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Forests and Memory

Boria Sax

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Aug 02, 2023 Forests and Memory

By Dr. Boria Sax

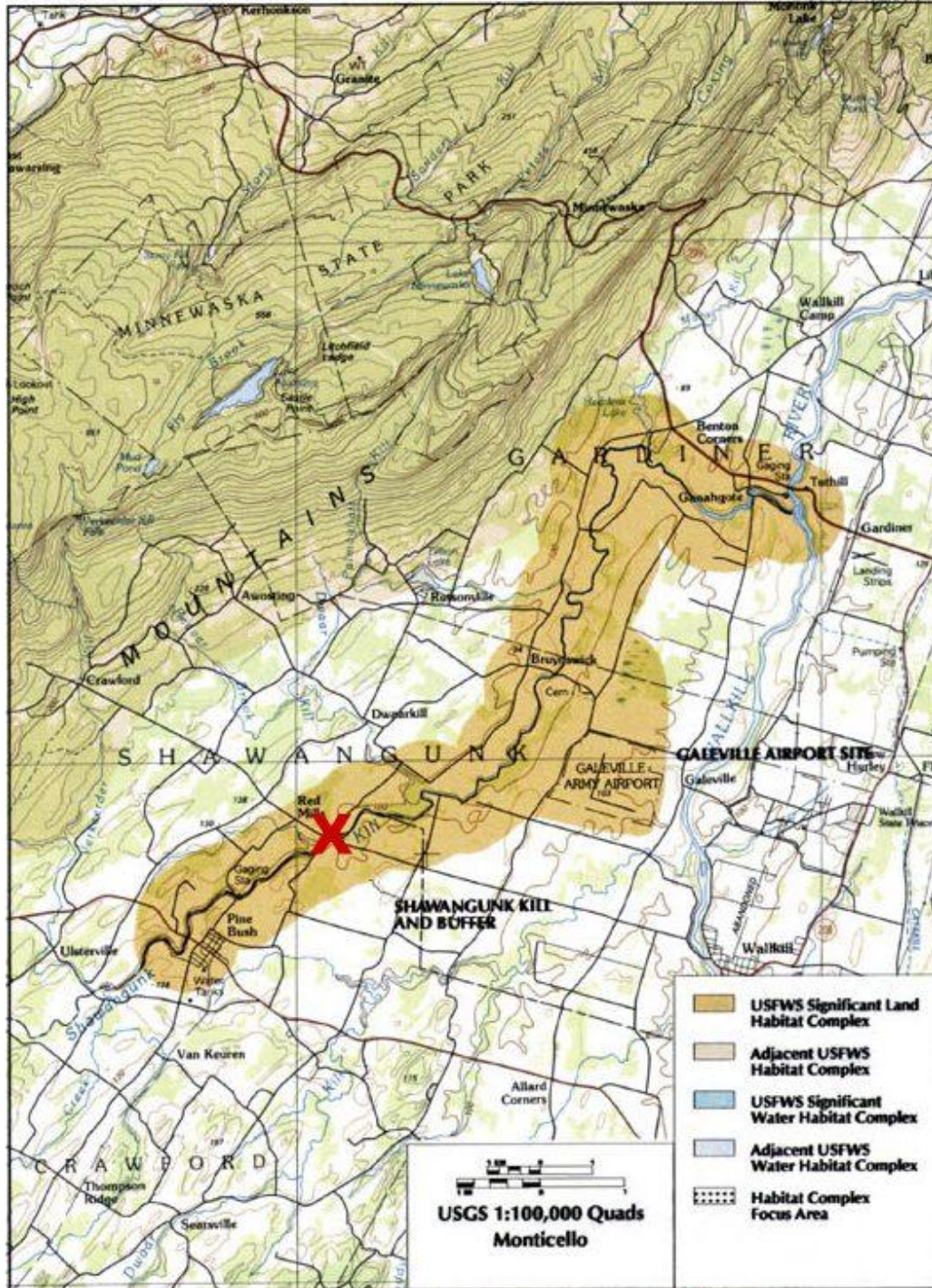
My grandfather, Bernard Sax, emigrated from Russia to the United States in 1914. With his wife, Bluma, he purchased some abandoned farmland so inexpensively that it was almost free. The land was for a little community of Russian Jews, largely Communist, as a buffer between them and a threatening world. They were like a flock of birds, blown off course during a storm, suddenly in unfamiliar territory, afraid of predators and seeking the security of a forest cover.

For me, as a child, those woods seemed to be endless. Time and distance seemed to lose meaning after a few steps amid the trees. There were occasional timber harvests. Poachers, lovers, and neighbors out for a stroll passed through the woods. But, in about fifty years, I may have been the only one who explored them repeatedly. A little over 80 acres of that land has come down to me, and it is as lovely and unprofitable as ever.

A deed to part of my land, dated 1933, cites a survey made in 1845. This opens by tracing the boundary of the property, "Beginning at what is called "the pear tree," the survey goes on to mention another arboreal marker, "a chestnut stump

near
the

Shawangunk Kill - Map 1 of 1



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bridge.” There are additionally two references to specific white oaks. These trees were so well known to local people that the demarcations could carry legal authority. I have looked in vain for the pear tree or any remains of it.

