

NATURE AS A SCARCE CONSUMER COMMODITY: VACATIONING IN COMMUNIST EAST GERMANY

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In the summer of 1975, it would not have been at all surprising to see *Trabant* automobiles sighing under the weight of camping equipment and tumbling through the green hills of the Ore Mountains. Some of those vehicles would have finally nestled down next to the Greifenbach Reservoir, or Geyer Pond. More than likely, leather-clad young men and women from Zschopau on their motorcycles also rocketed up onto the fir-blanketed plateau surrounding the pond. On the reservoir's shores, an auto mechanic from Langebrück might have pitched a tent so he and his wife could enjoy the cool forest breezes. Not far away, a mining engineer from the nearby Wismut uranium mines might have whistled while repairing the windows of his bungalow on the north shore of the reservoir.

Lying between the villages of Ehrenfriedersdorf, Geyer and Thum, the twenty-three hectare reservoir was one of the most popular and most accessible recreation sites in the countryside south of Karl Marx City in the German Democratic Republic, or East Germany. Writing of the recreation area, one author and expert on the area's history asked: "On a lazy, sunny July day, what could be more beautiful and more rejuvenating (*erholsamer*) than lying in tall grass, folding an arm under your head, listening to the . . . murmuring and rustling of windblown treetops, and dreaming with open eyes?"¹ Colorful tents and recreational vehicles filled three meadows; in between, families played soccer or set up volleyball nets and, as another local author remarked, "everyone relaxes in his own way."² Even as some vacationers sought out the rustling of treetops, portable radios blasted music, sunbathers filled the meadows and concession stands hummed as campers bought snacks and drinks. Under the trees, vacationers parked their vehicles since two nearby parking lots would have already reached capacity early in the morning.

This paper introduces a unique, and perhaps surprising, aspect of East German environmental history. As campers and bungalow owners struggled to find space for themselves in idyllic landscapes, I argue, a strong sense of citizen and consumer rights in a social welfare state influenced how vacationers enjoyed and understood the nature experience. In overcrowded nature retreats, vacationers increasingly understood nature as a consumer commodity and as campgrounds became noisier and even more crowded, nature's commodity value only increased. The con-

struction of bungalows by an emerging social elite only made matters worse. On the one hand, the state promised the entire population good health and relaxation through pleasant vacations in natural settings; on the other hand, local representatives of the ruling Socialist Unity Party had few resources to regulate construction in landscape preserves and to prevent a small elite from overtaking public spaces. Vacation practices thus had real consequences for physical environments, but they also encouraged citizens to imagine nature as a commodity, one among many, denied to them under communism. As I argue in this paper, East German citizens hoping for better nature experiences understood environmental planning as a compliment (and not an obstacle) to acquiring better cars, washing machines and televisions.

Of course, there was nothing entirely new about socio-economic arguments for free access to natural areas in Germany. The socialist Friends of Nature in 1900 had demanded public access to mountains in Bavaria and elsewhere, and their justification often rested on their perceived entitlement to leisure opportunities previously exclusively available to wealthier citizens. In the case of Greifenbach Reservoir, local history and culture only reinforced this notion of nature as a consumer pleasure. Still, the East German quest for outdoor enjoyment was distinct in two ways. First, the lack of consumer goods that marked everyday life behind the Iron Curtain encouraged East Germans to think of nature as a scarce commodity primarily enjoyed by privileged citizens who had access to luxuries like bungalows and Western consumer goods. Second, the loss of public access to unpolluted natural areas appeared as a particularly grievous affront to the principles of social equality and the promises of a better quality of life celebrated by the socialist regime. In their vacationing, East Germans looked to nature for enrichment—spiritual, material and physical. I will thus organize this paper into three sections: an overview of historical meanings attached to the Greifenbach region, an analysis of changes to the landscape under the communist regime and finally an exploration of consumer complaints about overcrowding in the landscape preserve.

For a case study of an outdoor recreation area, Greifenbach Reservoir has many benefits. While distinct, the history of Greifenbach was not unique in the German Democratic Republic and therefore tells us something about broader trends in East German society. From the Baltic coast to the Thuringian forest, East Germans crowded into shabby campgrounds and built vacation cottages. In addition, the retreat's proximity to Karl Marx City made it similar to many other weekend retreats near Dresden, Leipzig or Berlin. As a case study, Greifenbach also offers the historian something not all vacation spots in the East can provide; the reservoir's development into a popular vacation destination was primar-

ily an East German story. While other vacation or leisure destinations had long been attracting masses of tourists, the forests of Geyer did not attract large crowds until after 1945 (smaller numbers of middle class tourists had visited the nearby Greifenstein rock formations earlier). Large crowds, such as those seen in the 1970s, only became possible with the increase in automobile ownership (albeit less impressive compared to the ownership of automobiles in West Germany) and the introduction of social welfare benefits.

