The fight for SIBERIA

Short-circuiting the Global Phosphorus Cycle
On August 30, 2000, about 10 masked policemen wielding automatic rifles burst into the office of the Glasnost Foundation, a nonprofit human rights organization in Moscow. The police forced the dozen people they encountered to lie facedown on the floor. They spent 40 minutes rummaging through the office, then they left without a word of explanation. The Foundation’s staff never learned what exactly the police wanted—assuming they had anything more specific in mind than intimidation. But the larger significance of the raid was never much in doubt. It was yet another skirmish in the political war over the world’s largest remaining undeveloped natural area outside of Antarctica—and over the social rights of the people who live there. Siberia, the vast realm at the top of Eurasia, contains vast stores of timber, oil, and metals. The oil and gas deposits off the Siberian Arctic and Pacific coasts are by far Russia’s most important source of foreign exchange. Siberia is also a place of extraordinary natural and cultural wealth. It’s home to such indigenous cultures as the Udege, who live along the rivers that run through the forests of the Siberian far east, and the Inuit, who inhabit the tundra to the north. Its southeastern forests are the last remaining range of the Siberian tiger, the largest of the world’s great cats. Its northern tundra is the breeding ground of the once common and now highly endangered Siberian crane, which winters as far south as India. The rivers that pour from its Pacific coasts receive the largest surviving salmon runs in the world.

This is what the cops and the people on the floor are fighting over. The cops take their orders—although usually indirectly—from the oligarchy that inherited the crumbling industrial apparatus of the old Soviet empire. On the other side is Russia’s fledgling civil society. I went to far eastern Siberia to meet some of the people who are constructing this movement. I found them in the offices of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in cities like Vladivostok, on the southeastern tip of Siberia. (See map, page 16.) Vladivostok’s spectacular Pacific coastal fjords would have made it more beautiful than San Francisco, had it not been mostly composed of massive, decrepit cinder-block buildings. I found other activists in Khabarovsk, which lies to the north, along the Chinese border—a city that is home to many whose parents or grandparents were condemned to the Soviet-era gulags. And when I met these activists in their cramped apartments, their destitute universities, or the offices of their start-up magazines, I heard much that was encouraging: clearly, they are winning some of their battles.

To be sure, they have not patched the leaks that are too numerous to count in the corroding Soviet-era oil pipelines. Nor have they found a way to cope with Siberia’s abundant nuclear waste, or to reverse the region’s declining life expectancy, which has fallen to around 70 years for women and only 57 years for men.

But they have managed to secure licenses for their own environmental inspectors, who now monitor logging operations and chemical factories. And on the edge of a newly recognized World Heritage Site...
Russia's single greatest source of foreign exchange is Siberian oil and gas. Here, a worker struggles with a hose at a gas drilling rig on the Yamal Peninsula, in northwestern Siberia.
in Kamchatka, the vast and relatively unspoiled land that faces Alaska from the other side of the Pacific, they have blocked the opening of a gold mine that lacked adequate environmental controls. Compared with the problems, such victories may seem small, but they mark an enormous advance over Soviet times. Soviet Kamchatka, for example, was off limits not just to NGOs, but to all civilian visitors. It was primarily the domain of the military. Throughout Siberia, the new civil society is establishing itself, but it is still struggling with various ghosts from the Soviet past.

**Round One: Old-School Governance**

Gennady Devyatkin, the governor of Bystrinsky, a large district in central Kamchatka, sits in his office in the early afternoon of a crisp, bright summer day. The governor is a short, pale man with brown, disheveled hair. He appears to be in his mid-50s. And he is most definitely drunk. Very drunk. He rises and warmly greets the five of us—a delegation of three Kamchatkan environmentalists and two American colleagues.

Bystrinsky contains some of the world’s largest volcanos. The big chunks of lava on the roadsides look like illogically shaped boulders. The district also has the world’s best remaining salmon runs. When the salmon are running, fishers spread their nets into these immense rivers and haul them back without the slightest pause, straining to retrieve an overflowing load of coho, chinook, king, and several other, much rarer salmon species, like masu, which is also known as Japanese “cherry salmon,” although it has largely disappeared from Japan.

