Personal Reflections on the Fate of Wilderness Reserves in Russia

BY KATHLEEN BRADEN

Nature is dying in Russia. Poachers or habitat loss have decimated wildlife populations such as snow leopard, argali, Asian marmot, and Amur leopard. At this moment of greatest need, the network of Russian nature reserves that saves pockets of Eurasia's threatened species has fallen on hard times. Many reserves exist on paper only; most are under siege, and all are severely understaffed.

Nature Reserves Threatened

For more than 90 years, Russia had a vision: to keep sanctuaries of wilderness alive across the biggest country on Earth. The very word in Russian for the reserves, *zapovedniki*, implied they were forbidden territory, with almost biblical sanction. Off-limits to all but either scientists or wilderness inspectors, the protected territories were not for tourism, but for conservation and research.

The light of that vision endured through times of crushing poverty, the whims of dictators, and all Russia's wars of the 20th century. But in recent times, it is growing dim, and might not survive the neglect of its own government or the attention of the outside world. New winds called "the bottom line" may soon extinguish the light entirely.

Although there had always been pressure to open the reserves for economic use, at least the Soviet government paid minimally for staff salaries, housing, and equipment. Things changed radically after the USSR ceased to exist. The *zapovedniki* were on their own with their budgets under the new Russian Federation cut by 90% (Jorgensen and Honneland 2006). Wages for inspectors stagnated while the cost of living skyrocketed. In the mid-1990s, the EcoClub (2008) website posted job announcements that told the story:

- Assistant Director S. Khokhryakov of the Lazovskiy Reserve sends word that he really needs some specialists and kind-hearted folks for temporary work, but at the present time, the reserve has no means to pay for transit documents or its full work plan.
- Central Siberian Reserve is looking for ten people from May–September for temporary work on science projects. In 1996 the reserve does not have the ability to pay transportation and salary.

Kathleen Braden at Sayano-Shushenskiy Reserve.

Slashed budgets were just the beginning of the changes in store. By the year 2000, Russian Federation president Vladimir Putin had abolished the State Committee for Environmental Protection and moved care of the territories to the Ministry of Natural Resources, the same bureaucracy responsible for determining how to draw profits from Russia's minerals and forests. The reserves were to become "self-compensating" (*samookupaemost*') as part of the effort to attract private-sector partners (Center for Russian Nature Conservation 2003; Stepanitskiy 2004).

True, reserve buffer zones had been created back in Soviet times to allow use by local people, and yes, Communist Party officials had flouted the rules and taken occasional duck shooting trips, but now the buffer zones were open for business to wealthy New Russians or any foreigner who could pay. The idea was to maintain a sustainable harvest of trophy animals and use the proceeds to fill in the funding gap for biodiversity protection.

One of the places attractive to hunters was the Altai Mountains. In 2005, I traveled there with my husband, Zhenya, who often conducted fieldwork on snow leopards in Russia. I met his friend, Volodya Yantiev, an inspector with

the Shavlinskiy reserve. Yantiev was famous with locals because he had apprehended a group of wealthy Moscow tourists who had been planning a hunting party with a helicopter that briefly touched down in the neighborhood. The pilot replied that everyone inside had legal licenses. Later, when the craft returned, Yantiev boarded and on the cabin floor found 10 dead ibex goats, including breeding females, shot from the local herd of 14 animals. He was furious and took photos. The poachers turned out to include Alexis Saurin, a figure high up in the Department of Conservation and Hunting Resources in the national Ministry of Agriculture. The local prosecutor told Volodya no action would be taken against him if he hushed up the incident. He didn't. The story and images were published in the Altai press and read with dismay by ordinary folks who had seen the cost of their hunting licenses rise far beyond what they could afford (Vitovstev 2004).

The word on biodiversity seemed to get worse every year. Illegal trade in wildlife increased thanks to open borders with China and corruption at every level. Even the extensive brown bear population was under threat by poachers who harvested the bears' gallbladders. Along the Caspian Sea, the caviar stock was threatened due to overharvest and in Kamchatka, illegal fishing had almost destroyed salmon stocks and cost an official on patrol along the Pacific his life during an encounter with poachers in 2002 (reported as brief note in *Earth Island Journal*, Dec. 22, 2002). One Siberian inspector, Alexei Novoselov, and three coworkers disappeared while on patrol, apparently at the hand of poachers, and were assumed murdered. Although bodies weren't found, poachers who came across the border from the Tyva Republic were prime suspects (Hiatt 1994). The case turned into a political hot potato between Tyva and Russia.