Greifenbach also makes for a particularly rich case study because of the area's cultural and social history. Touched by both immense wealth and incredible poverty, the towns of Geyer and Ehrenfriedersdorf produced an abundance of folk legends and fairy tales that featured the problems of hunger, illness and social inequality. These cities, like so many in the mineral-rich Ore Mountains, or Erzgebirge, juxtaposed dense working-class communities with a wealth of nature restricted to a privileged few.³ While typical Erzgebirge workers often depended on the local forests and meadows to supplement their wages, local nobility had historically retained all hunting privileges. In later years, state foresters dictated how the poor could use forest resources. As vacationers at Greifenbach struggled to secure a campsite or a bungalow permit—in the name of health and happiness—they too sought greater access to nature's wealth. In the modern variant, however, security and happiness did not come with an unexpected gift of wild game felled by a poacher's bullet, but with a bungalow retreat or a campsite reservation.

What kind of nature did tourists find in the valley of Greifenbach? Once home to mixed beech-spruce-fir communities, local forests surrounding Greifenbach had already experienced radical changes long before the arrival of motor tourists. The surrounding Ore Mountains boasted one of the densest settlement patterns in all of Europe and one of the most complex geological formations in the world, famous for rich mines of silver, nickel, zinc and lead. Zinc had been extracted from the streambeds around Geyer since the thirteenth century. Later in the century, miners in Ehrenfriedersdorf flooded the moors at the head of Greifen Brook and built an aqueduct to provide water for intensive mining operations five kilometers away. The processing of ore recovered from those mines also demanded large quantities of firewood, since the complex ore had to be melted down before zinc could be extracted, and in the sixteenth century Saxony's first arsenic factory consumed half of local timber production and produced air pollution harmful to forest reserves. Long before the twentieth century, therefore, monotonous plots of scientifically managed fir and artificial water systems had replaced historic vegetation patterns and natural water flows.

Human exploitation of the surrounding Ore Mountains' natural wealth continued in the twentieth century, often with unfortunate results. During World War Two, the Nazis raised the Greifenbach Dam to increase the capacity of the lake, depending largely on Russian and French prisoners of war and other foreign slave labor to do the work. With the partition of Germany, the Soviets stumbled upon the richest known deposits of uranium outside of the United States and Canada—all just west of Chemnitz, soon to be renamed Karl Marx City. In the next decade, tens of thousands of workers arrived in the region to extract uranium for the Soviet military and by 1989 many of them suffered from cancer and other diseases. In the process, mines also left behind an array of toxic slag heaps and radioactive wastewater ponds.⁴ Along the nearby Czech border, whole forest ecosystems collapsed from sulfur dioxide poisoning as power plants in Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic burned brown coal.

At a safe distance from dead forests and toxic mines, a beloved nature retreat nevertheless thrived on the shores of Greifenbach Reservoir. This landscape preserve enjoyed warmer temperatures and healthier air than many forest reserves at higher elevations to the south. Moreover, residents of polluted urban centers like Karl Marx City or nearby mining towns could quickly reach the relatively unspoiled plateau by automobile.⁵ Even if humans had radically altered the forested plateau, it still seemed more natural than adjacent territories. The proximity to ecological disaster only made the campground a scarcer and more cherished commodity. In other words, Greifenbach became a precious treasure in the midst of ugliness.

Stories of Carl Stülpner, a local folk hero similar to Robin Hood, further embellished Greifenbach's credentials as a nature retreat by linking the local forests to a hunter famous for his intimacy with the natural world. Moreover, Stülpner's legend connected Greifenbach with a struggle for economic rights and a campaign to share nature's products more equally—foreshadowing the conflicts over bungalows and campsites in the 1970s. Stülpner had briefly worked for the local forester at Ehrenfriedersdorf and he used caves near the Greifensteine as hideouts once he began his outlaw life as a poacher. By the 1930s, an Annaberg theater troupe staged plays based on local folk tales and the life of Carl Stülpner at a natural amphitheater adjacent to the Greifensteine. Thanks to the efforts of local intellectual Willy Hörning (author of an East German guidebook to the Greifensteine and Greifenbach), the Annaberg district theater brought back these productions in 1957.

Beginning in Stülpner's own lifetime, middle-class men and women celebrated the exploits of the skilled hunter. Stülpner's first biographers described him as an honest, yet uneducated boy who preferred to live

close to nature and suffered under the conventions of civilization. His story served as a critique of feudal social relations and the excesses of the nobility (especially in Christian Gottlob Wild's account of 1816), but biographers tended to soften the radical implications of illegal poaching by reminding readers that Stülpner had little education.⁶ Stülpner, in this account, was little more than a simple romanticized peasant—corrupt and uneducated, but at his core innocent, pure and intimate with *heile Natur*. Since poaching threatened rational progress and civil society, writers reintegrated Stülpner into acceptable society by framing the story as one of a boy taking care of his mother. In even more romantic versions, the unrequited love between Stülpner and the daughter of an honorable bourgeois villager tamed Stülpner's story further.⁷

At the same time, however, Stülpner personified a distinct populist notion of nature and its uses. Stülpner wandered the forests of the Erzgebirge and hunted wild game illegally in order to feed his poor mother and to provide for the hungry peasants mistreated by their feudal landlords. According to almost every folklorist, peasants celebrated Stülpner's poaching adventures because he protected their fields from the scavenging of an overabundant deer population reserved for noble hunting excursions. Stülpner, so the legend goes, firmly believed that nature could not be owned, that everyone should enjoy its fruits equally. Even as Stülpner protested ownership of nature's treasures, he described deer and other wildlife as commodities or gifts to be shared equally. In a historical fiction written by Hermann Heinz Wille for East German audiences and printed in eleven editions between 1956 and 1980, Stülpner declares, "It is so beautiful here! It is as if all the deer were made for me alone . . . The deer and all the other game are not made for the nobility; they are for everyone to share! Even us poor people should enjoy them."⁸

