

# Socioecological Pioneers: The American Nature Friends

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*When the first American Naturfreunde/Nature Friends groups were founded in 1910 and 1912, among German and Austrian immigrants they were latecomers, but their socioecological profile gave them a rather unique hue. Their history is here discussed using the examples of two major clubhouses: Camp Midvale in New Jersey and Muir Woods in California. In their first decades, their programs across the nation united political progressivism, leisure time activities, and environmental sustainability. Due to the politicization of the 1930s, their practices forked out in two ways. Camp Midvale remained more fundamentally political but in the 1950s had to succumb to anti-communist pressure, whereas Muir Woods to this day thrives on a combination of German-Austrian cultural traditions with nature sports and nature preservation. These approaches also represent examples of differing models of how to tackle the socioecological problems of our present.*

*1910 und 1912, bei der Gründung ihrer ersten amerikanischen Ortsgruppen, gehörten die Naturfreunde/Nature Friends zu den Nachzügeln deutscher und österreichischer Auswanderung, doch ihr sozialökologisches Profil machte sie unverwechselbar. Ihre Geschichte wird hier dargestellt anhand herausragender Naturfreunde-Zentren: Camp Midvale in New Jersey und Muir Woods in Kalifornien. In den ersten Jahrzehnten verbanden sie über den Kontinent hinweg politisch progressive Forderungen mit Freizeitaktivitäten und den Grundsätzen von Nachhaltigkeit. In Folge der Politisierung der 1930er Jahre entwickelten sich aus diesen Anfängen unterschiedliche Formate. Camp Midvale betonte weiterhin politische Grundzusammenhänge und fiel in den 1950er Jahren antikommunistischem Druck zum Opfer. Muir Woods prägt bis heute ein Programm, das deutsch-österreichische Kultur, Natursport und den Erhalt der natürlichen Lebensgrundlagen als Lebensstil verbindet. Beide Versionen stehen so beispielhaft für grundsätzlich unterschiedliche Zugänge zur Lösung der sozialökologischen Probleme der Gegenwart.*

## Latecomers

When in 1910 and 1912 the *Naturfreunde's* first American groups, according to trade union practice called locals, were established in New York and San Francisco, mass migration by Germans, which had peaked between 1815 and 1893, had slowed down (Hoerder, 2010, pp. 56-64).<sup>1</sup> Austrian emigration culminated two decades later. Top decades for the Wilhelmine Reich were 1881-90 and 1911-1920 for the Habsburg Empire (Tolzmann, 2000, p. 13). That German-speaking immigrants once they had disembarked were uniformly considered to be of "Germanic" descent made it easy for future American Nature Friends to set aside regional differences. Their background in the labor movement at least theoretically would give them another reason not to overemphasize origin.

Founded in Vienna in 1895, the *Naturfreunde* were the hiking club of the working classes (Kramer, 1984). Their program rested on two major pillars: A focus on improving the recreational opportunities for the underprivileged, and a devotion to the cause of labor and its efforts to emancipate the dispossessed from capitalist oppression. Following Wilhelm Liebknecht's catchy tag that "knowledge is power – power is knowledge," in addition to an appreciation of nature they aimed at educating the uneducated in the broadest possible sense, including social and natural sciences (Gross, 2020, pp. 1-6). Their range of activities grew and soon covered mountain sports and cultural activities as well as ecological projects. Fast-growing as the organization was, an outright theory for its practices would only be developed in the context of Austromarxist debates (Sandner, 1996).

By World War I the club had spread all across Austria, Switzerland and Germany, and to the United States. Because most members arrived via New York, its Vienna-based members' journal *Der Naturfreund* suggested as contacts a multi-cultural center of labor organizations, the *New York Labor Temple*, and the leading German-language and labor newspaper, the *New Yorker Volkszeitung* – thus creating its own pattern of

chain migration. An essential German-language and labor infrastructure had existed in the USA from the first half of the nineteenth century onwards, into which the new *Naturfreunde* integrated easily. Like in Europe, in a clearly defined division of labor, their place was to propagate and practice the working people's equal right to the pleasures of nature and culture. As John Williams (2011) puts it: "The *Naturfreunde* movement promoted a proletarian 'turn to nature' through hiking, with the goal of improving the working class's physical, mental and political strength" (p. 199). Unlike romantic escapists, they did not reject technological progress, as it was viewed as a precondition for working-class emancipation (Linse, 1991); what they did criticize was any excessive destruction of nature to serve capitalist interests.

