

A cross-national comparison of protected natural area systems in Russia and the Baltic States: diverging systems ten years after the fall of the Soviet Union

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Introduction

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) spanned two continents from 1917 until 1991, incorporating the Baltic States (Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia) just after World War II. A protected area network developed across all 15 nations, including ecosystems as diverse as forests, coastlines, mountains, tundra, and steppe. In the mid-1980s the long-range plans for each nation included expanding all types of protected areas. Since the fall of the USSR, each nation has redefined its form of government, and thus too the system that protects natural resources. Russia expanded the two pillars of its protected area system, *zapovedniks* (strict nature preserves) and national parks. Despite tremendous economic challenges, Russia has focused on and maintained a tradition of ecological research on *zapovedniks*. Natural resource managers in the Baltic States face a different set of challenges. The expansion of their *reservats* has been more modest (the Baltic States use the term “reservat,” but for the rest of this paper I will use “zapovednik” with some risk until an international agreement is struck on terminology). Latvia and Lithuania have focused on a system of national parks which preserve cultural as well as natural resources.

Central to explaining the premise that Russia, Latvia, and Lithuania have divergent issues in protected area management is identifying emergent social forces during the decade of transition and democratization. Comparative works outline factors such as historical forms of government, ties with the West, natural resources, and the presence of minorities (e.g., Hill 1994; Hough 1997; Juviler 1998; Matveeva 1999). Common cultural values in each nation continue to be the importance of nature, access to wildlands, and concern for natural resource policy. A comparison of these three nations highlights the influence of culture, economics, and political choice on protected areas. Toward that end, each country is briefly described in sociopolitical terms and then their protected area strategies are analyzed.

Methods

Case study methodology (GAO 1990; Yin 1994) directed me to use data from Freedom House (an annual survey that uses a seven-point scale to rate “political rights” and “civil liberties”; Freedom House 2000) and literature that details the unique socioeconomic conditions influencing the process of democratization. The information on protected area policy is through archival research, elite interviews, and roundtable discussions in Russia in 1995, 1999 and 2000; and through elite interviews in Lithuania and Latvia in January 2001.

The Soviet-era system

The three nations inherited the Soviet system of protected natural areas, including local, regional, and national designations of natural, historical, cultural, aesthetic, and recreational significance. Two basic areas are utilized in this study: *zapovedniks*

and national parks. Established for scientific research in 1919, zapovedniks were defined as areas that exclude virtually all anthropogenic disturbance, including wildlife management, species introduction (on most areas), extractive resource use (industrial or personal), and recreational activities. Their primary purpose was to preserve typical and unique ecosystems and conduct baseline research in ecology (Pryde 1972; Weiner 1988). These goals have persevered through seven decades of Soviet rule, including two devastating reorganizations (Borieko 1993; Borieko 1994), and continued to dominate the management goals of zapovedniks in the 1990s (Shtil'mark 1996; Weiner 1999). Additional goals have been added to zapovedniks in all three nations to include environmental education and assisting in the preparation of environmental impact assessments. The expanded goals are intended to increase the zapovednik response to local and regional needs (Ostergren and Hollenhorst 1999; Ostergren 2001).

The second important category of protected area is the national park. Much like other national park systems in the world, the national parks under study here are geared toward natural, cultural, and historic preservation, as well as nature-based recreation (Chebakova 1997). National parks are a relatively new feature in the former USSR. During the late 1960s, a social movement for outdoor recreation encouraged thousands into the forests. The inevitable pressure on zapovedniks to allow recreation jeopardized their pristine qualities. In partial reaction to the demand for public recreation areas, the USSR designated the first national parks in 1971, one each in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (Pryde 1972; Gaava et al. 1984). Russia started designating national parks in 1983. These may include villages or agricultural activities (IUCN 1994).

Diverging protected area priorities

Russia The limited form of democracy in Russia has been described as a “delegative democracy” (O'Donnell 1994). As a delegative democracy, the regime has free and contested elections but, once elected, the president is able to govern with relatively little input from the general public (Tsygankov 1998). Juviler (1998) states that Russia's democracy lacks executive accountability, and economic and civil rights have shown slow, sporadic progress. Nonetheless “ten years after *perestroika*, Russia is more free and more democratic than it was before” (Sakwa 1996, 377).