According to tourist guidebooks, the forests of Geyer and Ehrenfriedersdorf were also populated with many ghosts, who—much like Stülpner—brought nature's wealth to the impoverished families of the region.⁹ Fairy tales and ghost stories set in the forests around the Greifensteine also became regular features at the amphitheater. In fact, most ghost stories suggested that the good would triumph and hard work would be rewarded. In one story, a young man on his way to Bohemia found himself lost in the forests of Greifenstein when he encountered a small ghost. Inside a cave under the Greifensteine, the ghost guided him to a huge vault made of silver with tables of gold and chandeliers of precious stones. The spirit offered the lost traveler a meal from the priceless dining table, but the next morning he discovered the food magically replaced by gold pots and pans and precious stones. Other tales told of the treasures of the Greifensteine disguised as the countless needles falling from conifer trees. The needles would fall into the basket of a poor woman collect-

ing wood or some would cling to a forester's hat. When these lucky men and women returned home, they discovered that the needles had transformed into tiny chains of gold. In another story, a poor miner from Geyer with four children struggled to feed his family. On New Year's Eve his wife expected another child, so he rushed out into the snow to retrieve an experienced midwife from Günsdorf. Lost in high snowdrifts at the cliffs of the Greifensteine, a spirit offered to be a godfather to the triplets born that night. At the baptism, the ghost appeared in miner's clothes and gave the father gifts of a hammer and pickaxe. Whenever he dug with those tools, he would discover silver. A retreat to Greifenbach not only provided a nature experience, but that very nature—as suggested by these stories—also promised health, happiness and enrichment.

East German vacationers at Greifenbach may not have discovered precious metals, but they sought out treasures of a more abstract form; they hoped for rich nature experiences that might bring peace of mind and good health, and the well-known legends associated with the area only made the reservoir more attractive. The discussion of Carl Stülpner here is not meant to imply that disgruntled vacationers in East Germany explicitly referred to the famous poacher in their letters of complaint or other protests about the loss of recreation landscapes. Instead, the Stülpner story reveals some of the cultural meanings attached to the Greifenbach region; more importantly, its portrayal of scarcity gave this vacation area meaning unintended by East German authorities.

Official East German publications associated Stülpner and the natural world with resource exploitation, social revolution and rational scientific management—all of which stood in direct opposition to fantasies of personal wealth and comfort. As youth from Karl Marx City discovered the lake, for instance, the cultural programs promoted by the Free German Youth (East Germany's youth organization) directed young people toward enlightened activities that featured Carl Stülpner.¹⁰ For educators, the tale of Carl Stülpner illustrated several key lessons, such as the need to redistribute wealth, the value of the military experience and the importance of rational state management. Stülpner's tale also promoted a meritocratic ideal that the regime theoretically supported. By contrasting Stülpner with wild gangs of bandits, educators presented audiences with a disciplined young hero who wanted to be respectable and ply his trade, but only turned to poaching and rebellion in desperation. Publications also linked the popular folk hero to a communist interpretation of Germany's revolutionary heritage.¹¹ One expert on Stülpner, Klaus Hoffmann, portrayed the hunter as a product of the age of revolution.¹² Ultimately, he argued, "[Stülpner] may be understood as a pioneer for liberal views and social justice."¹³

Poaching, Hoffmann insisted, was not irrational exuberance or a source of wealth, but instead a progressive political statement. Rebellious peasants in 1790 thus exacted calculated revenge on the “plague” of wildlife flourishing under feudal laws that protected aristocratic hunting privileges.¹⁴ Hermann Heinz Wille, in a guide to the Erzgebirge’s landmarks, also emphasized the drastic consequences of feudal hunting laws. He wrote, “Today we can hardly imagine the wealth of game in the Erzgebirge at the time or the plague that it caused for farmers.”¹⁵ In other words, Wille and Hoffman suggested that nature, under feudal rule, fell out of balance, to the detriment of the poor and the powerless. Wille’s Stülpner concluded that not only could he hunt the local wildlife, but also that it was absolutely necessary. He reflected, “Tomorrow [this game] will devastate the peasants’ fields, chew away the bark of young saplings and nibble away their sprouts.”¹⁶ Unlike earlier biographers from the nineteenth century, Wille did not contrast Stülpner’s ignorance with the wise management of game by forestry experts. Rather, Wille presented foresters as mean-spirited and greedy and glorified Stülpner as an environmentally sensitive hunter who warned his battalion officers and later his bandit brethren against shooting wildlife out of season.¹⁷ Only socialism, Wille suggested, could do justice to Stülpner’s legacy, bring nature into balance and repair the damage done by feudalism and capitalism. Likewise, the educational activities and organized sport offered by youth leaders were meant to repair German society, that is, restore bodies and minds destroyed by capitalism.

