



BREN Newsletter Issue 1 March 2002

Welcome to BREN!

Welcome to this first issue of the British Russian Eco-cultural Network (BREN) newsletter. BREN was founded in Scotland in 2001, when a small group of individuals shared their concerns and experiences of cross-cultural understanding between Britain and Russia regarding social, cultural and ecological issues in each country. Each of us also shared a passion to support and celebrate the many initiatives in each country which grassroots organisations are undertaking to create a more sustainable future. Many of us had worked on projects in the Russian Federation and felt the struggle to maintain connections and consequently pursue and follow up links with grassroots, community-based projects.

BREN aims to create, develop and maintain educational links and give

practical support to projects, with grassroots organisations and individuals working in the areas of social, cultural and ecological justice in the Russian Federation, its neighbouring states and the UK.

The post-Soviet period has resulted in many new relationships, happy memories and projects begun. However, it has also seen increasing debt for many former Soviet countries, growing poverty and massive restructuring in the management of natural resources, such as timber, fisheries, gas, oil and minerals. These huge changes are leading to increased threats both to peoples' health and livelihoods and also to endangered species such as the Amur leopard, sturgeon and Siberian tiger.

BREN seeks to act as a forum for people and organisations to share their enthusiasm, skills and local experiences.

BREN members want to create a working network. In this first newsletter some members share their projects and invite you to contact them if you wish to know more or become actively involved. Participation will lead to greater understanding, friendship and maybe some world-changing projects. Through our website you will be able to access information about many initiatives taking place within the UK and the Russian Federation.

Solutions to the world's situation are neither entirely local or global. They are a dynamic interaction of both. BREN aims to provide a forum in which such a dynamic process can successfully take place. We welcome all your support and are looking forward to hearing from you.

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A Visit from the Russian Far East

In late May, we are organising what we hope will be the first of many visits by Russians to Britain supported by BREN. Andrei Zakharenkov, the Director of the Russian Far East Association of Non-Timber Forest Products, has been invited by BREN, in collaboration with the CREATE Centre in Bristol, to come to the UK to give talks, workshops and meet with interested groups. Andrei has now confirmed that he will be able to come. The visit will be based around an event to be held at the CREATE centre on May 29th (see back page).

In his week-long UK tour Andrei will share his knowledge regarding the issues surrounding sustainable non-timber forest product collection, processing and harvesting. We hope that he will make many useful contacts and find opportunities for marketing Russian non-timber forest products in the UK.

To make this tour a success BREN needs to raise funding and involve as many relevant, interested organisations as possible in promoting this important visit. If you are interested in meeting

Andrei or feel you can offer support in any way please contact us.

At our March gathering (see back page) we will be organising the details of this and other future events. We hope to see you there! Please let us have your ideas about activities that BREN should be involved in, and do tell us about any Russian-related events in the UK, or Britain-related events in Russia. We hope to include a diary of such events in future issues of the newsletter.

Contact:

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Message from Russia

The Socio-Ecological Union (SEU), the umbrella organisation for social and environmental NGOs throughout the former Soviet Union, is very interested in co-operation with BREN. Like BREN, in our work we emphasise the relationships between nature and people and cultural heritage. We understand the importance of the historical, cultural and ecological parts of our work and we have several projects focusing on this.

1. The Ecosettlement XXI programme aims to establish ecosettlements as a popular form for organising human life. Our group in Novosibirsk has developed an eco-friendly house that uses very little energy and water and allows organic waste recycling. We hope to form settlements around the country. Construction has already started in Novosibirsk, and preparatory work is being done in Kazakhstan.

2. The Oaks of Europe project is working for broadleaf forest restoration in European Russia and other countries. The broadleaf forests, especially oak groves, played a significant role in Slavic and other cultures. Oak was a symbol of sacred things, the history of the people and relationships between nature and people. Even Russian officials seem to be concerned about the present condition of the oak groves! Oak grove

areas have decreased by 20 per cent in the past 32 years, from 4.4 million ha in 1966 to 3.5 million ha in 1998.

Broadleaf forests are highly important for biodiversity conservation as they have the most diverse ecosystems. This is why we think it is important to:

- discover natural territories that need protection and select areas for natural landscape restoration;
- stimulate public activities in the regions, to bring together state, commercial and non-commercial entities for practical work for oak grove conservation and restoration.

