

## Blooming Boreal wins silver

The wonderful boreal forest garden designed by John Kennedy's Landlab won a silver medal at the 2005 Chelsea Flower Show in June. BREN had been closely involved in the project as a participant organisation of the partner to Landlab, the Taiga Rescue Network (TRN). Alexei Zhukov (see his article on page 6) was one of the indigenous forest representatives supporting the event by coming from Sakhalin Island to share with people his knowledge of the medicinal and nutritional properties of the boreal's plants. He had a selection of teas, along with indigenous craft items, including naturally dyed eggs.

The garden was created in 10 days; trees were brought from nurseries as far afield as Germany in articulated lorries. A warm spell and unreliable water

supply provided us with a challenge to keep the trees watered until the first days of the show. An urgent call for volunteers was put out just before the



show and BREN was able to summon up some help so Landlab's crew could complete the design in time for the judging.

The boreal garden was an inspiration

for many. It provided a peaceful place amongst the mayhem that is the Show. Over 4,500 people stopped by to talk with BREN, TRN, Landlab and our indigenous representatives from Russia and Canada. TRN had produced a briefing paper on non-timber forest products which described the nutritional and medicinal value of some of the forest plants used in the design. The garden also received attention from TV, radio and the press from Britain, Canada, Russia and Europe, reaching millions. Many of the garden's features, such as the Scots pine, the forest pool and the artistic sculptures (including as the hazel 'egg basket' pictured here) offered

interest for comment by TV presenters. It was a wonderful exposure of boreal ecological, economic and social issues to many who have previously had no idea of the forest's importance.

## Latest from BREN...

Welcome to the latest edition of the newsletter of the British Russian Eco-cultural Network. This issue's special feature is on Sakhalin, with background information about the island and an in-depth look at the current challenges faced by the people and the environment there. This article is complemented by Alexei Zhukov's report about a children's forestry education project on Sakhalin.

There is more news of Look East and some updates on issues and projects covered in the last newsletter. You can also read about the experiences of Siberian volunteer, Vidana Shugaeva,

in the UK and there is a report on the diverse activities of Radi Zemley, an environmental organisation based in Tajikistan. In the wake of the recent bill in the Russian State Duma to require NGOs in Russia to register with the Justice Ministry's Federal Registration Service, we examine what the new legislation may mean for civil society there. Back in the UK, Stephanie Ward reports on her Siberian Wild road show to raise awareness of Siberia – the beauty of its landscapes and the threats to its environment.

Finally, as April 2006 marks the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, the decision was taken to defer

until the next newsletter the second part of the article on the NGO Viola and its work in Bryansk, Russia.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue of the newsletter and, if you feel inspired, please send us a letter or article about your own interests and experiences.

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# Siberian volunteers come to Britain

Five years ago I spent a year living in Irkutsk, Siberia, and volunteering for NGO Baikal Environmental Wave on an EU-funded placement. In Irkutsk I was struck by the unfairness of the world, which allowed me, a (comparatively) wealthy young woman from the UK, to receive funding to live and work in Russia, while such programmes were apparently not open to my peers in Irkutsk, for whom a trip to Europe might as well have been a trip to the moon.

The Baikal Wave volunteer co-ordinator pointed this out to me: "Our young people are so committed and so enthusiastic. We'd love to find them opportunities to do something exciting, but we just haven't been able to find anything." While working as a co-ordinator of volunteer programmes, several years later, I realised that using the European Voluntary Service (EVS) programme to exchange volunteers with Russia was possible, if a little more

complicated than sending volunteers to France! My final task, before leaving my post as EVS co-ordinator, was to establish contacts enabling Vidana Shugaeva, a keen local volunteer at Baikal Wave, to follow her dream of spending time in England, with 10 months' volunteering at the Slimbridge Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust Centre.

