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CUT AND RUN
Logging Threatens Siberia
Illegal Logging Threatens Russia’s Last Great Wilderness
by Adam Federman

One month after the failed August 1991 coup that fatally weakened the Soviet Union, a group of Russian and American scholars gathered in Moscow to review what might have seemed a politically irrelevant topic—the historical dimensions of the environmental crisis in the US and the USSR. Among them were Nikolai Nikolaevitch Vorontsov, Soviet minister for the Environment, and the only non-communist to serve in Gorbachev’s cabinet. Though largely unknown outside of Russia and overshadowed by the ebullient Boris Yeltsin, Vorontsov became something of a hero during the early pro-democracy movement as one of only two cabinet ministers to directly oppose the coup.

In a special issue of the Journal of the History of Biology devoted to the conference, Vorontsov reflected on the question of environmental defense in the USSR: “The ideology of the inexhaustibility of our natural resources, of the endlessness of our forests, seas and fish—all this was the euphoria that dominated our consciousness until quite recently.” At the same time that the ideology of inexhaustibility was coming to an end, the limits of empire and the redrawing of Russia’s borders posed a new kind of ecological threat.

One of the questions that plagued Vorontsov in the early post-Soviet period was how decentralization, new borders, and the opening of markets would affect a nascent environmental protection movement. Vorontsov worried that not only would his ministry be dissolved, but that solving complex ecological problems across national lines would become more difficult. In an effort to address the challenge, he fought to preserve a centralized...

He was not speaking solely of disasters like Chernobyl and the starving of the Aral Sea — icons of Soviet mismanagement. Russia’s ecological map is dotted with resources — forests, rivers, and lakes — that sometimes form and often defy political boundaries.

It is unlikely that Vorontsov, who died in 2000, included China as part of this new political and ecological landscape. Yet 17 years after his warning, the far eastern frontier has become a flashpoint in Russia’s resource wars. As the border with China has become more porous, the trade in illegally harvested timber has cast doubt on the ability of regional governments to manage Russia’s wilderness.

Nowhere is this more evident than along the Amur River, which forms a 1,755-mile-long border with China and is the largest free-flowing river in the Eastern Hemisphere. To the north and east of the Amur and its tributaries lies one of the greatest wildernesses on the planet and Russia’s most biologically diverse region. Sparsely populated and relatively unspoiled, the Russian Far East provides habitat for four of the world’s 15 species of cranes, nearly half of all wild Pacific salmon, and the 400 or so remaining Siberian tigers. It also accounts for close to one quarter of the world’s forest cover — the largest contiguous expanse on Earth — much of which remains inaccessible because of poorly developed infrastructure and difficult terrain.

“The border out there is the river,” says Darron Collins, managing director of the World Wildlife Fund’s Amur-Heilong project. “And in this part of the world, it’s not the Caucasus that defines Europe from Asia, it’s the Amur itself.” Wherever one draws the line between Europe and Asia, old distinctions no longer seem to apply.

South of the Amur, where the trade in illegally harvested timber has reached astonishing levels, much of the world’s inexpensive wood products are manufactured. In the last decade, once forgotten border towns — buoyed by cheap labor and accessible ports — have become industrial hubs, their wealth and rapid growth a product of the global timber trade. Wal-Mart buys 84 percent of its wood products from China, from baby cribs and toilet seats to picture frames and candle holders. China also serves as IKEA’s largest supplier of solid wood furniture.

“Chances are if you go into a store in the US,” says Collins, “and you find that kind of blond hardwood furniture that says ‘made in China,’ it’s very likely that the wood actually comes from this part of Russia.”

China, whose economy continues to grow at a rate of more than 10 percent annually (growth dipped below 10 percent in the third quarter of 2008 for the first time since 2005), has become the largest importer of logs (and the largest exporter of wood products) in the world. In 1998, after massive flooding along the Yangtze River killed several thousand people, the Chinese government — which attributed the floods in part to soil erosion and deforestation of upper river watersheds — banned commercial logging in 17 provinces. The ban marked the beginning of Russia’s timber boom.

In just three years, the volume of uncut logs entering China tripled. Russia’s share went from 1 million cubic meters of lumber in 1997 to nearly 9 million cubic meters in 2001. Today, more than five billion pounds of wood from Russia’s Primorski Krai region enters China each year. And nearly half of all the lumber shipped from Russia to China is illegally harvested.

The relationship between the two countries has an almost parasitic quality. Russia, in a state of relative decay, plays host to China’s emerging hyper-economy. Whereas the Russian Far East is vastly underpopulated, there are 75 million people living in the Amur basin of Northeast China. While China’s population continues to grow, the number of people living in the Russian Far East steadily declines. Between 1991 and 2005, 1.5 million people left the economically depressed region, and there is no indication that the demographic trend will be reversed in coming years.