3. A project on human-nature relationships is just starting in the Veliky Novgorod Region. The project includes the creation of a museum of Nature and People, reflecting the history of the nature-human relationship over the centuries. This region has a rich history of nature study, forest restoration, dendropark planting and other such things. The region is also rich in unique ecosystems - from marshes and swamps to forests that contain rare species. All this forms a network of great interest and educational significance. Veliky Novgorod region is also a historical oak grove location - a large part of Peter the Great's fleet was built from Novgorod oaks. However, this part of the region's

history is not reflected in any museum or exhibition of the region.

Among the activities that we plan for this year is an expedition in August for the Druzhina Movement (a student movement for nature protection). This summer school provides a form of mutual education where more experienced members or people from other green organisations train young activists to do various things connected to nature protection - media work, rangers, scientific study, environmental legislation, etc. The schools always take the form of a camp and the work is done in a very interactive way. This time we want to do it as an expedition between Tver and Novgorod region, following the route of Alexey Tillo from 100 years ago. Its aim was to look at the riverine forest ecosystems at the source of the Volga river, to discover the causes of a drop in river level. One of the main causes was forest felling. We want to look at the changes that have occurred in the past 100 years, and at the same time to do hands-on training and to attract attention to the natural and cultural history of the region.

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Sustaining Change?

This year it will be ten years since the 1992 UN Earth Summit put sustainable development on the political agenda. The idea at the centre of sustainability is that environmental action must be integrated with progress on social and economic change. Nowhere is this more urgent than in Russia and the other Newly Independent States (NIS), which have also recently had their 'ten year anniversary'.

This past decade has seen enormous change in social, environmental and economic issues within Russia and, as is all too obvious, some of that change has been for the worse. There are new environmental laws, there are new democratic structures and there is a much clearer public vision of the environmental crisis, but sadly there has been very little action.

This situation is, of course, not unique to the former Soviet Union, but these countries have distinct problems. The fast-declining quality of much of the infrastructure is not being dealt with by new investment and international

indicators show that poverty is rising faster in this region than anywhere else in the world. This is a critical issue for those working on environmental issues: if people are not sure how they will feed their families next week, then it is not surprising that they pay very little attention to the environment.

This linking of poverty and the environment and the need to find solutions that deal with both together will be one of the key issues for the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development (Rio+10) which takes place later this year in Johannesburg. It is an issue which is clearly important for the NIS and participation in that event by NGOs from this region will be important.

ANPED, the Northern Alliance for Sustainability, is an NGO network working in all parts of Europe. The organisation is based in Amsterdam, with Board members across the region, including two from Russia (representing the NGO Resource Centre in St Petersburg and the NGO ECO-Accord

in Moscow). We are working to ensure that the 2002 Summit does not just look at 'north-south' issues but also at 'east-west' ones. ANPED also works to stimulate local activity and to build NGO capacity.

Whatever happens at Rio+10, there will still be an urgent need for genuinely sustainable development in Russia and the NIS. New networks such as BREN which can improve 'bi-lateral' links between countries are ever more important. Lessons from the growing number of urban environmental initiatives in the UK may be very relevant to NGOs trying to build stronger links with communities in Russian cities, and there is certainly much that UK groups can learn from the determination of the best of Russian organisations. Let's hope that this is the start of a productive relationship!

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Scottish-Perm culture

Ewan McVicar, storyteller and song writer, is deeply involved in the Centre of Scottish Culture in the city of Perm in the Urals. His involvement began by accident but he is now helping to create a festival of Scottish-Russian Culture in Perm in June 2002. This will include Lochness Monsters and Scottish translations of Russian poets and, of course, Russian versions of the songs of Robert Burns.

Ewan has taken other storytellers and singers to work in schools in Perm and has brought back pictures, messages and creative writing pieces from Perm schools to Scottish schools, creating an exchange of artistic work. This is a good beginning and already surprising connections are being made between Perm and Scotland. One example is the geological Permian Age, named by a Scottish geologist visiting Perm. Permian sandstone has been used for some of Scotland's finest architecture, such as the Glasgow School of Art and the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. A creative writing project about stone has also come out of Ewan's links to Russia. Ewan is excited at the friendship and common goals that are being established through BREN.

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Healing through Humour



Two weeks of complete loving chaos! That best describes how I perceived Patch Adams' Healing Through Humour Tour of Moscow and St Petersburg last November.

