

Two Memoirs of Life and Work

in a Far Eastern Russian Reserve

Ed. note: We recently received these sketches of life and work in the Kronotskiy Zapovednik (State Nature Reserve) from Victoria Churikova, a GWS member. Kronotskiy, which is also designated as a Biosphere Reserve under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere program, covers almost 1.1 million ha on the Kamchatka Peninsula in the Russian Far East (Figure 1). The peninsula is a rugged, volcanic land dividing the Bering Sea from the Sea of Okhotsk. Her memoir, followed by that of her husband, Valery Druzjaka, gives us a glimpse at some of the difficulties facing protected area professionals in Russia—and of their dedication to overcoming these problems.

My name is Victoria Churikova. I was born on 10 May 1955 in Sochi on the Black Sea Coast—that is, in the south of the country, very near to the border with Georgia. I spent my childhood on the shores of warm sea, between palms—quite an interesting contrast to the extremely severe conditions in which my husband and I ended up raising our own children. After finishing secondary school I entered Moscow State University, to study for a philological degree in structural linguistics. In 1978 I married and the next year gave birth to my first son. In 1980 I graduated from the university and went to Kamchatka because my husband had gone there a year before. Like many people coming to Kamchatka, we had no intention of staying permanently. We wanted to return to Moscow and study further, so we left our little son at my mother's.

It was, as you can imagine, very difficult for me to find work in my specialty in Kamchatka. But after several months I was invited to work in the Institute of Volcanology, a division of the state Academy of Sciences, because the Institute had need of a person with knowledge of foreign languages. I worked there for one year during which I completed my Ph.D. In the summer of 1981, we were offered temporary work on the Commander Islands at the Institute's seismological station, replacing a family that was moving away.

We left Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy, a city of 300,000 and Kamchatka's largest. It was, and is, a very ugly, militarized city, and upon leaving we saw for the first time that Kamchatka and its islands are beau-

tiful and needing special care. But soon after our return to Petropavlovsk, our son joined us and I was obliged to leave my work because he became ill in that very polluted city. I worked at home, but still he was not well. Our doctors advised us to move away from the city and live with him in wild nature in order to cure him, so in 1984 we left our comfortable home and went to live in the forest. By that time we also had a baby daughter.

This was a turning point in our lives. At first we lived on the border of the Kronotskiy Reserve, in a little settlement called Zhupanovo. My husband worked as a ranger and I brought up and educated our children. We wintered virtually alone, with only ourselves for company,

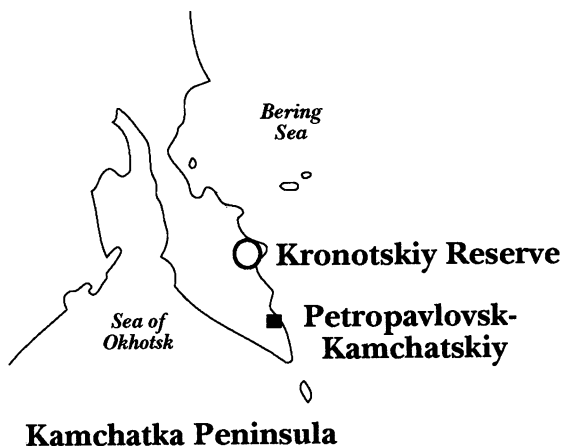
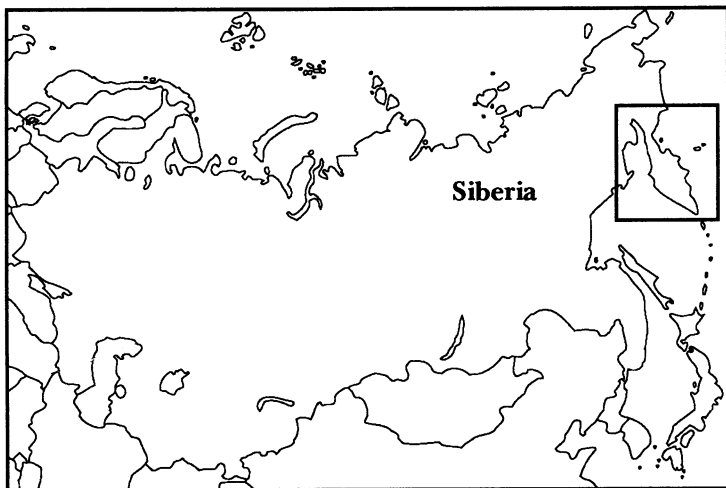


Figure 1. Location map of the *Kamchatka Peninsula*.

without electricity or running water, having to melt snow. But our children were never ill.

