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The Zapovedniks of Russia

“Occupying a huge territory spreading out into two continents of the world, we in Russia are the possessors of unique natural treasures. They are as unique as, say, the paintings of Raphael—and they are as easy to be destroyed, but it is not possible to recreate them.”

— Ivan G. Borodin, Russian academician, 1914

About 1.5% of the land area of Russia, or 33.2 million ha, consists of zapovedniks—strict nature preserves, comparable to designated wilderness areas. There are currently 99 zapovedniks. They are the most traditional and, arguably, the most important form of natural protected area in Russia. Thanks to zapovedniks, many species of animals and plants, such as sable, European bison, or Siberian crane, as well as the last little islands of virgin steppe and the most valuable forest massifs, have been conserved. There are more than 5,000 people staffing zapovedniks; they not only protect and study these islands, but conduct extensive environmental education among the population, especially schoolchildren.

The History of Zapovedniks

On 29 December 1916, the document “On Establishing a Hunting Zapovednik in Zabaikalsky Region” was presented by Russia’s minister of agriculture to the governing Senate. That date can be considered the beginning of the state-run system of zapovedniks. Now, at the turn of the new millennium, when one’s thoughts naturally turn both to looking back and looking forward, the need to summarize the achievements of zapovedniks has arisen. We are recalling all those who pioneered the cause of nature conservation in Russia at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century: professors and academicians such as V.V. Dokuchaev, Grigori A. Koz-

hevnikov, Ivan G. Borodin, Andrej P. Semyonov-Tyan-Shansky, V.I. Taliev, G.F. Morozov, and others. Unexpectedly, their ideas and words appear to be quite in tune with our time. Listen to Dokuchaev in 1895: “We are sorry to say that our virgin black-earth steppes with their original charm, boundless expanses, feather grass, unique dwellers like babacs, great bustards, wolfberry, etc., are surprisingly quickly disappearing from the face of the Russian land.” Today, virgin steppes are, alas, virtually non-existent.

Russia’s first scientific zapovednik was founded by Dokuchaev in the Luganskie steppes in 1892. Scientists had raised the alarm: forests

were being cut down, steppes were in danger, populations of the most valuable fur-bearing animals were catastrophically decreasing — the natural resources of Russia were, it was realized, not infinite. Semyonov-Tyan-Shansky's papers and talks developed an understanding of these problems among the enlightened part of the Russian society. He wrote: "Large areas of undamaged forest must be transformed, as has been done in many places in North America, into zapovednik areas to conserve the taiga intact forever." In a 1908 paper (which has come to be regarded as a classic), Kozhevnikov enunciated the principles of establishing natural areas as zapovedniks: "These areas must be 'zapovedniks' in the full sense of the word.... Here, any actions violating the natural conditions of the struggle for existence are not permissible and nothing should be eliminated, nothing should be added or improved, nature should be left as it is and we shall watch the results. The areas within zapovedniks are of enormous significance, so their establishment must be primarily the concern of the state; though it can, of course, be a matter of a public and private initiative, the state must be ahead here." How up-to-date these words sound now.

Morozov, a well-known specialist in forestry, said in 1910 that the selection of areas for zapovedniks should be carried out according to a plan so that each botanical-geographical region had wild protected natural areas which, taken as a

whole, would represent a number of the most characteristic and the scientifically valuable types of vegetation. It was this principle that was employed in the Soviet Union, and continues to be today in post-Soviet Russia, when forming the network of zapovedniks.

In a 1913 article titled "Protect Nature!," Taliev wrote that "the beauty of nature is the highest value of its own, and it must be protected irrespective of narrow practical tasks—a beautiful landscape, a scenic road, a precipice associated with recollections, etc., are the national heritage in the spiritual area just the same as minerals and so forth are our heritage in the area of material culture." These ideas did not become popular in Soviet Russia; the rational and utilitarian attitudes toward nature, including its protection, took the upper hand. Today, the nature-conserving community begins to return to those remarkable ideas.