Against its internationalist claims, the labor movement was not exempt from cultural prejudices, such as when early in the twentieth century the number of immigrants from Austria's eastern provinces was on the rise. Even later a sympathetic observer like E. Wilder Spaulding (1968) problematically distinguishes between "core-Austrians" of a Germanic background and "the outer peoples of the monarchy" (p. 235). Such hierarchies surfaced in, for example, the autobiography of Josef Jodlbauer, a former Socialist parliamentarian from Styria, who in his memories of thirteen years as a leftist activist in the USA remembers repeatedly being called a "Polack" (Hoerder 1996). His role as the honorary speaker at the first anniversary of the New York *Naturfreunde* (*Der Naturfreund* July 15, 1911, pp. 167-8) seems to indicate that among these such denigration was not the rule. Due to larger immigration numbers, a majority of the club officers in the American Nature Friends were Germans, but Austrians, including those from eastern provinces, were co-opted on equal terms. Early club members of high esteem included Austro-Slovak Alexander Wiederseder, who would be crucial for new locals in both eastern and western parts of the United States, or Viennese Wilhelm Heidelmann, who up to the present is honored in the Californian Nature Friends' impressive Heidelmann Lodge in the Sierra Nevada.

## Green Labor

Early on, Karl Renner, co-founder of the *Naturfreunde* and later Austrian Chancellor and President, summed up how contemporary workers were excluded from the benefits of nature:

Not a single piece of earth belongs to us. The house in which we live, the workshop in which we toil, the fields through which we hike – everything belongs to others. The tree under which we rest, the caves in which we seek shelter from the storm, the forest whose clean air strengthens our lungs – all of nature experiences us as strangers. We are strangers on this earth, for we have no part of it! They have only left the street to us! ... They have divided the earth ... among themselves and have granted us only the dust of the street. (Renner, 1898; transl. in Williams, 2011, p. 204)

Demanding equal access to the recreational opportunities of nature was seen as part of the fight for economic participation and political influence. It was part of the class-struggle at large. The pursuit of human rights, social equality, and a sustainable environment were closely linked – quite clearly a socioecological program.

Even hiking carried a political function. One *Naturfreunde* format was that of *social hiking*, which combined recreation, physical and mental well-being, actively acquiring a knowledge of the social and natural worlds and included overt action like "Der verbotene Weg" ("the forbidden trail"), i.e., purposely trespassing into areas sealed off for use by the privileged (Gross, 2019). Its emphasis on communality, equality, and freedom for everyone stood in utmost contrast to the marching promoted from the nineteenth-century nationalistic *Turnerbewegung* (gymnastics movement) to the fascist brown-shirts (Williams 2007).

What for Vienna school teacher Georg Schmiedl had initially been a local project, sparked off an international movement. Within a few years the number of Austrian groups exceeded forty. In 1905 the idea reached out into Switzerland and Germany, and from 1910 on branches were established in the United States. Unlike in Europe, where it went into the hundreds of thousands, membership there never even got close to two

thousand, organized in sixteen locals with fourteen clubhouses in exquisite regions. Its cross-over structure as an outdoor sports plus recreational plus cultural and political organization would keep it in a somewhat unique position in trans-Atlantic migration history.<sup>2</sup>

The *Naturfreunde* were also unique in another way. Early migrants to America had fled religious or political persecution and come out of economic despair – as is summed up in the concept of the “American Dream.” By the end of the nineteenth century, most migrants knew they were not moving to a land of milk and honey. What attracted them was that there was room for experimentation. Without giving up the powerful pursuit of individual happiness, they added ‘European’ components such as collective responsibility for each other (i.e., solidarity) and an appreciation for the new land’s nature (i.e., a ‘green’ perspective).

**New-York.** Seit dem 18. September 1910 besitzt unser Verein die erste Ortsgruppe in Amerika. Was noch vor einem Jahre als schlechter Witz gegolten hätte, ist heute zur Wahrheit geworden. Jenseits des großen Weltmeeres, im Lande, wo der Dollar, das Alpha und Omega des menschlichen Trachtens und Hastens ist, weht unser Banner, grüßt unser Abzeichen. In einem Lande, wie Amerika, das überaus reich an Naturschönheiten, gelten diese Schönheiten nichts, werden nicht gesucht und nicht geschätzt, weil das Naturempfinden nicht in klingende Münze umzuprägen ist, weil die kostbare goldbringende Zeit damit vergeudet würde. Und wie an anderen Orten sind es wieder die Arbeiter, die mitten im Trubel des Erwerbes sich Ideale in der Brust bewahrt haben, sich zusammenscharen, um auch in der Neuen Welt das Auge zu ergötzen an den Schönheiten der Natur. Das kleine Häuflein der amerikanischen „Naturfreunde“ wird ein Häuflein sein von Pionieren, deren schöne Aufgabe es ist, ihren Klassen- und Gesinnungsgenossen die Augen zu öffnen, sie sehen zu lernen. Zu werben und zu schaffen wird es genug geben für unsere Ortsgruppe New-York, so schreibt der Proponent in seinem vom 24. September datierten Schreiben: „Leider befinden wir uns — wenn wir von den bewohnten Stätten absehen — in einem verwahrlosten, verwilderten Lande, wo in den Gebirgen wenige geregelte Wege zu finden sind. Unsere Aufgabe wird es einst sein, diese Wege zu bezeichnen“. Bei der gründenden Versammlung am 18. September wurden in die Leitung der Ortsgruppe berufen: Adolf Tanzer, Obmann; Max Riedl, Kassier; Alexander Wiederseder, Schriftführer; Heinr. Weiland, N. Bechtold, J. Richter und Bruno Richter, Ausschußmitglieder. Zuschriften erbeten an Alexander Wiederseder, 124. Ferst Place, Brooklyn, N.-Y.

