# Russian Zapovedniks (Strict Nature Preserves) and Importing Ecotourism: Destruction of an Ideal or Learning from the U.S. National Park System?

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## Introduction

In 1991 the Soviet Union's experiment in a planned economy and centralized political system collapsed. Boris Yeltsin declared the official beginning of the Russian liberal project in October 1991 when he said, "We must ... provide economic freedom, lift all barriers to the freedom of enterprises and of entrepreneurship and give people the opportunity to work and to receive as much as they can earn...."(quoted in White 2000:123). This paper addresses how the emerging political and economic realities are influencing policy and practice on one category of Russian protected natural area—zapovedniks (strict nature preserves).

The Soviet Union contained one of the most extensive protected natural area systems in the world (Grigoriew and Lopoukhine 1993). Millions of hectares were protected under a network of strict nature preserves, national parks, and wildlife refuges. But the emerging sociopolitical conditions have had profound effects on the management strategies. While embracing the Western model of ecotourism, perhaps the system may be able to learn from the U.S. National Park System. This analysis focuses on the Altai region in Siberia. I demonstrate that the Western liberal model of ecotourism is being adopted and that the protected natural areas have strategies to mitigate potential negative effects. However, in the entrepreneurial rush to capture Western tourist dollars, more cautious strategies to preserve ecosystems and cultures may be lost by the wayside. This case study (Yin 2003) includes data from 1994, 1995, 1999, and, most recently, a 26-day ecoscientific tour with 12 students in 2002. The field work was built around three questions: (1) What is ecologically unique to the region? (2) Does the Altai have the social and political infrastructure to support ecotourism? (3) What can Altai's protected area managers learn from the National Park Service?

## Ecotourism and Change in Russia

As defined by Honey (1999:25), "Ecotourism is travel to fragile, pristine and usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and (usually) small scale. It helps educate the traveler; provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights." The World Tourism Organization reports that annually, ecotourism is capturing a larger and larger market share. Ecotourism is "tourism with a normative element" (Ceballos-Lascurain 1996:20). Although all reported ecotourism may not fit this definition, it serves as a benchmark for assessment.

Tourism in the Soviet era was a state-run operation (Hall 1991). The constraints on travel, limited options, and general xenophobia directed international visitors to the main cities, or, in the case of scientific exchanges, restricted experiences to field research. As people adjust to a new economic paradigm, the international tourism industry is an attractive potential source of income. Despite bureaucratic and institutional lethargy and a lack of any history of community-level planning (Hall 2000), both national parks and zapovedniks have emerged as tourist destinations (Burns 1998).

The risks of ecotourism include decline of habitat, overdevelopment of border towns, underdevelopment leading to illegal activity, and redirection of park resources to accommodate visitors (Vaske et al. 2000; Dearden

2000). Management guidelines have emerged to mitigate the negative effects of tourism and ecotourism (e.g., Butler and Boyd 2000; Eagles et al. 2002), but as cash-strapped protected areas struggle to pay salaries and purchase necessities, ecotourism is becoming an attractive alternative (Ostergren 1998). Nonetheless, ecotourism is not a long-term solution if there is a substantial departure from traditional practices, if the industry merely turns a profit for politicians and bureaucrats, if the experience only works as a "feel-good" green cover for self-centered tourists, or if the visitors degrade the resource they purportedly wish to protect.

## The Altai Region and Zapovedniks

Located in south-central Siberia, the Altai Mountains contain dry steppe, mountain meadows, alpine, taiga, and desert biomes. Representative of the central Eurasian continent, the area contains Mount Belukha, the highest peak in Russia (4,506 m), and the headwaters of the Ob and the Irtysh rivers (Badenkov 2002). The area is identified by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) as one of the most endangered ecoregions on the Eurasian continent. In part, the Altai is a perfect candidate for ecotourism because large swaths remain in relatively good condition with a wide range of protected areas. Nonetheless, the ecoregion is far from being "protected" in a practical sense.

The region includes a backbone of nine zapovedniks, or strict nature preserves. Initiated in the late 1800s in the steppes of Ukraine, zapovedniks were intended as inviolable regions of nature. These areas have traditionally been dedicated to scientific research on natural ecosystems (Weiner 1999). Two national parks in the area protect nature and offer opportunities for outdoor recreation. The Russian national park system was established in 1983 and now includes 35 parks protecting more than 6 million ha. Park boundaries in European Russia often include agricultural enterprises or villages, but in Siberia, the focus is on natural phenomena (Chebakova 1997; Ostergren 2001). Overlaying the entire region is the 1.6-million-ha "Golden Mountains of the Altai" World Heritage Site.