In 1914, the first proposals for founding zapovedniks in the Baikal area were put forward by Franz F. Shillinger. This passionate traveler, an enthusiastic and gifted man, was directly involved in the establishment of almost twenty zapovedniks, among them Altaisky, Pechoro-Ilychsky, and Kondo-Sosvinsky, both in Russia and in other parts of the Soviet Union. In 1929, Shillinger conducted investigations in the area between the Pechora and the Ilych rivers. He wrote then that "the beauty of the park we are working at does not yield in many ways to the

renowned Yellowstone Park in the North American United States; as for its economic aspect and its contribution to the growth of well-being of the local people, it will exceed that park in many ways.” In 1930, Pechoro-Ilychsky Zapovednik was founded; it has since been added to the list of World Heritage Sites. However, few people, whether in Russia or beyond, know about the beauty of Pechoro-Ilychsky, and it should be noted that its contribution to the growth of the well-being of the region has been very insignificant so far. The ideas and plans developed by Shillinger have not yet been put into practice. The history of establishing zapovedniks in Russia, as exemplified by Pechoro-Ilychsky, has been contradictory and far from easy.

Approaches to the purposes and objectives of zapovedniks have changed many times over the decades. During the formative years discussed above, three main competing ideas were put forward:

- Some felt that a network of zapovedniks patterned upon North American national parks should be created in order to conserve wild nature and to show its beauty to people.
- Others believed that a network of zapovedniks must serve scientific investigations exclusively.
- Still others promoted a strictly practical approach: zapovedniks must become hunting reserves in order to conserve and increase populations of valuable commercial species.

All three approaches were employed during the creation of the first zapovedniks. But subsequently Russian society’s attitude toward living nature started changing, and the attitude toward zapovedniks changed as well. In the 1930s, zapovedniks were influenced by activities aimed at “improving” nature. Authorities promoted the introduction and acclimatization of species of plants and animals alien to the country; for example, raccoon-like dogs and skunks, which are now ubiquitous. Such predators as wolves, lynx, birds of prey, and so on were considered harmful and were destroyed.

The rise to power in the 1930s and 1940s of the heterodox geneticist and agronomist Trofim D. Lysenko proved disastrous to the zapovednik movement. Lysenko’s views—he believed that ecology and genetics were hostile to the Soviet regime—received enthusiastic official support. Unfortunately, Lysenko’s beliefs were based upon the supposed necessity of radically altering nature in favor of the material interests of human beings. The impact on the zapovednik system was tragic: in the 1950s and early 1960s according to the “highest” verdicts, zapovedniks and the science dealing with them were branded as useless. Many zapovedniks were liquidated, and the area of surviving ones was considerably cut down. Beginning in 1951, 21 of the 37 zapovedniks in Russia proper were liquidated; in the Soviet Union as a whole the number was 88. The area of the remaining ones

was reduced catastrophically. For example, Pechoro-Ilychsky Zapovednik was cut to just 7% of its former area, while that of Sikhote-Alinsky Zapovednik went from 1.8 million ha to 100,000 ha.

In the 1970s, the network of zapovedniks began to be restored, and good progress was made in developing new ones. One might say that the scientists “took revenge” for the persecution of zapovedniks during the previous period! In 1981, the General Statute of National Zapovedniks was approved. It established a strict nature conservation regime for the entire area of zapovedniks, prohibited any interference in natural processes, and stated the priority of scientific activities. The statute reflected the interests of nature conservation in detail and rather completely, and has undoubtedly played a very constructive role. Nevertheless, many of its aspects were idealistic. Unfortunately, it did not take into account the interests of people living within zapovedniks or nearby, nor did it account for the peculiarities of each protected area, local traditions, and the variety of purposes and objectives that arose during different periods of the zapovedniks’ history.

At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the changes in the society led many activists to go to work for the nature conservation organizations that were then being formed. Thanks to their efforts, the network of zapovedniks began to grow very rapidly. In the 1990s

alone, 31 new zapovedniks were established. At the same time, up-to-date legislation was passed. In 1991, a new Statute of State Nature Zapovedniks in Russia was approved in which attempts were made to take into consideration the interests of nature protection and people as well as to phrase the rights and duties of the zapovedniks’ law enforcement (ranger) service. In 1995, a federal law on protected areas, including zapovedniks, entered into force. One provision was the creation of a conservation, research, and environmental education body to serve zapovedniks. Zapovedniks are now federal properties, and are completely exempt from any economic use. Today, when Russian protected areas are mentioned, it is the state nature zapovedniks that are mostly meant. Zapovedniks comprise the foundation of the Russian network of protected natural areas.