Figure 1: First report on New York club, 1910, in: *Der Naturfreund* (September 18, 1910: 250).

On September 18, 1910, the Vienna-based *Der Naturfreund* introduced their first overseas members as an avant-garde, as pioneers whose noble task it was to open their co-workers’ eyes to the beauty of the land, in a country characterized by a culture of plenty but also of wastefulness, which was fresh but also raw, where promises of social advancement were subverted by desperate living conditions, and where nature was unimaginably bountiful but in whose hectic money-making nobody really cared for such beauty. The president of the newly founded local was Adolf Tanzer, and mail was to be sent to Alexander Wiederseder, 124 Ferst Place, Brooklyn, N.Y.

The Alexander Wiederseder mentioned is a striking example of how the *Naturfreunde* expanded. A craftsman of socialist convictions, he had joined the club in the Austro-Slovak city of Bratislava. His travels would take him to New York, where he became the first Secretary (“Schriftführer”) of the new group. After a short time in Chicago, he moved on to California to preside over the San Francisco branch from 1917 to 1921. Already the number of *Der Naturfreund* which reported on the founding of a New York local contained his illustrated text on the Niagara Falls, in good social hiking fashion with multiple references to historical and social circumstances and advising visitors that its beauty was best savoured when hiking, in physical motion (1910, pp. 245-246). A plan to present a slide show on U.S.-American National Parks in Europe failed, but to an American public he became known through images of American natural sights and architectural follies.<sup>3</sup>

A follow-up article in *Der Naturfreund* (July 15, 1911, p. 167) celebrated workers’ solidarity on May 1, reported on increased membership and again complained about the average American’s lack of interest in the beauty of the landscape. It hoped that *Naturfreunde* outings would rouse the workers’ love of the land; travel plans included multi-day trips to Philadelphia (also to support the fledgling local there), the Catskills, and again Niagara.

Now certainly the *Naturfreunde* were not the first ones to introduce ecological ideas to the United States. Most prominently, that prize goes to Henry

David Thoreau, of *Walden*-fame, with lots of others before and after him (Kline, 2011); likewise John Muir and the history of nature preservation by way of National Parks predates the coming of the Nature Friends (Duncan & Burns, 2009). Their interest concentrated on the “wilderness” of the country (i.e., at preserving vast chunks of land from disruptive human interference), which differed quite a lot from conservation programs in more densely populated contemporary Europe (Lekan, 2007). The latter’s combination of *Naturschutz* (nature conservation) and *Heimatschutz* (homeland protection) opened environmentalism up to nationalistic interpretations, with fascist ones not far away (“*Blut und Boden*,” “blood and soil”). Its advocates wanted to save outstanding natural monuments from commercial exploitation by keeping out the uneducated masses. In their view the *Naturfreunde*’s claim for equal rights to nature called into question established sociopolitical and economic structures and infringed on their own elitist entitlements.

In the year the New York branch was established, in recognition of activities long practiced the now international *Naturfreunde* formally incorporated environmental protection into their legal by-laws.



Figure 2: International logo, Camp Midvale, Ringwood, N.J.

Programmatic texts followed to define how and why nature is to be protected without excluding humans from its beauties (e.g., Hühnermann, 1910). Parliamentary contacts were used to influence law-making. This very special working-class and environmentalist alliance within the framework of a leisure-time club made the *Naturfreunde* an early example of what would come to be called the green labor movement (Silverman, 2004).

### Expansion

The green labor connotation had already determined the iconography of the *Naturfreunde* logo. Again, it was Karl Renner who combined the “handshake in solidarity” the labor movement had been using since the mid-nineteenth century (Korff & Petersen, 1992) with the environmental reference to Alpine roses in front of mountain scenery. Its setting reflects early activities close to Vienna, and yet was so universal that it could easily be transferred (see fig. 2).

By 1923 six American clubs were active: New York (founded in 1910), Newark and Philadelphia (each 1913) in the East, and San Francisco (1912), Los Angeles (a first attempt in 1913; successful in 1920) and Oakland (1920) in California. *Der Tourist*, an all-American club journal mostly in German, joined members across the continent. Its header customized Renner’s logo: in the middle of a stylized map of America, the ‘T’ of the magazine’s title literally underlines a handshake of two hikers (see fig. 3). Their posture makes use of the well-known image of the Promontory, Utah, merger of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads in 1869. Again, this evokes a pioneer concept. Transnational backgrounds symbolize the diversity of American *nature* (mountains [also present in the European logo], valleys, rivers, and plants) and *culture* (an Easterner dressed in contemporary 1920s hiking fashion and a Westerner clothed accordingly in frontier dress codes).

