

Georgia – war and peace

Welcome to the special edition on Georgia of the British Russian Eco-cultural Newsletter where we survey recent events in Georgia and their impact on its environment and culture. Dion Battersby introduces us to Georgia's rich and fascinating history and environment and Elene Gvilava writes about how the war with Russia in summer 2008 damaged Georgia's environment. Then Sarah Marcus describes the impact of the war on arts and culture in the Georgian capital,

Tbilisi. Our final Georgia contribution encourages continued participation by international volunteers in ongoing eco-cultural projects at a time when the country really needs support.

This newsletter also celebrates the final closure of the Baikalsk Pulp and Paper Mill which for decades has polluted Lake Baikal in Siberia. Stephanie Ward reports on a research project in Tomsk, outlining the difficulties of realising sustainable, long-term incomes from non-timber forest products. Another challenge in

Russia is the smuggling of endangered flora and fauna species. Goska Romanowicz gives an insight into this issue – looking here at threats to the saker falcon population in the Altai.

Our next edition will focus on indigenous peoples and we would welcome contributions from readers.

The BREN Newsletter is edited by Feja Lesniewska and Heather Stacey (info@brenweb.org). Its publication is supported by Look East Wild Earth (www.lookeast.org.uk).

Saker falcons forsaken?

Many endangered species are regularly smuggled out of Russia, including body parts of musk deer, pallas' cat, Siberian tigers and snow leopard. This traffic has one major destination – China, where it feeds the demands of traditional medicine.

Another endangered species threatened by international smuggling is the saker falcon. Every year approximately 100 young falcons are illegally trapped in the Altai mountains and smuggled into the Gulf states to be used for hunting. With only 2,000-3,000 birds left in Russia, the Altai population may soon share the fate of falcons nesting in the Urals which died out 20 years ago.

For centuries saker falcons have been used for hunting in the Middle East. In the 1970s, when the saker falcon was listed internationally as an endangered species, falcon prices shot up and populations began to decline. A female saker falcon currently

fetches 1,000-2,000 USD in the Middle East and the species is threatened with extinction, with only 7,000-8,000 wild saker falcons surviving around the world.

"[The Altai falcons] stand out as the biggest of the species and so they are most valued", explains Elvira Nikolenko of the Siberian Environmental Centre NGO, in Novosibirsk. The birds are usually released after one hunting

season, but are unable to survive in the wild. "They are psychologically damaged and they die."

The Siberian Environmental Centre has set itself the challenging task of reducing the number of endangered animals smuggled out of the Altai. Along with porous borders and a lack of forest rangers, corruption is a major problem and one that can persuade even the best-informed customs officials to change their minds.

Elvira organises training courses for customs officials on the issue of smuggling. She admits that there is still a long way to go, although she believes that training increases their motivation to stop smugglers. "It helps them understand that the trafficking of rare species is as much the government's business as drugs or arms smuggling."



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 ru (in Russian)*

The ecological costs of conflict



In addition to expelling thousands of Georgians from their homes, making them refugees, killing civilians and attacking and destroying both military and civilian infrastructures, the Georgian-Russian conflict of August 2008 caused an ecological catastrophe in Georgia.

Unfortunately, the main areas to suffer damage were protected areas and the Black Sea coastal zones, which were far from the heart of the conflict. This article focuses on three particularly large-scale incidents.

Fires in and around Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park

Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park is located in the mountainous central part of Georgia which is internationally recognised as being of great significance to global biodiversity. In the heart of the Lesser Caucasus, Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park is one of the largest national parks in Europe and was the first to be established in the Caucasus.

It was set up according to IUCN criteria by WWF and its ecological and biodiversity significance was further confirmed by the Protected Area Network (PAN) Parks certificate which it received in 2003. Today it covers more than 76,000 hectares – nearly one per cent of the territory of Georgia – and preserves a large area of mountainous forest in its pristine and virgin state.

