

Russian Environmental Values and Strategies: Historical Development and Role of NGOs

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Abstract

This article describes the current state of the Russian natural environment, the historical development of Russian environmental values and strategies, and several factors, including the role of environmental non-governmental organizations, in the implementation of those environmental values and strategies.

Introduction and Background

Political reforms since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992 promoted by former President Boris Yeltsin and other Russian reformers have proved problematic, and domestic and international efforts to revitalize the economy were severely curtailed. This current status is very similar to the precursor events describing a bleak “fortress world” scenario for Russia (Hammond, 1999).

From a \$1.2 trillion economy during the late 1980s, Russia, at the end of the 1990s, had a G.N.P. of \$337.9 *billion* (World Bank, 1999). Promises of significant economic gains are belied by the fact that the post-Soviet economy is having serious difficulties in realigning itself along a more “capitalist” model. With the influence of organized crime, hard-line political factions, the military, and other anti-reform groups, an advanced economy similar to Western Europe’s may be decades away for Russia.

Though environmental degradation can be attributable to some types of economic growth, strong economies also often provide the backbone for environmental cleanup and conservation, as well as the tax revenues necessary for government planning, execution, and oversight of national environmental policies and initiatives. With the current social, economic, political, and civic degradation of the Russian Federation, the natural environment gets scant attention at best. While this dire situation may prompt some observers to call for foreign intervention to protect and preserve Russia’s environment,

many Russians would likely reject such an approach.

Observers in a number of nations, especially those in Europe and Japan, are deeply concerned over the impact of past, present, and future Russian nuclear, oil, and gas pollution and waste disposal. Several levels of Western involvement, including “governmental, inter-governmental, academic and non-governmental (NGO)” organizations (Stewart, 1999) can ease the burden on the Russian government and economy to conserve their natural environments. However, the significant size of the problem also requires national government-to-national government assistance.

Formulation of Russian Environmental Values and Strategies

Russian Environmental History

Environmentalism in Russia has a long tradition and range of achievement. Three major phases have been identified in Russian environmental history: 1910-20, 1950-60 and the second half of the 1980s (Mirovitskaya, 1998). All three phases coincided with the late stages of periods of economic expansion, heralding radical political changes and rising social tension and activism. The Russian “ecological” tradition became part of the social conscience through literature, philosophy and common ethics with the culture of the Eastern Orthodox Church, which sanctified water, prayed for harvests, decreed the desecration of bread a sin, and offered environmental education in its schools.

Phase one continued until 1930, developing what may have been the cutting edge of conservation theory and practice at the time (Weiner, 1988). Russian scientists established the unique system of zapovedniks (a strict nature reserve) and other types of protected areas, introduced regional land use planning, and developed “phytosociology” and several other major concepts making fundamental contributions to both ecology and conservation practice (Weiner, 1988).

The first government of socialist Russia was friendly to the environmental cause. Under Lenin’s political leadership, rational exploitation and conservation of nature was defined as a vital component of the radical socio-economic transformation that was undertaken in the 1920s (Mirovitskaya and Soroos, 1995).

The successes of the first phase of government policy on resources and the environment in Russia included a radical improvement in urban cleanliness, the creation of national medical and sanitary-hygienic systems, the establishment of the nationwide system of forest economy, and the setting aside of protected areas for the study of ecosystems. Lenin’s Draft Plan of Scientific and Technical Work laid a basis for pioneering integrated research into the natural environment and resource utilization, which were applied through the creation of a National System of Environmental Monitoring and the elaboration of the first principles of nature conservation.

The political climate during this phase was also favorable to civic environmentalism. The pace of conservation activities stepped up and, in an attempt to build a national unified environmental movement, an All-Russian Society for Conservation (VOOP), was created in 1924 with initial membership of a thousand (Vinogradov, 1982).

The decades following this first phase were characterized by activity that was ruinous

for the existing nature conservation system; the latter was practically abandoned during these years. The new pseudo-Marxist conception of human domination over nature was declared central to the survival of socialist society. The legislation permitting informal associations was altered and members of many prominent organizations were persecuted. The few attempts by militant activists to raise public protests against the closure of zapovedniks and reckless industrial expansion were unsuccessful, leading to official sanctions and the organization's liquidation. VOOP and the wider environmental organizations entered a period of forced hibernation.

The costs of the "Second Russian Revolution" were both human and environmental. In a twelve-year period, the Russian economy was transformed from a predominantly rural agricultural base to an urban industrial one. On the down side of this "great leap" lay enormous wasted resources, effort, and lives. The loss of human lives numbered in the millions in the 1930s. The initial "great leap" produced long-term projects with high environmental impacts, including rapid industrial expansion in the Arctic, Siberia, and Far East. Later projects, such as the Virgin Land Exploitation project and the Construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline railway added to these impacts. The extreme application of anthropocentrism became a key characteristic of the whole Soviet nation and was among the major factors that brought Russia to the brink of an environmental crisis.

However, small groups, unions and collectives of like-minded people concerned with the conservation of nature and preservation of cultural traditions managed to survive. Scientists exiled from the universities to far-away settlements created groups focused on environmental research and education (Yanitsky, 1993).