On moving to Wales, I started work at the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT) in Machynlleth. When colleagues showed an interest in hosting international volunteers, I was able to help CAT establish itself as a host project for EVS volunteers, and to suggest a possible volunteer - also from Irkutsk, Russia. Lyuda Antipina, the first EVS volunteer at CAT, arrived in the UK in September, and is enthusiastically working with the CAT maintenance team on maintaining and developing the vast array of eco-toilets at CAT, the compost display for visitors and other equally muddy but vital tasks. She has been inspired to

use her new knowledge in the future to develop similar 'eco-village' projects in Russia.

Look East aims to promote useful links, exchanges of experience and volunteer placements for other young people in the future. I'd love to hear from anyone interested in finding out more about volunteering opportunities, be it from someone wishing to volunteer or from an organisation in the UK, Russia, or elsewhere, who might be interested in hosting a volunteer. Baikal Wave is currently developing a proposal to use its own experience of hosting international volunteers to support and advise other organisations in Eastern Russia to do the same and make use of a resource which it has found invaluable over the last 10 years.

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## Meet Vidana

*Vidana Shugaeva, from Irkutsk, Russia, is currently undertaking a 10-month volunteer placement at the Slimbridge Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust Centre, near Gloucester, funded by the European Voluntary Service.*

What are volunteers looking for when they travel to another country? I suppose, a dream of their own. We all have dreams, either conscious or subconscious ones. People travel the world to get to know others and to find their own place in the world. So where shall I start my story? Probably best from the beginning.

I was a restless child, curious about everything and unable to sit still for five minutes. After school I enrolled at Irkutsk State University's Geography Department in anticipation of endless travel and participation in all kinds of activities. I adored nature and saw how irresponsibly people were treating it.

At university I found a group of like-minded people and we began volunteering locally for a newly



developing environmental organisation, Baikal Wave. It was founded by an English woman, Jennie Sutton, who has lived in Russia since her first visit to the Soviet Union 30 years ago. For her, founding Baikal Wave was the successful realisation of a long-held dream.

Thirty years ago, during the days of the Iron Curtain, the environmental movement hardly existed in Russia, yet there was a sense of duty and care towards nature, which changed radically with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today the environmental movement in Russia remains weak. The government gives no sponsorship to civil society groups (which are often concerned with environmental issues), as they tend to expose environmental crimes caused in one way or another by lack of attention to environmental policies by the government. Civil society in Russia is almost entirely dependent on financing from abroad, a sad but true fact.

The main activity of Baikal Wave is environmental education, translating information on environmental conservation and organising actions to increase public awareness of environmental plight. Due to the sense of Russia being a 'never-ending homeland', Russians are not inclined to consider the depletion of natural resources: "Why worry about landfill or logging of another forest? Look how many places round about are still not used!" But will these places remain so for much longer? ... Trying to change this opinion is the main goal of all environmental organisations in Russia at present

Before coming to the UK, I was a public official in the Irkutsk environmental services department (near Lake Baikal). There was too much paper work for me! I did my best to be forward-thinking but lack of professional knowledge kept me back. So I decided to take my future in my own hands and gain more skills abroad, where the field of environmental management is not a 'closed book' as

it usually is in Russia.

My choice of destination was determined by my love of two things – islands and castles! Not to forget, of course, my English friends who helped me to organise the placement and my craze for British music! My sending organisation was Baikal Wave, where I 'grew up'. And my volunteering placement is funded by EVS, part of the EU YOUTH Programme

Having been in the UK for several months, I have begun to appreciate the attention people pay to the living world. Programmes such as informative BBC documentaries raise concern and alarm for the future of natural systems around the world. The real value of environmental protection is discussed throughout the UK. Great importance is given to things such as recycling and to involving the public in these topics. *This is something to study!*

The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, embodies my dreams of living among natural surroundings, with clean air and abundant wildlife around me. The staff at the centre care about their work

– educating the public and taking care of a unique sanctuary for migrating birds, many of which come from Russia!! I have become fond of them all – both the local inhabitants and the birds. I have never before spent time in such close proximity to wild creatures. Like humans, each bird has its own character and individual look. Some of them are shy, and others cheeky, begging for food or simply trying the taste of your trouser legs to see which species you belong to! All this has inspired me to learn more and I hope to follow this placement by getting a scholarship for postgraduate study to further my knowledge of water ecosystems.

