

Russia's zapovedniks are some of the world's most pristine wildernesses. For 70 years they were protected ruthlessly by the Soviet system, but recently they have fallen prey to Putin, the World Bank and ecotourists. Paul Webster reports on their plight.

The Wild

They form a patchwork of dizzying diversity that includes the largest undisturbed Eurasian wilderness, the world's most biologically varied temperate forests and an inter-continental roll call of rare species from the Siberian tiger to the snow leopard, the Anatolian leopard to the Asiatic black bear and the European bison to the oriental stork. They are Russia's greatest natural marvels, a collection of 100 scientific reserves ranging in size from two hectares to 3.6 million hectares, that represent an astonishing 40 per cent of the world's scientific reserves. And they are at risk of being destroyed.

Better red than dead

Established in 1916, the reserves, which are known as zapovedniks, were originally

governed under the Soviet system by strict rules that prohibited any activities within their boundaries, other than those for scientific purposes. But in 1991 the Soviet collapse suddenly exposed the reserves to

market forces. The Russian government slashed zapovednik budgets by 90 per cent and pay was terminated for thousands of nature wardens and researchers in the reserves. The parks found themselves under fierce attack, threatened by developers and industries who were keen to strip them of their protected status.

'Russia's greatest protected areas are being destroyed,' says Arkady Tishkov, a biologist and geographer at Moscow State University who monitors parks and zapovedniks. 'Everything is being done to change the status of reserves and national parks to allow economic exploitation like logging and oil drilling.'

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The pressure on zapovednik directors and scientists is fierce. 'We are supposed to be quiet when our local administration makes plans to cut down the forests that we have been protecting with our limited resources, even at risk to our lives,' says Tishkov. 'We are supposed to be patient when local bosses visit us and demand bribes.'

Enter Putin

Although the crisis started in 1991 with the end of 70 years of rigid Soviet protection, the disaster deepened two years ago when Russian president Vladimir Putin came to power and introduced an aggressive programme to boost government revenues by exporting Russia's natural resources.

One of Putin's first moves in office was to shut down the Forest Department, which, along with the State Committee on Environment Protection, was Russia's main environmental regulator. Its responsibilities, including management of the zapovedniks, were passed to the Ministry of Natural Resources, a



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department, as its name suggests, dedicated to resource exploitation.

The effect was immediate. In October 2001 the deputy minister of finance suggested that money could be raised by logging the zapovednik's buffer zones which were designed to shelter their perimeters. Furthermore, it was put forward that those zapovedniks without buffer zones should sacrifice forest areas within the reserves to logging.

Vsevolod Stepanitsky, Russia's most senior zapovednik administrator at the time, resigned in anger soon after those suggestions were made. 'The policy of abandoning the zapovedniks is having dramatic impacts,' he says. 'There is incredible pressure from industrial lobbies. The ministry is dedicated to encouraging resource industries to strip and sell natural resources anywhere they can.'

The ministry's new zapovednik director Vladimir Pishchelev denies the charge. 'These are protected areas and that won't change,' he says. He insists the ministry will not surrender the zapovedniks to chaos, corruption and condemnation.

But when asked whether the zapovedniks are now open for business, Pishchelev gives an important admission. 'There are lots of ways to make money in the zapovedniks,' he says. 'We favour a sustainable conservation approach.'

Sustainable?

These days in Moscow, everyone aims to be sustainable. The forest industry promises it. The oil industry is enthusiastic. The nuclear industry is keen. Even President Putin, whose anti-environmental policies delivered huge budget surpluses in recent years, says sustainable development is his goal.

But Russia's biggest sustainability booster is undoubtedly the Washington-based World Bank. In recent years, it has sent out \$170 million in loans to the Russian government for 'environmental projects'. They started in 1994, with a \$110m loan for an environmental management programme. The aim was to help Russia's beleaguered Ministry of the Environment to re-organise, rebuild and rededicate itself to serve 'both nature protection and economic growth, through

sustainable and environmentally acceptable development options'.

The bank's efforts to rebuild Russia's environment department were temporarily punctured when Putin terminated Russia's federal environmental agencies in 2000. Forced to rethink, the bank quickly drafted a \$60m loan to Russia's Ministry of Natural Resources for a 'sustainable' forestry project which aimed to help the ministry boost pulp and paper production through intensified approaches to forestry.

