



Looking for more-than-human socialities. The role of anthropologist studying social forestry in Poland

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ABSTRACT

In this article I want to show a changing perspective on my role as an anthropologist in the field connected with social forestry in Poland. From doing research on the democratic environmental project called The Model Forest — where my role was limited to the evaluation of project activities — I move to the group of forest activists in Poznań and get engaged in its running. I become an anthropologist working with the people and interacting with them in a more-than-human society. We create stories based on relationships other than utility — trying to be attentive to forest socialities. In my view, this is the role of the modern anthropologist — staying with and imagining better worlds together.

KEYWORDS:

forest management, activists movement, environment, more-than-human sociality, engaged research

An anthropology beyond the human is in large part about learning to appreciate how the human is also the product of that which lies beyond human contexts.
(Eduardo Kohn, *How forests think? Toward an anthropology beyond a human*, 2013)

This text was originally written in Polish as “Droga do społeczności więcej-niż-ludzkich. Metodologiczna refleksja nad badaniem leśnictwa społecznego w Polsce”, but at the suggestion of the co-participants of the Ethnology Without Borders 2021 conference, I decided to re-write it in English to extend the possibility of debate to non-Polish speakers.

The outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020 took me back to my hometown. For a few months I moved back to Czarnków, a town in the Noteć Valley (Dolina Noteci), surrounded by the Noteć Forest (Puszcza Notecka), and the forest became my remedy for the new uncertain time. I wandered through the forest almost every day, learning about it and myself in it, blazing trails, observing how it changes along with its inhabitants — the royal longhorn, the Scots pine, the garlic mustard or the dung beetle. I wanted to learn about the forest world both in the language of science and in its own language. I then reached for a book by Agatha A. Konczal on the anthropology of the forest (Konczal 2017), which I had first encountered a few years earlier even before I began studying anthropology. Even then, I read parts of it excited about the connection between forest and anthropology, but I did not know that when it came time to choose a topic for field research in college, this reading and pandemic hikes would be my inspiration.

In July 2020, I began researching the Model Forest project in Oborniki Wielkopolskie, located about thirty kilometers from my family home. A year after I began

my research, I defended my first dissertation, entitled *Social forestry. Relationships of knowledge and power among actors of the Model Forest in Oborniki Wielkopolskie* (Małeczka 2021). In my thesis, I focused primarily on analyzing the project's activities by paying attention to power relations and the use of knowledge by the actors creating it. Although I applied elements of collaborative research during the study, working with one of the research partners, my role was mainly reduced to an anthropologist-analyst. The people associated with the project expected me to evaluate project activities, which is not entirely within the competence of a beginning anthropologist, and also does not correspond to my understanding of anthropology. Therefore, I decided that for my master's research I would choose a site that would allow me to be a more involved anthropologist. I decided to study the growing activist forestry movements in Poland.

In this article I want to show a changing perspective on my role as an anthropologist in the field. In the first part of the paper, I will start with my research on the Model Forest, thus outlining the context for my later research. In the second part, I write about the theoretical tools around environmental anthropology that I use in my research and that shape my thinking on the study of relationships with nature. In the third section, I touch on my current research field and show how I use the theories mentioned earlier. From doing research on the environmental project called The Model Forest — where my role was limited to the evaluation of project activities — I move to the group of forest activists and get engaged in its running. I become an anthropologist working with the people and interacting with them in a more-than-human society. We create stories based on relationships other than utility — trying to be attentive to forest socialites. This is the role of the modern anthropologist — staying with and imagining better worlds together. And this is the role that fits me better.

IT ALL STARTED IN THE WEŁNA VALLEY

The Model Forest was established at the initiative of the Oborniki Forest District in 2015. The Model Forest concept was born in Canada in the early 1990s and was implemented by the government in ten locations across the country. It was a response to a period of intense conflict between environmentalists, government, indigenous and local people and forestry workers in Canada's forestry sector managing forest resources in a sustainable manner. The idea behind the Model Forest concept was to move away from valuing forests solely for timber toward a vision in which social, environmental, economic and cultural benefits would be considered equally.