In the 1920s the American clubs thrived – if in their own niches. In the early 1930s a now mostly English members’ journal, *The Nature Friend*, con-

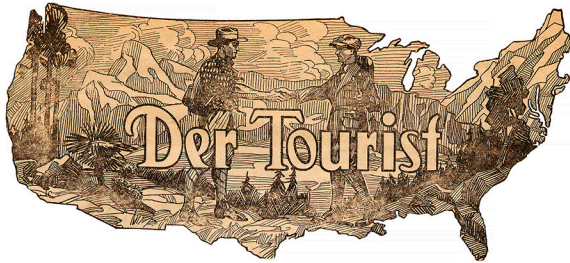


Figure 3: 1923 Header of members' magazine *Der Tourist*.

tinued to cover activities from coast to coast. An effective information system and an utter sense of cohesion made it possible for members to move across the nation to be welcomed by comrades at their new destinations, like the Rettenbachers, who from Nuremberg via Bremen first came to New York and then to San Francisco; they died mountaineering on Mount Ritter and are fondly remembered to this day (Galić, 2014).

In 1928, the fiftieth anniversary issue of the *New Yorker Volkszeitung* (NYVZ) Walter R. Boelke presented the *Naturfreunde* in a lengthy article headlined "Die 'Naturfreunde' bilden ein Glied der Arbeiterbewegung" ("The Nature Friends constitute a branch of the workers' movement") (repr. in Gross, 2014, p. 42). He sets out from an intensive description of the beauties of nature, which he contrasts with capitalistic realities, then sums up the history of the organization, its pacifist and ecological aims, its functions as a health-improvement and educational institution and elaborates on the Nature Friends Homes as a vision of what a society based on solidarity may achieve. His central political statement reads:

We Nature Friends are a hiking and cultural organization. We are [...] consciously proletarian and socialist. Like the political workers' parties and the socialist unions our struggle is devoted to freeing the proletariat from oppression by capitalist exploitation and establishing a communist social order, which guarantees to all workers just wages. There still is a long way to go, and in order to be able to fight the coming, decisive battles we need people physically fresh and intellectually alert. We Nature Friends have concluded that we can obtain this mental know-how outside, in nature, on our hikes; because to our hiking we have given a clearly defined principle, i.e., to educate humankind. Our educational program aims at creating men and women who

consciously promote the coming of the new society. Our hiking thus acknowledges a new concept of living, a new collective idea and sense.<sup>4</sup>

The "Constitution of The Nature Friends of America," adopted in 1935 as a primarily legal document, once again embeds socioecological aims in a proletarian perspective: "This association is an organization of workers interested in hiking, labor sports and cultural activities," whose objects "are: to acquaint the workers with the natural beauty of the country and to provide opportunities for its study and enjoyment; to encourage the study of nature; to teach appreciation of natural beauty; to disseminate the knowledge of natural science and of the mode of living and the customs of the various people; to further and aid the protection of nature and its beauty; and to strengthen the feeling of solidarity." "Membership in this corporation is open to persons irrespective of sex, color, creed or nationality." Particular mention is made of "[p]ropagating the maintenance and protection of National Parks" (repr. in Gross, 2014, p. 31).

Three years later, in his dedication speech to the Nature Friends' skiing resort of Mt. Pisgah in New York State, camp chairman Hans Wittich enthusiastically and in language astonishingly close to that of the first reports to Europe said:

"Berg frei" is our international greeting. It means: in the rugged, keenly shaped mountains where Nature Friends feel at home, there is boundless liberty. To achieve it, we must go through all the hardships of trailblazing. Mountains must be scaled. But when you have reached the summit and cast your eyes upon the country which lies below you, your voice will thunder "Berg frei!" into the valleys, into the gorges, into the winds, the music of that sound will dance along. Your greetings will travel away and far to the ears of our brothers and sisters who have not yet experienced the call of the mountains. (1938, p. 2)

Wittich was not only a hiker, mountaineer, photographer, botanist, and activist, but also a main proponent of communitarian projects like the Trail Conferences (which up to the present lay out hiking trails) and the New Deal Civil Conservation

Corps. His tours were organized completely according to the concept of social hiking. A route he climbed in the Grand Tetons as a first with his New York comrade Otto Stegmeier was named after him – the Wittich Crack.

Black Friday in 1929 would create a much broader leftist public in the United States, and the (Eastern) Nature Friends experienced a shift to the left; political statements in the members' journals adopted a sharper tone, although the practices of outdoor sports and camp activities remained unchanged. An extended international perspective increased the awareness of how racism, fascism, and the externalization of economic and ecological problems to less developed regions were meant to undermine workers' solidarity. All in all, with the New Deal in full swing and the American Left as strong as never before or after, the Nature Friends considered themselves part of the progressive mainstream. Even their most politically active subgroups never saw themselves as ideologically homogeneous. It was to their own surprise when they found that the Eastern District had turned up on the Attorney General's list of so-called subversive organizations.