The area is home to the largest expanse of small Caucasus pine forests, as well as the largest stands of Oriental

spruce in the Caucasus, if not the world. There are also areas of virgin forest, which are extremely rare in temperate zones and significantly enrich the biological and ecological value of the forest.

The forest fires in Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park and adjacent areas began on 15 August 2008. According to eyewitness reports, they started in Borjomi-Tsemi forest after Russian military helicopters dropped bombs over forested areas. During the next few days numerous new forest fire sites were recorded. Eyewitnesses again reported that the conflagrations in these new areas coincided with the appearance of Russian helicopters.

All the available local resources (fire brigades, Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park staff, the Environment Inspectorate and local communities) were involved in putting out the fires. Bearing in mind the situation at the time (martial law, complex relief and other circumstances which made it extremely complicated to carry out fire-fighting measures), the fire spread quickly from the adjacent territories of Tsaghveri to Borjomi on the right bank of the River Gujarela (Gujaretisckali), setting light to significant areas of forest.

Approximately 1,000ha of coniferous and mixed forests was burnt on the western slopes of the Trialeti Ridge (Borjomi Gorge, including parts of the Borjomi-Kharagauli Protected Areas), as well as over 50ha of mixed forests in the central part of the Trialeti Range (Tana valley) and sporadically throughout the rest of the Trialeti Range

and the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park. Biodiversity in this Priority Conservation Area has been seriously damaged and adjacent settlements and tourist resorts were put in danger.

As a result of the fires, endemic and relic species of the Caucasus, such as Himalayan yew, sifter fir, pine, beech, oak, hornbeam and other varieties were destroyed and there was severe damage to the humus and fertile layers of soil. The restoration and regeneration of such areas requires centuries.

The physical, chemical and biological characteristics of the soil have been changed, increasing the risk of natural catastrophes, such as slope erosion, mud slides, floods and avalanches. In addition, the natural regulation of ground water has been disrupted, potentially resulting in the loss of fresh water, which is vitally important for the population.

The fire caused significant destruction to wildlife habitats which will force surviving animals to move into unsuitable environments. This will lead to a reduction in the distribution area for certain species and a decline in reproduction. Thus the long-term negative biological and ecological impact will be significant.

Black Sea oil spills

The second area damaged by the Russian military operation was the Black Sea coastal zone and its adjacent areas in Kolkheti National Park.

To destroy Georgian civil and navy infrastructure, the Russian occupying

forces exploded and sunk Georgian vessels in the port of Poti, causing large amounts of oil products (diesel and benzene) to be spilled (see photo).

The port authorities and relevant institutions were not allowed by the Russian military forces to employ skimmer and containment booms, which made it impossible to respond adequately to the spill and hindered any minimising of damage to the environment. In addition, the occupying forces did not allow national environmental organisations to assess the situation onsite and determine the quantity of oil spilled.

However, experts estimate that up to 70 tons of oil products were spilled in the Black Sea. Such major oil spills are unprecedented in Georgia's coastal zone. The pollution has jeopardised many varieties of fish (such as sturgeon and grey mullet). The currents moved the spilled oil north of the city of Poti towards Kolkheti National Park and

its protected sea zone. The Kolkheti National Park, located 5km north of the oil spill site, is distinguished for its unique biodiversity and is an internationally recognised Ramsar protected wetland site.

Villages polluted

On 24 August 2008 a train loaded with crude oil was blown up at the Gori-Khashuri section (the Shida Kartli region) of the Georgian railway. The explosion was caused by Russian military forces blasting the Georgian Army's Skra military base. The train was blown up by a fragment of missile shot from a distance of 300m. The blast caused the other 11 carriages to explode.

In total 12 tanks (with 60 tons of oil in each) were burned and an area of 4,000m² was polluted. One hundred per cent pollution has been registered on half of this area. Fortunately, the

Department for Emergency Situations Management implemented site-cleaning activities. Pits for collecting raw oil were dug and 70 tons of oil were removed.