Zapovedniks and Local Communities

Up to the beginning of the 1990s, villages and other settlements were often included in the areas of designated zapovedniks. Sometimes the central office of a zapovednik was located directly in such a settlement. As in most remote places in Russia, people continue to live in some isolation from the rest of the world and mostly earn their living directly from the natural economy. They cultivate the earth, keep cattle, and use wood to fire stoves, and it is often only within the zapovednik’s forest that it

is possible to gather sufficient stocks of that firewood, collect berries and mushrooms, etc. Other zapovedniks are in the immediate vicinity of towns and villages, which causes certain inconveniences for the people living there. For years the question of relations between local people and zapovedniks was not dealt with properly. Zapovedniks, separated from the outside world, lived according to their own laws. The hard period that Voroninsky Zapovednik in Tambovsky Region went through illustrates the problem. Founded in 1994 to save the last surviving islands of forests, the zapovednik is almost completely surrounded by numerous settlements. Most of the local people, who had watched with a heavy heart the contamination of the rivers and lakes, mass poaching, and the destruction of forests, at first enthusiastically supported the establishment of the zapovednik. Then questions began to arise. Where to take firewood from? How about gathering berries and mushrooms? What about fishing? Can all the problems connected with the traditional use of natural resources by local people be solved in the areas adjacent to the zapovednik? The administration of the zapovednik carried out numerous negotiations, clarified the boundaries of the protected area, tried to take into account local peculiarities when preparing the "particular statute," the main legal document governing each individual zapovednik. An uneasy process it was. Antagonists of the

zapovednik tried to use these facts in their favor. Among them there were notorious poachers, but they were poachers invested with power. They launched a massive anti-zapovednik campaign, demanding that it should be closed down. They involved some representatives of the federal authorities in the conflict. Sustained efforts were required of the zapovednik's managers, its staff, and the Board of Zapovedniks to stop illegal actions associated with the campaign. It became obvious that zapovedniks will not be able to conserve nature if they do not bear in mind the interests of local people and do not win their understanding and support. The problem is, of course, not exclusively Russian. In many countries of the world, protected area specialists try to find like-minded people in local communities—representatives of the public who unite in supportive non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They help national parks and other protected areas conduct a dialogue with people, carry out environmental education work with children, and draw extra funding for nature conservation projects.

Public Movement in Support of Zapovedniks

Until 1994, NGOs dedicated to promoting protected areas and ensuring their public support were virtually non-existent in Russia, though some nature conservation organizations included protected areas in the sphere of their interests.

That December, a seminar held at the Caucasian Zapovednik became a landmark in Russian protected area management. It was devoted to the problems of environmental education activities of zapovedniks and national parks. The question of making the work more active, as well as the importance of winning nationwide support, were discussed for the first time at the seminar. It gave an impulse to the formation of a public movement in support of protected areas, and the process of organizing associations began. For the last several years, associations of zapovedniks and national parks in northwestern Russia, along the Middle Volga, and in the Far East (among others) have been actively working. A number of zapovedniks began to issue their own newspapers, and many have been intensively cooperating with mass media. Since 1994, the professional newspaper *Zapovedy Vestnik* has been issued to conduct an exchange of information between specialists of protected areas. In 1997, the first national monthly popular newspaper on zapovedniks and national parks, called *Zapovednye Ostrova* ("Protected Islands") appeared in Russia. The newspaper is being published by the EcoCenter "Zapovedniks."

Specialists working in zapovedniks have realized that only by working in contact with local people, informing the public of the activities of zapovedniks, and helping to resolve the nature conservation problems of the surrounding region, can

they enlist true public support. Here is a graphic example. In 1993, two years after the founding of Katunsky Zapovednik, an opinion poll was conducted to find out the attitude of people living in the adjacent Ust-Koksinsky Region. The region is in the mountains, far away from any large settlements. The immediate interests of the people would not seem to have been infringed upon. Nevertheless, 19% of those questioned expressed a negative attitude toward the existence of the zapovednik, and a further 22% had heard nothing about it. Intensive work, first of all with schoolchildren, teachers, and the mass media, has led to a change of opinion. According to a new poll taken in 1995, more than 94% of the people now knew about the zapovednik, and 81% found its activities useful. Today, Katunsky Zapovednik has firm support in the region and the wider republic, and has acquired additional financial possibilities.

In the 1990s, the attention of foreign charitable foundations and other organizations, such as the MacArthur Foundation, the Eurasia Foundation, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), and the U.S. Agency for International Development, was drawn to the system of zapovedniks as a whole. Of great importance was the development of *The Portfolio of Investment Proposals for Conserving Biodiversity in Russia*, a publication supported by WWF, which then set up a Russian program office. Further drawing the public's attention to

Russian zapovedniks and other protected areas was the formation of the EcoCenter “Zapovedniks,” established by WWF in 1996.