In 1992, at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, the Canadian government presented the model forest concept to the international arena, proposing to implement it in other member countries as well. The International Model Forest Network (IMFN) was then established. To the present time, it has established sixty Model Forests in thirty-five countries, the largest number of which are located (with the exception of Canada) in Latin America, and in Europe in Sweden and Spain. Each project has a regionalized character and responds to local problems. Each Model Forest has a Strategic Plan under which it operates in a specific area for a specific period of time, and





each Strategic Plan must be consistent with the principles of the IMFN, the values on which it is based. Oborniki joined the network in 2015 and thus became the first (and so far only) such project in Poland.

My research began with a meeting with the project coordinator — a forester working in the Oborniki Forest District. I received from him a book created during the creation of the project *The Concept of a Model Forest in the Management and Conservation of Biodiversity of the Welna and Flint Rivers (Wielkopolska)* (2014) (*Konceptcja lasu modelowego w zarządzaniu i ochronie różnorodności biologicznej rzek Wełny i Flinty [Wielkopolska]*), which contained a list of all participating institutions. During the research, methodologically, I primarily used semi-structured interviews — I intended to talk to as many people involved in the Model Forest representing different institutions and interests as possible. In selecting interviewees, I followed the so-called snowball method, using contacts and suggestions from previous interviewees. I also conducted participant observation on several occasions by establishing a closer relationship with several residents of the Woolen Valley.

My main research question was if the Model Forest was working. I asked my interviewees to talk about their activities within the project, their opinion of it, and their perceptions of nature and the forest. The interviews went in different directions, depending on the interviewee and their involvement. In total, I was able to conduct more than a dozen interviews.

The most important observation from my work was the divergence of opinions on the activities and usefulness of the project among the local community and representatives of institutions dealing with nature. Most representatives of the first group have not seen the effects of the Model Forest. No project meeting had been held for several months, and none of the established project activities were underway. They solved environmental problems in the Wełna Valley — such as river littering or plans to build a gravel pit in the meadow — on their own by organizing canoe clean-up campaigns on the river or informal meetings to inform residents about investments that threaten nature conservation. In contrast, most of those in the second group — foresters, scientists and employees of the regional directorates of forests, water and environmental protection — believed that the Model Forest was working. They didn't see the lack of meetings as a failure of the project, saying that the core of the project is the contact they have among themselves. "Today it looks like a person grabs the phone and calls, because we all know each other," one interviewee said. Some of the representatives of this group knew each other even before the project began, and had worked together before on other similar initiatives.

The Model Forest project came out of a forestry initiative, and although it was supposed to be a response to the needs of the local community — the residents were not asked what their needs were. The Oborniki Model Forest was not created out of the needs of local residents, but a certain framework was imposed on them. This was not only a national framework — of institutional management, but also a global one — outlined by the International Network of Model Forests. In preparation for the project, scientific research was conducted on the environment of the Wełna Valley, but humans were excluded from it — seen as a separate entity from nature. Not surprisingly, the local community did not use the tools of the Model Forest to fight

for conservation, preferring instead to use its own previously developed tools and networks of connections.

I also understood that the request to me to evaluate the project was politically motivated. Despite the declared openness of the project authorities to the opinions of others involved, a positive overall evaluation was expected. I made my work available to all interviewees when it was ready and not yet published, encouraging them to comment on it and suggest changes, which I then included in the body of the work. I received the most comments from representatives of the local community, to this day I have not received feedback from those responsible for the project.

My research on the Model Forest made me realize that true public participation is only possible when those in power step aside and make space for those who do not have such a strong voice. Only then the cooperation is possible. The same goes for the anthropologist. As part of my research for my master's thesis, I decided to start working with those who have less of a voice — a local community fighting for their rights and the rights of nature. The nature of this group also involved using a different methodology and theory. In the next section of the thesis, I will describe the theoretical tools I used to study the Model Forest and those I use and will use to study forest activists.

FROM NETWORKS TO ATTENTION

To analyze the material gained during the research of the Model Forest, I found it useful to use the actor network theory (ANT) (Latour 2005), according to which objects, ideas, processes, plants or animals are, like people, indispensable factors shaping social situations. I used it to distinguish groups of agentive actors of the Model Forest, one group of which were non-human actors — the Welna and Flint rivers and the forest. My theoretical inspiration came from, among other things, Michel Callon's famous text *Introduction to the Sociology of Translation. The Domestication of Scallops and the Fishermen of the Bay of Saint-Brieuc* (Callon 1986), which is one of the first examples of the introduction of ANT theory in the methodology of ethnographic research. In the text, the author analyzes the scallop domestication project, distinguishing different groups of actors and stages of action in the project. Scallops are precisely one group of actors, and like the other human actors, it has a vested interest in the project — its success will ensure their survival. Like the other groups of actors in a project, their actions can change the course of the project, affect its success or failure. Callon uses the same methods and uniform vocabulary for the actions of scallopers, fishermen or scientists from the beginning, thus calling for the erasure of the boundary between the natural and the social. The vocabulary he proposes to help is to avoid ontological hierarchies.