From the sixteenth until the eighteenth century, European colonists claimed the land as their own, driving out the Native Americans. Then, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they abandoned their farms to move westward in search of greater wealth. The forest quickly reclaimed deserted farms. The state where I live, New York, is known for its big city, but it is currently about 65% forested, more than three times the rate at the end of the nineteenth century.

Written records of forestland in the American Northeast are relatively rare. The New York Botanical Garden, which I visit often, contains an area known as the Thain Family Forest, which is advertised as the largest remaining “virgin forest” in the New York City Area. The term itself is now controversial. It once meant a vast area of trees untouched by human beings, a bit like the mythic Eden. Tour guides have told me that the Botanical Garden defines “virgin forest” as meaning that the area has never been clearcut as far as anybody knows. Even the Botanical Garden, which has vast resources, cannot tell with any certainty whether the land on which it rests has ever been clearcut in the past.

More history is written in the land than in documents and books. Native American artifacts such as arrowheads have been found on my property, as have many shards of pottery that are very difficult to date. Over a hundred meters of stone walls wind through it, which shows that it was used for farming. The remains of two cement milk coolers, fastened to the ground with heavy chains, tell me it was once used as a pasture.

I have come across deer skulls placed on branches of trees so they look like goblins from a short distance away. Was this some obscure folk custom? Was it a practical joke? If the skulls were meant to scare deer away, that surely failed. If they were meant to scare trespassers, it may sometimes have worked.

A wind passes through the forest, and each leaf becomes a memory. Accounts of America by very early settlers tell of an abundance of life so rich that it seemed miraculous. You needed only to place your hand in a stream, and fish would swim into it. Deer and turkey were plentiful and seemed to offer

themselves to hunters. Flocks of birds were so numerous that a nearly random shot into the air might bring them down.

The bounty was undoubtedly exaggerated, perhaps out of the American love of hyperbole that still fills our advertisements or to entice new colonists. But the colorful descriptions had a basis in experience, and much of the credit for it must go to how the Indigenous peoples, intentionally or not, managed the forest. Blazes, whether from lightning, accidents, or intentional creation, cleared the undergrowth and gave the landscape a park-like appearance.

Eventually, as the soil began to be exhausted, the Native Americans would move on, and another group might reforest or take over the area. This created a patchwork of unevenly aged forests, meadows, and transitional areas where many animals and vegetation might thrive. In the early twentieth century, colonists thought of the native peoples as essentially a force of nature in a forest that had remained unchanged from time immemorial before the arrival of Europeans. Their use of clearings for agriculture in the northeastern part of what is now the United States, however, appears to date back only about five hundred years before the arrival of Columbus.

The Native Americans, like Europeans, represent only one chapter in the long history of forests in the Northeastern United States. After the glaciers had retreated, about 12,000 years ago, the initial forest consisted of pines and firs. About 2,000 years later, birches became common, followed by oaks, maples, beeches, and hickories. Chestnuts arrived about 3,000 years ago but became the most dominant tree in the forest canopy for a while, only to be almost completely wiped out by a pathogen imported from East Asia at the start of the twentieth century.

Animals mirror mostly transient human emotions such as amusement, fear, or curiosity. Trees tell us something about abiding passions and, more broadly, about the human condition. They have personalities in ways more vivid than those of human beings. Their histories are told in scars, twists, breaks, and changes in the direction of growth. They are about determination in the face of

adversity. As Hermann Hesse wrote in his essay “Trees,” when we look at the stump of a newly felled tree, “. . . in its annual rings and deformities are faithfully recorded all the struggle, all the illness and suffering, all the joy and flourishing, the lean years and the rich years, attacks withstood, and storms outlasted.”

For millennia people have projected their fears and hopes onto the forest. They have then endeavored to obscure, deny or ignore their contributions, giving nature all the credit or blame. The forest is a monstrous double of humankind, utterly alien in some respects and profoundly human in others. Forests reveal the myriad ways we think of nature, from terrifying to bucolic. We view forests with intense fear and longing; we alternately destroy and venerate them.

The forest seemingly obliterates the past yet subtly preserves it in forms such as pottery shards, pollen grains, ruins, paths, introduced vegetation, scattered records, and scars on bark. My forest is heir to Native Americans, settlers, farmers, Communists, turtles, migratory birds, and deer. In remembrance of all these tangled legacies, I would like it to be a wildlife preserve when I take my place alongside them.

Boria Sax, Ph.D., is an expert on human-animal relations. He is the author of numerous books and articles exploring animal themes in myth and folklore and is a lecturer at Mercy College, New York. Two of his books, Animals in the Third Reich (Continuum, 2000) and The Mythical Zoo (ABC-CLIO, 2002), were included in a list of outstanding academic titles of the year compiled by the journal Choice. The above article is adapted from the initial chapter of a new book by Dr. Sax – Enchanted Forests: The Poetic Construction of a World Before Time – forthcoming from Reaktion Books in October 2023.