In 1995, the Federal Law on Specially Protected Natural Areas delineated the rights and responsibilities of protected areas (Ostergren 2001). The express inclusion of environmental education (and, by extension, ecotourism) for zapovedniks is highly controversial. Traditional researchers are concerned about anthropogenic disturbance to flora and fauna (Volkov and de Korte 1994; Rhodes 1998). At the turn of the 20th century, planners could hardly imagine the demand for, and role of, environmental education in society. Nonetheless, some preserves (< 1% of the total territory) have always had museums for public education, and several preserves have long allowed limited access for recreation or education. However, the 1990s witnessed a dramatic increase in ecotourism and environmental education. If (the theory goes) more people know about their mission, then protected areas gain political saliency and budgetary support.

The nongovernmental organization (NGO) community has also supported and promoted ecotourism. In several WWF planning documents, tourism and ecotourism play an important role in sustainable, nonconsumptive development. In December 1999, the World Conservation Union (IUCN), World Commission on Protected Areas (WPCA), and EcoCenter Zapovedniks (a Moscow-based NGO) convened a meeting to create strategies for actions, including the use of ecotourism, to protect nature. Local NGOs in the Altai region, such as KATUN, also support ecotourism (Shishin 1999). There is a strong belief that if the local economy can realize the benefits of "intact nature," more exploitive and resource-intense activities may be averted.

Katunski Zapovednik was established in 1991, and rather then attempt to hire enough border guards to keep people out, they adopted a strategy of environmental education for school children to create a generation of caretakers. This preserve had regular experience with adventure tourists. The Katun River offers challenging kayaking and rafting (Class

4–5) and requires that people camp for three nights on zapovednik territory. Mount Belukha has hosted backpackers and mountaineers for decades. In 1991, Katunski initiated a two-tiered fee system that differentiates between foreigners and Russians. For groups such as ours, the preserve charges an extra fee and the two biologists accompanying us significantly supplemented their annual salary ($50 per month is an average salary).

The director of Katunski, Aleksandr V. Zateev, estimates that about 100 ecotourists (including foreigners, Russian high-school-age groups, and rafters) visited the zapovednik each year during 2001 and 2002. Tourists will never number more than 500 per year and be limited to a few trails with constant supervision by biologists. For our group, an additional precaution was that we never entered the zapovednik proper: we walked (with horse-pack support) for two and one-half days one-way, and were still just in the buffer zone (an area subject to all sorts of activity, including grazing).

In 1995, the local town, Ust–Koksa, was in the throes of economic depression. Gasoline was scarce, public transportation had come to a standstill, and even diesel fuel for farm machinery was at a premium. Inflation was high, the cattle industry subsidies had evaporated, the potato crop was failing, and locals were stockpiling pumpkins for the winter. In stark contrast, by 2002 the village center was boasting a dozen new shops, a restaurant served tourists, and a couple of guest houses had started up. Although statistics are nonexistent, the tourism contribution to the economy appeared to be significant. With meals, four inspectors (i.e., horse wranglers), a donation, four nights under a roof, seven nights in the wilderness, trail food, bus rental, two biologists, and a flurry of souvenir buying, the 14 people in our group spent about US$3,000 locally. If the zapovednik continues to carefully manage ecotourism (i.e., fewer than 500 visitors per year), there are implications for the surrounding wildlands. A U.S. group leader on another trek observed that the real worry for natural conditions was not U.S. tourists, but the Russian traditions of cookfires, canned goods, and burning refuse. The allure of pristine conditions in Katunski Zapovednik may prompt foreigners to seek it out, and the increased revenue may prove too tempting to maintain a limit of 500 travelers per year.

Established in 1932, Altaiski Zapovednik protects over 880,000 ha of taiga, subalpine, and alpine ecosystems and the spectacular 78-km-long Lake Teletskoye. The eastern shore serves as a portal into the northern half of the preserve, while more remote, alpine regions lie to the south. In 1994–95, logging was the principal activity for the small community of 3,000–4,000 inhabitants. Lake traffic included fishing boats, with a few tourists visiting Korbu Waterfall. A half-dozen guard stations dot the shore and several remote guard stations are located on the periphery of the preserve. In 1995, the opportunity for ecotourism was immediately apparent, but as Altaiski Zapovednik Director Sergei Erofeev stated, “If we let the tourists on the zapovednik they would carry it off in the tread of their boots.”

