



BREN Newsletter

Issue 3

Spring 2005

Network update

The BREN team wishes to welcome you to this new bigger, better edition of the newsletter. We have decided to focus on providing a regular, larger bi-annual newsletter packed full of interesting stories of grassroots projects, profiles and exchanges. We hope you find it enjoyable and we would be pleased to receive any comments and suggestions you may have.

The majority of the articles in this edition result from the visits by BREN co-ordinators, Feja and Heather, to various parts of Russia in 2004, during which they met with many grassroots activists and encountered some fascinating and inspiring projects.

The articles illustrate the diversity of initiatives currently occurring in the Russian Federation from

ingenious environmental education programmes to exciting cultural events struggling in the face of adversity and academic conferences in ecological economics.

For many people in Russia today the situation of daily life becomes more difficult with the increasing division between the rich and the poor. Many environmental and cultural projects are struggling to survive as the international funding policies of donor countries like the United States and Europe change priorities to the detriment of large areas of Russia.

It is important that the day-to-day experiences faced by these dynamic people and groups trying to create positive solutions to serious ecological problems are not forgotten, that their inspiring stories are heard internationally and acted upon. BREN aims to assist in getting some

of these voices heard. If you have information, contacts or stories you could share for future newsletters then please contact BREN.

The Autumn 2005 BREN newsletter will be a special edition focusing on issues and projects on Sakhalin Island. However, reports of projects from elsewhere in Russia will be included. Until then the BREN team hopes you find this newsletter useful and interesting.

Contact

Feja Lesniewska & Heather Stacey
BREN Co-ordinators
Feja: feja@brenweb.org
Heather: heather@brenweb.org
or
info@brenweb.org
www.brenweb.org

Logo unlocked

Chad McCail is an internationally acclaimed Scottish artist. His work has included co-pioneering a community art project in Edinburgh where young homeless people make furniture from reclaimed materials. The participants held an exhibition of their work at the Edinburgh Collective Gallery.

Chad was invited to design a logo for BREN in 2001 and since then we have had repeated enquiries about the logo's origin,

so Chad offered to provide a short explanation for the newsletter. "The logo is based on woven fabric designs where things are represented in the most simple and reduced way. It's something I'm always after in my own work -

making easily read signs and combining them to create simple language that can talk about complex things.

"The tree design comes from the national flag of the Chuvash, indigenous people who live in the Volga region south-east of Moscow. The tree has fruit for the birds and animals and is nourished at its roots by the awareness of men and women, and above by the sun."

BREN would like to take this opportunity to thank Chad for such a beautiful and inspiring design.



Combating the legacy of Chernobyl

Part 1 of a two-part series on Viola

Deep in the forest of south-west Russia lies the city of Bryansk. An ancient trading centre, built on the River Desna, it was at the intersection of important trading routes from north, south, east and west.

During the Second World War Bryansk found itself on the route of the Germans on their march towards Moscow. Many people lost their lives and Bryansk became known as a hero city of the Soviet Union in honour of the partisan fighters who took to the woodlands and ambushed the advancing Germans. They were known as the Bryansk Wolves.

In 1986 the Bryansk region suffered another invasion, this time from a very different source. After the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear reactor in Ukraine on 26 April, the wind blew radioactive clouds towards Bryansk, resulting in an area of over 11,000km² being polluted with radiation.

The people in the predominantly rural and agricultural Bryansk region were as unprepared as the rest of the world for the catastrophe. The authorities were slow to react and evacuate people and reliable information about how the population

could protect itself was extremely scarce.

At the time Ludmila Zhirina was a lecturer in ecology at Bryansk University. She was quick to realise some of the implications of this lack



of information and she began to publish pamphlets advising people about the precautions they could take and how they could access safer food. One of the early publications, *Save*

yourself from radiation (pictured left), provides very detailed information about cooking, washing, cleaning the home to minimise the accumulation of radioactive dust and carrying out decontamination measures on allotments.

The information was invaluable, but Ludmila was by no means lauded and appreciated everywhere. Attempts were made to discredit her and she was accused by officials of scaremongering. However, firm in the belief of the importance of the work, Ludmila and her colleagues at the environmental NGO, Viola, continued their work of education and awareness-raising.

Eighteen years on the children born at the time of the disaster are now adults, yet the legacy of Chernobyl lives on. Apart from the fact that there are people still living in the exclusion zone, there are many other areas in the Bryansk region which are severely polluted with radiation. Visitors to Bryansk are often shocked at the stark illustration of the continuing threat of radiation provided by the clock in the city centre, which alternately shows the time, the temperature and the background radiation.



Viola volunteers in the woods

In rural areas, where the collective farm system has broken down, life is extremely hard and people are reliant on food they can collect from the forest. But mushrooms, berries and firewood can all be heavily contaminated.

As ever, Viola recognises the need for practical assistance. Radioactive fallout was very patchy, depending on where it rained and the thermal currents in the atmosphere, so there can be a huge difference in levels of contamination within a very small area.

In winter birch wood is used extensively in wood-burning stoves but this can be very dangerous. As birch trees grow they lock in radioactive contamination from the soil, but when they are cut down and burnt in the enclosed space of a home in winter, the radiation is released. Viola has been active in raising money to provide villages with mini Geiger counters so that people can go into the woods and check for the places where it is safe to gather the fruits and fuels of the forest.

Conscious of the importance of raising awareness, Viola is very involved in educational activities. In partnership with the head teacher, they have set up an environment centre in a secondary school in



Poster produced by pupils at the school environment centre to commemorate the eighteenth anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster

Bryansk, with a second centre at a village school in the countryside. At both centres Viola staff and volunteers organise seminars and events and teach the pupils and local people about a wide range of environmental issues. They have also worked together to set up a school garden, involving children in the production of safe food in a very practical way.