In an economically depressed region with weak government oversight, high-value logs have become hard currency. The first time I traveled to Siberia in 2000, I spent some time in a small village near Lake Baikal, the name of which literally means “of the taiga.” The village had no communication or electricity after the power lines were cut down and the wood and scrap metal sold for a small sum.

“Because the mature forests have value as logs being shipped to China, you could end up having a large part of the biodiversity heritage of the Russian forest being decimated in the pursuit of immediate returns from harvesting,” says Charles Backman, an expert on forest resource management and the author of The Forest Industrial Sector of
Russia. Backman, who spent much of the 1990s helping to develop a model sustainable forest in Khabarovsk, adds that without clear property rights and protected forest areas, it is unlikely the situation will improve. Unregulated harvesting, he says, poses the greatest threat to Russia’s forests. A recent report by the BBC warned that Zabai- kalsky Krai in Eastern Siberia, not far from Lake Baikal, “could be stripped of wood reserves in five years if nothing is done to stop the criminal trade.”

In Moscow, Matthew Brzezinski’s first-person account of the early days of Russian capitalism, the former Wall Street Journal staff writer described Vladivostok as “five time zones ahead of the Russian capital, but a decade behind.” The same might be said of the forest industry itself, most notably in the “Wild East,” where there are few rules, political and economic power are closely aligned, and corruption is widespread.

“It’s very, very unclear how things work out there,” says Katy Harris of the Taiga Rescue Network. “It’s lawless out in the Far East, and there’s a huge amount of corruption within the national government structure .... You’ll go and you’ll walk through an area that’s supposed to be a watershed area — one of these protected areas along the bank of a river — and you’ll see that somebody’s been in there with a tractor and just taken out all those trees.”

The forestry sector was not exempt from the process of aggressive decentralization and market liberalization — what came to be known as “shock therapy” — that dominated Russia in the 1990s. The first forest legislation passed in 1993 turned over decision-making power from federal to municipal administrations. And while subsequent legislation has restored some power to the Federal Forest Service, “Decentralization ... has been one of the main impulses for illegalities in the forest sector,” according to a study of Russian forest policy published in 2006 by a group of Finnish and Russian scholars.

But there are many who believe that regional control, especially in the Russian Far East — thousands of miles and many time zones from Moscow — is necessary. The WWF’s Collins, who previously worked on tropical forest issues in the Amazon, says that one of the global trends in forest management is toward decentralization. “You can’t make decisions very effectively or enforce them out of Moscow or Lima,” he says. “You’ve got to do it in Madre de Dios in the Amazon or out in at least Vladivostok or Khabarovsk in Russia. That’s a good trend. You want decision making to be made more locally, but it also opens up some interesting issues.”

In Russia, regional management of forests has been further complicated by the fracturing of the timber industry. Once dominated by a handful of state-owned enterprises, timber harvesting is now the domain of thousands of small and medium-sized companies. More than 70 percent of Russian enterprises are privately owned, and in the forest sector, the number is even higher. Of the logging, pulp and paper, and woodworking industries, 98 percent are in private hands.

“Think about being on the forest floor,” says Josh Newell, a research assistant professor of geography at University of Southern California who has worked extensively in the Far East, “and you’ve got one huge company that owns a million hectares and you’ve just got to deal with that one entity. Then think about fracturing it by a hundred and trying to deal with all these personalities.”

Or by more than 22,000 — the official number of forest companies registered in 2002.

There is some hope that the recent implementation of an export tariff on unprocessed softwood will help to consolidate the forest industry by forcing small and medium-sized companies to merge or eventually fold. In April 2008, export taxes for softwood logs increased from 20 to 25 percent of log value, and in 2009, the Russian government says it will further increase the tariff to 80 percent — a figure that has European countries rather nervous. The move has already had a significant effect on world timber markets, and Russian log exports to Europe in the first quarter of 2008 fell by 44 percent, forcing a number of Finnish processing plants to shut their doors. Notably, however, exports to China continue to rise — purchases increased by 14 percent in the first quarter of 2008 — and most agree that “Russia will continue to dominate China’s softwood markets for many years to come,” as one industry analyst recently commented.

So it is unclear whether the tariff will strengthen domestic processing and improve forest management, especially in the Far East. At the moment, there is little confidence it will significantly alter the largely unregulated timber trade between Russia and China.

“The Chinese will either move their sawmills two kilometers north over the
border and slice each log in two before it goes out so that it counts as processed, not round wood,” Harris says. “Or it could drive [trade] underground. People will try and avoid doing it legally because they have to pay such a high tax.”

According to Anatoly Lebedev of the Bureau for Regional Outreach Campaigns in Vladivostok, who recently authored a report on the new Russian Forest Code with Harris, environmental organizations generally supported the tax measure and have promoted regional initiatives to impose tariffs over the last decade. But there is no simple fix, he says. Illegal logging is part of a much larger problem — what Lebedev calls the “officially adopted destructive operations” of regional authorities and the Russian timber industry.