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Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust  
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European Voluntary Service  
[europa.eu.int/comm/youth/program/sos/index\\_en.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/youth/program/sos/index_en.html)  
European Youth Programme  
[www.connectyouthinternational.com](http://www.connectyouthinternational.com)

## For the Earth in Tajikistan

**R**adi Zemley (For the Earth) is an association of young environmentalists in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, working for radical social changes that prioritise environmental concerns. Since 1997, the organisation has worked on campaigns and educational work with school children, initiating many campaigns for the first time in the Central Asian republic – for example it was the first to bring the Car Free City campaign to Tajikistan and the first in the country to campaign against GM crops.

From small beginnings as a voluntary group of very active young people, Radi Zemley has gradually developed the capacity to undertake large-scale projects with funding from a range of donors, becoming an important part of the Tajik green movement.

Today, Radi Zemley is working actively on an international project to educate school children about energy issues, SPARE ([www.spare.net.ru](http://www.spare.net.ru)), and has involved over 40 schools in Dushanbe and other regions in the work, which includes education on renewable energy, energy efficiency and the links to global environmental issues.



It also works on Local Agenda 21 projects, including producing publications and a regular bulletin on environmental issues, and on disaster-preparedness, with the aim of minimising risks to children's lives from emergencies such as flooding,

earthquakes and avalanches. Another project that the organisation is keen to continue provides the means for farmers to plant fruit orchards, both to boost the local economy sustainably and to prevent erosion to sloping farmland.

Timur Idrisov, representing the organisation at the Youth and Environment Europe (YEE) annual meeting in Prague, said that Radi Zemley is finding it ever more difficult to get funding for environmental projects, as international donors turn their interests to social or cultural projects or prioritise other regions of the world.

Radi Zemley, an enthusiastic, adaptable organisation working to find alternative, creative solutions to environmental problems, is keen to build partnerships with other similar organisations and would welcome contact from those who are interested in its work.

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# Sakhalin special report

The island of Sakhalin is situated in the Russian Far East, off the coast of Khabarovsk Krai. With an area of 78,000km<sup>2</sup>, it is the Russian Federation's largest island and is just slightly smaller than Austria. Administratively, it is part of Sakhalin Oblast, together with the Kuril Islands (territory still disputed with Japan).

Three quarters of the island is mountainous and around two thirds is covered by forest. The island's climate is slightly milder than that on the mainland, with temperatures ranging from -30°C to around 27°C during the year and over different regions. This is due to the mountains and the difference in temperature between the cold Sea of Okhotsk to the north and east, which is covered by ice in winter, and the comparatively warm Sea of Japan in the south-west.

One of the striking things about Sakhalin is its extraordinary diversity of flora and fauna. The island's location and climate mean it is home to a wide range of plants and animals, some of which are unique to it.

Most of the forest is coniferous, much consisting of Ayan spruce and the endemic Sakhalin fir, in the central area, and Dahurian larch in the north. The south of the island has largely been clear-felled and areas of regeneration here feature stone birch and bamboo.

The forests are also home to vine plants, such as lianas, magnolia vine and wild kiwi. The undergrowth is rich in berry-bearing plants like cranberry, cloudberry, crowberry and Sakhalin raspberry.

Over 90 species of mammal live on Sakhalin, ranging from mice and rats to hares, otters and sable, as well as larger animals such as musk deer, reindeer and brown bears. Of particular importance are the marine mammals, especially the endangered grey whales, found off the north-eastern coast.

Sakhalin also boasts several hundred species of bird, including seabirds like the white-tailed sea eagle and endemic species such as the Sakhalin leaf warbler. Fish have long been an essential part of the island's economy and so it is no

surprise that hundreds of species find a home in the rivers and coastal waters. The thousands of streams and rivers provide spawning grounds for several species of salmon and the endangered green sturgeon. Reptiles and insects are also well represented.