A committee was established for the assessment of environmental damage as a consequence of the war by order of the Prime Minister of Georgia. The committee, which comprises representatives of governmental and non-governmental organisations, experts and scientists, has already finished its preliminary research and has presented its conclusions. It estimates the damage to the environment at over one billion Euro.

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Environmental issues in Georgia

The Georgian natural environment is outstanding. Despite its small size the country has an amazing array of habitats, including 40 per cent forest cover. It has the highest species richness of any European country except the Russian Federation – over a fifth of plant species are endemic and it is situated in one of 34 global biodiversity hotspots.

Unlike its neighbours, Georgia escaped the worst ravages of Soviet ecocide, but there are still serious problems of pollution and land degradation resulting from chemical use, radiation sources and unsustainable agricultural practices.

The biggest threats now come from a lack of infrastructure and legislation, political instability, climate change and free market approaches to resource management. These have led to an over-exploitation of natural resources, including deforestation, poor water quality, little or no waste management, natural disasters, energy generation and consumption and low environmental awareness among the population.

In addition, the country is characterised by a tragically high number of internally displaced people: over a quarter of a million, due to the various conflicts since independence

and another 60,000 eco-migrants since the 1980s. Social and environmental issues are inextricably linked and climate change is expected to have a serious impact on the most vulnerable groups here.

The Georgian government is often unable or unwilling to help. The Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources suffers from high management turnover (four ministers in three years), underfunding and being asked to promote the sale of mining and forestry licences without any inventory and environmental and social studies. However, through the efforts of some dedicated ministry staff and local and international groups, it is starting to move towards Western European approaches and legislations.

The Ministry of Energy doesn't always seem to appreciate that there is any connection between its remit and environmental concerns. Fortunately, civil society is thriving and many local and international NGOs are actively tackling Georgia's environmental problems.

The IUCN and WWF are working on ecological protection and implement monitoring, research and conservation measures, including the creation of a network of national parks, management

plans and advising on legislation.

The Caucasus Environmental NGO Network (CENN) is working on many of the above issues. Current foci include natural disaster risk reduction, climate change at the policy level, working with rural communities to develop integrated resource management plans, land degradation, transboundary river basin management and the engagement of women in participatory approaches to tackling land degradation.

These and many other actors and projects are making a real difference to the environmental situation in Georgia. However, there is still a long way to go before it can be said that the country is truly on a path to sustainable development. Progress requires real political will and continuing international support, both financial and knowledge-based. Sadly for Georgia, the political instability and internal violence that has held back development for so long does not seem to have yet passed.

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Keeping Georgia's cultural flame burning

What puts a country back together when it has been ravaged by war or terror or natural disaster? Apart from aid, investment and rebuilding, it is the story tellers, the music makers, the dancers and the painters who can revive a defeated country's spirit and help its people believe in its future once more.

When the vicious fighting which marked Georgia's war with Russia last summer subsided, the overwhelming concern for many of Georgia's artists was to help the victims who had lost everything.

"We try to help," says Nina Ananiashvili, legendary Bolshoi Ballet prima ballerina and since 2003 artistic director of the Tbilisi Ballet Theatre. "Even if what we can do amounts to almost nothing because there are so many of them, at least we can do something small. It's very sad, that people can't live quietly and normally, not just in Georgia, but wherever there is war."

Ananiashvili's charity foundation was started before the war and provides one-off donations for the needy. Last December she took the lead in Romeo and Juliet, the proceeds of which bought a house for a large family displaced by the war.

The ballerina is not alone in using her art to help those affected by the war. Tbilisi's famous Rustaveli Theatre donated the takings of the first week of its new season to them and in September, world-famous opera singer Paata Burchaladze organised a charity concert attended by 10,000 people in Tbilisi's Sports Palace.

First and foremost a humanitarian catastrophe, the war also threatened the artistic developments Tbilisi's artists had been nurturing so determinedly for years.

Nino Anjaparidze, the dedicated director of the Tbilisi International Film Festival, says the 2008 festival was very nearly cancelled.