These educational and athletic projects, in fact, did little to shape everyday life at the resort; life at the reservoir seemed to follow its own rhythm regardless of the intentions of youth leaders. Vacationers at Greifenbach sought personal enrichment, not balance and order. Like Stülpner, Greifenbach vacationers claimed the landscape as their own, to do with as they pleased. In the early 1960s, for example, one could find two sand pits at Greifenbach designed for long-jump competitions. Just a few years later, however, tourists discovered that these pits had been destroyed and in their ruins children happily built sand castles.¹⁸ Likewise, the choir in Zschopau complained that unapproved free time activities disturbed scheduled performances. Children played soccer next to the provisional stage, youths drowned out the performance with their portable radios and laughter and children tried to tease the choir leader.¹⁹

Recognizing the failures of cultural and athletic programs, local authorities merely acceded to vacationers’ demands for more comfortable leisure facilities. Zschopau authorities installed new water pumps and ordered bureaucrats to devote more attention to outfitting the emerging recreation district at Greifenbach.²⁰ In this spirit, officials requested at least 60,000 marks from Karl Marx City to fund the necessary construc-

tion projects.²¹ In 1961 the local government first invested in the construction of a beach to respond to consumer demand, but in 1963 tourists still complained to the local press about standing water. The lake had previously provided water to miners and villagers, who cared little about the lake's appearance, and, as a result, wetlands had dominated the lakeshore. As one vacationer described it, tourists needed rubber boots to manage the swampy conditions and without lawn furniture it remained impossible to sunbathe.²² The mayor of Ehrenfriedersdorf responded to complaints about marshy beaches by assuring readers of the upcoming development of a sandy beach and a grassy meadow for sunbathing, as well as the construction of toilets, kiosks and athletic facilities. The city hired a professional dredger to begin draining the land, and while the city portrayed development as a boon to the mining economy, its primary motivation appeared to be the expansion of beaches. Though a drought during the previous winter had inspired plans to expand the reservoir to secure more drinking water for the residents of Karl Marx City, concerns about vacationers at Greifenbach appeared to trump these plans to expand the lake. The government decided to delay plans for reservoir expansion until 1975 and allowed the construction of tourist facilities.²³

More precisely, vacationers overwhelmed the reservoir and its overseers. In 1968, a meadow for sunbathing and camping had still not been constructed.²⁴ By 1969, Zschopau still had not raised the funds (150,000 marks) to finish draining land around the lake.²⁵ On a beautiful day in 1969, so many visitors arrived at the lake that the parking lots filled before noon.²⁶ On another weekend when 5,000 campers and 12,000 day-trippers visited the lake, parking lots reached capacity before nine o'clock in the morning.²⁷ As the campground grew, cars threatened the tranquility of the lake as drivers parked in the woods, drove throughout the campgrounds at all hours and washed their vehicles on the lakeshore.²⁸ In response, planners constantly had to consider adding new parking lots near the lake; in fact, many requests for money from Karl Marx City emphasized the need to address traffic problems.²⁹ In general, the transformation of Greifenbach into a tourist destination did not keep up with demand. As a result, well-connected citizens who could acquire vacation cottages or purchase camping equipment fared better than workers who relied on public transportation and public facilities.

Even authorities managing the Greifenbach Reservoir soon realized that the development of the lake promoted social inequalities. In the late 1960s, seventy-four well-connected individuals or organizations had built bungalows around the lake without official permission.³⁰ Despite a ban on the structures, they appeared everywhere and once they were built little could be done to remove them.³¹ To address the problem of private bungalow construction, Zschopau authorities followed the lead of Ber-

lin's tourism planners and in January 1967 created a VEB Naherholung (a "people's own enterprise" responsible for managing the reservoir for regional recreation). The enterprise provided an institutional setting for addressing consumer demand. For example, members of the Campingbeirat (a camping council set up by the VEB Naherholung to let vacationers, bungalow owners and planners discuss planning for the park) demanded that unauthorized buildings be torn down because comfortable leisure in unspoiled nature had become a luxury accessible only to well-connected citizens.³² Campers with working-class backgrounds requested better landscape management to protect the park from bungalow owners who could afford to pay fines imposed by authorities.

Despite the best intentions of local authorities, the landscape remained part of a cash nexus. But who were those individuals in East German society that could afford to vacation in comfort? In part, "people's own enterprises" like industrial firms built bungalows for their employees; the state provided each firm "social and cultural funds" to compensate productive workers and employers thus had more money to develop recreational areas than communal or county officials in charge of Greifenbach. Private bungalow-owners at Greifenbach were artisans, white-collar employees, managers or skilled workers such as welders or electricians who had extra cash on hand. Considering the mining economy of the region, surprisingly few, if any, workers from the mining industry owned a bungalow. In fact, it appeared that not a single unskilled worker from heavy industry owned a cottage at Greifenbach Reservoir.

Social status and the availability of ready cash determined who built a bungalow. At least in this case, the privileged class did not consist of political functionaries in the ruling Socialist Unity Party.³³ Given the absence of private property and large income differences, social status often depended on political connections, the possession of tradable skills or resources or the good fortune of having wealthy relatives who could send gifts or cash from the West. Workers in luxury goods industries may have had more access to barter goods than average workers and thus had more purchasing power. In addition, many proprietors also engaged in professions that allowed them to trade services (carpentry skills, for instance) for favors, and artists and artisans may have been able to sell their goods in the West for cash. The complaints among East Germans that some citizens had privileged access to nature would appear to hold true; in leisure and tourism, the ruling Socialist Unity Party had not eradicated social differences.³⁴

More and more, frustrations with privileged access to "nature" framed expectations of the nature experience. Vacationers found themselves scrambling for more and better "nature experiences" at the ex-

pense of public space. In this way, interactions with the countryside became acquisitive and anything that interfered with opportunities to obtain “green space” became an aggravation and a source of broader discontent. It was this aggravation that led to criticism of fellow vacationers, industrial pollution and, ultimately, regime policy itself.