Phase two (1950-1960) can be described as a combination of: (1) a period of reduction of unique natural landscapes and historic habitats after the Second World War, (2) Khrushchev's period of political liberalization, and (3) Brezhnev's period of activity of protection of the Corps (Mirovitskaya, 1998).

The first period of this decade coincided with the post-war policy of the wholesale resettlement of entire ethnic groups, leading to the increasing settlement of virgin lands, and an enormous rise in human resource pressure. The limited political liberalization of the mid-1950s made it possible for environmental groups to bring the intensifying human-caused environmental problems to the attention of the leadership of the Communist Party. The Academy of Sciences re-started the campaign against the closure of zapovedniks and was able to restore many of the liquidated reserves.

In the late 1950s, plans for the intensive development of the area, including changes in water flow and the creation of pulp-and-paper plants on the shores of the lake, unleashed a thirty-year-long public movement to defend Lake Baikal. The origin of this movement was a round-robin letter of protest, signed by prominent scientists, doctors, writers and publicists, against problematic low-level nuclear waste remediation activities at Angara. The tactics of the movement included campaigns, appeals, civic expert commissions and protests. The most militant and durable of the environmental groups of the second phase proved to be the "students" movement. The so-called Students' Nature Protection Corps started in Estonia during 1958 and spread to Moscow University and others.

By the 1960s, the government began to promote changes in technology policy that were

intended to produce enhanced environmental sensitivity. The new concept of the “ecologization of production,” though not challenging the basic societal goal of economic growth, was meant to adapt the Soviet productive structure through new technology, such as closed-cycle or low-waste production, to new ecological demands (DeBardeleben, 1992).

Many students joined the environmental movement during the 1960s-1980s to protest against industrial monopoly and to assert intellectual autonomy against an increasingly oppressive regime. However, the protest was largely silent and autonomy remained illusive. The regime tolerated the movement and considered that it represented no particular threat to its existence.

By the late 1980s, the total number of affiliated Students’ Corps groups exceeded 100, with a total membership of 3500. Most student associations organized ecological expeditions, coordinated joint inter-Corps programs, and engaged in environmental education and advocacy.

The third phase (the second half of the 1980s) of Soviet environmentalism differs from its “conservationist” predecessors in several ways. First, it coincided with significant government environmental reforms. Second, it reflected widespread concerns linking environment and health issues. Third, the social bases of environmental concern had assumed historically significant proportions. The most important difference came about as linkages were increasingly established among environmental degradation, human health problems, and the practices of the communist regime.

The second and third phases of Russian/Soviet environmentalism shared much in common. Under strong government paternalism, the environmental activities of scientists, writers, students and the urban-educated stratum were channeled toward a benign conservationism and political neutrality.

The sphere of environmental protection was one of the main targets of Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika. From 1987 onward, the Soviet authorities issued a number of important environmental documents and regulations. These included the 1987 decree on Lake Baikal, the 1988 decree on the Aral Sea, and the Resolution on the Radical Perestroika of Nature Conservation. By 1989, increasingly pressing environmental problems produced a decree “On the Emergency Measures to Improve the Environmental Situation.” An All-Union Committee on Environmental Protection (Goskompriroda) was also hurriedly convened. The first Soviet State Environmental Program was adopted in 1990. This promoted a number of radical changes in Soviet environmental and resource management regimes. The Soviet State Environmental Program and the 1992 Environmental Law of the Russian Federation combined with similar acts within the sovereign states of the former Soviet Union (FSU), creating a legal framework for environmental progress.

In the early 1990s, the new Committee on Ecology and Natural Resources of the USSR Supreme Soviet attracted a majority of radically oriented deputies. The new leadership put forward important initiatives in the realm of international environmental cooperation. The notion of ecoglasnost (eco-transparency) was perhaps the most significant feature of this period, beginning the process of declassifying environmentally sensitive information and making it available to the public for the first time.

The most coherent campaigns among Soviet civic groups during the 1980s were anti-nuclear. After the Chernobyl catastrophe and the associated mass demonstrations and strikes, civic actions adopted a “radiophobic” orientation. Other targets of the “green” groups included areas in the Urals and Siberia that were heavily contaminated with radioactivity from weapons production and waste dumping. Groups organized public hearings, referenda, and scientific conferences on the issue of nuclear safety. A group called the “Movement for Nuclear Safety” was created in Chelyabinsk Region (Kyshtym-57) where nuclear accidents like Chernobyl had occurred.

Despite these environmental organizing efforts, reforms failed to meet the aspirations of the civic movement during its mobilization phase. And, the political promises of the “green-plus-market” democrats were quickly swept aside by the shock therapy of economic liberalization required by the IMF and World Bank. However, the politicization of environment issues in this third phase of Russian environmentalism was instrumental in fragmenting the Soviet empire. The leaders of the “greens” had unprecedented opportunities to participate in public decision-making processes and to pass progressive laws and legislative initiatives. Despite these gains, actual improvements in the environmental situation in Russia remained poor. These developments provoked a crisis in the environmental movement accompanied by an acute decline in its activities and the loss of support amidst the ideological discord.