"This year the festival only came together at the very last minute. There was no money, of course, but apart from that the circumstances were wrong – how could we think of having a festival when the country had been at war?"

But the festival went ahead, and Anjaparidze is proud to be part of something which she sees as playing its role in returning Georgian cinema to its former glory.

During the Soviet era and before it was not just Georgian film, which Federico Fellini once described as "a strange phenomenon, special, philosophically light, sophisticated and at the same time childishly pure", which was renowned beyond Georgia's borders. Georgian dancers, singers, painters and writers, like Tbilisi-born George Balanchine, musician Bulat Okudzhava, painter Niko Pirosmani and writers Shota Rustaveli and Vasha Pshavela, were all representatives of the native Georgian artistic flair.

Georgia is a very artistic country, the arts are in our genes

"Georgia is a very artistic country, the arts are in our genes," Nina Ananiashvili comments.

But with the collapse of the Soviet Union generous state funding for the arts evaporated and the country was plunged into twelve years of turmoil which saw civil war kill thousands and armed bandits run riot on Tbilisi's streets.

Throughout that period Georgia's artists kept the cultural flame burning, but it was not easy and they must have hoped that the new era Mikheil Saakashvili pledged to usher in when he swept to power in 2003's Rose Revolution would see the country's arts

restored to their former splendour.

It seemed the new president thought similarly, as he began to employ the arts in his bid to remake Georgia's image, personally phoning Nina Ananiashvili to appeal to her to leave the Bolshoi, where she was still performing regularly, and return to her birthplace to take the helm at Tbilisi's ballet company and steer it to international acclaim.

Many of the country's cultural figures are proud that what they do reflects well on Georgia. Ananiashvili is happy that the country's most talented young dancers are no longer obliged to go to Russia for quality training and employment and theatre director Robert Sturua comments that developing the country's reputation around the world is possible "through the art of our theatre". The newly-appointed culture minister recently added his voice to the chorus, saying that, "Culture is the spine of our statehood and identity and the calling card of Georgia outside the country".

But while the government says the right things, it doesn't always act accordingly. Although the ballet company receives very generous state funding, the salaries paid to the actors and staff of the Rustaveli Theatre are low and Anjaparidze tells me the film festival desperately needs more government support.

With or without state support, Georgian artists continue to forge links across the world. The ballet company performed to great acclaim at last year's Edinburgh Festival, the Rustaveli Theatre has just signed a cultural exchange agreement with London's National Theatre.

But there is also a partner closer to home with whom Georgian artists would like to see a renewed relationship. Although many had an emotional reaction against Russia in the immediate aftermath of the war – singer and actor Vakhtang Kikibadze, adored in Georgia and Russia, cancelled a concert to be held in his honour at the Kremlin and Sturua too pulled out of plans to work in Moscow in September – now there seems to be a strong desire to renew the symbiotic cultural relationship the two countries have long enjoyed.

Sturua has decided to stage Othello in Moscow next September and says that the relationship is still strong and will always be there, "How could it not be – for two hundred years Georgia was under Russia's rule, so it couldn't be any other way. However, there is a painful thing between us now."

Ananiashvili, who says that she

has achieved the standards for which her ballet company is internationally acclaimed only with the help of fellow professionals from Russia, is concerned that the young generations in Georgia and Russia are the first which will grow up not really knowing anything of the other country, never having been there, and hearing only negative propaganda. This, she warns, is a great danger for the future of both countries.

But all the cultural figures I spoke to seem to see the political stand-

off as one thing and the relationship between the people and the cultures of Russia and Georgia as something else completely.

Speaking of cinema, Nino Anjaparidze really summed up the potential for all the arts to repair the vital relationship between the two countries. If the political problems can be solved, she said, then, "We won't have any problems at all because cinema is a different language for mutual understanding, international

relationships, friendship, for absolutely everything, because cinema doesn't speak of enemies."

Even as politicians fail to soften the stalemate between Tbilisi and Moscow, the leading artistic lights of Georgia are forging ahead, winning international acclaim, training the standard-bearers of the next generation and showing the world the positive, resilient face of their often beleaguered country.

