took part in the post-war conference in Brunnen, Switzerland (1947), and then in Fontainebleau (1948) or in Edinburgh (1956). Special consideration was required for the detonation of nuclear bomb and for extending environmental protection to all the environment influenced by human beings. The dilemma facing environmentalists was the need for technicalisation of the world (repairing war damages) without allowing for deterioration of the natural environment. Multidimensional discussions of many years resulted in the formation of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (Union Internationale pour la Conservation de la Nature et de ses Ressources), which is considered the beginning of a new stage of development of environmental protection [9].

As far as specific ideas from the time of Polish People's Republic are concerned, it is worth mentioning that in 1952 the Institute of Nature Conservation was founded in Krakow. Natural science chairs were created in schools of higher education. In 1963, a "Seminar for the Protection of Natural Resources and Securing Sustainability of Raw Materials" was created in the University of Science and Technology in Krakow. Generally, the idea of teaching ecological awareness in post-graduate studies or in schools of lower-level education was developed.

Social environmental movement has been active in Poland already since the end of World War II. However, as late as in the late 1960s, thanks to activists from scientific and journalistic circles, it gained formal character. The actions of these people aimed at promoting ecological ideas are connected to the thesis advanced at the beginning of these considerations, concerning the development of environmentalist ideas in Poland that was parallel to the West. Journalists and scientists brought to Poland experiences of the Western countries, which began to turn their attention to the fact that economic development is often connected with the policy of plundering natural environment. Polish activists focused at that time at the most valuable natural areas, fighting for the rights of nature, mostly of the Bieszczady Mountains, the Pieniny Mountains, the Gorce Mountains and Suwałki Region.

In 1969, secretary of the United Nations, U Thant, published his famous report "The Problems of Human Environment," in which he presented the global situation of environmental protection. Poland joined this action both formally and scientifically. The result was creating a separate ministry dedicated to the matters of ecology.

It is also worth mentioning that the Poles were trying to introduce the notion of "sozology" to environmental protection terminology (W. Szafer, W. Michajłow, S. Leszczycki). In contemporary environmental science this term is obvious.

In the 1970s, independent groups and organisations from Krakow and Jelenia Góra were especially active. Their members comprised mostly of scientists and journalists. Naturally, at that period in Poland there could be no talk of civic rights, as we understand them today, therefore, it cannot be considered environmental movement in the literal sense.

A phenomenon related to the thesis from the introduction is the development of independent pro-environment organisations and groups in 1980s, when – paradoxically – the official activity of the "Solidarity" trade union was blocked [10]. The activities of these rankandfile pro-environment initiatives were visible from the very beginning. They resulted in closing the most polluting branch of aluminium works in Skawina; added the environmental protection thesis to the Programme of the "Solidarity" trade union, passed during the convention in Gdańsk-Oliwa; and in 1981, Polish Ecological Club was officially registered.

The turning point in the shaping of Polish ecological awareness was the nuclear catastrophe in Chernobyl, Ukraine (26th April 1986). The catastrophe was caused by overheated reactor, which resulted in hydrogen explosion, followed by fire and terrifying contamination of land (by spreading radioactive substances). This greatest industrial catastrophe in the history of nuclear power industry of the 20th century caused radioactive contamination of up to 56,370 square miles, covering mostly Belarus, Ukraine and Russia. However, the radioactive cloud was spread throughout Europe. This event demonstrated the need to share information about the condition of the environment. The flow of information in turn contributed to reflection on the condition of nature and the world around us.

Towards Democratic Poland

In the late 1980s, the political system in Poland was visibly liberalised. This "thaw" allowed for the emergence of social initiatives for various movements, including environmental ones. Some researchers are inclined to perceive this phenomenon as the beginnings of Polish civil society (e.g. Piotr Gliński).

By the end of the 1980s, there was an idea of transforming environmental protection movements into political parties. It was possible due to the aforementioned liberalisation of the political system and the

chance for political activity. The actual attempts at forming political parties took place after the strikes of the summer in 1988. Thanks to this initiative, on 10th December 1988 Polska Partia Zielonych (Polish Green Party) was founded. Unfortunately, this party played no political role in the elections of 4th June 1989 [11], the turning point in the history of Poland. This is the date marking the beginning of the history of the Third Polish Republic.

In the 1990s, there were still ideas of the environmentalists with political ambitions concerning creating formal political structures. These visions were possible to be realised thanks to the democratisation of political life in Poland. There were even initiatives of introducing environmental provisions in the project of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland. A project was developed and supported by the Institute for Sustainable Development: *The New Constitution of the Republic of Poland and Environmental Protection*, which included propositions of constitutional solutions. From 1994 on it was possible to propose “civic projects for Constitution” by at least 500,000 citizens, which mechanism was used by Polish environmental movements. This was the cause of the “Ecology in Constitution” Social Committee.