Why don’t we all go to the restaurant, asks Devyatkin. No need to sit around the big conference table at the office. So we make our way to the only restaurant in town, arrange ourselves at one of the three or four tables, and the governor orders lunch. But he also orders vodka, which comes first, in several bottles. The glasses on the table are meant for either water or vodka; peer pressure, it seems, drives everyone towards the latter option. Eventually, we turn to the reason for our visit: a pending decision on whether to open a gold mine.

We don’t think the mine is a good idea. We argue that tourism would bring in more revenue and create more jobs. But the tourists won’t come unless the province is maintained in its pristine state. You can’t have both, we say. Mines and tourists don’t mix. But the governor favors the mine. Strongly—although he has trouble explaining how he arrived at this conviction. Perhaps, floating somewhere in the vodka fumes, is the notion that the mine would be a safer bet.

This is the old fashioned way of governing—and indeed of conducting any type of business. The drinking is routine. Some people even say it is necessary: “sober people can keep secrets.” (Actually, though, Siberian politics furnishes plenty of evidence that practiced drinkers can keep secrets too.) But the biggest deficiency is the lack of any real analysis of profits, employment, environmental impact—in short, of what would best serve the public good. In the absence of such analysis, vested interest generally prevails. And since restraint of vested interest is an essential function of government, you could argue that the Bystrinsky District, like much of Siberia, doesn’t really have a functioning government.

After lunch, the governor takes us on a tour of the town. We see the Olympic pool-sized hot springs facility, crowded with playing families. We soak our feet in a more rustic spring nearby. We are surrounded by mountains, bearing traces of last winter’s snow even in late August. This winter’s snows may start in less than a month. Below the mountains are meadows...
Russian corruption is well known from reports on the gangsters in Moscow. But the source of that corruption is largely in places like this. Russian oligarchs may live in Moscow, but most of their money is coming from Siberian natural resources. This is a pattern that can be traced back through the Soviet era, to the time of the Tsars. And it is one of the reasons why many—perhaps most—Russians now believe that post-Soviet privatization has failed them.

A little recent history: in the mid 1990s, President Boris Yeltsin tried to implement western-style economic reform as quickly as possible, without alienating his wealthy allies. To accomplish this, he permitted these oligarchs to make loans to the government—loans secured by massively undervalued shares in major state-owned companies, such as Gazprom, LUKoil, Sibneft, and Sidanco. When the government defaulted on its loan payments—an eventuality that is widely believed to have been part of the deal to begin with—a very few men ended up owning much of the country’s industrial base. Russia’s conglomerates had indeed been privatized, but the result was hardly a private sector in the usual western sense. Instead, Yeltsin’s cronies used their new quasi-monopoly status to make themselves even richer, through wholesale liquidation of the natural assets that the companies control. Government agencies are not in a position to regulate or even monitor most of this activity. As one official told the *Moscow Times*, “We have only one nature inspector for every 3,000 square kilometers! While in Luxembourg, for example, they have a staff of more than 300 inspectors for a territory of less than 3,000 square kilometers.”

The result is rampant violations of natural
resource regulations. According to Viktor Duroshenko, a director of Primorsklesprom, one of eastern Siberia’s largest timber companies, as much as half of Russian logging may be illegal. In the fishing sector, the situation is reportedly even worse. The take from illegal fishing in eastern Siberia is estimated at more than triple the legal harvest of 2.5 million tons per year. In Kamchatka, poachers reportedly in the pay of the Moscow Mafia are stretching nets all the way across river mouths—and basically removing entire salmon runs. The high-value roe is cut from the fish, which are then heaped into enormous piles and left to rot.

Fighting this corruption can be very dangerous. During the 2000 salmon season on Sakhalin Island, which lies just north of Japan in the Sea of Okhotsk, a car bomb injured the chief fish protection inspector one morning as he was leaving for work. He had been called the “terror of local poachers” for his attempts to curb corruption. Although he suffered only minor leg wounds, it’s likely that the bomb inflicted substantial collateral damage, in the form of widespread intimidation.