The bank hopes the loan, which is currently in the final stages of negotiation, will help Russia hugely expand forest cutting using 'sustainable' practices modelled on those found (and bitterly opposed as utterly unsustainable) in Canada, says Andrey Kushlin, the bank's Russian environmental chief.

Conservation?

In 1996 the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), an environmental protection fund established by the World Bank and the UN, granted \$20m for a biodiversity conservation project aimed at helping Russian nature ►

reserves and parks cope with the crisis triggered by the Soviet collapse.

Under the recently completed project, zapovedniks received nearly \$3.8m in direct aid for computers, security, transportation and salaries. A further \$440,000 was awarded for 66 scientific projects. And the project delivered another \$15m for programmes based in Russian parks.

And what did the bureaucrats do with those millions?

Mostly, they engineered projects promoting 'sustainable' ways to squeeze money from nature, including the publication of two books: *Ecological Problems and Commodity Producers: a Review of Facts and Examples in the Russian and World Markets* and *Nature and Profit: a Textbook for Children and Ministers*.

The programme also paid for various economic studies, the language of which typifies modern man's relationship to the natural world. For 'The Economic Value of Living Nature in Concrete Situations based on the Total Economic Value Concept' and a study of how to integrate 'categories of economic value of biodiversity into the National Strategy of Biodiversity Conservation,' read 'How much do you want for the trees?'

Business of biodiversity

So it goes on. 'We looked at how the business of biodiversity can be made more sustainable', says Kushlin, who managed the project. He explains that putting the zapovedniks to work was a key objective in an overall effort to bring environmental protection into the mainstream and make it a factor of economic development.

The programme focussed on making use of high-profile reserves as engines of economic development with more and more focus on maximum use of protected areas. Specifically, Kushlin says, that means eco-tourism and sustainable hunting.

According to the bank, its programme delivered a 44-fold increase in tourism in ten zapovedniks where tourism was tracked. Trails and roads averaging 487 kilometres long were built in each of these reserves.

The zapovedniks were originally protected by strict Russian laws that ensured natural purity in these areas by keeping humans out. Asked if the

ZAPOVEDNIKS UNDER PRESSURE

Driven by Putin's greed, aided and abetted by the myopic World Bank and a host of foreign multinationals, Russia's great ecological wildernesses are being plundered.

An hour from Moscow, housing developers have put the buffer zone around the Priosko-Terrasny zapovednik to work, for sewage lines and roads.

On the borderlands of the Sayano-Shushensky zapovednik, north of the Mongolian border, nature wardens reportedly now serve double duty as hunting guides for hunters from Europe, Canada, and the United States.

South of Lake Baikal, plans are set to flood a section of the Bureya zapovednik for a hydro project.