The EcoCenter “Zapovedniks” created a network of 40 small NGOs aimed at ensuring public support for particular zapovedniks (much like Friends’ Groups). The main members of such groups are teachers in local schools. The director of Bureinsky Zapovednik, Albert Dumikyan (who was drawn away from sunny Armenia to Khabarovsk Territory to manage the zapovednik), spearheaded a Bureia Center, which is actively working with schoolchildren and the mass media of the region. The EcoFund “Chazy,” established under the initiative of Khakassky Zapovednik, issues the *Zapovedano* newspaper, and works with libraries of the republic getting readers (especially children) acquainted with the work of the zapovednik. The EcoCenter of Voroninsky Zapovednik, created by the talented and enthusiastic Alexander Yegorov, who heads the zapovednik’s department of environmental education, conducts interesting regional studies and arranges for children’s Olympiads related to the zapovednik.

Historical Monuments and Zapovedniks

Traditionally, zapovedniks were intended only to conserve wild nature. At any rate, neither in the theoretical statements nor in the law is the protection of monuments of history and culture mentioned. But the his-

tory and culture of Russia are closely connected with natural features. A striking example is the relationship between the Raifsky Monastery of the Holy Lady and Volzhsko-Kamsky State Zapovednik. For many years, the monastery protected the beautiful forest massif that was in its possession. Then the 1917 revolution broke out and the monastery was closed down. Many years later, the zapovednik was founded and has been conserving the valuable forests ever since. The monastery has now been renewed and its architectural ensemble reconstructed. The zapovednik and the monastery combine their efforts to conserve the beautiful natural environment. Mutual understanding and friendly relations unite Archimandrite Vsevolod and Yuri Gorshkov, director of the zapovednik. Many other zapovedniks incidentally conserve cultural and historical sites and monuments, but do not have the means to give them proper attention. A preliminary investigation carried out by the EcoCenter “Zapovedniks” has shown that Russian zapovedniks contain over 6,000 historical and cultural sites. They include the famous Kapova Cave with prehistoric petroglyphs (Shulgan-Tash Zapovednik, South Urals), 18th-century hermitages (Visimsky Zapovednik, North Urals), medieval settlements (Sikhote-Alinsky Zapovednik, Far East), churches of the 11th-13th centuries (Severo-Osetinsky Zapovednik, Caucasus), ancient burial grounds, monuments of the Second

World War era, and on and on. These monuments and sites need legislative protection and special studies.

Tourism and Zapovedniks

Can tourism be developed in zapovedniks? The issue has been discussed for many years. In the beginning of the century, “nature zapovedniks” and “national parks” were taken as synonyms. After the issuance of the statute of 1981, the point of view implying the impossibility of tourism in zapovedniks predominated. But a number of zapovedniks were established in places that traditionally have attracted many tourists. These zapovedniks conserve unique nature features that arouse great interest in many people, such as the valley of geysers in Kronotsky Zapovednik (Kamchatka); Kivach, the biggest waterfall in Europe; and other unique or beautiful landscapes. There are also traditional tourist spots such as the Dombai within Teberdinsky Zapovednik (Caucasus), Krasnoyarsk *stolby* (peculiarly shaped rocks—a Mecca for climbers) in Stolby Zapovednik (Siberia), and others.

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Today’s legislation allows zapovedniks to develop tourism facilities in specially assigned areas, and to create trails. At the same time, zapovedniks remain nature reserves—strictly protected areas. The tourist routes and areas assigned to traditional uses by local people account for only 0.3 to 5% of the zapovedniks’ total area. On the rest, nature proceeds according to its own laws. In most areas of zapovedniks, hunting, the felling of trees, the collection of windfallen trees and branches, or any other interference in natural processes are prohibited.

Conclusion

Thanks to the unique historical conditions of Russia, a geographical network of zapovedniks has been created which represents virtually all the diversity of nature throughout the country: the northern tundra, the mountains of the Caucasus, the Urals and the Altai, the black-earth steppes and Siberian taiga, the Far East and Kolsky Peninsula. The potentialities are unique, and today it is necessary to continue strengthening the network that has resulted from almost a century of zapovedniks.