Round Two: Civil Society Emerges

A group of college students in ragtag camouflage gear walks down a deserted dirt road deep in the Siberian taiga. “Taiga” means “forest” in Russian, and there is a lot of land behind that word. Russian forests cover an area as large as the continental United States and almost twice the size of the Amazonian rainforest. For 11 hours, the students walk. It’s summer and the forest on either side of the road is in full leaf. It’s second growth, mixed broadleaf-needleleaf, and it seems to stretch on forever. A monotonous, infinite realm where the only sound is the wind and the footfalls on the road. But in the evening, the spell is broken: the road emerges from the taiga to reveal a vast, desolate clearcut.

The students are representatives of the Tomsk Ecological Student Inspection (TESI), an NGO and school for “young ecological inspectors.” Before the school was established, there was only one natural resource inspector in the whole of Tomsk, a province in western Siberia. Now there are hundreds. TESI was founded at Tomsk State University in August, 1999. Its teachers come from the Tomsk Forest Service, the Fisheries Protection Department, the non-profit Novosibirsk Ecoclub, and other organizations. Its training sessions, now attended by more than 50 students from 11 Russian provinces, cover a very broad curriculum. Students learn some basic environmental journalism and wildlife management. But they are also taught more tactical skills, like how to catch poachers and how to inspect toxic and radioactive waste sites.

Russia has strong environmental laws on its books but very little enforcement. Enter TESI—and the battle is joined. That group of students has the power to cite large companies for illegal logging, or for leaking mines. They can even fine poachers directly.

TESI is just one of hundreds of NGOs that have emerged since the Soviet thaw. Unlike their Soviet-era precursors, which were few and straight-jacketed by the state, the new organizations are serious players in the natural resources sector. Many of them are run by eminent scientists who lost their state salaries when the Soviet Union collapsed. Because they are accustomed to poverty and because the ruble is so weak, these people frequently make do with the equivalent of only $1,000 or $2,000 per year. Some of them, who still draw residual salaries from their old official jobs, donate their labor to the NGOs.

The entire annual budget of a Siberian NGO may come to no more than the equivalent of $5,000 (although a few have budgets in excess of $100,000). In general, most of the cash support comes from abroad—in the form of tiny grants from western foundations and NGO partners. Some of these organizations specialize in supporting Siberian NGOs, not just by funding them, but by providing access to information, to western decision makers, and to the international news media. Among the most prominent of these groups are the Global Greengrants Fund, Pacific Environment, ISAR (formerly the Institute for Soviet-American Relations), and the Wild Salmon Center. In 1999, the W. Alton Jones Foundation launched a series of Siberian NGO summits—meetings at which representatives from many NGOs could work out common strategies—but the foundation has since disbanded and it is uncertain if the summits will continue.

Despite their meager resources, Siberian NGOs are now engaging a range of environmental problems in a broad spectrum of contexts. For example, a magazine called Zov Taigii (Roar of the Taiga) now covers the environmental scene in Siberia for a readership of NGOs, government officials, and the general public. Over thousands of kilometers of eastern Siberia, a host of little organizations has sprung up to press for the land rights of indigenous peoples. An NGO called Sakhalin Environment Watch has drawn international attention to the lack of oil-spill contingency plans on drilling platforms off the Pacific coast. And in 2000, TESI students provided evidence that resulted in 33 raids on poachers and other environmental criminals in the taiga of Amur province alone.

The conditions under which most of these people work are challenging to say the least. In a small apartment in the Pacific frontier town of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, Olga Chernyagina, a lanky, earnest botanist who looks to be in her mid-50s, runs the Kamchatka League of Independent Experts. Her
Leaking oil pipelines are a common form of groundwater pollution in much of Siberia.
apartment often lacks running water, and sometimes electricity or heat. It is stuffed with books and furniture. Clothes lines stretch from most of the windows to the buildings on the other side of a courtyard. She tells me that the clothes dry slowly because of the wet wind coming in off the Ocean. Two volcanos, snow on their peaks even in late summer, dominate the horizon on days that aren’t too foggy. From the street outside the building, you can see the harbor, where nuclear submarines lie low in the water, black and menacing.

