

# From the Serengeti to the Bavarian Forest, and back again: Bernhard Grzimek, Celebrity Conservation, and the Transnational Politics of National Parks

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2022.13.2.4525>



## Abstract

This short piece focuses on the work of the German “celebrity conservationist,” Bernhard Grzimek, situating it in the context of historical and contemporary debates about the political and ecological importance of national parks. Grzimek’s role in the creation of Bavarian Forest National Park may not be as well-known as his public ministrations on behalf of the wild animals of the Serengeti, but in several ways his work in and for these two national parks, engaging with the fraught politics of the period, was intertwined. The essay looks at some of these overlaps, using them to make the case for national parks as complex geopolitical formations in which human and animal interests alternately collide and converge. The essay also makes the case for national parks as multi-scalar entities that need to be understood—politically and ecologically—in both local and global, both national and transnational terms. Finally, the essay cites the multiple roles of Grzimek to re-examine the ambivalent role of the celebrity conservationist as a media spokesperson and publicity-conscious advocate for the world’s wildlife.

*Keywords:* Grzimek, conservation, celebrity, transnationalism, national parks.

## Resumen

Este breve trabajo aborda la obra del “conservacionista” y al mismo tiempo “celebridad,” Bernhard Grzimek, al que se sitúa en el contexto de los debates históricos y contemporáneos sobre la importancia política y ecológica de los parques nacionales. Aunque el papel de Grzimek en la creación del parque nacional del Bosque Bávaro no sea tan conocido como el ejercicio público de su ministerio en favor de los animales salvajes del Serengeti, su trabajo en y por estos parques nacionales, comprometido con las tensiones políticas de la época, estuvo estrechamente ligado. Este ensayo analiza algunos de estos solapamientos y los utiliza para abogar por los parques nacionales como formaciones geopolíticas complejas en las cuales colisionan y a la vez convergen los intereses de humanos y animales. El ensayo también aboga por los parques nacionales como entidades multiescalares que requieren una comprensión—a nivel político y ecológico—en términos tanto locales y globales como nacionales y transnacionales. Por último, el ensayo cita los múltiples papeles de Grzimek para reexaminar el papel ambivalente del “conservacionista-celebridad” como portavoz ante los medios de comunicación y defensor, consciente de la publicidad, de la fauna de nuestro mundo.<sup>1</sup>

*Keywords:* Grzimek, conservación, celebridad, transnacionalismo, parques nacionales.

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Professor Maya García de Vinuesa de la Concha (University of Alcalá) for the Spanish translation.

This short essay emerges out of the context of one of my current international collaborative research projects (<https://conservationhumanities.com/corridor-talk/>), a broad comparative study of human/animal mobilities in and across four European transboundary national parks. Transboundary parks are obvious places to look when considering the politics of national parks, which necessarily involve transnational considerations. For if national parks—like nations themselves—are ideas, they are clearly not just *national* ideas, and as the German environmental historian Bernhard Gissibl and his colleagues put it, they are perhaps “more adequately understood as *transnational* parks: globalized localities that owe their establishment to transnational practices of learning, pressure, support and exchange” (Gissibl, Höhler, and Kupper 2; my emphasis). And while national parks, in different ways and to varying degrees, are local responses to global environmental pressures, they are also regional responses to pressures *within* the nation; as such, there is a case to be made for national parks as *regional* rather than national entities, and they are frequently the products of factional disputes between provincial and federal actors, political battles within the nation-state.<sup>2</sup> My “Corridor Talk” colleagues and I have made this case at greater length elsewhere, and I refer the reader to this longer essay (see Carruthers-Jones et al., forthcoming). Here instead, I want to dwell on one particular example, involving the twentieth-century German “celebrity conservationist” Bernhard Grzimek, whose fame is mostly based on the role he played in advertising the plight of the wild animals of the Serengeti, but whose conservation work—as we will see—spanned countries and continents, and was deeply entangled with the fractious Cold War and decolonization politics of his time.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> National parks are many different things at once: “open” scientific laboratories, “closed” nature reserves, “hybrid” recreational outlets. They also come in many different shapes and sizes, and are controlled by a range of entities with different purposes in mind. Indeed, one of the few uncontested things that can be said about them is that (albeit not for the want of trying) there is no standard model of what constitutes, and may legitimately be classified as, a national park (Frost and Hall). The most elaborate current classification system is that adopted by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which puts national parks in Category II of protected areas worldwide, acknowledging that they are something less than “strict nature reserves,” but also something more insofar as they are designed to “provide a foundation for environmentally and culturally compatible spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities” (Dudley 16; also quoted in Gissibl, Höhler, and Kupper 13). However, attempts to standardize this definition have inevitably been unsuccessful, mainly because, as Gissibl et al. argue, the concept of a national park, first developed in the US, has been mobilized globally to support initiatives that serve often radically different purposes to those with which it originally began (13). Indeed, the IUCN guidelines on how to interpret the different management categories lists protected areas in every category which are named as a “national park,” and note that “*the fact that a government has called, or wants to call, an area a national park does not mean that it has to be managed according to the guidelines under category II*” (Dudley; emphasis in the original). The categories themselves, in other words, are explicitly not an attempt to prescribe what should happen within these places, but rather a tool to describe and analyze them.