Sakhalin's economy has for centuries been based on resources. The chief of these has long been the exploitation of the island's abundant marine and fresh water fish stocks and associated fish processing. In recent years there have been issues around overfishing, illegal fishing and the use of drift nets which can have a rapid and dramatic impact on fish populations.

Forestry was also traditionally an important industry, providing timber for export and for processing into pulp and paper and other products. Massive forest fires and over-exploitation of this resource has led to severe deforestation. The economic collapse of the timber processing industries since the end of the Soviet Union has meant that production is now largely limited to the extraction of raw timber for export, a procedure which is both environmentally wasteful and means the Sakhalin economy loses the added value from processing.

Finally, Sakhalin also has very extensive offshore oil and gas deposits. Since the economic disintegration following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has been increasingly keen to exploit these resources with the aid of foreign investors. The Sakhalin Energy Investment Company was set up in 1994 by Shell, Mitsubishi and Matsui and a production sharing agreement was signed with the Russian government.

The deposits have been divided into six areas, with the current focus on Sakhalin II. Much of the financing comes from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) and the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC). The first stage of development involved the construction of the Molikpaq drilling platform to the north-west of the island which has been associated with declines in some fish species.

The next phase involves the construction of another offshore platform, a gas platform and underwater



pipelines running from them to the land. Further pipelines are then needed to take the oil and gas 800km across the island, down to a liquid natural gas (LNG) production plant and terminal at the southern tip.

As the project progresses, increasing local and international concern is being voiced about a range of environmental, economic and social aspects.

Economically, the problem for Sakhalin is that few of the benefits of the oil and gas exploitation will be seen locally. While some local labour may be used during construction projects, much of the workforce will be brought in from outside, and the terms of the production sharing agreement (PSA) mean Russia is set to receive a fraction of the revenue and most of this will go to Moscow.

The potential environmental impacts are complex. One of the major concerns at present is the threat to the Western Pacific grey whales. The whales are one of the world's most highly endangered species with a current population of around just 100.

Between May and November the whales feed off the north-east coast of Sakhalin in preparation for their

winter migration. This area is in close proximity to existing and planned platforms and pipelines but is the only known feeding ground of the whales. Any disturbance in the area thus poses a severe threat to their survival.

The rich coastal fisheries which still form an important part of the local economy and diet face disruption and pollution through dumping during construction and oil spills.

An additional problem is associated with the planned 800-km pipeline to the LNG plant near Korsakov, just south of the island's capital, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. This pipeline must cross over 1,000 rivers and streams, threatening important salmon spawning grounds. In addition, the route of the pipeline goes through seismically active areas, posing a risk of the pipe fracturing and oil seeping into the earth, waterways and ground water. Sakhalin Environment Watch is calling for overhead crossings similar to the system used in Alaska.

Construction work is already disrupting communities and at particular risk are Sakhalin's many indigenous groups whose way of life is reliant on the fishing and other habitats under threat from the oil and

gas exploitation (see article below).

The latest news on the developments on Sakhalin came in December 2005 when the EBRD judged the environmental impact assessment for the Sakhalin II oil and gas project to be fit for purpose, despite the fact that for the last three years the bank has maintained that the project does not comply with its environmental policies. The announcement was greeted with vociferous indignation by NGOs who consider this to be a reversal of the bank's position and also believe that crucial reports looking at impacts on river crossings and the Western Pacific grey whales have been ignored.

The issues confronting Sakhalin are complex and international awareness of them is low. You can keep up-to-date with further developments by following the links below.

