Umdenken: von der Natur lernen (Rethinking Nature): Some personal thoughts on the Goethe Institute traveling exhibition

Hans J. Rindisbacher, Prof. of German, Pomona College

These atmospheric, perhaps even a little rhapsodic, musings bring together the four elements of the *Rethinking Nature* exhibit that brings a German perspective on environmental issues to the Claremont Colleges. It does so in a material that is very German: wood and the woods. Bear with me for five minutes and, via a few detours, you'll see how it works.

I am a German professor primarily but have taught a course, *The Culture of Nature*, for over a decade now out of personal environmental interest and concerns and in order to reach beyond the small German language and literature student cohort at the Colleges. The course offers a forum to explore "green thinking" in a comparative German/European American framework.

This course, by design, is many things to many students. First, it is an elective in our successful Claremont-wide EA program and, second, I let students develop as their major project any topic in environmentalism, broadly speaking, that has a comparative element of German/European and American approaches to environmental thinking in a cultural, historical, aesthetic, or social rather than strictly scientific, technical, or economic context.

Above all, the course has a strong historical dimension and we address how green thinking emerged differently in the old and the new worlds, how the long-inhabited, smaller-scale landscapes of Europe became *Kulturlandschaften* early on and Europeans realized the close interpenetration of civilization and nature and developed a different sense of interaction than was the case on the new, excitedly open, and seemingly empty North American continent. (That it was not empty is a fact that has repercussions to this day). But the grand American vision of *manifest destiny* that developed as a consequence, surely also shaped how we see nature in a situation when humans could always move on after a place was beginning to fill up. And we see different European and American perspectives in the idea of *wilderness* and even in the present understanding of nature as *environment* and how to approach it.

It is significantly the spirit of *romanticism*, a high point in the history of German thought that a good part of my course materials focus on, and the German role in mediating the opening American West to the political and economic establishment on the East coast through painters from the Düsseldorf school of the 19th century, such as Albert Bierstadt or Emanuel Leutze and their majestic representations of nature.

My colleague Sabine Wilke from the U of Washington-Seattle writes lucidly on such German-American cross-currents and historical legacies in thinking on nature and the environment.

Wilderness and environment are key parameters today. And both are in play in a modern German-American nexus when, on a 115-degrees day at Zabriskie Point in Death Valley, with every reasonable person indoors, you will hear German being spoken by the few hardy (slightly crazy?) souls out there, looking into the distance: It's the romantic longing for the wilderness that Europe no longer not has, as well as the concern for the changes humans have wrought on the environment and the need to preserve whatever is left that brings many young Germans to visit North America, from Death Valley to Yosemite to Yellowstone to Arches, Zion, and Bryce, the great natural monuments to (a bygone?) American way of thinking about nature and the land.

Nature as wilderness, as landscape, as environment - these are of course not only German concerns, but they are deeply rooted in a culture for which notably the forests, the woods, the trees have profound significance. The perception of Germans as forest people has a long documented tradition, starting with the Roman historian of the 1st century AD, Tacitus, who, in his famous treatise *Germania*, takes a dim view of their lands:

"The appearance of the country differs considerably in different parts; but in general it is covered either by bristling forest or by foul swamps. It is wetter on the side that faces Gaul, windier on the side of Noricum and Pannonia. A good soil for cereal, it will not grow fruit trees." He also comments on the settlements of the old German tribes: "It is a well-known fact that the peoples of Germany never live in cities and will not have their houses adjoin one another." And of Germany's modern national drink he writes, taking his Latin-world *wine* as the standard: "Their drink is a liquor made from barely or other grain, which is fermented to produce a certain resemblance to wine."

Generally, the Germans of two millenia ago are backwoodsmen from the Roman metropolitan perspective of urban brickwork and Mediterranean light. They are uncouth, wooden almost literally, but also more natural, less sophisticated, honorable and simple in a way that Tacitus senses as being lost in his modern Rome that's leaning decadent.

Ass it happens, just now, a book on the woods has risen to bestseller status in Germany, the forester Peter Wohlleben's *The Secret Life of Trees*, published last year, emphasizing the interconnectedness of tress in the woods, their information exchange, their communication, their memory even, and their emotions! On Amazon.de you find testimony how Wohlleben's findings on trees are already changing people's lives!

This is Germany, the country that invented the word "Waldsterben" (forest die-off) as in the 1980s acid rain (saurer Regen or, as it was sometimes spelled in a little transnational political quit of the time, "saurer Reagan") emerged as a significant environmental threat. As *le waldsterben*, it has become one of the few German words that penetrated the usually near-impenetrable borders of French vocabulary, vigilantly guarded by Académie française.

Among artists, Anselm Kiefer, whose very name translates as "pine," draws deeply from German nature and history in his brilliant, evocative, large-scale, heavily material, and infallibly political works on the Germans' rootedness with their very life blood in their old, dark soil.

And Elias Canetti, the German-language literature Nobel Prize winner of 1981, in his famous work *Crowds and Power* from the 1960s, writes movingly about trees and woods and unhesitatingly identifies the forest as the German national symbol – with a twist:

> "The crowd symbol of the Germans was the army. But the army was more than that: it was the marching forest. In no other modern country has the 'forest feeling' remained as alive as in Germany. The rigidity and parallelism of the upright trees, their density and their sheer number, pleases the heart of the German with a deep and mysterious joy. He seeks the woods, where his ancestors lived, even today and feels one with the trees."

The four elements, featured as the conceptual floor plan of our exhibit, are united in the trees and the woods: taking their nourishment from the *soil*, trees connect to the *air* and the *sky*, regulating the *water* household and evaporation in local ecosystems. And the fourth element, so feared around here, draws on wood, too, in our forest *fires* but equally and more pleasingly as the glowing log in your fireplace that warms up a cold night.

I want to thank Julia, Friederike, and Char – and many others whom I don't know personally who have contributed to making this exhibit possible and brining it here. On a matter of global importance that is our environment, it distinctly brings a German vision into our Claremont American context.