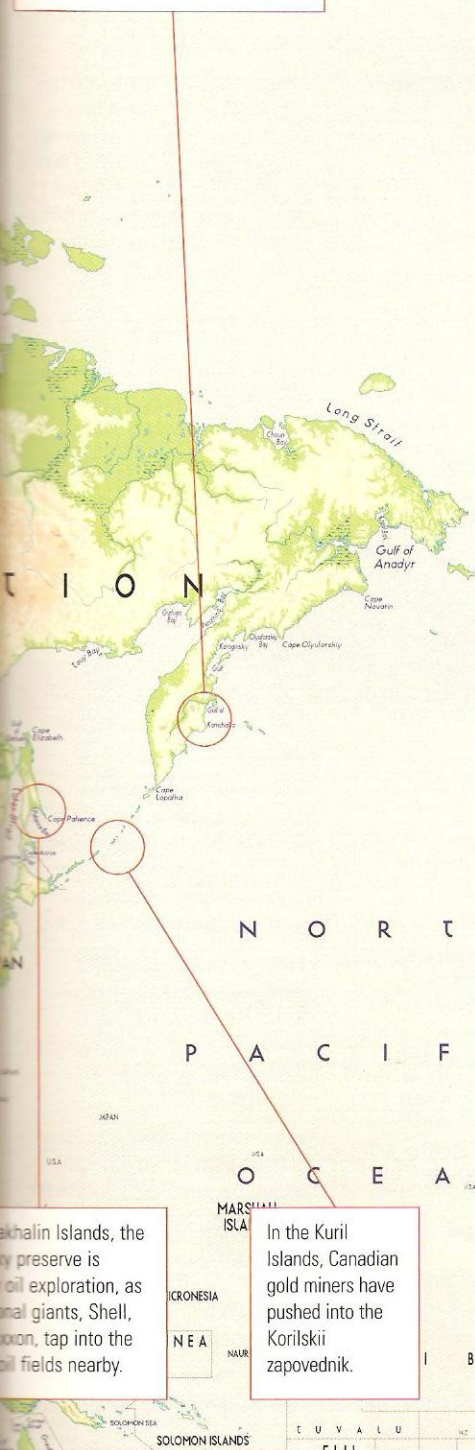


A Canadian company has plans for another massive ski resort on the Krasnaya Polyana zapovednik near Sochi on the Black sea.

In the Caucasus mountains, efforts are underway to build a road through the Kavkazsky zapovednik, and for a Russian-owned ski resort in the Terbidinski zapovednik.

At the Astrakhansky zapovednik on the northern shore of the Caspian, guiding tourists distract wardens from patrolling for poachers.

On the Kronotsky zapovednik, masses of tourists pour from cruise ships anchoring offshore, trampling all over one of the world's most unique ecosystems, as helicopters thunder overhead.



In the Kuril Islands, the preserve is... oil exploration, as... giants, Shell, ... tap into the... fields nearby.

In the Kuril Islands, Canadian gold miners have pushed into the Korilskii zapovednik.

economic push contradicts this original purpose, Kushlin says the old-style purists must surrender. 'There are no longer sustainable economic means to do it the old way,' he says.

Development or disaster?

The Kronotsky zapovednik is Russia's most famous reserve. Lying on the Kamchatka peninsula it is home to active volcanoes, thermal rivers and beautiful scenery. When Putin cut funding for Kronotsky, GEF specialists were invited to help develop tourism.

Soon afterwards tourists started arriving on cruise ships and helicopters, generating substantial revenue despite the laws to keep them out.

'The reserves do not need financial sustainability based on ecotourism,' says

Vladimir Mosolov, Kronotsky's deputy director of science. 'Ecotourism will only destroy the Russian system of reserves. What has to be supported are protection activities, not the infrastructure of ecotourism.'

'None of the proceeds are invested in supporting the reserves themselves. The next step will be when the government changes the reserve's status from zapovednik to national park. And if that happens, Russia's most famous zapovednik, one of the world's great biodiversity reserves, will cease to exist.'

Marine biologist Olga Selivanova, a field researcher at Kronotsky, echoes these criticisms. 'The World Bank did a great job of opening Kronotsky for cruise ships and helicopter companies. But they have only succeeded in making the reserve environmentally unsustainable.'

In conclusion

Olin Rhodes, a Purdue University wildlife ecologist with a strong interest in the zapovedniks, is unequivocal on the topic of opening them to ecotourism. 'Once you allow ecotourism, they are no longer zapovedniks,' he says. 'They cannot be, because they are no longer suitable for the study of long-term ecological processes in

undisturbed natural settings.'

Vadim Mokievsky, an oceanographer with Moscow's Shirkov Institute agrees. He insists that the zapovedniks are 'strict scientific reserves where any kind of human activity must be prohibited completely'. Even from a narrowly economic view, he says, protecting biodiversity by keeping people out will pay a greater economic reward through scientific rewards in the long run. And the way to do it, he says, is through pressurising the government to protect the reserves from market forces. 'Society has to pay,' he argues.

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says David Ostergren, a researcher in Russian wilderness policy at Northern Arizona University. In his view, the Russian government has a responsibility to fund the sanctuaries.

Budget surplus

A review of Putin's recent budget priorities suggests environmental cuts are no longer necessary. Profits from oil and other natural resources have increased Russian government revenues by 50 per cent in just two years, delivering a \$10 billion annual windfall starting in 2001. This has allowed Putin to pay off foreign debts ahead of schedule while putting aside a \$3bn budget surplus; he has boosted military expenditure by 40 per cent and spent \$500m a year on the war in Chechnya.

Recently the international community has got wise to Russia's new wealth and of Putin's controversial spending. So the idea of mobilising public support for a lobby to persuade the government to set aside some of what it squeezes from nature to protect the reserves has become a realistic ambition. If successful, the zapovedniks would have a real chance at a sustainable future. Otherwise the world will lose some of its greatest natural treasures before most people even knew they existed ■