



BERLIN IN THREE SEASONS
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For still there are so many things that I have never seen:
In every wood, in every spring is a different shade of green.
J. R. R. Tolkien

My visit to the Wiko began in March – I came the day after the very last snowfall of the season and left after the mercurial weather changes of April had given way to a glorious succession of sunny May days. Like the quick thaws in the frozen Grunewald lake, the warmth of the greetings at the Wiko made me feel at home immediately – and by the end of the visit, the long summer days were packed with busy conversations and activity. The changes in seasons mirrored my changing thoughts and experiences during my all-too-short two-month visit. Except for autumn, I got to see Berlin in three of its glorious seasons and to watch the cold majesty of frozen fronds give way to the warmth and sunshine of regrowth and renewal. In many ways, this mirrored the objectives of my two-month visit, which was to develop a deeper understanding of the processes impacting forest regrowth around the world.

Most current studies of land cover change focus on the negative aspects – land clearing, deforestation, land degradation, desertification. This is in large part because these, unfortunately, are the changes that dominate the world today. The global-scale clearing of tropical forests that is taking place today is one of the major factors responsible for global climate change – following the recent extreme weather events that have taken place in countries as far-ranging as the USA, Switzerland and India, I think there can be little doubt that global warming has come to be a significant factor in our lives. Forest clearing also leads to a host of downstream events, including losses in biodiversity, deterioration in soil quality, loss of livelihood for forest-dependent communities and a decrease in the quality of life for all of us. However, this focus on the narrative of deforestation, while very significant and necessary, obscures the awareness of the many success stories taking place across the world today – albeit at much smaller scales. If one is to develop better policies to help stem the growing tide of deforestation, it is necessary to develop a good understanding of the problem as well as to look at existing solutions.

Around the globe, there is an increasing awareness of the capacity of human institutions – whether traditional, community-based, private or state-owned – to conserve natural resources in the face of tremendous odds. From country-wide statist initiatives such as in China and South Korea, to community efforts in Nepal and Mexico, forests are growing alongside fast-expanding economies. In the developed nations of Western Europe and North America, the retrenchment of agricultural land has led to similar patterns of reforestation – but with very different underlying economic, social, institutional and cultural processes. While these “new forests” are often very different in quality from old-growth forests in terms of biodiversity, biomass and other ecological factors, they present the

possibility of increasing spaces where humans and nature can coexist. Understanding the driving factors that give rise to these interesting, seemingly anomalous patches of regrowth in an overall landscape of deforestation is my aim.

What better place to work on such ideas than the Wiko, going through its own period of renewal and regrowth as the cold winter months give way to spring? This sounds as though the timing of my visit was planned to reflect this – I must confess that this was merely serendipitous, as so many good things often are. I had a mental vision of Wiko long before I set foot in it – but it is a place hard to capture in imagination unless one has been and spent a reasonable amount of time there. I first heard of the Wiko from Raghavendra Gadagkar more than five years ago – and then in great detail from Helga Nowotny. We had a Branco Weiss Society in Science fellows meeting at Wiko in 2004 – this brief 3-day meeting was my first actual taste of Wiko (literally as well as figuratively). But, living at the Wiko (even if only for two months) is very different from visiting. The weekly colloquia, lunch and dinner discussions, road meetings and bus stop meetings, along with the indefinable yet very tangible atmosphere that characterises the Wissenschaftskolleg, led to many more developments of my research than I had anticipated.

I came with the plan to work on an exhaustive analysis of the literature (and what better place than the amazing Wiko library!), of studies on reforestation in different parts of the world. I did get together such a collection – multiple boxes worth, to mail back to India. In addition, I ended up with other gifts and surprises that the visit held in store for me. The dining table conversations led to many interesting discussions. I learnt about German history from Ottmar; shared Maquam and Sufi music with Scheherazade; explored Berlin with Galit; and discussed parallels between social insects and social communities with Francis and Kevin – interspersed with Monday afternoon jogging sessions with the Wiko staff. The workshop organised by Francis Ratnieks’ group on “Conflict Resolution: Bringing Together Biologists and Social Scientists” towards the end of my stay provided opportunities for very interesting interactions – both with colleagues at Wiko and guests from outside.

All of this transformed my horizon in surprising ways – I found myself moving into urban ecology and beginning investigations into the changes in my own home city of Bangalore, much to my own surprise! Another long-pending project was to study how effective parks have been at limiting habitat clearing – the wonderful Wiko library (which surpasses all description, so I will not even try) motivated me to start and almost finish this

exercise as well before leaving – which has in turn led to its own stream of thought, generating new projects (and so on, ad infinitum).

All good things must either come to an end or become so commonplace that one begins to take them for granted – but one makes so many good friends that it is a difficult thing to leave. But the globe is shrinking, and distances are no longer what they used to be – Frau Fogt, Frau Klöhn and Frau Bottomley just finished visiting Bangalore, and we had wonderful gifts from them – table mats with photographs of the Wiko buildings in all four seasons. The perfect gift – I get to hold a portrait of the one season I missed (autumn) and build another set of montages in my imagination! I can't wait to visit the Kolleg again – I am sure we will have future Berlin visits to see old friends and refresh our memories.