Soon we moved into the real wilderness: to the center of the reserve at Kronotskoje Lake. We began to work there at a small hydrometeorological station at the very center of the Biosphere Reserve. Our second son was born and we took him there when he was six months old. We educated the children ourselves, coming to our apartment in Paratunka (near Petropavlovsk) so that they could take their exams. But, as we think, their best educa-

tion was received at the lake. Our schooling plan was very specific. The children spent almost all their time outdoors both summer and winter, come rain or snow. They ate and studied in the open air too, building their shelters themselves, only coming inside the house to sleep. So they became acclimated to low temperatures, wind and rain, and all kinds of weather. They learned all the names of the flora and fauna of the surrounding area and can describe their ecology. The older children have studied science under the guidance of outside biol-

ogists and vulcanologists who were doing field work in the reserve.

But everything came to an end at the close of 1992. Our station, which is reachable only helicopter, was closed because the flights became too expensive. We were compelled to leave and go back to the apartment in Paratunka. Our eldest son is now a student at Novosibirsk University and has given prize-winning ornithological reports at youth science conferences.

We are finding it difficult to live in the relatively comfortable condi-

tions of Paratunka. Our psychology has been changed by ten years of living in the wilderness. It is especially difficult to be away because we know that many bad things are happening in the reserve: there is a lot of poaching and no guards to stop it, for example. So now we have begun a battle to restore the station and our observations at Kronotskoje Lake. So far our attempts to find money have been in vain. At present we work for environmental organizations in Kamchatka.

— Victoria Churikova

Our house at Kronotskoje Lake was ridiculously small. It was even hard to see it when the helicopter made its last circle before dropping me at the place where I would spend the next seven years. One could, however, see quite easily how severely beautiful the entire surrounding area was. It seems impossible to describe it in words; the strongest impressions are purely visual. The place is described in a recent book about Kamchatka this way: "Mt. Kronotskiy, one of the most beautiful volcanoes on Kamchatka, is a perfectly formed cone cut by ribs and barrancas. At its foot lies Lake Kronotskoje, the largest on the peninsula. The lake is fed from underground streams. At one time lava flows cut off the river channel. Salmon were trapped in the lake, and some species died, unable to adjust to the change from their nomadic life. However, the red salmon adjusted to spawning in the shallow parts of the lake and the tiny streams that still flow into it."

Under the window of my house was one of the largest shallow spawning places. Here, strong currents keep the lake ice-free. This place is called The Source, because just here the Kronotskaja River begins its run to the ocean some 30 miles away. It is the only river which flows out of the lake, and its upper reaches are also kept free of ice by numerous waterfalls and rapids.

It was my usual morning pleasure in late August to walk barefoot from the door of the house to the canoe lying near the water and then to watch, moving soundlessly on the lake's surface, the red fish playing their games. In winter, swans would show off their lazy life: eating, sleeping, and making short flights down the river. When the temperature goes below minus 20 degrees Celsius, a vapor rises over the water and

faraway swans melt like wisps of smoke.

We landed at the house of the sixth of November in 1986. Everything was already covered with snow. The helicopter was capable of carrying a ton of food—our annual store. The next one did not arrive until October 1987. My chief, a senior hydrologist who had himself lived nearly ten years on the lake, said that only by such a stock of food could we survive the winter. And he was right.

My job was to be a "hydrometeorological observer." Twice a day the temperature of the air and water, and the water level, were recorded and described. But even these simple observations provided some useful information because they were taken every single day for seven years—no holidays! (It is clear that, in recent years, water levels have

fallen, the winds have become stronger, and the summers have become warmer.)

This official work was certainly modest. A much more time-consuming task was gathering fuel for survival. How we happened to do this give some insight into how environmental affairs are managed in this part of Russia.

The fuel problem was the same for everybody who lived and worked in the territory around the reserve but were not a part of the staff. It was prohibited to fell trees inside the reserve. But firewood is, in many places, the only means to warm a house. How to solve this dilemma? The decision was made in the typical Russian style. The forest guards of the reserve could fell dead or unhealthy trees and give firewood to all the people who needed it in exchange for petroleum, which is in scarce supply.

At the end of 1992 we were obliged to leave the lake and have been unable to return in spite of our best efforts. As you have seen, lack of money was a major factor, but it was not the only one. Some tourist businesses were willing to sponsor the hydrometeorologist position in

exchange for hosting the few scientists who visit the lake to do their research—and whose travel would have benefited these businesses. But, according to the usual practice in here, only one company decides all the questions related to tourism in the reserve, and it has declined to give its approval. In consequence, there is the danger that, through corruption, commercial hunting may become the focal point of tourism in the area. We recently hosted a visit, our second from Americans (Kamchatka was closed to foreigners for some 40 years), from correspondents of the *National Geographic* magazine. I asked one of them what would happen if one company were allowed to decide how to manage Yellowstone National Park. He answered simply, "Revolution." But there have been too many revolutions in Russia this century. One thing is clear: it is necessary for us to find some other way of making hard decisions related to the environment. Very long and hard work is needed to break a new iron curtain which covers places like the Kronotskiy Reserve.

— Valery Druzjaka



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