Also during the analysis of my research material, I tried to point out the agency of the rivers and the forest, without which the existence of the Model Forest would make no sense — but I felt that they are not equal to the human actors by whom they are played and prejudiced. It was only later that I encountered criticism of Latourian theory.





Tim Ingold (2013), for example, points out that actor network theory focuses more on the actors than on the network they create. Thus, it misses the essence of the relationships they create. Anna Tsing, on the other hand, criticizes the sociology of translation on the basis of Callon's (1986) text I have already mentioned. She notes that Callon singled out only those actors in the process of translation that he himself considered important, such as the Japanese mentioned at the beginning of the text (Tsing 2010: 48). Tsing suggests that it is difficult to call network actor theory holistic if the researcher makes choices about which actors to include. The anthropologist's suggestion corresponds with my reflections on the Model Forest research site — I, as the researcher, decide which actors have agency in the field and which do not.

ANT seems to me to be methodologically attractive in its attempt to overcome ontological hierarchies between the social and the natural. However, in order to create a language free of this division, it is necessary to look more closely at the natural — that is, what is less familiar to us. I believe that the theoretical tools of multispecies ethnographies offer an opportunity for this.

My perception of the study of non-human entities in the field has changed gradually and continues to do so. One of my greatest anthropological inspirations was and is the work of Tsing. *In More-than-Human Sociality. A Call for Critical Description* (2013) I first encountered the concept of attention in anthropology. Tsing wonders how to study plants and fungi when we cannot use what anthropologists usually use when they want to learn something — conversation. The anthropologist suggests two approaches, both based on attendance. One involves attention to assemblages, or communities of co-existing plants. Which plants does the fungus live with? Does it grow more willingly with some and less willingly with others? This is paying attention to the relationships between plants just by observing them. The second approach is attention to form:

Humans don't always think about bodily form as an expression of sociality because, like many animals, we have determinate body structures. [...] Many plants and fungi, in contrast, are indeterminate in their bodily form. They keep growing and changing throughout their lives. Even if they can't pick up and move to another place, they can grow into new environments and social fields. Their form shows their biography; it is a history of social relations through which they have been shaped (Tsing 2013: 32).

Tsing in *Arts of Inclusion, or How to Love a Mushroom* (2010) describes her observations of matsutake based precisely on mindfulness. Looking at entities we cannot talk to is a way to see their way of being in the world, to understand more deeply their world — a world of processes and relationships. Anthropologist also looks at the relationships that occur between matsutake and humans. She shows how the lives of some people intertwine with the lives of mushrooms, thus pointing out that human stories are always more-than-human stories.

Similar processes are highlighted by Andrew S. Mathews (2011) and Eduardo Kohn (2013), who put into words the entanglements of the communities they study with the forest. In both cases, the forest is an integral part of human stories, which without the forest would be the stories of very different people. The authors present



the perceptions of nature by indigenous communities — indigenous forest communities in Oaxaca and the Runa of Ecuador's Upper Amazon — quite different from the dominant perception in Western societies. Doing research and writing about these relationships that are not utilitarian — those that have little value in the neoliberal system — is what calls us to look at life in new and excitingly different ways. This is one of the goals of the collection of texts *Arts of Living on the Damaged Planet: Ghosts and monsters of the Anthropocene* (2017), in which from the very beginning the authors ask the question — how to do anthropology on a damaged planet? This question is answered by researchers who write stories about relationships with wolves, fungi, birds or trees, thus valuing not only interspecies relationships, but also cooperation between the humanities and biology.

The above examples are suggestions for shifting the focus to stories of more than human relationships. These are relations that exist, but we are not used to paying attention to them. By doing anthropology beyond human (or interspecies ethnography¹) we show the agency of plants, fungi, and animals present in human life and forming their own social relationships. This anthropology is an alternative to the object-oriented and hierarchical treatment of living beings, and has the potential to broaden empathy for the natural world, to include it as a creative and important part of our reality.