### The Split

The Californian clubs had gone through the New Deal era in a less politicized way, and the Eastern and the Western Districts began to drift apart. When on July 9, 1940, representatives of fifteen locals met geographically midway in Rocky Mountains National Park, in practical matters all agreed. Yet the fact that Eastern clubs were in the focus of the red-baiters also endangered the Californians' existence. Another national convention in 1947, in Grand Teton National Park (with Hans Wittich as a co-organizer), could not any more reverse the split, in which the Western branch separated from the New York headquarters; even in the East and Midwest some groups sought their distance from the national office (Gross, 2015a).

Socioecology was not among the reasons for splitting up, but over time the break-up also initiated a drifting apart in that respect. In 1951 the Boyertown District Convention of the Eastern Dis-

trict adopted a constitution which included as its educational aims the study of nature, the teaching of its appreciation, the distribution of knowledge on nature and the conservation of natural resources, i.e., a full-range green labor concept. The largest Nature Friends property in the East, Camp Midvale in Ringwood, N.J., can stand for how Eastern branches tried to realize these aims. The Californian clubs, on the other hand, shifted towards a concept in which the socioecological element was reinterpreted as the appreciation of nature in a cozy social German-American environment; to this day the Muir Woods Nature Friends' lodge in Mill Valley, CA is run on such a program.

### Camp Midvale and the East

For business meetings, lectures, photo shows, and balls, the early *Naturfreunde* in New York and San Francisco used inner-city venues they shared with other labor organizations: The Labor Temple in New York and California Hall (or: Teutonic Rathaus) in San Francisco (Gross, 2020, pp. 7; 14-15). But for the pleasures of nature and an extended sense of community, they would look for opportunities within easy reach from the big cities. Built through cooperative efforts – most members were craftsmen – these *Naturfreundehäuser* (club houses) were pioneer projects which opened up undeveloped natural sites for the members' and implicitly the public's use. They were centers of a shared identity, of solidarity, and for an ecologically sustainable lifestyle. They served as vacation resorts and space for outdoor sports (mostly hiking, skiing, and mountaineering, but also ball sports and dancing), and recreational activities combined with cultural and political projects. They were contact zones (Pratt 1991) in a physical, intellectual and social sense. Cross-over experiences ranged from world views and lifestyles to food and drink, artwork, drama, and music.

Camp Midvale was established by the New York club in 1920. It soon attracted members to live there permanently and over time achieved an identity of its own. Never far from politics, after the Depression years it "became the scene of many Popular Front activities during the thirties. [...] It

made the contact of city workers with nature financially possible” (Ragg, 1977, p. 38). In 1939, during the New Deal era, it was a hiking destination sympathetically singled out by the New Jersey Federal Writers Project, which introduced it as a bilingual institution with a huge swimming pool run by German unionists catering to the recreational needs of industrial workers (Gross, 2014, pp. 16-21).

The Camp represented everything the Nature Friends stood for: hiking in a beautiful area, spending holidays cheaply, being together with people of a progressive persuasion, with a moderate openness as to moral restrictions, and no racism. It attracted hundreds and thousands from the region and from New York City. In the 1950s there were 44 miles of hiking trails, and the Trail Conference, of which it was a member, included its tours in its famous *Walk Book*. Nowhere around could one find such a wide-ranging version of green labor:

- Through the **spectacular contrast** to hectic New York City (the skyline of which can be seen from High Point above the Camp) and the industrial centers of Newark, Passaic, or Paterson (where many of its users came from) it provided not only an escape from the chores of everyday life but also a collective experience of what the labor movement can achieve if it sticks together.
- Due to its **cooperative and participatory character and as property shared**, members and to an extent visitors could influence how the place was run; it manifested a comprehensive model of democratic self-organization.
- Based on the **humanistic values** of freedom and equality, there were no restrictions as to race, gender, age, etc.
- They were **free-speech areas** in which a host of topics ranging from how to live in a sustainable way to international solidarity were discussed.
- The advantages of **technological progress** both for access to the Camp (railroad, car) and for maintenance (such as electricity provided by the new Wanaque Reservoir or steam excavators for building its huge swimming pool) were used but remained supportive tools, not driving factors for its development.