Sarah Marcus

Volunteering in Georgia

I first came to Georgia in November 2007. I was a couple of days late as there had been clashes on the streets of Tbilisi and I arrived to a city in a state of emergency and a media black-out. I finished my placement in August 2008, a few days before the conflict with Russia. Unfortunately, those sad events are all many people know about this beautiful country. Through European Voluntary Service (EVS) I was lucky enough to see another side.

EVS is an EU-funded programme that enables young people to volunteer and live abroad for up to a year. I had chosen to come to Tbilisi on the advice of a friend and my knowledge of the country was hazy, just that it was a biodiversity and political hotspot.

The placement was with Green Way, a small Georgian NGO which mostly works on education and awareness-raising. Coming from a background of environmental work in the UK I was prepared for the slight chaos that you find with organisations that have their minds on more important issues. Even so, Georgian work culture was a shock. The office opened at 11.00, work started at some indefinable point later and whilst bank holidays weren't recognised, there was a dizzying whirl of saints' days and birthdays celebrated in fine style.

I didn't know then that this was representative of Georgian life in general and that work/life separation is a difficult thing to achieve here. Everybody expects to know all that is happening in their colleagues' lives and a fight between a friend and a person in another organisation many years previously can make professional collaboration unthinkable.

The levels of environmental protection were another shock. Green Way and other local NGOs are doing great work but it is a constant struggle

against public apathy and a lack of interest by the State. On the homepage of the Ministry of Environment there is a large flashing advert asking you to 'INVEST IN MINING' and legislation is patchy and ignored.

Georgia survived the Soviet era relatively unscathed ecologically, but the years since independence have been harder than for many other post-Soviet states. One of my first tasks was to create some educational materials about energy efficiency. I had to go back and rewrite it all after my first visit to a school that didn't even have glass in the windows.

My role was undefined, it involved a fair amount of editing and occasional attendance at meetings held in Georgian

I couldn't yet understand. On one occasion I asked my colleague for some work to do and she pointed me to a recruitment website. After meeting other EVS volunteers, I discovered that my experience was not that unusual: volunteering is not a developed concept yet in Georgia, although many local NGO workers are unsalaried and underemployed.

In my first weeks at the organisation I grew increasingly disheartened until I finally realised that I had the freedom to design and develop my own projects. This was when the real EVS began. I learnt a lot about project writing, researching and networking. I also learnt how better to adapt, cooperate and share and I discovered what I was capable of.

There is a certain duality to everything in Georgia and the things that might frustrate you are just the flipside of the things that enchant. Or, as my EVS friends would say to each other, everything is possible, but nothing is easy.

In those nine months I was able to launch a community recycling programme and started the journey towards opening a sustainability centre. I had the chance to study a beautiful, infuriating language and meet inspiring friends and I developed personally and professionally in ways I never could have imagined.



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News in brief

Boreal Forest Conference

In October 2008 the Taiga Rescue Network (TRN) held its biennial international conference in Petrozavodsk, Karelia, Russia. TRN is an international network of NGOs and grassroots groups working to protect the world's boreal forests. The event was hosted by local NGO, SPOK, and attended by over 100 people from 10 different countries.

The conference themes included: protection of old-growth forests in Karelia, climate change and the boreal, new forest legislation in Russia, sustainable forestry and 'model forests' and illegal logging. A new TRN report, *Transition in the taiga: the Russian Forest Code 2006 and its implementation process*, was launched.

Conference field trips introduced international participants to some of Europe's last old-growth forests on the Finnish-Karelian border and gave people the opportunity to inspect forestry methods currently used in Karelia.

Conference information and outcomes: www.taigarescue.org/conference2008
TRN website www.taigarescue.org
SPOK: <http://spok.onego.ru>

Baikal Wave award

Marina Rikhvanovna of the NGO Baikal Environmental Wave (Volna) won the 2008 Goldman Prize for Asia. This annual award honours grassroots environmental campaigners from every continent. For many years Marina has led efforts to protect Lake Baikal from potentially damaging industrial and

governmental activity.

