

Retreat of Man and the Venture Wilderness

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Perception of loss and the beauty of decay:

If there is a project for opening a new mining area in the Alps, protests against that are guaranteed, however, old abandoned mines are seen as attractive parts of history. The same refers to agriculture, forestry, residential and even industrial uses: introducing them in pristine landscapes is seen as a loss of nature, abandoning them is seen as a loss of cultural heritage, but rarely as a gain in nature: We look at former farming terraces which are now covered by forest, see how much human labour there had been spent to build them, and we feel that this intervention is now rendered useless, lost. The current de-population processes in peripheral regions are often seen as irreversible, while we know that significant fluctuations have often occurred in history. They can actually be seen as indicator of wealth: No one is longer forced to live in environments which are less suited for agriculture such as the Alps. The de-industrialisation process since the 1980s has even made us fight for preserving former industrial sites as part of our cultural history. Remnants of former human activities always stimulate our imagination, we feel the roots of our own existence. Ruins are such an important aspect of our culture, that in the romantic period they were sometimes even built on purpose. Early stages of abandoned cultural landscapes can be quite attractive in terms of species diversity, however, it is difficult to preserve certain stages of natural succession.

Public misconception of wilderness:

The term wilderness has multiple connotations. For most people living in urban environments it is regarded as the antithesis of their everyday life: No restrictions, less control, freedom to do things which we are usually not allowed to do. And on the other hand also some risk, some difficult to describe fears. This public expectation of wilderness can hardly be met in real wilderness areas: For example, abandonment of agricultural use does not necessarily imply that access to such areas is now easier. Infrastructure such as roads and trails will decay as well, and other use demands might gain importance, which can in fact even limit the accessibility of a landscape more than before. This could be hunting or also nature conservation: the more pristine an area, the more likely it is that nature conservation imposes strict access rules. There are only a few examples where wilderness life in the comprehension of the general public can actually be experienced.

Retreat as an active process:

Shall we invest resources into making something smaller? It seems to be absurd to ask for a planned retreat: We are used and trained to actively plan for expansion, but reduction is mostly seen as a passive process, something which happens to us rather than something we do. Therefore it is a challenge for both individuals and society to develop concepts for reducing the human presence in peripheral areas. This includes accepting that downsizing can also cause costs. The benefits to be achieved should come from the opportunity to develop spaces for society where we can experience a different aspect of our civilisation, complementary to our normal life.