- In a most personal way, it connected **nature and freedom**, as in this exemplary childhood memory of the 1950s:

We’d eat our meals in the front of our cabin and watch the deer coming down from behind us. There were shows on the stage on weekends and we kids would sit under the apple trees on our blankets. Talent shows, music, dancing and puppet shows. Every week we’d go hiking with our lunches up to High Point. What fun. Maybe I was too young to realize anything political was going on, but it sure wasn’t when I got older. We used to go down to the dump in the evenings with our flashlights and watch the bears rummage through the trash. In the afternoons the men would play pinochle in the clubhouse and the women played canasta. We kids just ruled the camp. Ping pong, volleyball, horse-shoes, swings, swimming. (Qtd. in Gross, 2014, p. 39)

The principles the Camp was based on were not understood or appreciated by everyone, though. Even progressive participants failed to recognize its cooperative character, and those who opposed its politics worked hard to undermine it. From the 1940s onwards to keep the Camp going was made difficult by various factors both internal and external:

1. **A reduced number of volunteers.** With a growing number of visitors, it became increasingly difficult to find the dozens of volunteers necessary to cover all the necessary functions throughout the year and for every weekend, including keeping intact the vast grounds, maintaining its hiking trails, and servicing the multiple buildings and Olympic-size swimming pool; permanent costs began to exceed the revenue from the working-class-friendly attendance fees; volunteers felt uneasy about a lack of appreciation from some visitors.
2. **Lack of support from organized labor.** Unionists and refugees of all shades came, but mainly as short-term visitors. Political parties did not help either, and certainly did not understand its socioecological approach. Even though some Nature Friends functionaries felt attracted to the Communist Party,

the CPUSA promoted an English-only policy and did not appreciate bilingual enterprises. On the other hand, the now fairly conservative Social Democratic successor of the NYVZ, the *Neue Volkszeitung*, in 1941 stated that “the Nature Friends belonged to those German American labor organizations which are abused by a small clique of communist party functionaries” (May 31), hoped that “the doubtlessly non-communist majority of the Nature Friends [...] would make their stand [...] to the clique [of their] leaders’,” and on September 7 ominously indicated that they were in danger of losing Camp Midvale (Ragg, 1977, pp. 233-234) – a threat many a volunteer saw as openly siding with the enemies of the Camp.

3. **Flaws in the integration of refugees.** Like other labor organizations, the *Naturfreunde* were illegalized in Nazi-Germany and clerico-fascist Austria in 1933 and 1934. Refugees of this generation had known *Naturfreunde* principles at home and thus blended in well, like Bavarian author Oskar Maria Graf, who even became an ‘honorary member’ at Midvale (Gross, 2015b). But for the next generation of exiles, after the German annexation of Austria in 1938, “there was an almost complete organizational separation between the Austrian and the German resistance groups” (Neugebauer, 2014, pp. 53-54). The Austrians kept to themselves and did not participate in the camp activities necessary for its survival. Interviewees for an oral history project in the 1980s remembered what obviously was the nonpartisan antifascist *Freie Österreichische Jugend* (Free Austrian Youth), a New York group of some 250 members, among them 25 to 50 Jewish. To these Midvale was a mere outdoor escape in a beautiful area, as a note on August 28, 1943, makes clear: “Our sports season in Camp Midvale comes to an end with a big festival, including water-polo, fist ball, volleyball and girls’ handball matches against Nature Friends teams” (Eppel, 1995, pp. 645). This ‘we’ against ‘them’ implies a distance old-time members and residents did not appreciate (Gross 2021).

4. **McCarthyite intimidation.** Internal controversies and disappointments were intensified when as part of the McCarthy-witchhunts the FBI began to question camp neighbors and take down the licence plates of cars visiting, and when the KuKluxKlan and local Minutemen attacked the camp for the non-segregated politics of its swimming pool. Under the circumstances, residents even of Nature Friends stock wanted to establish formal property rights of where they lived (with legal conflicts among members following), and long-time supporters began to stay away or withdraw to camps in the New York and New Jersey hill-sides (Gross, 2014, pp. 42-43).

All of this makes clear how the Camp did not perish because of its socioecological character but was destroyed through a complex melange of internal and external factors. At least its ecological character could be preserved in the long run. Once the Nature Friends gave it up, the property was handed over to the Metropolitan Recreation Association, a civil rights and sustainability project in which old members were involved. Then a well-to-do couple, Walter and Mary Weis, endowed money to maintain the grounds as a nature reserve. After an interim phase as a nature center for the New Jersey Audubon Society, today the camp and pool are run on a non-profit and cooperative basis by a group of environmentalists who had mostly grown up there. In that particular format, socioecological values are preserved although the Nature Friends’ existence as an organization has come to an end.

### Muir Woods and the West

Muir Woods, on the Pacific end of the nation, has remained more of a success story. In her volume on the history of walking, Rebecca Solnit (2014) devoted to it a few pages as an example of working-class wanderlust with an explicitly environmental tinge (pp. 155-157). It was opened soon after the San Francisco club had come into being. Like at Midvale, its ideological roots were progressive, but from early on an Austro-German character was more visible. In the 1930s traditional working-



class rhetoric was reduced to allusions to a spirit of cooperation, collectively enjoying nature and running one's properties with people whose lifestyles one shared. Although money was collected for war efforts during World War II and refugees were supported, the Californians were less outspoken about the situation in Europe. Anti-racist activities seem to have played a less prominent role.