In 1996 Lake Baikal was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is home to 1,700 endemic species, a fifth of the world's fresh water and is the world's oldest and deepest lake.

In 2002 the Russian government proposed to build the longest oil pipeline in the world: 2,566 miles from eastern Siberia to the Pacific Ocean.

Marina and her colleagues at Volna campaigned tirelessly against the pipeline, which was to pass as close as 800m to Baikal. Thousands of local residents were mobilised to get their voices heard. In 2006 President Putin ordered the pipeline to be re-routed away from the lake.

Marina plans to use the prize money to promote sustainable tourism in the region (see article on p. 8) and she and Volna are now campaigning against the construction of a uranium enrichment plant proposed near Baikal at the town of Angarsk.

We congratulate Marina and Volna and wish them continued success!



Photo: Courtesy of the Goldman Environmental Prize

Siberian Wilds update

Look East Wild Earth's Siberian Wilds project remains as busy as ever. We had stands at several UK festivals last summer, including Lancashire-based Shamania and London's Urban Green Fayre in Brockwell Park. We collected many signatures towards Pacific Environment and Baikal Environmental Wave's campaign to keep the Baikalsk Pulp and

Paper Mill closed and to create a new economic zone to stimulate tourism in the region.

We raised funds for Look East Wild Earth through sales of Siberian Forest Tea and hand-made Siberian jute bags. This year we have spoken at St Andrews and Exeter Universities about the value of Siberia to the global environment and volunteering opportunities in the

region. Recently, Stephanie Ward spoke at the Great Britain-Russia Society about her research trip to Tomsk (see article on the Tomsk Taiga research project opposite).

To find out more about how the Siberian Wilds road show can enhance your event contact: steph@lookeast.org.uk

Tomsk Taiga Research Project

In summer 2007 a research team journeyed to the Kaltayskii forest, in western Siberia, to collect biological and sociological data to inform an application for Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification.

With almost 23 per cent of the world's forest cover on Russian territory, this project aimed to undertake a case-study in the Tomsk region, in order to establish a viable framework for sustainable forest management and protection.

WTA Education Services Ltd, the Tree Council, the British Trust for Ornithology and the Cambridge University Expedition Society joined forces with the Tomsk-based Institute for International Environmental Safety (IIES), Tomsk State University Ecology Department and the Tomsk State Forestry Service to work on this project.

We monitored the Kaltayskii forest's biodiversity by sampling throughout the different stands, recording dead and decaying wood, the age and species of trees, shrub-layer density and diversity, natural tree fall gaps and the existence of bogs and hay meadows. Our research also looked at the potential for non-timber forest product (NTFP) development and eco-tourism.

FSC certification is not only an ecological management plan, it also considers the forest communities. My main role was to conduct sociological research in one of the area's many small, forest-based villages to find out to what extent the inhabitants rely on the forest for their everyday needs and how they perceive the threats to it.

I stayed in the village of Kurlek with a family in their modest wooden home, complete with a vegetable garden, fruit bushes, chickens, ducks and a couple of pigs. This rural idyll was great for my brief two-week stay, especially gorging myself on mushrooms and blueberries from the forest. But the more I understood about the village during my research, the more these delights seemed rare seasonal treats that were infrequent joys in a very tough and often bleak life.

Many of Kurlek's 1,351 inhabitants

today are descended from 1940s' exiles. Unemployment is high in Kurlek and there are many people whose employment is casual, temporary or unofficial, which makes it difficult to classify. At the time of my research the 70 state forest jobs were soon to be reviewed as part of the new Russian Forest Code and fear for job security was rife amongst the foresters. Other significant social issues in the village include rising alcoholism amongst young mothers.

Based on in-depth interviews and questionnaires my research revealed some very interesting data. All of those interviewed harvested NTFPs, with firewood, mushrooms and berries being the most frequently collected. Only three per cent went on to sell any of their produce and they were on the lowest incomes of the sample.