Russia is rated as “partly free” (Freedom House 2000). Studies cite an emergent, but fragmented presidentialism; powerful, self-serving ministries; a tenuous pluralism; and the short history with open elections (Frank 1994; Fish 1995; Sakwa 1996; Biryukov and Sergeev 1997). The Freedom House civil liberties rating is “5” (out of 7) for a variety of reasons. The media wars during elections have been equally caustic to all members of the Duma, and the state pressures media outlets to present material in a “pro-government” light. Other fundamental problems include corruption, crime, human rights violations, and the slow reform of the judicial system.

Despite tremendous challenges, Russia has invested in its zapovednik system. Since 1991, the system suffered a two-pronged assault of draconian budget cuts and increasing pressure to utilize the reserves' natural resources (Krever et al. 1994). Results of a 60-80% reduction in federal funding include the elimination of helicopter support, infrastructure degradation, a decrease in wages, and a decline in research (Ostergren 1998). However, the most dangerous threat to the system emerged from social conditions (Pryde 1997). As the borders of the USSR became more permeable, poachers accessed world markets for illegal trade. Furthermore, as people lost their income, hunting and fishing in the zapovednik “pantry” was often a matter of survival (Ostergren and Shvarts 1999). However some changes after 1991 were positive. For example, newer zapovedniks are utilizing outreach programs in schools and “on-site” environmental education. Although enlarging a struggling and impoverished system seems counterintuitive, the Russian system has expanded from 77 preserves in 1989 to 99 in 2000.

Russian national parks are zoned to accommodate multiple uses, although 50-100% of a national park is protected for natural (undisturbed) conditions. Road building and resort-type lodges for the public are permitted within the tourism zones. Generally, the 35 national parks were a minor consideration for funding by the then-parent Federal Forest Service. One result of scarce human and financial resources was that the managers have turned to international aid and voluntary help to conduct basic maintenance. The most significant recent event affecting Russian national parks was that in May 2000 President Vladimir Putin abolished the Federal Forest Service. Although national parks had been the poor stepchildren in the Forest Service, they have now been merged into one department with the zapovedniks and have lost their independent home.

Also in May 2000, President Putin eliminated the State Committee of the Environment. This institution was the umbrella agency for zapovedniks. The preserves and national parks have been placed in the Ministry of Natural Resources (a frequent target of criticism by the State Committee of the Environment). Either the events will energize the environmental community, or public participation in protected area policy-making will sink to new levels of ineffective protest. In general, Russia has been characterized as lacking active participation in public affairs and suffering from a weak civic community (Marsh 2000). Despite the bleak prospects for protected area agencies housed in a "pro-development" ministry, placing the sister systems within one department may ultimately lead to a cohesive, unified national protected areas network. However, Director Stepanitsky appears to have no intention of merging the two systems; rather, their missions may be highlighted and viewed as necessary complements.

Latvia. The independence of 1918-1940 set democratic roots deep in Latvian political culture. However, Premier Karlis Ulmanis suspended the parliament in 1934 to right a flagging economy, and then the Soviet Union annexed the Baltics in 1940 (Runcis 1999). Civil society remained a strong force, as active dissidence and social organizations emerged in the late 1980s during Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost*. Eventually, members of various organizations united to form the Latvian Popular Front in 1988, awakening a national move for independence. The eventual formation of 20-plus parties and early elections to determine a 100-member parliament boded well for democracy (Nørgaard et al 1996).

Democratic institutions in Latvia have been refined and tested over the decade. Freedom House describes Latvia as "free" with extensive political rights and civil liberties. The parliament has exchanged hands several times; in June 2000, it elected the country's first female president, Vaire-Vike Freiberga. The shifting coalitions in parliament are accompanied by stable political parties and high voter participation. Although the judiciary is weak, the press is free and prolific, social organizations assemble without harassment, and human rights are guaranteed. The biggest concern for civil liberties are the difficulties for the mostly Russian ethnic minorities (Linz and Stepan 1996; Runcis 1999). However Plakans (1997) suggests that the interethnic problems are less of a concern than many analysts suggest, and recent developments suggest that the Latvian government is streamlining the immigration process. For much of rural Latvia, forest culture, wildlife, nature, timber, and a host of forest products remain intertwined with economic and personal health. The expanded protected area system will remain an important part of sociopolitical decisions in the coming decades.