The practice of enjoying nature as a commodity, ironically, depended on unique East German conditions for its specific form. The German Democratic Republic was a small state with limited space and little opportunity to explore tourist destinations outside its borders. Without an abundance of consumer goods, East German citizens also suffered from a sense of “want” or “absence” even if they were by no means hungry or wanting of basic necessities. Worse still, the 1970s brought higher wages but not enough consumer goods on which to spend those wages.³⁵ With surplus income, citizens who could find material to build a bungalow could certainly afford to pay fines imposed by local authorities for illegal construction. Simultaneously, citizens of the GDR learned from the regime that “nature” was a resource to contribute to the advancement of the people’s welfare and that socialism would provide for a better quality of life, including, among other things, little luxuries like vacations from everyday routine.

Local officials could do little to stem the tide and authorities in charge of the lake caved in to pressure from an influential minority. In December 1966 authorities in Zschopau placed a ban on construction near the lake, but administrators on the Annaberg side of the lake ignored the new regulations.³⁶ Annaberg had already given verbal permission to seventy-nine individuals or firms to build bungalows and Zschopau had approved five more bungalows. Of these, construction had already begun on seventy-five.³⁷ At the end of 1967, authorities accepted the bungalows as a *fait accompli* and integrated bungalow construction into the VEB Naherholung budget.³⁸ Permits would be given to firms that contributed money and labor to further development of the park;³⁹ in other words, financial pressures on leisure planners in Zschopau had clearly pushed them toward compromise with bungalow owners. A decision from Zschopau in December 1969, for instance, allowed the construction of six more bungalows for businesses with the following provision: “From now on firms are obliged to annually grant the VEB Naherholung material and financial assistance for the further development of the regional *Erholung* district on the shores of Greifenbach Reservoir.”⁴⁰

The construction of such bungalows, however, elicited numerous complaints and in their grumbling citizens especially criticized the private consumption of public space. In 1972, for instance, one citizen wrote to the Ministry for Environmental Protection to criticize construction along lakeshores (in this case, not at Greifenbach, but at a similar recre-

ation area). If not accessible to the public, he argued, "nature" (in this case, lakeshores and river banks) was "*umfunktioniert*," or changed. This individual identified accessibility to the public as a key characteristic of "nature." He wrote:

Directly on the lakeshores in the recreation districts stand various forms and sizes of weekend homes, which sometimes reach the size of fully functioning suburban homes (*Siedlungshäuser*) with garages. The landscape preserves that are themselves designated by local authorities do not remain spared. Even if the satisfaction of individual needs in this matter should not be ignored, one gains [through current policy] only maximum benefits for a few citizens.⁴¹

The writer hoped to open up the recreation district to all citizens and not just to the "privileged." This letter, it should be noted, criticized conspicuous consumption, but not consumption *per se*.

A group of campers at Greifenbach Reservoir also complained of conspicuous consumption that benefited a few privileged bungalow owners and not the community of vacationers as a whole. In one case, the VEB Naherholung told campers they would have to give up their campsite because overcrowding demanded that individuals not reserve campsites for years at a time.⁴² To justify the evictions, authorities claimed that they hoped to provide more vacation opportunities to the working class. In their responses to eviction, these campers not only attacked conspicuous consumption but also defended themselves as individual consumers of "nature." Pressing the regime to better satisfy their consumer demands, these citizens included green spaces in their list of desires.

One family from Karl Marx City, for instance, described at length their investment of money and time in their *Stabilzelt*, an especially sturdy tent that could remain at the reservoir throughout the camping season regardless of weather conditions. Campsites, they suggested, were rare commodities to be cherished and preserved since they were not easily acquired. Once in possession of one, the family held on to their "piece of nature" tenaciously and scoffed at suggestions from the VEB Naherholung that they easily could find another campsite elsewhere in the vicinity of Karl Marx City. Moreover, they feared that other "consumers" would not suffer as they might, since other campers who had used the campground for over four years had not been given notices of eviction!⁴³

This camping family also suggested that, as consumers, they could still have an intimate relationship with the landscape. The reservoir had not always been suitable for tourists because of the swampy lakeshores, but when they received their campsite years before, the family became custodians of the land and was closely tied to its fate. "As you know," the head of the family wrote,

we contributed twenty hours of our own labor in order to improve the parcel to a proper condition [for camping]. Moreover, we leveled off recently drained land and sowed grass on the lakeshore. In addition, we divided blocks A and B into parcels, laid out gravel paths and set up boat ramps.⁴⁴

Another vacationer wrote:

Before the [lake] was 'discovered,' before even the masses had any idea that one could rejuvenate and relax there, our family belonged to those who had reconstructed the pond. In the beginning we camped on the grass fields, and when authorities finally took control, we adapted to the planned routine.⁴⁵

Because of the state's limited financial resources and poor management, these campers became stewards of the land and felt a sense of pride. Hence, they took great offense at the state's decision to evict them from what they considered their own "backyard."⁴⁶ Eviction was a threat to a way of life or an identity they had created for themselves through their leisure and consumer practices.

