

Can Economic and Ecological Interests be Reconciled in Siberia

For many years, particularly since the drive for rapid industrialization which started in the 1920s in the then Soviet Union, the great Siberian forests — there called 'taiga' — have suffered from ruthless and wasteful exploitation. Now, with privatization and foreign logging firms moving in, the situation is getting even worse. In an article published in the Russian weekly *Moskovskie Novosti* (Nr 33, 14–21, August 1994, page 9), Elena Matveeva reports on a particularly distressing case which involves not only the tragic fate of the forests, but also that of its human inhabitants, belonging to the small tribes named Udege, Nanai, and Orochi, whose home these forests have been since time immemorial.

About four years ago, two Russian enterprises, *Primorlesprom* and *Terneyles*, formed a joint venture with the South Korean corporation *Hyundai*, to start logging in the Far Eastern area called Primor'e, which lies between the Ussuri River and the Pacific Ocean. This joint venture, named Svetlana (apparently in part after the local river and settlement named *Svetlaya*), promised to carry out logging in an environmentally friendly way, felling only mature and over-age trees, followed by reafforestation. Svetlana undertook also to build roads and an ultra-modern industrial wood-working complex which would provide employment for the local population.

'Unprecedented Vandalism'

However, in actual fact, using the most up-to-date machinery, the joint venture proceeded to saw down all the woody vegetation wholesale, so that within a year an area of 5,000 hectares was turned into a practically lifeless desert. Many mammals and birds perished with the forest; many streams and small rivers — some of them fish spawning-grounds — disappeared under the rubble. Even grass ceased to grow on much of this mutilated land which had become polluted with petrochemicals. Many felled trees — thousands of cubic metres of wood — were left to rot on the spot because the joint venture had felled more trees than it could transport to the seaport at the mouth of the River Svetlana, to be shipped to South Korea.

Representatives of the international activist organization *Greenpeace*, who had managed with the greatest difficulty to get to the site, described the actions of the joint venture as unprecedented vandalism, no similar destruction having ever been performed anywhere else, at least so far as they were aware. They were so shocked by what they saw that they chained themselves to the felling machine. In another act of protest, the Greenpeace ship blocked the exit from the port to the South Korean transport ship. Nevertheless the joint venture continued its onslaught into the 'taiga', promising again but failing as previously to take measures of reforestation and social development. In return for its destroyed forests, the district got timber-transporting roads, a port in Svetlana Bay, and a workers' settlement to house foreign — mainly Chinese — labourers to work in the 'taiga', *i.e.* facilities that were needed first and foremost by the joint venture itself, whose aim was simply to export the timber as a raw material that was needed in South Korea.

Forest Peoples' Resistance Inadequate

The unexpected resistance of the Udege, who blocked the way to the tree-felling machinery, resulted in a slow-

down of the timber procurement and a considerable financial loss to *Hyundai*, the South Korean partner, which now threatens to bring its case to the London Court of Arbitration and sue for \$70 million damages. On the other hand the last of the Udege (in the Primor'e province they number only 818 individuals) have no intention to leave and abandon their home to be looted and laid waste. For them it is a question of life or death. A small 'nation' which calls itself 'the forest people' cannot survive in other conditions.

Wanton exploitation of forests seems to have become the norm. Even protected territories that have so far not been touched by logging are now in danger. The American firm *Weyerhaeuser* is said to have its eye on the Nature reserve in the valley of the River Bochi, in the north of Khabarovsk Province, and the Russo-Norwegian firm *Forest-Vanino* to have set its heart on the *Dublikansky zakaznik**. Not far from there, North Koreans have been lumbering for the last 30 years. Russia's timber industry has always been conducted without giving a thought to the future, which means of course neglecting the environment. Despite — or perhaps because of — the vastness of the areas concerned, no systematic research work has been carried out, so that even today no data are available on the amount of industrial exploitation that forests have supported or hopefully could sustain.

Such an irresponsible attitude towards the country's national wealth attracts foreign firms but their outrageous vandalism cannot well be stopped unless the Russians themselves change their own ways and set a worthy example. A fund for scientific study of such forests is urgently needed, as well as an assessment of the position of the 'taiga' in the life of different regions, remembering that forests not only provide wood and paper but — first and foremost — air, moisture conservation, shelter, safeguarding of soil, and also protection against landslides. Moreover, the nature of the territory along the River Bikin is unique. More than 50 plant species growing here, and a hundred animals, are on the protected list of endangered species. Among the rarest plants are the Ayan Fir-tree and the White-barked Silver Spruce. Even the microclimate is quite special: the rainfall is double that of the whole Primor'e, while according to the Author of the article on which this note is largely based, the destruction of these forests may have global consequences, even altering the climate over much of Planet Earth and thus affecting the life of its human population.

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**Zakaznik* is a term used for partially-protected areas where certain activities are prohibited: *e.g.* hunting or fishing, and digging up certain species of plants or, most frequently, lumbering. *Zakazniks* are less protected than *Zapovediks*, which are fully protected Nature reserves.