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“Warning of Global Warming? The Intertwined Nature of Ecological, Cultural, and Political Change in Siberia’s Far East”

In summer 2007, a close Sakha colleague Uliana Vinokurova, sociologist and former deputy in the Sakha Republic’s parliament, shared her concern about global warming trends reaching the Srednaia Kolyma region where she grew up. Not only had the region seen more numerous and serious floods in the past decade, she explained. People were beginning to worry about the broader encompassing health and ecological problems that climate change seemed to bring. “We love the cold,” Uliana affirmed. “It protects us from all sorts of viruses that flourish in warmer weather. We are suspicious of thaws that come too soon in the spring, and freezes that arrive too late in the fall. But most of all we are concerned about the capriciousness of the weather. The old weather charts and the folk wisdom of our elders do not seem to predict our climate the way they used to.”

This essay attempts to probe the implications of Uliana’s concern. How far do the ripple effects of climate change go? Do local changes harbor potential benefits as well as harm? Is the famously delicate Northern ecology particularly vulnerable to global warming? How do demographic implications of increased development in the Far North impinge on indigenous peoples? And particularly significant: how do indigenous land keepers discuss the dangers and potential remedies of change? Are indigenous Siberians who rely on subsistence the ‘canaries in the mine’ – warning of global warming?

One of the hallmarks of post-Soviet life has been new possibilities for group expression and organization. Yet these possibilities combine and collide with increasing conflict between indigenous peoples and developers in the Russian Federation North. Through tensions over land and resources, multiple identities and political rivalries are revealed. Such tensions may well be exacerbated by climate change. Far from stability, such tensions spark uncertainties that are also exacerbated by the wider political climate: recent processes of Moscow-level recentralization and renegotiation of rights. For the larger of the Siberian groups, in the last eight years under President Putin, gains of relative degrees of sovereignty have been revoked or circumvented, so that republic-level status within the Russian Federation means less than it did ten years ago under President Yeltsin. For the smaller, less well-represented groups, de-facto rights have also been curtailed, despite some “on paper” beneficial legislation and the increasing activism of their umbrella lobbying organization RAIPON (Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North).

The many levels of social interaction in Russia’s perpetually in-transition society provide a challenge for anthropologists accustomed to focus refined ethnographic lenses at a nomadic camp, village or “ethnic” level. I argue in this essay, building on earlier concepts of oecumene (June Helm, Robert Netting) and recent anthropological theories concerning newly ‘emergent forms’ of global interrelationships (Mike Fischer), that it is crucial for us to pay attention to the intertwined nature of ecological, cultural and political relationships at many levels. Analysis is divided into three sections: climate change in local lore and discourse; political and economic contexts; cultural implications, including a probe into the limits of shamanic adaptability.