Campers especially focused on the unequal treatment of some citizens. According to a resident of Karl Marx City, a great number of long-term campers (*Dauerzeltlern*) had not received eviction notices even though they too had resided at the campground the previous four summers. In his opinion, the GDR had been created to avoid such discrepancies between social groups. "I believe," he wrote, "that it is not in the spirit of the Eighth Party Conference . . . to introduce such differences between campers, when we struggle daily against such petty bourgeois manifestations in other areas of life."⁴⁷ Likewise, a resident of Wünschendorf complained that not all campers had been equally affected by the new rules. He also established in his letter a narrative of a respectable "worker" losing his right to consume and enjoy leisure. He wrote, "When one has worked day after day for eighteen years as I have, a person looks forward to when they can relax (*sich erholen*) after a work shift at a nearby campground."⁴⁸

Other campers took a more aggressive approach to the matter and accused a certain "class" of citizens of receiving preferential treatment. "After closer inspection," one angry camping enthusiast noted, "you have arranged special privileges for distinct groups within the population in the form of approval for their long-term campsites." This vacationer believed the promises made by the regime to provide *Erholung* and health had been violated. "I must confirm," he added, "that blue- and white-collar workers from collectivized firms [*volkseigene Betriebe*] . . . did not retain their permit for a campsite . . . What happened to the concerns about working people and the class consciousness of our socialist leaders?"⁴⁹ Campers such as these considered the lake and its surrounding

landscape to be an accessible space to be distributed evenly to all citizens. Nevertheless, they still wanted to secure their own personal plot.

While the authors of these complaints astutely quoted party rhetoric, they cared mostly about their own consumer needs. One vacationer explicitly linked her health, happiness and enjoyment of nature to a consumer identity. She wrote:

We do not earn our money so easily that we can make purchases and then simply leave a tent unused in a corner. Of course—and to this you should give some thought—there are no time limits for cottages at the lake. These [vacationers] may, regardless of how many years they were already there or how long they want to remain, pursue their leisure. It is, as always, the little man who only has a tent that is easiest to drive away. We recognize that others need a possibility for recreation—but not at the cost of others. The grounds [at the lake] are big enough; they only need to be developed.⁵⁰

This vacationer not only criticized the inequalities of East German society, but she also revealed a distinct attitude toward nature. She criticized an elite and merely wanted to extend the ideal nature experience (currently available to bungalow owners) to all citizens and, to this end, she demanded better management by authorities. The complaints cited here, furthermore, were not isolated cases. The Ministry for Environmental Protection noticed a trend in letters of complaint in 1977 toward a critique of the development and parceling of public land.⁵¹

Vacationers encountered plenty of evidence that some individuals—political elites, artisans, the well connected or those with hard currency from relatives in the West—enjoyed cleaner, quieter and materially more comfortable nature experiences. The countryside, which brought together relaxation, fresh air and greenery to create an escape from the dirty, hectic and politicized daily life of East German cities, had become a commodity to be consumed. Instead of an environment, or *Umwelt*, closely interconnected with human behavior, “nature” became *primarily* a commodity—a combination of sights, sounds and smells that, if properly experienced, contributed to good health, relaxation and contentment. On the one hand, this meant that East Germans could develop a critique of the government’s failure to prevent the parceling of the recreation district into cluttered colonies of vacation homes. On the other hand, it was very difficult to separate the fate of nature from individual consumer satisfaction. As a result, criticism of the regime’s social and environmental policies often amounted to little more than a demand for the satisfaction of individual desires.

It could be argued that many of the complaints cited in this paper reflect anger with consumption and not a defense of consumer rights. Certainly, many people grumbled about the conspicuous consumption of

a special class of citizens and some committed nature lovers probably did condemn consumption in any form. Yet at least as many, if not more, citizens approached nature in the same way as the campers at Greifenbach Reservoir. Those East Germans who had an opportunity to secure their access to a “nature experience” did not waste it. Laws and regulations mattered little if an individual had the connections or the cash to reserve a plot of land and create their own little retreat in the countryside. While some conservation-minded professionals despaired about damage to natural beauty, many vacationers just wanted to secure their piece of nature—to ensure themselves of the enjoyment of *Erholung*, clean air and green vistas at least once a year, if not over several weekends. Rarely was there a fundamental critique of consumption and its effect on the popular “nature experience.” Like Carl Stülpner, vacationers in the Ore Mountains sought enrichment in nature; moreover, they complained of citizens who took those riches out of public circulation, just as Stülpner criticized nobles restricting access to wild game. Also like Stülpner, they believed that the resources of nature were there for the taking—not to be sequestered away and preserved from human consumption in a nature preserve. If shared more equally, they suggested, nature flourished in balance with human needs. The state, citizens suggested, had to impose limits on conspicuous consumption to preserve some open space to satisfy their consumer desires.