Sakhalin Environment Watch  
[www.sakhalin.environment.ru](http://www.sakhalin.environment.ru)  
Pacific Environment  
[www.pacificenvironment.org](http://www.pacificenvironment.org)  
CEE Bankwatch Network  
[www.bankwatch.org](http://www.bankwatch.org)  
Sakhalin Energy Investment Company  
[www.sakhalinenergy.com](http://www.sakhalinenergy.com)

## Sakhalin – island of diversity

The current population of Sakhalin is 83% ethnic Russians. This illustrates the success of the colonisation of the island by Russia (largely as a penal colony), despite an extended struggle for sovereignty with Japan. However, the remainder of the island's population, excluding the 5.5% Korean population, is a mixture of the indigenous peoples who have inhabited Sakhalin for centuries. On Sakhalin the Russian Indigenous Peoples NGO RAIPON recognises five ethnic groups: Nivkh, Ainu, Oroch, Evenk and Yakut. Each group has its own history which reveals the cultural diversity of Sakhalin.

There are approximately 2,000 Nivkhs on Sakhalin. Originally they inhabited the north of the island. Nivkhs had links with the Chinese over the centuries, especially prior to the Russian colonisation. The Nivkhs suffered greatly under Stalin's witch hunts, where thousands of indigenous peoples were killed throughout the Soviet Union and then were later

co-opted as a 'model' nation having transformed from 'stone age' to 'socialism'.

The Ainu constitute the second largest indigenous ethnic minority on Sakhalin with a population of approximately 1,300. The Ainu lived in southern Sakhalin. Ethnically originating from Japan, the Ainu also have 50,000 descendants of more than 50% ancestry living there. Ainu peoples are well known for their strength and height and also the women, who tattooed their mouths, arms, clitorises and sometimes their foreheads, starting at the onset of puberty.

There are smaller numbers of Orochs (750), Evenks and Yakuts (around 260 together). The Oroch (and Evenk) people are representatives of the Tungusic linguistic family. The distinctive feature of Oroch culture is reindeer-breeding. In winter they roamed the taiga of northern Sakhalin and in summer moved to the coast of the Sea of Okhotsk and Terpenie Bay. The Evenks, originally nomadic,

originate from the Mongolia and Baikal regions.

The indigenous peoples now face a new threat to their varied subsistence economies, based on fishing, hunting, reindeer herding and wild plant gathering. Sakhalin II oil and gas developments will have significant detrimental environmental impacts on salmon spawning grounds and reindeer herding territories and increase deforestation. One of the key figures in coordinating the indigenous peoples' non-violent protests against the oil and gas developments was the Nivkh leader, Alexey Limanzo. He claims that Sakhalin indigenous people have been demanding a survey (environmental impact assessment) for about ten years. "Such surveys are normal practice around the world, but the oil and gas companies working in the Sakhalin region have not conducted them." He claims the protest could continue until 2008 if the indigenous peoples' demands are not met.

# Putin puts the price on a national civil society

On 23 November 2005 the Russian Parliament (the Duma) approved by 370 votes to 18 President Putin's Bill that would require that non-governmental organisations register with the Justice Ministry's Federal Registration Service. Putin argues that a country's civil society should be sponsored by its national rather than foreign organisations. Citing the Ukrainian Revolution as an example, the Russian president claims that foreign money is being used to fund activities detrimental to the development of Russia and that this will not be tolerated.

Since the early 1990s many Russians hostile to civil society development have been suspicious of the intentions of foreign funded civil society organisations, especially human rights and environmental non-governmental organisations. It

is correct that a nation's government should support the development of civil society in any democratic country. Yet certain activities if seen as 'political' (like objecting to national economic development strategies such as oil and gas fields in protected areas such as Baikal) will leave environmental NGOs unfunded internationally at a time when the government is unlikely to support them.

Nikolai Duckworth, director of Amnesty International's Europe and Central Asia programme, said that if the Bill became law it would lead to the closure of foreign NGOs. The law, similar to that which currently exists in China, would bar foreign NGOs, such as Human Rights Watch or Greenpeace, from having representative offices in Russia, and also prohibit Russians suspected of terrorist links from funding NGOs. It is easy to imagine

how the authorities' increased powers of scrutiny could be abused.

Most opponents to the Bill do not oppose Putin's claims that Russia should fund civil society. However, this should not be contrary to the freedom for international civil society to be engaged in the country. The Bill will no doubt receive further demonstrations against it by national and international civil society representatives.