<sup>3</sup> As in previous work (Huggan), I want to distinguish here between “celebrity conservationists,” who have at least some degree of formal scientific training, and “conservationist celebrities” (politicians, entertainers, and the like) whose effectiveness is largely a function of their high degree of media visibility, and who are generally characterized by their emotional commitment to, rather than their in-depth understanding of, one or more popular conservation cause (Huggan 3). At times, of course, the lines between the two can become blurred – as turned out to be the case with Grzimek. While there is no space here to examine this in detail, Grzimek, who was very much a man of his time, brought out the tensions, not just within specific sets of contemporaneous social and political issues, but within the composite figure of the contemporary celebrity

Grzimek has been described as “Europe’s most important wildlife conservationist of the twentieth century” (Lekan vii). For all that, his work, partly because most of the available sources on it are in German (see, for example, Claudia Sewig’s 2009 biography), has not been given the attention it deserves. Though Grzimek’s star may not shine quite as brightly today, for a good while, from roughly the mid-1950s through until the late 1980s, he was a household name in his native Germany, a “charismatic mega-scientist,” as Thomas Lekan wryly calls him, whose winning media persona and widespread political connections enabled him to advocate for global nature, galvanizing national TV audiences with “a vision of wildlife conservation as a noble, apolitical cause above the ideological and Cold War anxieties that dominated Europe in the aftermath of the Third Reich” (2).

Grzimek was many different things at different times, and some of them simultaneously: trained veterinarian, conservation-minded agricultural minister, modernizing director of the Frankfurt Zoological Society, indefatigable champion of the world’s wildlife. But for most of the German public it was his media role as a TV presenter that took him into the nation’s hearts, while his international reputation was sealed by the landmark 1959 wildlife documentary film that he made together with his son Michael, *Serengeti darf nicht sterben* (*The Serengeti Shall Not Die*).<sup>4</sup> Parallels can be traced here between Grzimek’s work and that of other mid to late twentieth-century celebrity conservationists such as David Attenborough and Jacques-Yves Cousteau. Telegenic figures both, Attenborough and Cousteau, like Grzimek, were able (and, in Attenborough’s case, are still able) to use their celebrity to advocate for various environmental causes, while also like Grzimek, Attenborough and Cousteau were/are both national and global figures, the celebrity status accorded to them having been produced by a “heavily mediated conversation between national and transnational understandings of their work” (Huggan 3).

