

Bishops' Trees: The Environmental History of the White Forest

Currently, the forest cover in Poland is almost 30%, which means that over 9 million hectares of land are covered with trees. These forests are mostly located on relatively poor soils, which is why the dominant type is the coniferous forest with pine at the forefront. However, it should be noted that in the past, the forest cover of the area of the modern Polish state was greater and forest habitats were more diverse, with deciduous trees playing a much more significant role. The revolutionary changes in the landscape that took place on Polish lands in the 19th and 20th centuries – as a result of the Partitions, but also due to the progressing industrialization, the events of both World Wars and the times of centrally planned economy – led to how insight into the past landscape and the relations occurring in it is extremely difficult to grasp.

Therefore, the research project concerning the White Forest that we are proposing aims to get to know better the mutual relations between people and the environment that have taken place in that area throughout the last one thousand years. The territory of the White Forest is located at the fork of the Narew and Bug rivers, extending from Pułtusk to the surroundings of Ostrów Mazowiecka. In the Middle Ages and Early Modern period, the Forest was under the control of the Płock bishops, who protected it and banned its excessive exploitation. During the Partitions, all episcopal property was taken over by the state treasury – first Prussian, then Russian – which contributed to the excessive exploitation of the forest, the dynamic settlement developments and numerous environmental changes, which are still occurring in this area even in the present day. Numerous traces in the landscape and ecosystems of the Forest were also left by the events of the 20th century – especially the post-war centrally planned economy, which contributed, among others, to the draining of one of the larger swamps in the region.

When carrying out the project, we would like to not only tell a complicated history of interconnections on the human-environment level, but also propose innovative methodological solutions based on a close combination of archival data (written sources) with nature archives (the story about the region's past obtained from biogenic sediments from oxbow lakes and/or fens, as well as resulting from extensive soil analysis). It is important to us that the possible deficiencies of one source be supplemented by another. In this regard, the project is innovative and interdisciplinary. The project will prove to be a fascinating research undertaking important not only for the development of science itself. We believe that its effects will also positively affect the functioning of local communities living today in the White Forest. That is why we want to organize meetings with local history and nature enthusiasts each year (in the main cities of the region – Ostrów Mazowiecka, Brok, Wyszaków, Pułtusk), during which we would exchange our experiences and work together towards the protection of the past and the environment of the White Forest.