In contrast, our study group arrived in Altaiski in 2002, and in 2001 fifteen eco-science tourists visited from Germany. Both times a full-time research scientist was assigned to teach and monitor the group. We paid a daily entrance fee ($3.00 per person per day), a stipend for the biologist, a boat fee ($300), and made a contribution to the preserve ($300). The most remarkable contrast from 1994–95 was that zapovednik managers met me at the front office (with a bill) and sent us into the preserve with an agenda.

Clear precautions included that “none of our activities could produce a long-term impact on the ecosystem.” The contrast to a western wilderness area is profound because our travel was often on vague or nonexistent tracks, and even close to the lake, bear and wildlife sign was common. In 2002, 160 Russian schoolboys camped on the shores of Teletskoye to learn about ecosystem processes (in 2001, 180 had). Combined with the few travelers per year (50–80 researchers) traveling through the 880,000-ha preserve, our general impact may be considered insignificant.

The more substantial impact is outside of the preserve in (1) an unofficial mass campground (100–200 campers per night) on the shoreline; and (2) at the three vacation lodges on the non-zapovednik shores. Between 15,000 and 18,000 visitors per year now travel by boat from Arti–Bash to Korbu Waterfall, where a small tourist industry has sprung up. Three small kiosks sell trinkets, souvenirs, snacks, and vodka. In 2002, each visitor paid $0.63 to the zapovednik to stop at the falls. The kiosks do not pay a concessionaire fee, nor do the dozens of tourist boats (ranging from 15-ft speed boats to 90-ft passenger tugs) pay a docking fee. The good news is that there are outhouses and an educational display. The bad news is that the sacred nature of the spot has been compromised and the sheer volume of visitors will eventually takes its toll. There is a limit to water quality even in the huge Lake Teletskoye, but staff note that there is little they can do to limit use. The bigger concern is poaching by indigenous Altains who suffer from a high unemployment rate (approximately 60%). Unfortunately for many Altains, there is no "trickle-down effect" from tourism, and they only know that they are excluded from the larder.

## Concluding Remarks

To paraphrase Honey (1999), the debate is: "Who does own paradise?" That is, how can a region benefit economically from a natural resource? Throughout the entire Altai Republic, campgrounds, restaurants, health spas, souvenir stands, and adventure services are capitalizing on the steady flow of tourists. Ecotourists are a part of the tourism stream and are only ecotourists for that small period of time they are in a small guest house or on the trail, river, or mountain top.

Criticisms include the following: (1) *any* recreational activity will lead to ecosystem degradation; (2) if zapovedniks become a wilderness refuge for wealthy foreigners, local resentment may prompt an increase in poaching; and (3) resources once dedicated to research or protection are now redirected to hosting visitors. In fact, inspectors are being drawn into private tourist organizations because the pay is twice to three times as great. Nonetheless, at the current scale the impact of ecotourism on the preserves remains slight. Zapovedniks are realizing the financial benefits of ecotourism and the added notoriety among Russian students will sow the seeds of good will. Existence value among Russians seems high, and working on large intact ecosystems is an incredible opportunity for international researchers.

In essence, zapovedniks are "corners of freedom" (Weiner 1999)—free to be wild. They are prepared to handle ecotourism by restricting small numbers of visitors to "sacrifice zones." But these islands of nature are icons, and wild, beautiful nature is the draw to the Altai. There is pressure from the regional government to expand business despite potential problems. It is no stretch of the imagination to picture a time when the surrounding economic activity impedes biodiversity goals. Altaiski Zapovednik is approximately the same size as Yellowstone National Park—a park that by some estimates should be twice as large to adequately preserve the ecosystem. Major obstacles to expanding Yellowstone include logging, mining, grazing, and tourism—all products of a market economy and individual entrepreneurship.

What is the future role of zapovedniks in regional development? Perhaps guiding management strategies *outside* of the preserve may be the salvation. The long-term goal could be to influence agencies to make certain communities realize benefits. Simultaneously, the area needs to maintain high-quality outdoor experiences so that the zapovedniks do not become the last refuge of wild nature, the last place left to both protect biodiversity and try to offer recreational opportunities in a wild Siberian landscape—a balancing act all too familiar in the liberal West.

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