“There’s the perception, and I think rightly so, that the Far East is selling off its natural resources and really not getting all that they could out of it,” Collins says. “So there’s been a big push from Moscow to put tariffs on exported material in the form of raw logs, with the hope that such tariffs will inspire at least local secondary processing. That’s something that’s really important and could shape the future for the timber industry.”

International attention to illegal logging in the Russian Far East has also mounted, and Wal-Mart’s recent decision to phase out illegal wood sources from its supply chain within the next five years is encouraging. In addition, a recent amendment to the Lacey Act, a law that regulates the trade in wild animals and non-native plants, will prohibit the importation into the US of products that contain illegally sourced wood. There is hope that putting pressure on the consumer side of the supply chain will eventually have an impact on logging practices in developing countries. The Forest Stewardship Council certification process is slowly making its way across Russia (second only to Canada in the total number of hectares certified), though most of the certification has taken place west of the Urals.

For environmental NGOs working in the Russian Far East, efforts to improve forest management have been stymied by the absence of a clear legal framework. Numerous forest codes and secondary legislation have been drafted since 1993, the most recent of which came into force on January 1, 2007, adding to an already Byzantine legal background. As a measure of just how complicated the process has been, deliberations on the new forest code began in 2002, and since then, over 20 outlines and proposals have been published by the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade.

The new forest code marks the beginning of an important transition that encourages further decentralization and market liberalization. By the end of 2008, every region in Russia (there are 83) was expected to come
up with its own 10-year forest management plan that then has to be approved by Moscow. (According to Harris, only half will be completed by then.) There is also a new initiative to track illegal logging, revise the land register, and create a new system of forest inventory to be completed by 2020 that, Harris contends, no one really understands.

Moreover, many of the regions do not have the resources or expertise to draft legislation that will reflect the needs of local people while ensuring that the forests are not auctioned off and destroyed. According to Harris, “There is a concern that poor legislation will be pushed through because it’s in somebody’s interest but not in the interest of the general public.”

The Taiga Rescue Network, in concert with local NGOs, Greenpeace Moscow, and other environmental organizations, has been working to make sure that the public is involved in the legislative process, particularly at the regional level. This has proved to be an uphill battle, as many NGOs and local environmental groups struggle to make sense of the new forest code before regional governments have drafted their management plans.

Harris recently returned from a Taiga Rescue Network meeting in Karelia near the Finnish border, and also attended a seminar of NGOs and environmental organizations in the Russian Far East — from Sakhalin to Baikal and Novosibirsk — organized by Pacific Environment. She says the mood was good and that there’s plenty of organizing around the development of new pipelines, hydrostations, and dams. (The Russian government has plans to build 20 large-scale dams in the next 20 years.) But there weren’t as many people working on forests as she’d hoped.

The local Russian opposition to illegal logging is nearly as fragmented as the timber industry. According to Lebedev, “civil non-governmental activities are almost absent” in parts of the Far East where people do not have the energy or resources to focus on conservation efforts. The optimism of the 1990s has been tempered by a crackdown on NGOs, increasing resource exploitation, and enduring poverty. In 2000, W. Alton Jones dissolved and scrapped its Russian forest program. Several other foundations withdrew, and funding became scarce, leaving only the larger environmental organizations like Greenpeace and WWF with the resources to operate.

“That hit the movement pretty hard,” says Newell. “And I think in some ways, at least in the Far East, you saw a consolidation of a lot of groups that sort of were two- and three-person operations. A lot of the best staff got picked up by WWF in Vladivostok, like the director now, Yuri Darman, who used to be with the Socio-Ecological Union in the Amur region. So a lot of the talent went there and it’s, I think, much more of a centralized civil society movement that’s funded by the WWF machinery and not that dependent on foundations.”

Nonetheless, a patchwork of small organizations that focus on one or two issues remain. Jennie Sutton, a founder of Baikal Environmental Wave who has lived in Irkutsk since 1974, says that these groups can “form ‘oases’ of green knowledge and action but their scope is very limited.” Sutton also notes that Baikal Wave has fewer volunteers than they did in the 1990s, and that the Russian environmental movement has not succeeded in getting its message out to the general population. “The environmental movement is weak,” she says, “and there are far more problems than it can deal with either individually or collectively.”

Perhaps, too, ecological protest is no longer viewed as part of a larger pro-democracy movement. In a speech before leading environmental organizations in 1995, a Russian sociologist argued that “ecological protest during the period 1987-1989 became the USSR’s first legal form of democratic protest and of solidarity among the citizenry as a whole.” Today, the word “democracy” is largely discredited in Russia, and there is little faith in open markets. As the state takes on an increasingly powerful role in managing Russia’s economy, and resource scarcity exacerbates existing environmental problems, the question is whether Russia’s wilderness — what some consider the Soviet Union’s most significant environmental legacy — and the world’s last great forests will be preserved.

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