The relationship between conservation and celebrity is increasingly well documented (Brockington, *Celebrity and the Environment*; Huggan), while the entanglement of both with histories and discourses of colonialism has also been well covered, and is evident in—for example—Thomas Lekan’s recent critical assessment of Grzimek’s work (Lekan). I am indebted in what follows to Lekan, whose work shows better than most that while Grzimek may have been hugely popular on screen, in other respects he was a deeply ambivalent figure, and was often as arrogant in his dealings with his fellow humans as he was affectionate in his attentions to the world’s wildlife (Lekan;

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conservationist as moral educator, bound up as he/she is with the moral ambivalence of celebrity *and* the perceived integrity of the greater conservation cause (Huggan 3).

<sup>4</sup> Michael and Bernhard, while by no means alike in personality or always in agreement on conservationist principles and methods, joined together in terms of their effectiveness in cultivating what might loosely be called the Grzimek mythos, which was characterized by the heroic mission to save the African continent’s (and, by equally loose extension, the world’s) wildlife. Michael’s untimely death in 1959, when the light propellor plane he was flying fatally crashed, most likely after a collision with a local griffon vulture, fed into this mythos, which has proved remarkably resilient over time. It is perhaps unsurprising that Frankfurt Zoo’s Grzimek House continues to this day to pursue a largely hagiographic approach to the Grzimek legacy, but a similar commemorative display at the Serengeti Wildlife Research Center, “right in the heart of East Africa’s savannas, raises the specter of a not-yet-resolved colonial past” (Lekan 254).

see also Sewig, Torma). Certainly, it is difficult not to consider him today as a more or less paradigmatic example of a mid-twentieth-century “environmental saviour” (Huggan) whose conservation work, however admirable in intent, eventually served to buttress the white-male privilege and colonialist hierarchies that have long since been recognized as deeply entangled in the history of conservation, both on the African continent and elsewhere (see, for example, Adams and McShane; Adams and Mulligan; Brockington *Fortress Conservation*; Garland; on the “redemptive” contexts for Grzimek’s work, see also Lekan and Torma).<sup>5</sup> And certainly he could cut a confrontational figure to those who happened to disagree with him, not least in the multiple roles he played (corporate organizer, public-relations guru, political arm-twister) in the formation and development of the Serengeti and Bavarian Forest National Parks.

Seen from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, these two geographically distant parks may seem to have little to do with one another, but as several of Grzimek’s commentators have shown, back in the 1960s—the decade during which nature conservation is generally acknowledged as having become a truly global movement—their existences were inextricably entwined (see, for example, Gissibl; Lekan; Torma). There were several good reasons for this transnational convergence. First and most obviously, “wild Africa” was viewed by Grzimek and other conservationists of his time as an antidote to the ecological impoverishment that was the “dark side” of Germany’s post-WWII economic miracle; but conversely, it was seen as an ecological disaster waiting to happen: an animal paradise, assailed by the twin forces of US-style materialism and Soviet-style collectivism, that was in the process of being destroyed (Lekan 79, 76; see also Adams and McShane).

Various critical attempts have been made to account for the Cold War tensions in Grzimek’s conservation work, though Grzimek himself disingenuously claimed to have transcended these (Sewi). As Lekan and Gissibl point out, these tensions were apparent in Grzimek’s virulent anti-Americanism—about which he *was* more than happy to own up—while they were also projected internationally, e.g. onto postcolonial East Africa, and within the nation, e.g. in his support for Bavarian Forest National Park, which is located in a border zone which, at the time of its creation and early development, lay alongside the Iron Curtain (Chaney 214; see also Lekan, Gissibl). American interests were relevant, too, insofar as Bavarian Forest National Park was both influenced by the “universal” preservationist ideologies that underpinned the formation of the early US national parks, from the late nineteenth century onwards (Minteer and Pyne), and fully cognizant of national and regional alternatives to them. As I will show in more detail later, the park that eventually emerged was thus a compromise in more ways than one, a multi-purpose space which aimed to protect nature through reshaping it (*gestaltender Naturschutz*), and