Figure 1—Wolf print at Sayano-Shushenskiy Reserve. Photo by Kathleen Braden.

Figure 2—Musk deer snares. Photo by E. Kashkarov.

Despite these grim reports, Zhenya occasionally heard of a bright spot from his contacts. A biologist friend, Viktor Lukarevskiy, emailed that he had found good sign of snow leopard tracks and markings in the Altai reserve. Most of the messages, though, sent Zhenya into a black mood. Musk deer, a small animal with long, curved tusks, had been common in Siberia, but populations had declined up to 80% as poachers killed males for their pods (World Wide Fund for Nature [WWF] 2004). During his fieldwork, Zhenya tried to destroy or collect every snare he encountered.

The situation was all the more infuriating given the money coming in from large international donors. Since the mid-1990s, more than $170 million from abroad entered the country for nature protection as large wildlife conservation groups stepped into the void left by the Russian government's shrinking conservation ruble (The World Bank Group 1994). A key player was the World Wide Fund for Nature (called the World Wildlife Fund in the United States and Canada and sharing the same WWF acronym), the financial supporter for nature reserves across the continent. The organization's panda symbol ("for a living planet") showed up on reserve vehicles, printed materials, Web sites, and even the Russian inspector uniforms, prompting one American conservationist to call WWF "the 500-pound panda in the closet."

When I went to Siberia in 2005, those panda people had a big plan on the table: the Altai-Sayan Ecoregion project, funded in part by World Bank money and implemented through the United Nations Development Programme and WWF. According to the documents I obtained from the World Bank, large sums were involved ($3.85 million provided by the World Bank alone), as well as plans to train local people for tourism, increase hunting near the reserves, establish new reserves in the region, and expand the boundaries of existing ones. The documents used all the words that Western funding agencies loved to hear: *sustainability, local stakeholders, integrated*

networks, flagship species (United Nations Development Programme n.d.). The plan seemed to offer innovative forms of user-fees, and these new forms of financing for the reserves were controversial in Russia. Old-timers whose management expertise dated back to the Soviet period were appalled that the reserves would turn to commerce to stay viable.

In March, I was teaching in the Siberian city of Barnaul, and observed a meeting of the region's Association of Reserves and National Parks. Knowing what I did about the World Bank proposal, I was expecting to hear a hot discussion. Instead, I witnessed a quiet clash of cultures. The WWF people, in khakis and T-shirts displaying slogans from American national parks, sat at laptops, intense and well-organized. The reserve staff in their Soviet-era suits looked uncomfortable and were easily distracted. They stood up and gave impromptu speeches, slapped each other on the back in greeting, yelled messages across the room, made drumsticks out of their pencils, and peered at articles about wildlife when they were supposed to be listening to the speakers. The WWF representative tried to get the directors focused back on the work at hand and pass resolutions to send back to the government in Moscow.

Aleksandr Rassolov stood out at the Barnaul conference. He managed the Sayano-Shushenskiy reserve in Krasnoyarsk Kray and had a reputation as one dynamite entrepreneur. Trim and well put-together in his sport jacket, Rassolov was enthusiastic about what they had achieved. "Come and see for yourself," he told my husband and me, "and you will find a *zapovednik* where the wildlife is still alive and thriving." We'd heard that Rassolov had succeeded in attracting support from a nearby aluminum company and was bringing hunting parties and tourists into the buffer zones around the reserve, moving it much further toward self-support than the other struggling *zapovedniki.* Since Rassolov's operation seemed to be the model called for in the Altai-Sayan plan, we decided to take him up on his invitation.