Vacationing, in sum, had profound consequences for the appearance of physical environments in the German Democratic Republic, not only at Greifenbach, but also in the Elbe Sandstone Range and along the Baltic Sea. As overdevelopment began to degrade cherished “nature experiences,” citizens began to complain to newspapers, local authorities and the Ministry for Environmental Protection. Their protests, however, rarely expressed a committed rejection of bungalow construction or consumerism as a threat to ideal nature. Distinct from the Friends of Nature early in the twentieth century, East German vacationers employed a consumer rhetoric shaped by the promises of better living standards made by the ruling regime, and they hoped to acquire nature experiences just as they longed for the better cars, exotic fruit and modern televisions common to West Germany.

Notes

¹ Heinrich Heinz Wille, *Silbernes Erzgebirge* (Dresden, 1958), 45–46.

² Manfred Blechschmidt and Klaus Walther, *Bergland Mosaik: Ein Buch vom Erzgebirge* (Rudolstadt, 1978).

³ Unlike many other regions in Germany, relatively few peasants worked the land in the Erzgebirge region.

⁴ Rainer Karlsch and Zbynek Zeman, *Urangeheimisse: Das Erzgebirge im Brennpunkt der Weltpolitik, 1933–1960* (Berlin, 2002); Paul Reimar, *Das Wismut Erbe: Geschichte und Folgen des Uranbergbaus in Thüringen und Sachsen* (Göttingen, 1991); Ralf Engeln, *Uransklaven oder Sonnensucher? Die Sowjetische AG Wismut in der SBZ/DDR 1946–1953* (Essen, 2001); Michael Beileites, *Pechblende: Der Uranbergbau in der DDR und seine Folgen* (Wittenberg, 1988); Michael Beileites, *Alltlast Wismut: Ausnahmezustand, Umweltkatastrophe und das Sanierungsproblem im deutschen Uranbergbau* (Frankfurt/Main, 1992).

⁵ Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR, *Atlas-DDR* (Gotha, 1976).

⁶ Nevertheless, Carl Heinrich Wilhelm Schönberg faced censorship for publishing a text that appeared to glorify banditry. At least, this is what Klaus Hoffman argues in his epilogue to Schönberg's text. Klaus Hoffman, "Nachwort," in Carl Heinrich Wilhelm Schönberg, *Carl Stülpnerns merkwürdiges Leben und Abenteuer als Wildschütz im sächs. Hochgebirge* (1832; Leipzig, 1982) 137.

⁷ Friedrich von Sydow, *Der Wildschütz Carl Stülpner* (Sonderhausen, 1832).

⁸ Hermann Heinz Wille, *Der grüne Rebell: historischer Roman um den Freijäger Karl Stülpner*, 12th ed. (Berlin, 1983), 30.

⁹ According to guidebooks to the region, the miners encountered many strange spirits on their nightly patrols of the aqueduct between Greifenbach and Ehrenfriedersdorf. For examples of guidebooks to the region, see Willy Hoerning, *Greifensteingebiet: Thum, Ehrenfriedersdorf, Geyer, Brockhaus Wanderheft*, Heft 132 (Leipzig, 1961, 1970); Hermann Heinz Wille, *Vom Kahleberg zum Fichtelberg: Wanderfahrt durchs Erzgebirge* (Leipzig, 1971); Manfred Blechschmidt and Klaus Walther, *Bergland Mosaik: Ein Buch vom Erzgebirge* (Rudolstadt, 1978).

¹⁰ Kreisarchiv Marienberg-Zschopau, Rat der Kreise Zschopau (hereafter KMZ-RdKZ), Signatur (hereafter Sig.) 6117, Author – Rat der Kreise Zschopau, Abteilung Jugend, Körperkultur und Sport, no title, speech detailing the history and development of the reservoir, 2.

¹¹ Hoffmann, *Carl Stülpnerns merkwürdiges Leben*, 129.

¹² *Ibid.*, 131.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁵ Wille, *Der grüne Rebell*, 50.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 83, 145–6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 6117, February 3, 1970, Abschrift von Folkschor Streckewalde, Kreis Zschopau, to Kreiskabinett für Kulturarbeit beim Rat der Kreise Zschopau, "Betr: Urlaubsbetreuung Naherholungszentrum Greifensteingebiet" Signed Kurt Pohlung, Chorleiter; Herbert Wetzell, Organisationsleiter.

²⁰ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 7073, Letter from Rat der Kreise (hereafter RdK) Zschopau, Stellv. der Vorsitzender to Abteilung Handel und Versorgung, Rat der Kreise Zschopau, April 17, 1961; also a letter of the same date from Baumann of the Rat der Kreise Zschopau to the National Front in Karl Marx City in response to their letter of March 29, 1961, complaining about conditions at the campsite.

²¹ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 7073, Letter from Repmann, RdK Zschopau to Rat des Bezirkes Karl Marx Stadt, Genossen Felfe, Vorsitzenden, July 21, 1961.

²² "Ob das so bleiben soll?" *Neue Zschopauer Zeitung*, July 18, 1963.