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<sup>5</sup> To see Grzimek as an out-and-out colonialist is, however, oversimplified. Grzimek was by no means apolitical, as he sometimes strategically claimed to be; rather he was adept at capitalizing on the new opportunities provided by changing social and political circumstances. Behind the “honest broker” image thus lay a shrewd political manipulator, who was perfectly prepared in the context of his African work to take advantage of the colonial privileges that his nationality and status gave him, but was equally keen to profit from African decolonization, which gave him the chance to cultivate an enlightened self-image as a durable friend to Africa and a “European outsider who cared” (Lekan 194).

which mixed commercial imperatives with preservationist ones while attempting to avoid the moral dilemmas that complicated the US “wilderness ethic”—especially the thorny issue of whether national parks were *for* the people or were designed to protect nature *from* people and/or to keep particular kinds of people out (Chaney 233).

Grzimek’s interpretation of the Cold War era was a particularly gloomy one, structured around a stark declensionist narrative that pegged Africa’s animals as dying out because “Africans were gradually recapitulating the stages of development set in motion by European civilization” (Lekan 63). At the same time and typically for him, Grzimek recast this sorry scenario of social and environmental decline as a triumphant opportunity. Based on his ostensibly globalist, strategically apolitical view of African wildlife as the common heritage of mankind, he thus set about his mission of creating a national park that would provide a spectacular shop-window onto an ecologically threatened Earth while also functioning as a sustainable global commons: a “for-the-ages” animal sanctuary, but also a thoroughly modern natural laboratory in which conservation—practised according to the best European scientific principles—would promote a forward-looking, pacifistic internationalism that turned its back on both the imperial and the recent Nazi past (123). Serengeti National Park, according to this vision, would help save the world but it would also help save Germany, allowing (West) Germans to “redeem themselves in the world community by [rescuing] life rather than destroying it” (6).

This heady view, suggests Gissibl, was very much of its time, but it also harked back to earlier times, conjuring up early twentieth-century European images of African nature as “a heterotopian wilderness equalling the prehistoric landscape of Europe thousands of years ago” (Gissibl 107). Bringing Africa and Europe together once more, Gissibl links Grzimek’s less well-known role in the discussions that would eventually lead to the establishment of Bavarian Forest National Park in 1970 to his fascination with what would probably be known today as rewilding, the reintroduction of larger, supposedly native fauna that might help restore the “lost originality” of the German landscape (104). The connection, however, is a loose one. It is certainly true that Grzimek was interested in the possibility of reintroducing megafauna – including that semi-mythical Aryan beast, the bison – into German-themed motorized safari parks, and that this, to some extent at least, represented an attempt on his part to “translate the wildlife experience of East Africa’s national parks into West Germany’s cultural landscape” (102; see also Lorimer; Schama, esp. chapters 1 and 2). It is also true that, in the often heated debates that led up to the belated creation of Germany’s first national park, Grzimek insisted—though for once he would eventually lose out—that space be allocated to autochthonous wildlife that had once lived in German forests, and that his staunchly preservationist view of nature conservation flirted at times with the National Socialist conceptions of “characteristic” animals and “original” nature that he publicly disavowed (Gissibl 112; see also Chaney 221).

However, it seems unwise to go too far with this. After all, Grzimek had previously distanced himself from, *inter alia*, Lutz Heck’s notorious animal breeding experiments, which “paralleled Nazi efforts to locate and replenish ‘Aryan racial stock’” (Lekan 33; see

also Driessen and Lorimer). Meanwhile, he never tired of repeating that his was, above all else, a *global* mission, and that he was opposed to all forms of national and regional partisanship: partisanship he decried in his dealings with the various players and interest groups—federal and state politicians, but also scientists, foresters, hunters, industrialists—who, seemingly endlessly in the late 1960s, traded disparate visions and versions of a German national or, as some of the harder-headed secessionists preferred to call it, a *Bavarian* national park (Chaney 229).