However, despite this NTFP harvesting and the fact that half those surveyed collected wood for daily fuel needs, most people said the forest did not contribute to their household income at all. This suggests an attitudinal issue – no monetary worth was assigned to these products, resulting in a perceived lack of household value and, perhaps, in turn, a reduced sense of the value of the forest. This directly affects the potential development of NTFPs as a means to alleviate rural poverty and promote sustainable forest management through small-scale community entrepreneurial activities.

The history and culture in Russia of NTFP usage is rich and long. Before the First World War a quarter of traffic by weight on the Trans-Siberian railway was pine nuts. The centralised system of harvesting and

marketing in the USSR meant a simple and effective extra income for rural people. When this system collapsed so did the imperative to collect for more than one's own household.

Developing NTFPs could lead to a convergence of economic and ecological interests. There is great moral incentive to develop the capacity of small community enterprises in villages in Siberia, but informal business practices, illegal logging and corruption within the local forestry unit, lack of training in what products could be attractive to both local and foreign markets, as well as the threat of elite capture of forest resources by private business that may accompany the implementation of the new Forest Code, suggests many difficult challenges ahead.

As a result of the Tomsk Taiga Project, the Kaltayskii Forest is now a model for FSC application in the region. Six sites within Kaltayskii have been given Special Protected Area status. Our partner NGO, IIES, organised seminars for regional government and partners to draft the whole region's FSC certification forest standard. IIES and its partner organisation, STRIZH, are undertaking inspections of illegal logging and hunting in the region, with the support of the relevant local authorities. They have been given the status of community inspectors.

I was able to participate in this important project with help from a kind donation by both BREN and Look East Wild Earth.

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Is the Baikal tide turning?

Baikalsk Pulp and Paper Mill has once again hit the headlines but, as many now hope, perhaps for the last time. Throughout its 40-year existence on the eastern shore of Lake Baikal, the mill stood as a divisive and environmentally-damaging blot on Siberia's landscape. Yet on 23 January 2009 the factory finally ground to a halt, with the loss of thousands of jobs. Environmentalists had long campaigned for the mill's closure, yet in the end the mill fell victim not to their demands, but to those of the market. As one commentator noted, there is a green lining to the economic downturn.

But does this really spell the end for the mill, once and for all? My colleague at Baikal Environmental Wave in Irkutsk, Marina Rikhvanova, believes so: "I think there is very little chance of it re-opening; besides, the mill has been left unused in the cold now for quite some time, I'm not sure it would work again anyway."

Marina recently won a major US award (the Goldman Award) for her work in the region and is using her prize money to help redevelop Baikalsk into a sustainable tourist destination. She believes the tide of opinion has already turned in the town, noting the enthusiasm for her project among residents and the fact that locals had started investing in holiday properties even before the mill's final closure. Having recently travelled with Marina to Baikalsk to help run a free small-business development workshop, I too was energised by the



level of enthusiasm and support for her project.

Indeed, even the plant's director, Anton Zavalkovsky, has avoided talk of a return, instead focusing

his efforts on plans for a 'socio-ecological' pollution clean-up programme that will involve some re-employment opportunities. Among environmentalists, however, scepticism remains as to what such a 'clean-up' plan would involve. What's more, there is still resistance among residents and members of the town's Duma to the closure – only recently a letter was handed to the mayor and representatives of the Irkutsk Oblast, stating the need to re-open the plant, albeit with improved environmental safeguards.

Nevertheless, with a deepening of the economic crisis, the mill's future is likely to look even bleaker. Though environmentalists may welcome this, given that the mill was the reason for Baikalsk's creation in the first place, one of the biggest challenges now lies in supporting all those who are faced with a jobless future. Despite the success of Marina's workshop, the sight of young unemployed people throughout the town was utterly depressing. With any luck, Baikalsk can build a model future, where neither the environment nor the economy is compromised.

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We look forward to sharing your Russian passion!