Lithuania. The country is rated by Freedom House as "free" with extensive political rights. Parliamentary elections have produced a range of political parties and institutional processes. The media is very free from state intervention (Girnius 1999). Lithuania rates slightly lower in civil liberties because, although social plurality is guaranteed, the obstacles to full democracy are a weakness in applying the law, the poor condition of political debate, and the deep divide between Communists and

non-Communists (Krikus 1997; Girnius 1999). The most recent elections brought back the “left” (members of Communist party before 1990) into the parliament. Some officials are worried about the abrupt shift in government policy with regard to protected area management, but the national policy direction appears to be set.

Contributing to Lithuania’s peaceful move to democracy is its brief history of independence from 1918-1940 and the development of a constitution (Krikus 1997). Unfortunately, the country slipped into authoritarianism in 1926 and any independence was doomed in 1940 with its annexation by the USSR. In the late 1980s, the strong Catholic Church supported activists and underground newspapers until Lithuania elected the first non-Communist party to its legislature anywhere in the USSR (Krikus 1997). Lithuania was relatively quick to emerge as a functional democracy. The 137-member parliament and directly elected president are balanced by an independent judiciary (Girnius 1999). Natural resource management in this small nation has emerged as a high priority.

Lithuanian and Latvian protected areas

In general, the people in these two democracies are faring much better than their Russian counterparts. Ties to the European Union are increasing and foreign investment topped US\$1 billion during 1995-2000 (including Estonia; Maldeikis and Rainys 2000). Although Latvia and Lithuania should not be casually lumped together for analysis, in the field of protected area policy they appear to be more similar, and thus mutually distinct, from conditions and issues in Russia. Keep in mind that Latvia and Lithuania (as well as Estonia) have a host of distinctive characteristics (Maldeikas and Rainys 2000).

Zapovedniks in Latvia and Lithuania have remained true to the traditional course of highly restricted access and conducting ecological research. The greatest growth has been in national parks and regional nature parks. One of the obvious goals of both countries is that their ministries of the environment seek to increase foreign tourism. Not only are the national parks expanding in scope and size, but the local populace is encouraged to capitalize on the trade. Bed-and-breakfast operations are attracting foreigners, and active programs have been developed to preserve and highlight traditional culture. Nature parks emphasize non-consumptive activities for national and international tourists. Literature and maps are available in English and German and highlight the natural and cultural attractions.

The emerging conflict for national park managers takes two forms. Timber remains a significant resource as an export to Europe. It is important to keep in mind that the Baltic region has been settled for centuries and does not possess the extensive wildlands of Russia or the USA. The forests have been harvested at one time or another and many areas have been replanted. National parks have been defined with logging “zones.” The obvious question is how much can an area be logged and still maintain a semblance of protecting natural resources? The national parks receive an income from sales of timber, which contributes to a conflict of interest. NGOs are active in seeking a balance, and in some national parks the logging practices actually maintain meadows that preserve the landscape and enhance grazing for wildlife. As Ugis Rotbergs (of the World Wide Fund for Nature’s Latvia project) observed, it is impossible to determine exactly what is the “natural” state of the Baltic region, so WWF supports a range of conditions that preserve a “best guess,” including culturally or traditionally meaningful conditions. The contrast to Russia is evident.

The second major challenge is in land ownership. Unlike Russia, land restitution to pre-World War II owners created an extensive pattern of in-holdings. In addition, city dwellers are purchasing land in, or near, national parks for aesthetic and recreational values. Compared with Lithuania, Latvia appears to have been more successful at limiting in-holdings for natural areas, but the cultural zones are similar between the two nations. Future challenges to management will include the friction between preservationists wishing to maintain the old character of small villages and new residents

wishing to improve their homes. For instance, if a landowner passes away in a “culturally significant” village and the heir would like to add plumbing, an indoor toilet, or new windows, what right does the national park have to restrict changes so that the home remains consistent with its old character? Land zoning is in its infancy and the concepts and restrictions are not nearly as sophisticated as in, say, Switzerland, with its severe zoning requirements.

Conclusion

The distinctions between Russia and the Baltic States lie in fundamental differences in interpretation of land ownership, land use, and economic affluence. With new challenges to seek funds, Russian national parks may well increasingly pursue foreign tourism, although it appears that the unique system of zapovedniki will persevere. Latvia and Lithuania have significant land management challenges ahead, as private land ownership and pressure to extract timber increase in the next ten years. The fall of the USSR has provided an excellent “experiment” in the evolution of protected area policy over time under a variety of sociocultural conditions.

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