With democratisation of the political system, the environmental awareness of Polish citizens increased, which was certainly strengthened by the shaping of civil society. From the turn of the century onward is the period of increased activity of environmental protection movements’ sympathisers and members. One of the more interesting environmental initiatives in the 21st century’s Poland is the Zieloni 2004 project. This project aimed at broadening the spectrum of matters and going beyond ecological issues, including feminists’ propositions and human rights. In 2003, *Zielony Manifest (The Green Manifesto)* was drawn up – a policy paper passed on the founding convention. It included problems important from the point of view of contemporary citizens, such as: women’s rights, rights of sexual minorities, the concept of sustainable social, ecological and economic development, objection to war and forcible conflict solutions, and participatory democracy [12].

Conclusions

The history of Polish environmental protection movements can be also presented a bit differently. Not by dividing it with events – as seen above, but by reference to the methods of environmental protection. With this second perspective, one can distinguish two periods: preservative, until the outbreak of World War II, and modern – from the end of the war onward. The first period was focused only on protecting rare plants, animals or landscapes. The second one, apart from local protection, is of an international character, legally sanctioned and employing intricate solutions, it is complex and long-term in nature.

The beginnings of Polish environmental protection initiatives in the 19th century show that, despite the lack of statehood, Poles knew how to take care of their homeland. This also points to the universal presence of ecological ideas and to the fact that Poles were not different from other European nations as far as their awareness and care for Earth’s heritage is concerned. It should be emphasised that this was evident despite the lack of statehood.

The acts of bravery from World War II should be especially recognised. When Polish environmental protection movement went underground, both of the two great libraries were saved. The second act of heroism is the disobedience of Polish foresters, who refused to follow orders of the Nazis and saved our forests. This chart in the history of Polish environmental protection movements is especially glorious.

The transnational nature of the concept of protecting Earth’s heritage is visible, e.g. in the collaboration of Polish and Czechoslovakian scientists aimed at protecting the biologically homogeneous border areas. The Poles’ ecological awareness, not different from European standards, was also visible in the Act of 1934 on appointing natural monuments. The Interwar Period in the history of Polish environmental protection movements first of all demonstrates their European character or, in a broader sense, their accordance with world tendencies. It is evidenced by the idea of national parks like those in the USA.

It is worth mentioning that environmental protection in Poland was met with recognition and respect in the world. This was connected to the extraordinary care over national parks and nature reserves exercised by eminent scientists. The most valuable, from the ecological perspective, was the perseverance of Polish activists, who not only initiated forming protected areas, but also consistently watched over them, so that the challenge of protecting the environment would not be abandoned.

The history of Polish environmental protection movements in the 1980s showed that suppressing civic rights has the opposite effects. For the civic energy has to find an outlet, and it cannot be fully quashed. From the point of view of a political regime, it is, therefore, better to let the citizens take up rankandfile initiatives than try to eliminate them totally.

The latest history of environmental protection movements was not given much attention, as they follow the European, global current of activities for the protection of Earth. Neither methods nor proposition of Polish environmentalists surprise or differ from the ones applied in the West. What was valuable from the perspective of this topic, was to bring the typically Polish features closer to European readers, and to show Polish initiatives were not necessarily different from the European or global activities. The holistic approach of the Poles was present from the beginnings of the idea of environmental protection, and in the Interwar Period international organisations started to be created with this idea in mind. Currently, the Poles are involved in global environmental protection, as is evidenced e.g. by the actions of Polish Greenpeace activists in the Arctic [13].

References

- [1] *One cannot shout down the voice of Nature (Iris und Zeniede, III, 1768).*
- [2] *Whatever befalls in accordance with Nature should be accounted good.*
- [3] P. Sztompka, "Ruchy społeczne – struktury w procesie stawania się," in: *Między historią a teorią. Refleksje nad problematyką dziejów i wiedzy historycznej*, edited by M. Drozdowski, Warsaw 1988, p. 416.
- [4] W. Goetel, "Tradycje ruchu ochrony przyrody w Polsce," in: *Prawo a ochrona środowiska*, edited by L. Łustacz, Wrocław 1975, p. 15.
- [5] H. Lisicka, *Organizacje ekologiczne w polskich systemach politycznych*, Wrocław 1997, p. 68.
- [6] *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.
- [7] *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- [8] W. Goetel, *Tradycje...*, p. 22.
- [9] *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- [10] P. Gliński, *Polscy Zieloni. Ruch społeczny w okresie przemian*, Warsaw 1996, pp. 149-150.
- [11] The environmental protection activities of the 1980s in Poland are brilliantly described by Barbara Hicks. See B. Hicks, *Environmental Politics in Poland. A Social Movement Between Regime and Opposition*, New York 1996.
- [12] See A. Grzybek, D. Szwed, "Zieloni 2004 – długi marsz w paru odsłonach," in: *Polski odcień zieleni. Zielone idee i siły polityczne w Polsce*, edited by P. Sadura, Warsaw 2008, pp. 54-55.
- [13] As we know, after the action in the Arctic, Greenpeace activists were arrested. They were freed by the Russians after three months.