The purpose of the League is to unite unemployed and under-employed scientists and put them to work protecting nature. They bring major credentials to their new task, as well as strong networks of colleagues. The League focuses on companies building oil pipelines in Kamchatka, pressuring them to design pipelines that are more “spill proof,” and to develop spill clean-up plans. The League has also opposed gold and diamond mines, arguing that the mines cost Siberia dearly, in the form of ecological and public health damage, while nearly all the profits end up elsewhere. Many local politicians and executives have, predictably, taken offense. But Chernyagina has persisted and the League has built a role for itself: it’s both a watchdog and a kind of conceptual pioneer. It has introduced local politicians to ideas that are completely new to them, such as the idea that environmental protection makes economic sense.

Chernyagina’s apartment seems positively luxurious compared to the squalor in which many other NGOs operate. To get to the offices of the magazine Zov Taigi, in Vladivostok, you have to walk down the long, eerie corridors of a building that once housed various chemical laboratories. It’s easy to stumble because the floor tiles are loose and none of the lights in the corridors work. The wreckage of decades of Soviet chemical equipment corrodes in piles along the walls. The air is dank and filled with unidentifiable odors. The magazine office itself is so jammed with piles of papers, photographic equipment, computers, printers, tea cups, and the remnants of recent meals that there is scarcely space to stand, let alone sit.

But not all NGO offices are decrepit. The Khaborovsk-based Wildlife Foundation has been able to raise the funds not only for adequate working space, but also for new computers that run sophisticated “Geographic Information System” software. The foundation is making detailed maps of the region. Such maps are crucial for tracking—and eventually managing—environmental change.

**Round Three:**
**The Oligarchs Retaliate**

Sergei Grigoryants, the president of the Glasnost Foundation, describes the police raid on his organization as a “conscious, government action aimed at intimidating civil society.” Among the Foundation’s likely offenses: it had strongly criticized the Federal Security Service (the KGB’s successor), and the war in Chechnya.

This is the kind of e-mail that Russian activists are accustomed to getting from their colleagues:

August 9th, 2001. Our friends were protesting against Gazprom plans. I’ve just called the policeman on duty at the local police station in Smolenska Stanitsa. He said that Andrey Rudomakha and Vasily Agafonov are imprisoned for 10 days. There is no information about two other activists—Vera from Krasnodar and Yura from Taganrog, but I guess that they are also imprisoned for 10 days.

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**Norilsk, a city of 230,000 in northwestern Siberia, was established as a center for nickel and copper smelting in the 1930s. The first smelters were built by political prisoners in Stalin’s gulag; more than 100,000 of them may have perished in that effort. Pollution from the smelters has killed more than 350,000 hectares of forest. Above, a worker at Norilsk Copper takes a drag on his respirator to ward off sulphur dioxide fumes. Norilsk Nickel, which reported profits of $1.5 billion in 2000, is owned by a Muscovite oligarch, Vladimir Potanin. He bought control of the company for $170 million.**
Then follows some practical information: Name of the chief of police in Severskiy region: Sergeev Aleksandr Nikiforovich. Fax: (266) 21-331. Good luck! Semen Simonov.

Such harassment is not confined to NGOs. Even government agencies have come under attack, sometimes with devastating effect. In May 2000, for example, the Kremlin abolished the core environmental agency of the federal government: the Committee on Ecology. “Our raw material giants could not survive any seriously conducted … environmental impact assessment. That is why our committee was abolished,” said Viktor Danilov-Danilyan, former head of the Committee, in an interview that August. “The authorities have placed all their bets on raw materials…. They believe that by selling oil, gas, gold, diamonds, and metals on world markets, Russia
will be able to pull itself out of this crisis. This prejudice is stuck in the heads of our government and it is difficult to beat it out of there.”

