

Life After Chernobyl: A Surprising Ecosystem Flourishes In No-Man's Land

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When the Chernobyl nuclear reactor melted down in 1986, dozens of people died, more became ill with acute radiation sickness, and 135,000 people were evacuated. The blast spread more than 200 times the radioactivity than the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.

The prognosis for Chernobyl and its environs—succinctly dubbed the Zone of Alienation—was grim.

If fears of the Apocalypse and a lifeless, barren radioactive future have been constant companions of the nuclear age, almost twenty years later Chernobyl shows us a very different view of the future.

In *Wormwood Forest: A Natural History of Chernobyl* (October 2005, Joseph Henry Press), journalist Mary Mycio vividly describes an extraordinary—and at times unearthly—new ecosystem that is flourishing in this no-man's land, with radiation too intense for people to live there safely.

Ten years after the Chernobyl disaster, journalist Mary Mycio made her first trip to the Chernobyl region. Equipped with dosimeter [describe what this is used for] and protective gear, Mycio set out to explore the world's only radioactive wilderness environment and the defiant local residents who remained behind to survive and make their lives in the Zone."

She discovered a wilderness teeming with large animals, more than before the nuclear disaster and many of them members of rare and endangered species. Like the forests, fields, and swamps of this unexpectedly inviting habitat, both the people and animals are radioactive. Cesium-137 is packed in their muscles and strontium-90 in their bones. But, quite astonishingly, they are also thriving.

Chernobyl's flourishing new ecosystem is "one of the first examples of how, in the absence of human intervention, nature in the zone could recover its balance," writes Mycio—even in the face of radioactive "ghost towns and villages [that] stand in tragic testimony to the devastating effects of technology gone awry.

A vivid blend of reportage, popular science, and illuminating encounters that explode the myths of Chernobyl with facts that are at once beautiful and horrible, Wormwood Forest brings a remarkable land—and its people and animals—to life to tell a unique story of science, surprise, and suspense.

Mary Mycio is a pioneering American reporter who first visited the city of Kiev in 1989 to do a semi-clandestine interview about the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl. She later became the Kiev correspondent for the Los Angeles Times and a contributor to a variety of newspapers around the world. With her background in journalism, a B.A. in biology, and a law degree from New York University, she was uniquely positioned to write the story of Chernobyl. She has accumulated reams of material about the disaster's environmental and health effects and filled numerous notebooks with details of her many journeys into the Zone of Alienation. She currently lives in Kiev where she is also director of the IREX ProMedia Legal Defense and Education Program for Ukrainian journalists.

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