²³ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 7073, Letter from Bürgermeister of Ehrenfriedersdorf to the *Neue Zschopauer Zeitung*, "Betr: Campingplatz am Greifenbach Stauweiher, Kritik in der Ausgabe Nr. 29 vom 18.7.1963," July 18, 1963. Also, Sig. 7073, June 14, 1966, Letter to Kreisinspektion Zschopau, From Repmann, Vorsitzender des RdK – "Bericht vom 3/24/1966 über die Kontrolle

der Verwirklichung der Direktive zur Einführung der 5 Tage Arbeitswoche im Naherholungszentrum Greifensteine.“

²⁴ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 7073, April 21, 1965, “Niederschrift aus einer Beratung von Vertretern des Rates der Stadt Ehrenfriedersdorf und der Stadt Geyer, betreffs Campingplatz Greifenbachstauweiher,” 1; also Sig. 7074, November 26, 1968, Letter from VEB Naherholung Ehrenfriedersdorf to the RdK, Abteilung Jugendfragen, Körperkultur und Sport, Betr: Bericht über die Auswertung der diesjährigen Saison.

²⁵ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 6117, RdK Zschopau, Abteilung Jugend, Körperkultur und Sport, Speech, 11, 16.

²⁶ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 7073, Abteilung Erholungswesen, August 5, 1969.

²⁷ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 6117, August 6, 1969, Entwurf, Letter from Bauman, RdK Zschopau, to Rat des Bezirkes, Abteilung Jugend, Körperkultur und Sport, Betr: Situation im Naherholungszentrum Greifenbachstauweiher/Greifensteine Ehrenfriedersdorf, 2–3.

²⁸ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 7073, September 7, 1966, Niederschrift über eine Beratung des Campingbeirates am Mittwoch, dem 7.9.1966; Sig. 7074, November 26, 1968, Letter from VEB Naherholung to Rat der Kreise Zschopau, Abteilung Jugend, Körperkultur und Sport; Sig. 7073, September 12, 1968, Niederschrift über die durchgeführte Beratung am 16.8.1968.

²⁹ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 7073, July 26, 1966, Letter from RdK Zschopau to Rat des Bezirkes Karl Marx Stadt, Abteilung Jugendfragen, Körperkultur und Sport. Plans still to be considered in 1971; also Sig. 6093, September 24, 1971, VEB Naherholung, Vorschlag des VEB Naherholung Ehrenfriedersdorf zum 5 Jahr Plan.

³⁰ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 6117, Abteilung Jugend, Körperkultur und Sport, Speech, p. 5.

³¹ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 7073, Niederschrift über eine Beratung des Campingbeirates am Mittwoch, dem 7.9.1966.

³² *Ibid.*, 3.

³³ At this time, unfortunately, I have no record of the party affiliation of these individuals.

³⁴ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 6117, “Zusammenstellung der Bewerber für Wochenendhäuser am Geyer’schen Teich auf der Grundlage der Standortbesichtigung vom 25.6.1967.”

³⁵ See Jonathan Zatlin, “The Vehicle of Desire: The Trabant, the Wartburg, and the End of the GDR,” *German History* 14, no. 3 (1997): 358–380.

³⁶ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 6093, August 8, 1967, RdK Zschopau, Abteilung Jugendfragen, Körperkultur und Sport, Vorschlag zum Perspektivplan Naherholung bis 1970.

³⁷ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 6117, April 12, 1969, Abteilung Jugendfragen, Körperkultur und Sport, Vorlage für die Sitzung des Rates der Kreise am 11.12.1969, Betr: Bungalows.

³⁸ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 6117, Städtebauliche Bestätigung, Form für Errichtung eines Wochenendhauses am Greifenbachstauweiher in Geyer.

³⁹ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 7074, December 18, 1967, VEB Naherholung, Niederschrift über die konstituierende Sitzung des Beirates für Naherholung am 14.12.1967.

⁴⁰ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 7074, February 28, 1969, Abteilung Jugendfragen, Körperkultur und Sport, Konzeption für die Beratung am 1.3.1969 mit Bungalowbesitzer; Sig. 6117, December 4, 1969, Abteilung Jugendfragen, Körperkultur und Sport, Vorlage für die Sitzung des Rates der Kreise am 11.12.1969, Betr: Bungalows.

⁴¹ Bundesarchiv-Berlin-Lichterfelde (hereafter Barch), DK5 Sig. 4393, August 1, 1972, Letter from Karl Dutschmann to Ministry for Environmental Protection.

⁴² In response to numerous complaints, however, officials eventually reversed course and gave permits to campers for at least another year.

⁴³ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 6117, Eingaben, February 14, 1973, Letter from Horst Anders to VEB Naherholung.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 6117, Eingaben, February 18, 1973, Letter from Marta Tausch-Marton to VEB Naherholung.

⁴⁶ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 6117, Eingaben, February 22, 1973, Letter from Guenter Seifert and Joachim Seifert to Kollege Mann, VEB Naherholung.

⁴⁷ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 6117, February 18, 1973, Letter from Heinz Peters to Herr Mann, VEB Naherholung.

⁴⁸ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 6117, February 16, 1973, Letter from Kurt Schubert of Wünschendorf to VEB Naherholung.

⁴⁹ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 6117, February 14, 1973, Letter from Horst Anders of Karl Marx City to VEB Naherholung.

⁵⁰ KMZ-RdKZ, Sig. 6117, February 18, 1973, Letter from Marta Tausch-Marton to VEB Naherholung.

⁵¹ Barch, DK5 Sig. 71, Abteilung Umweltschutz, Eingabenanalyse 2. Halbjahr 1977, 2.