The status of the environmental movement as a politicized force of opposition in the *post-perestroika* period has been closely tied to “market-environment” dualism. The market euphoria of Soviet/Russian environmentalists was short-lived. After *perestroika*, most of the new businesses were also among the anti-environmental forces. In the atmosphere of economic chaos and flourishing corruption, the so-called “new Russians” not only lack any incentive to follow environmental regulations, but were inclined to exploit loopholes for profit. Despite the absence of mass mobilizations, environmentalism continues to evolve. This evolution, combined with the introduction of environmental issues to the platforms of opposition parties, provides some hope that social controls can still be put in place to stop the environmental degradation of the country. However, the current movement is still in its infancy, and Russia’s other problems make environmental issues less important in the eyes of many.

In 2000, President Vladimir Putin transformed the Committee for Environmental Protection into an agency within the Ministry of Natural Resources. The same pattern was applied at the provincial level. However, in 2003, environmental protection issues were once again on the forefront of politics. The first deputy Minister of Natural Resources of Russia V. Karaganov was appointed Head of the State Environmental Protection Service. A number of measures were taken to improve environmental protection activities, including fining a Cadbury Dirol chewing gum factory in Novgorod for air pollution.

The Future of Russian Environmental Values and Strategies

The Russian government needs to formulate a long-term plan and commit to reversing the continuing degradation of the environment. The first major step entails

systemic reform of the Russian legal system. Such reform would provide a rationale for reducing the widespread corruption in Russia, while creating severe penalties for energy industry polluters. The business sector in Russia also needs reform, and a strong legal system would help to protect domestic businesses from the influence of the organized crime and of extremist groups that are vying for political and economic power.

The political party system in Russia also needs changes to the extent that no one government or coalition of political parties could seriously undo legal, environmental, and economic reforms. Finally, the education system in Russia needs alterations to further support the changes in the legal, environmental, and economic efforts, so that the next generation of Russian policy-makers will be sensitized to the importance of long-term sustainability issues and goals.

Combined with domestic reform, other strategies to improve the Russian environment include efforts by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the United Nations. North American, Japanese, and European Union cooperation and commitment is essential to making such an undertaking work over the long-term. Furthermore, NGO and private sector initiatives can help to identify and address those environmental problems that may escape the view of international aid organizations and Western governmental efforts.

Implementation of Russian Environmental Values and Strategies

The Role of Environmental NGOs: Prospects and Challenges

The growth of the NGO sector, including environmental organizations, is one of the most promising developments in the potential modification of Russian environmental strategies. Although estimating the exact number of NGOs is a difficult task because not all Russian NGOs are officially registered and some have changed their activity areas, the approximate number of environmental NGOs currently operating in Russia has been estimated to range from 800 to 1,000. The majority of NGOs (at least 60%) have an annual budget of between \$500 to \$10,000, compared to 13% with operating budgets that exceed \$10,000 per annum.

According to the provisions of Article 12 of The Federal Law on Information, citizens and NGOs have equal rights of access, and are not obliged to give reasons for their request to the holder of the information. In the Law on Environmental Protection in Russia (article 13), NGOs that espouse environmental goals have the right to recommend their representatives for participation in governmental expert panels. Public participation, on the other hand, is limited to the discussion of specific issues. NGOs do not have right to vote or to veto, as this is the exclusive jurisdiction of governmental bodies (Razbash, 1999). Russian NGOs do have the right to have their comments seriously taken into account. This right is provided by the relevant norms of the Environmental Protection Law and Federal Law on Environmental Expertise.

Russian environmental NGOs can be categorized as “older” (11%, formed before 1987) and “younger” (89%, formed in or after 1987) (REC, 1999). The older NGOs are more politicized and developed. The younger NGOs have a greater ability to communicate

in foreign languages, especially English, and have greater concern for grass-roots activities.

Some of the initiatives that can be used to help the Russian environment are the use of tax incentives by the Russian government to help promote cleanup efforts.

The use of Life Cycle Analysis to measure and evaluate the design, implementation, and effectiveness of Russian environmental policies should work in tandem with the design of a comprehensive protection strategy and policy.

Conclusion

The specter of nuclear, oil, and gas pollution, contamination, and waste in Russia is alarming, with potential significant impacts on both global and Russian environmental issues, such as global warming, ozone depletion, industrial pollution, and impairments to human health. Despite these daunting challenges to Russian society to effectively address a myriad of human-environment problems, Russian environmental history and typical Russian values of a love for the land and of endurance in the face of tragedy, lend hope to the Russian environmental outlook. Russia's developing environmental non-governmental community is another bright spot in this regard. What is necessary to reverse the nation's environmental problems is a heightened sense of urgency and commitment to reform within Russia, as well as matching resource commitments from the international community. Reform can be achieved, but it must be planned and executed by strategically effective policymakers within Russia itself. Furthermore, more sustainability-oriented legal, economic, and bureaucratic structures need to be ingrained into the very fabric of Russian society in order to create the needed improvements from the current situation.

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