The latest news demonstrates a frightening level of support for the Bill. On 21 December 2005 the second reading took place. By a vote of 376 to 10 deputies rushed the Bill through with 62 Kremlin-supported amendments. Over 80 other amendments which were not backed by the Duma's Public and Religious Organisation Committee were rejected. Only one more reading is required to take place before the Bill comes into force.

## Forest education on Sakhalin

As Head Forester in the Timovsk region on Sakhalin, I am responsible for the protection and replanting of the forest. I see it as part of my responsibility that the children in my area respect and value the forest that surrounds them. The forest is their long-term sustainable future and they need to know not only how to look after it, but of the amazing harvest they can reap from it in terms of mushrooms, berries and herbs with their medicinal and nutritional properties.

Eight years ago, I set up the Adonis forestry school to do just that. We plant trees together, explore the forest, and learn how to survive in it, even in temperatures as low as -50°C. We have regular meetings, expeditions and camping trips and paint, draw and do drama associated with the forest. Last year we built a boat and sailed it from the village to the sea, a distance of 200km. For the last year I have been collecting building materials for the construction of a pottery workshop, for the use of children and adults alike. Building is already under way. There are large deposits of clay around the village and we are going to build the

pottery workshop before the winter sets in and then a wood-fired kiln in the spring. One pottery wheel has already been built by a villager who heard of the project and wanted to help. Another wheel is in the process of being built.

So word is out and there is a great deal of interest, not only locally but from further afield on the island as

well. Since the start of the building work, we have been hearing about a brick factory that used to be in the area over 50 years ago, employing over 100 people. Who knows, perhaps our small pottery workshop, will be the start of something bigger than we had ever imagined!!!

**Alexei Zhukov**



# News in brief

## Kitezh

Since our article on the Kitezh children's community in Kaluga region (see Issue 3), work has continued on the second village of Orion. Funding is still being sought for expensive infrastructure work, such as installing gas, and to build the next house. Currently, just two families are living there and it is important they do not become isolated by being alone for too long.

Meanwhile, Kitezh has continued to welcome visitors and volunteers from many different parts of the world. In late spring two natural wetland reedbed systems were constructed for Kitezh and Orion. Two young men who grew up at Kitezh were able to benefit from training in this environmental waste water treatment system.

Exciting news is that Dmitry Morozov, Director of Kitezh, was awarded the Order of Honour by the Russian Federation, an important official recognition of the value of the work of Kitezh.

Finally, 59-year-old Rosie Swale Pope from Tenby, Wales, is running round the world to raise money for Kitezh and other charities. She has just completed the gruelling Siberian leg. For more news click on 'Rosie's Run' on the Ecologia website below.

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## Kondopoga update

Following our article about Kondopoga in the last BREN Newsletter, in April 2005 the Parish House which Lynne Young described in her diary was seriously damaged by fire. The sewing workshop, the icon workshop and the flat occupied by the priest and his wife were completely destroyed.

Since then great efforts have been made to rebuild the Parish House. Despite a number of hiccups and some lack of support from the local authorities, the reconstruction is

now complete. What has been truly inspiring is the commitment shown by local people – ranging from donations of home baking to the free use of a bulldozer and lighting for the building site.

Work is now proceeding on furnishing the building and slowly but surely the activities based at the Parish House are restarting.

### Contact

St Gregory's Foundation  
[www.stgregorysfoundation.org.uk](http://www.stgregorysfoundation.org.uk)

## Wave of support

**V**olna (The Wave), a unique environmental journal which in 1998 won an award for the Best Green Journal in Russia, may soon cease to exist. Published by Baikal Wave, the journal has developed over more than 10 years to become a unique resource for the Irkutsk Region. It combines Russian-language translation of international environmental material otherwise unavailable to Russian speakers, with articles and news on local issues and campaigns, such as forestry and illegal logging, oil and gas developments, community planning for sustainable futures, climate change and updates on the Lake Baikal World Heritage Site.