Sayano-Shushenskiy Reserve

On the first day in May after the ice melted on the Yenisey, Zhenya and I joined some of the reserve staff to wait for the cutter boat that would take us to the reserve. We met at a launch point behind the hydroelectric station on a dark and bone-chilling afternoon. Many of the construction team traveling out for summer work were just youngsters, happy to be employed, and the box of empty vodka bottles on the deck under the back awning suggested they had started celebrating hours before we arrived. I noticed that the boat crew was hooking up a barge and peering at the mess, I could discern lumber, food supplies, machinery, building materials, a child's bike, boxes of electronics, outdoor gear, and cheap, Chinese-made antenna dishes. There may have been a backhoe too; it was hard to tell. The cutter was packed solid, with each square inch holding supplies or a staff member's personal belongings.

Zhenya struck up a conversation with Igor Kalmykov, a big guy in camouflage fatigues, one of the reserve's inspectors. Igor was a member of the WWF-sponsored snow leopard anti-poaching brigade. As assistant director for science at the reserve, he seemed to be the leader on board.

I made my way to the back of the boat deck where the construction workers were drinking and smoking Belomorcanals. They all seemed to be simple country guys, some already missing teeth, but one named Peter was slightly older and left to nap.

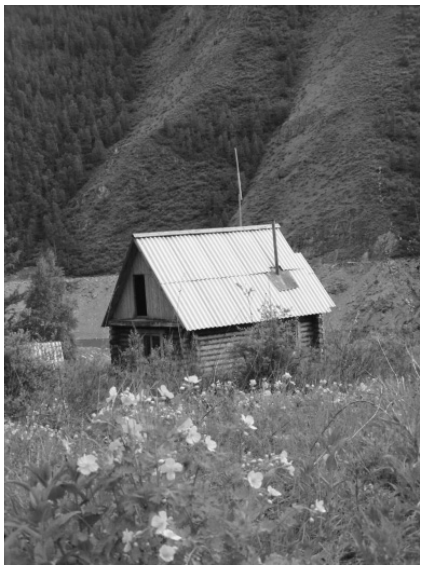

Figure 3—Science station at Maliy Uri River. Photo by Kathleen Braden.

The cutter reached Kurgol station along the banks of the reservoir. Two large houses designed to serve as a type of bed-and-breakfast for ecotourists stood partially built. A shiny boat named the *Amyl* was tied up at the shoreline, and Igor asked if we would we like to go aboard for lunch.

We were shown to a dining room on the upper deck, light filtering in through picture windows and plates of fresh greens and caviar laid out on the table. The well-heeled European passengers told us that they paid to hunt game in the buffer zone around the reserve every year. The boat was part of the infrastructure built by Rassolov to develop tourism, just like the reserve's private hotel where we had stayed in Shushenskoye two nights earlier. Someone had put careful planning into that little hotel. It was rustic, but had the same classy feel as the *Amyl.*

After lunch, our next stop was Shugur station, almost to the border with the Tyva (Tuva) Republic. Igor showed us around the outpost. In addition to the simple houses with sleeping quarters and a ham radio, there was an open-air kitchen, an outhouse, and the necessary *banya*

Figure 4—Igor Kalmykov with ibex rack. Photo by E. Kashkarov.

(bath-house). Promptly at 9 a.m. and 4 p.m., all the staff gathered around their ham radios and let everyone know they were safe, checking in with details and observations.

Our last stop of the day was a remote spot where the Bolshiye Uri River flowed into the reservoir. I didn't see a ranger station, but we pulled up to the bank and dropped off Peter, who had finally woken up. Why did one of the construction crew need to be out here, so far from everything else? Igor explained that Peter wasn't a construction worker; he was an inspector—in fact, one of their most experienced guys, who had done reserve work for 20 years. "Peter didn't need to see the scenery along the way," laughed Igor, "He's seen it all before."

Toward the end of our week in the reserve, we stopped at the science station along the Maliye Uri River. Two tidy huts faced the river and steep, green hills on the opposite bank. A small stream filled the air with water sounds and the meadows were covered by yellow wildflowers. Igor Kalmykov surveyed the shore and picked up a goat skull with horns. Most likely a wolf kill, it would be brought back to the Shushenskoye headquarters for examination.

Zhenya headed up the slopes to look for snow leopard sign, and I took a walk along the shoreline. Along the hillsides, forests were interspersed with rocky outcroppings. I followed a line of wolf tracks and then sat in the sand with my back against a log, watching a group of ibex high up above me in the sunshine. A merganser guarded her eight babies in the river nearby. It was very quiet, maybe a vision of Eden.