From then on what came to be called the Nature Friends Tourist Club rather concentrated on Austrian and German folklore, from Alpine dress codes and dancing modes to traditional beer fests. Its building style was called 'Swiss.' The paintings at the clubhouse blend the craggy peaks of the European Alps with those of the High Sierra. Geographically, its location just across the Golden Gate creates a unique contrast to the densely populated and industrialized Bay Area, and the beauty of its surroundings, from Mount Tamalpais and the nearby Pacific to easy walking access to Muir Woods National Monument with its shady creeks and redwood trees, makes it a constant reminder of how nature appreciation and entertainment can go together.

Muir Woods, both the National Monument and the Tourist Club, were named after well-known Scots-American National Park activist John Muir (1838-1914), whose life briefly overlapped with that of the San Francisco club. Muir was, in spite of his intensive political contacts, more interested in nature than in political matters, which seems to make him a perfect namesake here. Yet unlike Muir's (and Thoreau's) fascination with wilderness as an antithesis to civilization, the clubhouse combines the natural and the social, Austro-German *gemütlichkeit* and active participation in nature. Today the Californian Nature Friends' profile merges German-Austrian folk traditions, non-political sociability, and outstanding sports opportunities. Environmentalism on a larger scale has given way to preserving and enjoying the nature in the clubhouses' immediate environs and its hinterland in a practical way.

The process of the Californian *Naturfreunde's* 'Americanization' is outlined by Erich Fink, whose 1971 booklet on the fiftieth anniversary of the

Oakland Nature Friends (founded with the help of the San Francisco local) covered the interconnected history of both clubs. Its advertising section almost exclusively exhibited Germanic-sounding names and European products, proof of an active German-American community's vivid support. Just as the old language was gradually given up, the political orientation was also abandoned: "All members in the 1920s spoke German. All meetings were conducted in German. Until the early 1930s, membership in a union was also required before becoming a Nature Friend. This aspect of our organization has nearly disappeared" (Fink, 1971, n.p.). Elsewhere Fink acknowledges that the Californians were jeopardized by McCarthyism as well; conflicts were settled more easily than in the East, although they did contribute to the Californians' withdrawal from politics (2008, p. 37).

In yet another publication, Fink compares the Californians' self-image with that of the Sierra Club and the European *Naturfreunde*:

What is the NATURE FRIEND CLUB? In California it is an incorporated club, an association of hikers, mountaineers, skiers and nature lovers whose aim is to perpetuate and further the interests of its members and others in outdoor sports and activities, to further and aid the protection of nature and its beauty and to conserve our nature's resources.

The club is of a non-political nature, although the members' declaration of love of nature involves some commitment to the environmental cause. Our club's parent club in Europe, just like the Sierra Club here, is actively involved in the political ecological movement on all levels.

Here in California our members have more of an inclination to be participants and friendly users of the pleasures of nature: hiking, skiing, mountaineering and outdoor recreational activities. (1986, n.p.)

This still describes the status quo. The current San Francisco club's website states: "We are Friends of Nature. We are hikers, mountaineers, and passionate advocates for the natural environment." To which Susi Raub-Vogler, the International Secretary of Nature Friends California, adds in a recent Nature Friends International website post:

The priorities for our organization are ex-

posure to nature and the preservation of it through access and awareness, to provide community for wellbeing, and to continue and share our cultural traditions of the founders per their mission statement. Over time our organization has become multifaceted in people and activities. Each one of our Naturefriends houses has acquired its own atmosphere and culture that adds to our club diversity and interest. [...] I strongly believe, in order to foster any and all healthy environments, we must encourage healthy human activities and community, and this is what the NF promotes. Through such community we can motivate people to help preserve what we value so greatly – our natural environment and friendship. The enrichment I have gained from the Naturefriends has been invaluable!<sup>5</sup>

On such a synthesis of community life, nature sports, and cultural entertainment, Muir Woods will celebrate its 110th anniversary in 2022. Its ‘Alpine’ festivals amidst a spectacular landscape follow the seasonal course of the year as a reminder of how central to its values nature is. The combination of environmentalist aims with an emphasis on Germanic culture had probably helped fend off the onslaught of McCarthyism. Stabilizing factors may have been a cultural hype for things Bavarian in the reconstruction years after World War II (Raithel, 2004, p. 27) and the German-American heritage revival of the post-1960s (Tolzmann, 2000, p. 355). All in all, linking nature appreciation and *gemütlichkeit* has made it possible for the Californian Nature Friends to prevail over political adversities, at the cost of more complex socioecological aspirations.