After seven years of generous funding, at the end of 2005 the Heinrich Böll Foundation is withdrawing all but a small grant for the library and so far no new funding has been forthcoming. Therefore the future of *Volna*, as well as much of Baikal Wave's valuable work, is at great risk.

### To offer support contact:

Baikal Wave  
[www.baikalwave.eu.org](http://www.baikalwave.eu.org)  
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## Young European environmentalists gather in Prague

In August around 25 young environmentalists (aged 18-30) gathered at Toulcuv dvur, an environmental centre on the outskirts of Prague, for the annual meeting of Youth and Environment Europe (YEE).

Representing NGOs, youth and community groups from a diverse range of countries including Poland, the UK, Denmark, Russia, Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, Bulgaria, Romania, Tajikistan, Malta and Portugal, the participants spent time planning events and co-operation for the next year,

as well as visiting local projects and learning about the development of biomass fuel and products from plants such as hemp – which are successfully contributing to sustainable farming and community development in parts of the Czech Republic.

Toulcuv Dvur, is an oasis of organic gardening among the suburban tower blocks of Prague, with a smallholding, compost toilets and children's educational facilities. It provided an ideal place to meet and share ideas. YEE provides an opportunity for young environmentalists to meet and

converse on an equal footing, as well as to learn about important issues such as fund raising.

### Contact

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[www.ecn.cz/yee](http://www.ecn.cz/yee)

# Siberian Wild

**S**tephanie Ward of Look East after returning from a year volunteering in Irkutsk, Siberia has recently started a UK tour to raise awareness of the environmental issues of the region. The following report outlines her experiences so far.

As a part of my European Voluntary Service placement, I designed a project linked to my work at Irkutsk-based environmental NGO, Baikal Wave, and applied for a small grant from the British Council's Future Capital programme to realise it. I decided to create a Russian environmental road show and visit various places, such as university departments and community events. This project aims to offer insight and information to people and organisations who may or may not have heard anything positive or recent about Siberia. It will be an opportunity to learn about one of the largest and most forgotten land masses on the planet and to provide possibilities for travel, contemplation and adventure there.

Together with my friend Aisha, I began in August 2005 at the Big Green Gathering where I had a Campaigns Stall. The gathering was a receptive starting place; filled with people active and involved in environmental, global and local projects who are positive and responsive to all attempts at bringing knowledge and peaceful suggestions for the initiation of change.

Our stall offered a creative, welcoming space which we filled with a photographic exhibition, maps and various leaflets. We also had Baikal Wave merchandise and a great display of Siberian teas and herb pillows from Sakhalin Island delightfully presented with ingredients and information, that were supplied by forester, Alexei Zhukov (see article on page 6) and Kitty Paul.

The response was quite overwhelming. The subject of Russia really fascinates many people and when the word Siberia is used reactions are even more incredulous! When the weather was fine we had many rugs and

blankets for people to sit on and were continually brewing up pots of Siberian herbal forest or flower tea.

People came and drank tea with us and heard about the threats to the amazing waterways and forests of Siberia. We talked of the link between the tea they were enjoying and the many reasons why forests left standing and living have more economic and eco-cultural significance than when they are felled and inefficiently made into paper.

We pointed out that the relatively well-known issues affecting other countries in the world, such as the Amazon rainforest and irresponsible oil extraction in Nigeria, are problems which are being faced by Russia as well, but are much less known in the public and campaigning arena. We drew attention to the important work of various organisations in the fight against this merciless pillaging and their need for support, advice and help from those with experience to share and knowledge to offer. Many people were interested to learn about opportunities for volunteering with projects by Lake Baikal.

This initial venture helped to consolidate my own ideas and aims, as well as reiterating the need for such ventures to play a part in the campaigning sphere of the UK. It also reinforces the relevance Russia has to the rest of the planet. Its local problems must be seen in the wider framework of the issues facing global sustainability, environmentalism and responsible ecological, economic and social development.

**Stephanie Ward**



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