On our last night at the reserve, we all gathered in the hotel kitchen back in the town of Shushenskoye. The guys drank vodka and then retired to the *banya*, bottles in hand. When they emerged with steaming bodies wrapped in white towels, Igor seemed ready for one more conversation.

I told him about my wish to discern the truth of nature conservation in Russia and to understand what motivated someone to work in the *zapovedniki*. It was hard for me to picture development of ecotourism or hunting that might stay within quotas. Furthermore, I could not imagine that any amount of "sustainable alternative livelihoods" (in the jargon of the Western megafunds) could make a dent in the walls between local people and the *zapovedniki*. It was the reserve workers themselves who seemed to be the real guardians of nature in Russia. What made them keep at it despite the dangers and low pay?

Igor paused a moment before replying. "I think you might have noticed the reserve is like a big *kolkhoz* [collective farm]. It needs teams who will work together and it needs organization."

I asked, "What is it going to take to get more of these international grants to end up directly with the *zapovedniki* people?"

Igor would have none of it. "Do you really think that money is what motivates these guys? Sure, we could always use more money, better training, more equipment, but I don't imagine any of them would do very much differently just for more money." He did allow that attracting smart young trainees into the profession was a problem, and he worried about the future. "I guess we are endangered too in our own way—getting smaller in numbers and trying to keep our traditions alive."

I said that the workers still seemed like heroes to me. Once more, he challenged my argument. "Some of these people really are heroes to me too. But a lot of them are here for their own reasons. Some can't adjust too well to life and need a place to hide out. Like any group, you find all kinds. Don't idealize us."

The men were tired now and more than a little drunk, so I stopped asking questions, knowing they needed to sleep. But I was not ready for bed and tried to sort things out. Was it delusional to think the Putin government would support the reserves properly again? Were most of the Soviet-era staff just dinosaurs, stuck in a time that would never return? In the realities of the new Russia, would the only effective managers be those who could bend and sell off for tourism or hunting part of the very territory they needed to protect?

I decided to download photos of my week at Sayano-Shushenskiy. Here was one of Peter being dropped off in the rain at a little cove of the Bolshiye Uri River. In the picture, it looked like Peter was sober now, hoisting up his heavy backpack and trying to blink himself awake. The moment of that photo came back to me: it was late and he still had a three-hour hike in front of him to the Chul-Aksy hut at the far end of the reserve, the far end of planet Earth. He'd probably stay there many months before coming out again. As the boat backed up, I watched his figure grow smaller along the shoreline. I hoped he would have enough of the evening light to help him find the way.

Postscript

On January 16, 2006, the Ministry of Natural Resources issued a decree to

the reserve directors, mandating that they generate a profit of 154.5 million rubles (approximately $5.5 million dollars) that year (Ministry of Natural Resources 2006). In March 2007, new rules limited the ability of reserve inspectors to levy fines against poachers on-site, moving the function to bureaucrats in distant urban areas (Goroshkova 2007). Zoning was changed for the Sochi National Park near the Caucasus Nature Reserve to pave the way for resort development associated with Russia's 2014 Winter Olympics. Over protests of environmental groups, a new agreement with China resulted in approval for a gas pipeline to cross the Altai's Ukok Plateau, a UNESCO World Heritage Site protected territory (Braden 2007).

My husband received another email from Viktor Lukarevskiy, who had just updated his field research on snow leopards along one of the Altai mountain ranges. "How many tracks did he see this time?" I asked. Zhenya looked up from his computer screen: "None."

In May 2007, Igor Kalmykov was picked to be the director of the Altai Reserve, with a territory more than twice that of Sayano-Shushenkiy. He has recently announced plans to develop a Visitor Center to welcome tourists. **IJW**

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centuries: initially out of fear of a hostile environment, then to maximize agricultural productivity, and finally, because the cultural and aesthetic values of traditional agricultural landscapes had become so highly valued that maintaining them, through heavy subsidies if necessary, became a high priority. As a result, the wilderness concept still meets considerable resistance throughout the continent. Nonetheless, the mindset is changing, and momentum for wilderness is building. In our view, we have crossed a critical threshold: building toward a European strategy for wilderness conservation is a difficult undertaking, but we believe it will happen in the foreseeable future. **IJW**

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