## Conclusion

Since the 1970s scholars and activists have come up with highly complex socioecological concepts (Radkau, 2014; Bruckmeier, 2016). These developed into various strategies for a “socioecological transformation” as the groundwork for a sustainable future (e.g., Haberl et al., 2016; Kramm et al., 2017), among them some with a clearly anti-capitalist impact (e.g., Moore, 2016), others with

a particular emphasis on global aspects (e.g., Lessenich, 2019). The *Naturfreunde* today are actively involved in this debate.<sup>6</sup>

It is quite obvious that, decades ago, debates on high-tech renewable energy, the externalization of environmental and social costs, or the relevance of diversity in nature for future economies could not have been dealt with in such a way. What distinguishes the *Naturfreunde* is how, as a leisure-focused labor organization, they were among the first to address ‘green’ matters in such a context. This article on the history of the American Nature Friends as an environmentalist group has tried to show how two very different versions developed from its green labor beginnings, one with a progressive emphasis linking environmental and socio-political processes (Camp Midvale), the other one of a more pragmatic ‘green’ character where fun and nature go together (Muir Woods).

The first concept would in no way have ruled out the recreational impact of a love of the outdoors and nature, but added that environmental questions, recreation, self-empowerment, and justice are linked closely (human rights plus social equality plus sustainability). Their clubhouses and camps were not only sites of enjoyment, but they also served to enlighten others on what a life built on solidarity with both co-humans and nature could achieve, as – to use a slogan about German *Naturfreundehäuser* during the Weimar Republic – “grüne Inseln im Klassenkampf” (“Green islands in the class struggle”).

Blurring their working-class background in a long historical process, the Californian Nature Friends adopted the second approach, which served more immediate physical and psychological interests. That Muir Woods and the other lodges flourish in their niches today is due to the fact that they began to emphasize cultural matters and a relatively traditional concept of nature appreciation over political contexts. Their practices aim at teaching outdoor enthusiasts how to enjoy nature without disrupting it, and that learning to do so can be fun shared with

others. Its history reflects a shift away from a comprehensive socioecological orientation towards a social plus ecological one.

All in all, the Nature Friends as an environmentalist group have left only few traces in the ecological movement in the USA as a whole. This raises the question whether it makes sense to reconsider their socioecological experiments and experiences beyond merely documentary historiography. Three aspects may suggest the answer is 'yes':

The duality between **environmentalism as a lifestyle and as a demand for fundamental change** emerging from their history is one permeating ecological debates in the present as well. Its contours can thus be historicized. On the one hand, the radical critique of the Fridays for Future movement is not unlike that of the Camp Midvale type (though without its recreational aspects), whereas on the other hand less ambitious lovers of nature may look for ways how best to reduce their personal footprints on the environment. Both sides claim to be "friends of nature," and in fact both versions are to be found within the Nature Friends International today.

Due to their complexity, socioecological debates are the realm of highly specialized organizations focusing on their own topical expertise and perspectives. Yet their findings have to be translated into practices which motivate the general public to participate in such efforts. **What is the role of a leisure-time organization like the Nature Friends in such a process?** The two dominant *Naturfreunde* organizations today, in Austria and Germany, answer that question in differing ways: Most Austrian groups see themselves as outdoor clubs with an ecological tinge – an approach not unlike that of Muir Woods. In Germany many clubs rather are political plus recreational groups – i.e., closer to the Nature Friends in the former Eastern District. Can American experiences shed light on how, even beyond institutionalized politics, civic clubs like the *Naturfreunde* can best support and influence socioecological progress?

This is even relevant in **recent American contexts**. The Trump presidency has shown how fragile democratic patterns can be (culminating in the storming of the Capitol in January 2021), and how undervalued ecological and social questions were on the administration's political agenda. To the surprise of many, the presidency of Joe Biden has opened up new doors for a Green New Deal (e.g., Smith, 2021), which almost certainly will be oscillating between the poles of a more radical socioecological transformation and traditional small-scale reforms. A weighing of the merits and disadvantages of both approaches, past and present, can, for example, also be accomplished by comparing the socioecological practices as they were outlined on a small scale in the history of the Nature Friends in the United States.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For general surveys see Jones, 2014, Rippley, 2014; Sydney, 2014. Immigration from Switzerland (Schelbert, 2014) has often been sidelined as it follows different trends. Yet for the Austrian Vorarlberg region, e.g., it became a major emigration route (Pichler, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Heike Bungert's comprehensive reconstruction of a German-American festival culture does not even include the founding of the New York branch (2016: 562-564). The *Naturfreunde* do not fit easily into categories.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.azarchivesonline.org/xtf/view?docId=ead/asu/americanstockphotophotographs.xml&doc.view=print;chunk.id=0> [05/18/2021].

<sup>4</sup> Using the terms "proletarian," "socialist," and "communist" interchangeably, Boelke reduces the social order he envisions to just and fair wages, not exactly what one might expect from a revolutionary. – Black Friday would (also through European influences) lead to more rigid ideological conflicts among American Nature Friends.

<sup>5</sup> <https://touristclubsf.org>; <https://www.nf-int.org> [05/18/2021].

<sup>6</sup> E.g., <https://www.naturfreunde.de/manifest-transformation>; <https://www.nf-int.org/en/about-us/mission-statement> [05/18/2021].

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