A Shaggy-Bear Story: An Environmental History from a Remote Region

David Moon

Summary

This article opens with an account of a hike in a remote region and a story about how local bears bore extreme deprivation during a harsh winter. It then opens out to reveal the location, a nature reserve on the shore of Lake Baikal in Eastern Siberia, and contrasts the story from this remote region with conventional accounts of "Russian environmental history" that emphasize destruction and disasters in the Soviet period, which are sadly all too true, but give insufficient attention to other aspects of the environmental history of the vast territory that once comprised the Soviet Union.



Hiking through the forest

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As we made our way through the primeval forest above the lake's clear waters, our guide pointed to fresh bear tracks and scratch marks on tree trunks where male bears had marked their territory. He advised us that the bears were higher up the slope, and that they could see and smell us, even if we could not see them. Our way was blocked by fallen trees which, as they decayed, provided habitats for wild life. Younger trees were thrusting upwards, competing for sunlight throught the canopy. Lichens covered the trees, evidence for the air's cleanliness. We asked when people had last been in this forest; the answer was two or three years ago.

Our guide told us about extreme hardships the bears had experienced in a very harsh winter two decades earlier. Deprived of their usual food by the severe cold, bears had approached the settlement, where the inhabitants had shot them in self-defense. When they cut open the bodies, they found that, in their desperate hunger, the bears had been eating each other. By the winter's end, only the smaller bears, which needed less food, had survived. Their human neighbors noticed that the females were having more cubs than usual, but that the cubs were smaller than average. Our guide stretched out the shaggy-bear story to build up the tension before delivering the punch line: one of the smaller male bear cubs was observed climbing up a tree to scratch out its territory, higher than it could reach from the ground, to give the impression to potential rivals that he was taller than he really

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was.



Trees with lichen in forest

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Bear scratch marks on trees

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Some readers may assume this story comes from a remote region in North America. But, we were in the Barguzin scientific nature reserve (*zapovednik*) on the remote northeastern shore of Lake Baikal in Eastern Siberia. Our guide, Aleksandr Ananin, was the reserve's scientific director. The area is so remote that some of our group were horrified to find there was no phone signal. Or mains electricity. Or running water. Or road to the outside world. To get there, we had three options: hire helicopters (beyond our budget); hike for two weeks over the mountains carrying 40-kilogram packs; or charter boats to meet us at the end of the road from Ulan-Ude, the capital of the Russian Republic of Buryatiya. We took the last option and enjoyed several days on the lake.

Baikal is well known to environmental historians, not primarily for its natural riches, but for how it was endangered by Soviet economic development. Spurred to overtake the capitalist West, Soviet planners subjected their environments to ruthless, wasteful exploitation. Global environmental historians compare the environmental impact of communist, capitalist, and colonial states, and while there is disagreement, many argue that communism was most harmful (e.g., Weiner, 2009). Baikal's pristine waters and unique ecosystem were threatened by pollution from cellulose plants built on its shores from the 1960s. After a long struggle they have

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finally been closed. A dam built in the 1950s at Irkutsk on the Angara River, which flows out of the lake, remains. Further dams planned for tributaries of the Selenga River, which flows into the lake from Mongolia, may pose further threats. While we were there we witnessed the lake shrouded with smoke from forest fires caused by lightning strikes, which are natural, but also by careless tourists and in conditions more prone to fire due to a changing climate, which are threats caused by humans. Thus our bears, like their fellow bears and human neighbors around the globe, face a constellation of threats from both natural and anthropogenic sources.



Smoke from forest fires over Lake Baikal

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Why don't more environmental histories of Russia and the Soviet Union start in remote regions and pay more attention to areas that people have not yet utterly transformed, but in which they, and even bears, struggle to survive? A leading environmental historian expressed surprise that "the Soviet Union was ... the first country where nature protection sought to avail itself of the authority of science" (Radkau, 2008: 275). However, the Barguzin Nature Reserve was founded in 1916 and was the first of a network of state reserves established throughout the Soviet Union that had roots in late-nineteenth-century Russia. Its global importance was marked by its designation as a UNESCO biosphere reserve, and it is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Lake Baikal: "the most outstanding example of a freshwater ecosystem." Accounts of Russian or Soviet environmental history typically characterize it as "a deadening litany of environmental disasters" such as Chernobyl (Josephson et al., 2013: 236). While this declensionist narrative conveys the undeniable damage inflicted during the Soviet period, there are wider stories to be told about this part of the world, such as: the diversity of environments away from the centers of population and industry; the long-standing commitment of scientists and conservationists to protect such environments; and the resilience of even fragile environments and their inhabitants if they are given a chance. Thus, from the perspective of our bears in a remote region, who kept away from Soviet planners and

nuclear power stations, as well as from us, the environmental history of Russia takes on a different hue.

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Map of Lake Baikal

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Further readings:

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Related links:

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  http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/754/
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  https://www.york.ac.uk/history/research/majorprojects/russiasenvironmentalhistory/events/
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- https://www.york.ac.uk/history/research/majorprojects/russiasenvironmentalhistory/baikalgallery/
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lake_Baikal#/media/File:Karte_baikal2.png

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David Moon specialises in Russian, Eurasian, and transnational environmental history. His most recent books are *The American Steppes: The Unexpected Russian Roots of Great Plains Agriculture*, 1870s–1930s (Cambridge UP, 2020); *The Plough that Broke the Steppes: Agriculture and Environment on Russia's Grasslands, 1700–1914* (Oxford UP, 2013); *Place and Nature: Essays in Russian Environmental History*, edited with Nicholas Breyfogle and Alexandra Bekasova (White Horse Press, 2021). He is professor (emeritus) at the University of York and professor (honorary) at the University College London, UK. He was visiting professor at Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan, in 2018–2020.
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