That said, Grzimek always had German national interests at heart in his international conservation work, and it seems fair to say that he was as committed to preserving the natural environments of his homeland as he was to saving African wildlife. He was also acutely aware of the cultural capital to be gained from making connections between the two—and likewise aware of the political advantage of claiming to be apolitical which, whatever else he might have been, he was certainly not. Thus, while he liked to project a neutral image of himself as a “globalist without imperial ties or Cold War ambitions, an ‘honest broker’ mediating between the competing claims of international conservationists and African national leaders” (Lekan 182), there seems little doubt that Grzimek was continually looking to prolong West German influence in postcolonial East Africa. Initially, he did this by justifying his and other European conservationists’ roles as technical experts in the run-up to independence. Then, later, he voiced enthusiastic support for Julius Nyerere’s plans to reclaim Tanzania’s national parks for the Tanzanian people, but worked behind the scenes to secure a bipartisan legacy (one that Nyerere, no mean political operator himself, would seek to manipulate to his own advantage, for example, by soliciting Grzimek’s support for evicting Maasai herders from one, particularly threatened corner of Serengeti National Park).

As these various machinations suggest, national parks are political footballs *par excellence*, whether kicked around by federal and state authorities (the Bavarian instance), or subject to competing national and international interests (the Tanzanian case). In the global environmental context of the 1960s and 1970s, conservation became the primary conduit for these hard-fought political games, which played between different versions of the national park idea as embodying a mythical national character, as expressing regional alternatives to that character, or as eschewing national aspirations altogether to lay claims to nature and/or wildlife as a common heritage of mankind. As the American historian Sandra Chaney points out, national parks are cultural ideas, protecting nature but also protecting “cultural views of what nature is [supposed] to be like [and seeking] to naturalize what is deeply cultural” (Chaney 214-15). This certainly proved to be the case with both the Serengeti and Bavarian Forest National Parks, which either transferred German *national* cultural anxieties onto the “primitive” domain of African nature and wildlife, or reflected German *regional* rivalries about what a national park was supposed to be, along with deeper concerns about what a nationalized nature—still not fully excised of the darker eugenicist assumptions behind Germany’s “original” animals and landscapes—was supposed to register to the people who were intended to benefit from it; and *which* particular people were implied (Chaney 221; see also Gissibl 110-112).

Last but not least, the national park idea as it emerged in these local (social) and global (environmental) contexts gave cause for reflection on what “nature” itself meant, and whether it was entangled with “culture” or somehow separate from it. It seems difficult from the ecological standpoint of today to imagine that “nature” was *ever* separate from “culture,” but such arbitrary separations have historically served a multitude of social, political, and economic uses, as can be seen in turn in any attempt to engage with the social, political, and economic history of national parks. Bavarian Forest National Park is a case in point insofar as it was designed and has subsequently been developed on sound ecological principles (Heurich and Mauch); but it still depended, especially in its early years, on the view that “nature” was somehow external to people, and that these “natural processes” could be independently observed (Chaney 234).

Like most national parks today, Bavarian Forest NP is a segmented, multi-purpose site that seeks to balance the sometimes competing demands of recreation and research, though its claim to provide an authentic experience of the natural world, along with its distinctly preservationist motives (“*Natur Natur sein lassen*”: “letting nature be nature”),<sup>6</sup> is complicated by its hybrid status and underlying economic rationale. (As Chaney argues, the primary reason for the creation of the park was economic, even as its early existence was defined by a state law that stipulated that it should not serve any specific economic purpose. Indeed, as Chaney concludes, the park “was singled out for protection, not because it was seen as hallowed ground symbolizing a mythical national character—or a uniquely Bavarian one—[but] because it was a unique, sparsely populated landscape situated in a region in economic trouble” [235-6]).