In the next, and final, part of my paper, I will talk about forestry in Poland and my current research I am doing, and how the above theories can be useful during field research.

THE SOCIAL FORESTRY

Over the last five years the number of local forest initiatives in Poland has been increasing. More and more people are interested in what the forest looks like, who it belongs to and what its future will be. People are also starting to question the validity of forest management carried out by the State Forests institution (Lasy Państwowe), which oversees 82 percent of the forests in Poland. Since 1997, the principle of sustainable development has been introduced in Polish forestry, and forest management has become multifunctional, but social and environmental functions definitely play a lower role than the economic function (logging, timber sales), which brings the State Forests the main profit. Decision-making regarding forest flora and fauna is top-down, centralized and, in addition, represents the main political thought in the country, as State Forest employees report to the Ministry of Environment.

Public protests against the State Forests management exploded on a national scale in 2017. Environmental organizations and activists protested for months against the cutting of trees in the Białowieża Forest, about which Polish media thundered. The

1 There is an ongoing debate among anthropologists over a name for anthropology that deals with the relationship between humans and other living beings (see Ingold 2013). For the purposes of this text, I have chosen to use the two terms closest to me: interspecies ethnography and anthropology beyond human.



dispute also touched the international arena — the foresters' actions were stopped only by a decision of the EU Court of Justice ordering Poland to halt logging under threat of heavy penalties (Czaplinski et al.: 2019: 8). Recently, public opposition has increased in strength. It mainly concerns disagreement with the actions of foresters taken in the already mentioned environmental and social functions, whose role in the face of the climate catastrophe should significantly increase.

According to research by the Forests and Citizens Foundation² since 2008, the number of forestry initiatives — understood as local actions directed against logging — was 300 as of May 6, 2022. The foundation maintains a map of forestry initiatives, which, when created in March 2020, counted only 30 initiatives. Polish society is demanding structural changes in forestry. On its Facebook fanpage, the Foundation writes: , “We wonder how many initiatives will arrive on our map in the next 2 years? If the trend continues we can expect 3,000. But the more important question is, will we then live to see systemic changes that will realistically protect Polish forests, adapt the principles of forest management to the times of climate catastrophe, and ensure that the public is truly involved in decisions about the forest?”

Forest activists I work with are active in Poznan. They fight against the cutting of old oak trees in the protective forest of the city of Poznan — Las Darzyborski (Darzybór Forest) using various methods such as searching for natural and social values of the forest, attempts to create a nature conservation area, and media publicity. As a researcher and activist, I participate in the group's activities, working especially with its charismatic activist-biologist leader, who is sincerely interested in environmental anthropology. Since January 2022, I have participated in walks organized by the group and meetings they hold with foundations working on forest conservation. I also conduct informal interviews with members of the group, the axis of which are questions about being an activist and socially engaged citizen, their motivations for action, and their relationship with the forest. The cooperation with activists is mutual and combines not only the anthropologist's involvement in the field built by the research partners, but also involves the research partners in the anthropologist's activities. A good example of this is the participation of two activists, at my invitation, in a scientific conference I co-organized, which also extended our cooperation to other terrain than the forest. During their speeches, they presented issues relevant to them in the fields of ornithology, habitat conservation and forestry to the academic community centered around the social sciences and humanities.

Multispecies ethnography shines through in my practice by exploring non-utilitarian relationships. Each activist has his or her own motivations in fighting for “their” forest, but none of them do it for profit. Nature protection appears as our collective responsibility, as a care for a common future on Earth. That's what social forestry is — it's the creation of a forest management system by the local community, it's action from the bottom up, showing that the forest is much more than wood. My research focuses primarily on what happens on the ground — on working together, learning from each other, the biologist from the anthropologist, the ornithologist from the forester, the activist from the oak, the biologist from the mycorrhiza. I hope

2 Forests and Citizens, <https://lasyiobywatele.pl/>, (access: 25.07.2022)

to face the task of describing these interspecies relationships we experience in the field, and thus join the ranks of researchers creating stories about communities-more-than-human.

I also hope to show a changing perspective on my role as an anthropologist in the field. I am in the process of inducting methods into my research practice and am trying to look at it critically. I think we should pay more attention to the process of building our research methods in the theoretical debate, while remembering that “anthropology is a discipline but the goal is ethnography” (Miller 2017).

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