Some of the government’s critics fear that this prejudice, as Danilov-Danilyan calls it, is in some respects even worse than the old Soviet economic policies, which at least emphasized some types of manufacturing—crude and polluting though they were. Nikita Fedorovich Glazovski, Director of the Russian Federation Off-Budget Environmental Fund, a government-controlled environmental grant-maker, puts it this way:

“There has been a radical shift in Russia’s economic priorities, in the direction of extraction and sale of raw materials. This policy shift is transforming Russia’s economic doctrine. The nation’s current leaders have chosen natural resources as their panacea. Liquidation of the Committee on Ecology is but the first step. What will follow will be changes in those features of current environmental law that thwart the resource extraction sector from advancing its interests.”

Frozen Potential

Yuri Shmakov, a veteran journalist in the city of Khabarovsk, sets his glass down on his jumbled desk and leans back. Over drinks he’s been explaining his optimism to me. Now he tells me that kids today just don’t know their history, and from the twinkle in his eye, I can see that he regards this as yet another cause for hope. People who were six or seven years old when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Shmakov observes, would remember little of those hard times. Besides, he says, whatever memories they have would be confined to the Gorbachev years, when things had already improved significantly. Today, those people are 17 or 18 and they never learned their elders’ fatalism or pessimism.

Khabarovsk is in the land of the gulags. It was the destination for thousands of dissidents and criminals who had been banished to the camps. Its economy has long been based on mining and logging—and on slave labor. The memories of older people like Shmakov are stocked with miseries completely foreign to the experience of their children and grandchildren.

And clearly the journalist has a point. Young Siberians, whose imaginations are not scarred by the past see possibilities other than working the mines or the forests. They do not assume that the primary purpose of Siberian society should be the sale of its natural resources to Moscow or the West. By and large, they are well educated—their literacy rate approaches 100 percent—and they are as comfortable with computers and the web as their western counterparts. They are not a Third World nation; they are careful to tell you, and they expect to develop a First World economy.

People who talk over drinks eventually need to relieve themselves. In Shmakov’s office, that requires a trip to the basement, so I descend into a labyrinth of crumbling, dilapidated corridors in search of the holes in the floor that pass as toilets. Down here, it’s easy to imagine that one has somehow wandered back into the era of the gulags. The subterranean decay is a reminder of just how optimistic my host really is. Siberia has never known any economic role other than that of supplier of raw materials. Its landscape is pocked by cities that have names like Ugle-gorsk (“coal town”) and Neftegorsk (“oil town”).

In the province of Magadan, for example, 70 percent of industrial output comes from the processing of raw materials, mostly gold, silver, and diamonds. The big mining operations date back to 1932, when forced labor from the gulag system first became available in the region. Seventy years later, Magadan has yet to diversify much beyond its old gulag economy, and its narrow economic base is very vulnerable to price fluctuations in the metals markets. It’s the same story in virtually every other Siberian province—just substitute oil, timber, or fish for Magadan’s precious metals and diamonds.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Siberia seemed for a time as if it might be on the verge of reinventing itself. For decades it had been forcibly populated with dissident scientists and engineers. The gulag system conferred an enormous fund of latent technical talent on the region. The Soviet Union had bestowed a few intentional benefits as well, in the form of “science cities” like Novosibirsk. All this expertise, bolstered by the western advisors who had begun to arrive, could now be put to more constructive ends. At last, it seemed, the time had come to move from logs to furniture, from silver to silverware, and on to electronics and who knows what else. But the new economic policies never arrived. Siberia remained a resource colony; only its ownership changed hands, from the old Soviet state to the new Russian kleptocracy.

This is the Siberian paradox: among the world’s comparably underdeveloped regions, few could claim so great a wealth of highly educated talent. And yet this social potential remains largely frozen. Against so great a waste, the new NGOs may seem hopelessly small and ill-equipped. But they represent something fundamentally new to the region. The Siberian thaw, if it comes, will occur not from the top down, but from the ground up.

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An Even woman comes out of her yurt. Of Siberia’s 31 indigenous ethnic groups, the Even are among the most broadly distributed. Even settlements are scattered from the Yenisey River (west of Norilsk), all the way to the Pacific. This woman belongs to a settlement in Kamchatka.