As Germany’s first national park, Bavarian Forest NP has a history of its own that confirms that national parks are best understood in their cultural and historical specificity. Part of this specificity relates to its evolving status as a *transboundary* entity: a space that is defined by the borders it crosses as much as the borders within which it is nominally enclosed. Indeed, the story of the park, like that of other transboundary protected areas, is a story of borders. For one thing, Bavarian Forest NP abuts another national park, Šumava NP in what is now the Czech Republic, with the two parks together comprising one of the largest continuous forested areas in Central Europe (Chaney). And for another, the debates surrounding its creation in the mid to late 1960s—debates in which Grzimek played a typically forthright role—could hardly help but be influenced by the fact that the two adjacent parks lay on either side of the Iron Curtain: a fact that necessarily limited opportunities for cross-border cooperation even though there was substantial support for nature protection on both sides and, as Grzimek among others was quick to argue, the area immediately beyond the German park was a wildlife-friendly “no-man’s-land,” kept free of human habitation and cultivation by the land mines and electric fences that were the all-too-familiar accoutrements of the Cold War (Chaney 224-225).

National parks, now as then, are complex geopolitical entities. But if the usual definition of a transboundary national park is one that spans the geographical and

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<sup>6</sup> On the “*Natur Natur sein lassen*” policy, which is usually associated with the founding director of the Bavarian Forest National Park, the conservationist and forester Hans Bibelriether, see Heurich and Mauch (including a chapter by Bibelriether himself); also Chaney.

administrative boundaries of more than one country, it is also an *ecological* one insofar as national parks, whether situated in border regions or not, are designed to support the lives of the nonhuman as well as human actors that are bound up with them – actors whose movements extend beyond the official boundaries of the parks themselves. In this sense, while national parks may by definition be enclosed geographical entities, they are also paradoxically open spaces that provide valuable refuges and corridors for mobile wildlife. This ecological understanding of national parks, while by no means new (see, for example, Timko and Innes; also Carruthers), has assumed increasing importance at a time of mass species extinctions in which the conservationist imperative to protect wildlife faces unprecedented challenges. Take Europe, for example, where the EU’s ambitious Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 has recently called for 30% of all terrestrial areas to be protected. This requires going beyond the dominant “islands of protection” idea that is historically encapsulated in European national parks, and involves a different – or at least revitalized – understanding of connectivity in which the spaces *between* these “islands” are taken into critical consideration, as is the internal logic of self-sufficiency implied by the term “island” itself (Cartwright).

Such insights on “connectivity conservation” (Worboys et al.) are an integral part of current European environmental initiatives such as those attached to the aforementioned Biodiversity Strategy which, in calling for the *layering* of nature protection as well as *additional* nature protection, enjoins EU member states to “create ecological corridors between protected sites to prevent genetic isolation, allow for species migration, and maintain and enhance healthy ecosystems,” the main aim being to build “a truly coherent Trans-European Nature Network” (*Nature and Biodiversity Newsletter* 4). At the same time though, the Strategy somewhat counter-intuitively states that “It will be up to the [individual] Member States to designate the additional protected and strictly protected areas” (4); in other words, it is *national* governments that should ultimately determine which *transnational* guidelines to follow—and which not. Although the new trans-European language of “multispecies conservation” (Lorimer) might seem a long way from the kinds of debates that Grzimek and other German conservationists were pursuing in the 1960s, it thus resonates with at least some of the same political dilemmas, as well as reconfirming that national parks represent just one particular piece of a much larger conservation puzzle that requires collective thinking and action across a wide variety of spatial and temporal scales. Finally, Grzimek’s legacy also shows us that celebrity—for good or ill—continues to play its part in many attempts to solve the puzzle. While numerous convincing critiques have been made of the at best ambivalent role played by celebrity in conservation, it is increasingly recognized, not least by those doing the critiquing, that celebrity remains a powerful mechanism for soliciting public sympathy for conservation in media-driven times (Brockington, *Celebrity and the Environment*). Grzimek may thus have been a man of his time, but he is also a man of *our* time, and like several other twentieth-century celebrity conservationists, he cuts both an exemplary national figure and a contradictory global one, embodying some of the contradictions inscribed within the contemporary practices of conservation itself.

Submission received 21 September 2021

Revised version accepted 23 March 2022

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