We clowned in many hospitals and orphanages. We also made people laugh on the underground with balloons and chased the general public in Red Square with a pair of rather large white underpants and my wonderful self-inflating whoopee cushion! We brought smiles to many faces! With the laughter came the tears. Moscow alone has around 90 orphanages. With inadequate education and social skills, many of the orphans are ill-prepared to execute the simplest everyday functions. It is with these young people that an organisation called Maria's Children works.

I will go back to Russia in May to help on a two-week boat trip and I will stay for at least one year. I have seen the incredible work Maria has done with

these youngsters. These children are our future. The way we treat our children is a reflection of our future. Even if I just help to 'heal' one child then my life will be complete. I am asking for donations and sponsors. Absolutely any amount will make a world of difference to these children. I have around 20 Maria's Children Art calendars which need homes. Believe me (and others!) at £10 each they are a bargain!

I have already found new contacts through BREN and I haven't even landed back on Russian soil! The value of sharing contacts and information should never be underestimated. The benefits of BREN are enormously positive for both countries and I feel the relationships gained by this network will create beautiful leaps in sustainability. This is just the tip of the iceberg!

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Celebration

Elemental Earth is a community group based in Machynlleth, mid-Wales. The group formed in 1998. The driving vision was to create opportunities for people to engage with each other and their environment through practical and arts-based projects. Our particular focus is working with young people.

Elemental Earth has always been 'project driven'. We began with the creation of a woodland garden in the local school, teaching the principles of ecology to 40 children over a year, through a wide variety of methods and activities. We have learned that the strength of the work comes from the collective doing. We hope to create a network of school woodland gardens and are currently fundraising for a large woodland garden where children and adults can have more adventurous experiences.

Through this project we became very enthusiastic about the power of celebration. Elemental Earth now runs a community celebrations programme which is consciously connected in to the earth cycles and seeks to bring people together and raise awareness about ways to improve the ecology of the region.

The two projects link into each other very well in our small community and are helping to build bridges between the divides that exist here. After all, there is plenty of information available for people but that is not the only ingredient for change. Encouraging creativity generates so much happiness – we feel that bringing people together for that is a powerful tool.

We are very happy to be a part of BREN. We can see that there are many creative opportunities for learning about the people and land of Russia. We would be particularly interested in:

- our regular after school clubs making connections to ecological clubs in Russia, through letter writing, hosting visits, project work, sharing stories;
- putting teachers/other youth groups in touch with information - maybe an education pack linking the areas;
- being a channel for BREN to communicate in our region, facilitating/organising workshops, sharing experiences and knowledge of agroforestry, community woodlands etc;
- learning about celebrations in Russia.

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BREN Spring Gathering

Quaker Meeting House, Edinburgh

10am-5pm, 25 March 2002

Meet other BREN members and take part in creating the network's future at a lively day of sharing, visioning and planning. It is through your participation that a working interactive web of support grows. We look forward to being with you all. The event is by donation, lunch and drinks are provided.

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BREN gets CREATIVE

Last November the CREATE Centre was pleased to invite Feja Mira Lesniewska and Monica Sjoo of BREN to take part in our autumn *Sustainable Futures* lecture series.

The CREATE Centre is Bristol's unique Environment Centre and is home to more than twenty environmental and sustainable development organisations. (CREATE stands for *Community Recycling Environmental Action Training and Education*). CREATE organises open days, green building fairs, schools programmes, workshops, talks and many other public events throughout the year.

It was a great honour to welcome Feja to speak about the work of BREN and present in such an entertaining manner her first hand experiences of the Russian



Federation. The evening was a life-changing experience through a stimulating collection of art, music, slides and performance that explored the impact of globalisation on the cultural ecology and forests of the Russian Federation. The presentation was brilliantly complemented by an exhibition of Monica Sjoo's Nordic Paintings inspired by the Taiga Forests.

The CREATE Centre greatly supports the work of BREN and its aims

to create a network of groups and grassroots organisations to develop a web of understanding across the eco-cultural divides of Britain and the countries around the Russian Federation.

We hope to remain closely in touch with the work of BREN and plan to link up again in May with a Timber Event here at the CREATE Centre. We intend to hold a number of talks

focusing on non-timber forest products at this event. We look forward to welcoming Andrei Zakharenkov, the director of the Russian Far East Association of Non-Timber Forest Products, whose visit will be organised by BREN.

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How to join BREN

Join BREN to receive this newsletter regularly and support the activities of our members.

Send a cheque or postal order to the address below, or email us for banking details.

Membership costs just £5 per year for individuals, £30 for organisations.

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We look forward to sharing your Russian passion!