The commitment and seemingly boundless enthusiasm of Ludmila, Igor and everyone involved in the

activities of Viola is a continuing source of inspiration. In the next newsletter we shall be looking at their work in setting up a nature reserve and studying and protecting the oak trees which grow there.

Contact

We hope to provide direct contact details for Viola in the next newsletter. For now please address any enquiries to: heather@brenweb.org

Sand, sea and bards

The Primorsky Strings Festival may conjure up in people's minds the idea of quartets playing classical music on well-mown lawns in Tolstoyan Russia. Well they'd be wrong, this festival is a celebration of contemporary bardic minstrels, including children. It comes down to one person and their guitar or accordion. The festival has taken place for 28 years and people have "freed their souls by singing beside beach fires" as the sun falls and rises over the Pacific Ocean. The festival takes place every summer at one of the numerous bays near Vladivostok City in the Russian Far East, giving everyone an opportunity when not singing to swim in the sea. People come from Khabarovsk, Magadan, Sakhalin Island and even as far away as St Petersburg. Some 3,000 people (simple workers, professors, poets, writers and sailors), of whom over 500 perform, come by



foot, car, truck and aeroplane to spend three days sharing music, food and inevitably, in good Russian fashion, a vodka or two. The importance of the festival, Dimitry Freeman (one of the organisers) tells me, is that it adds to the communication of spirits between different parts of Russia and hence people's happiness.

Although very few artists are professional, the standard of the performers is astounding. It is a platform for individuals, young and

old, men and women, as well as groups such as Antarios. It is almost free to attend the festival, 100 roubles (approx £2.50). Dimitry claims that charging more to ensure the costs are covered would only result in the government wanting some money. Despite the success of this year's festival the main organiser, Sergei Bulgarkov (a bardic legend in his own right), sold his garage in Vladivostok to pay debts incurred. The future of the festival looks shaky. Dimitry asked BREN if we could help. The festival could grow and create exciting new fusions with exchanges from Scottish and Welsh bards, Dimitry said. If you are interested or feel you could assist in any way in supporting this important musical cultural grassroots event in the Russian Far East, please contact Dimitry.

Contact
Dimitry Freeman
buffalo@pisem.net

Kitezh

Fostering the future

In Russian folklore Kitezh is the ancient, mystical paradise we all yearn for. 300km south of Moscow a community of deeply committed people is seeking to make this paradise a reality on earth.

The Kitezh community was established in 1992 as a non-governmental, non-profit partnership of foster families living in an educational and therapeutic eco-village. The idea was to provide an alternative to the crowded and archaic orphanage system which operates in Russia. The massive social and political changes in Russia over the last 15 years have left over a million children either orphaned or unable to live with their birth families. Statistics show that when they have to leave the system at 18, these young people are disproportionately likely to end up in prison, homeless or committing suicide.

At Kitezh children from orphanages are fostered by families and grow up in a stable, caring environment. The community is set in 100 hectares of mixed grassland and forest, part of an abandoned collective farm. Beautiful wooden houses and a little church have been built in the traditional vernacular style. In addition to the foster families, Kitezh has a regular stream of volunteers from all over the world and has developed a culture of making all-comers feel at home.

I arrived in late July during the blackcurrant harvest and quickly felt myself being absorbed into the life of the community, as we picked blackcurrants until our fingers were

stained purple and weeded the vegetable garden between rain showers. As we topped and tailed blackcurrants in Tamara's cosy kitchen, the rain beating on the roof, she talked about her life, her role as a foster mother and the work of the community. Tamara fosters a family of five brothers and sisters. She told us about how the focus of Kitezh is on the children and how the foster parents attend seminars and training about working with orphans and are supported by psychologists and social workers.

A recent development is for each child to have their own 'Life Book'. Children who are adopted or fostered can quickly become dislocated from their past and can suffer from not having the same fund of childhood memories as children who grow up with their birth families. The 'Life Book' is a ring binder in which the children are encouraged to write and draw pictures of the times they remember from before Kitezh. The 'Life Book' may include a family tree, memories about siblings who have died or live elsewhere and even copies of documents such as birth certificates and fostering papers.

Since 1992, 60 children have lived at Kitezh. Some continue to live there into adulthood, while others have gone away to study or get married. They can return to Kitezh at any time, just as any adult son or daughter is welcome in their parents' home.

Over the years an important source of support for Kitezh (and our original link to the community) has been the Ecologia Trust, based in Scotland and set up by Liza Hollingshead in 1995.



In the vegetable garden

Ecologia's tireless fundraising efforts have been invaluable in supplementing the funding Kitezh receives from the Russian state and from donations.

It was felt that, with a total of 60-65 adults and children, Kitezh had reached its optimum size. Yet demand is unending. Last year the decision was taken to build a second village, Orion. With a great deal of hard work and determination a site was found between Moscow and Kitezh. Building soon commenced at the new site. The first house is already finished and a second will follow this year. The latest news from Ecologia is that their bid to the Big Lottery Fund for three years' funding was successful.

Meanwhile new families are being recruited and trained and plans are being made for a reedbed waste water system. Orion is making rapid progress – the next stage in a vision which ultimately hopes to see a network of fostering, eco-village communities all across Russia.

Back in Scotland I think about the Kitezhans eating the blackcurrant jam we helped to make and still feel the atmosphere of warmth, openness and sanctuary of this community – surely they are well on the way to realising that mystical vision of paradise that the Russians call Kitezh.

Contact

You can contact Kitezh through the Ecologia Trust.
Tel. +44 (0)1309 690995.
Email: all@ecologia.org.uk.
www.ecologia.org.uk



The church at Kitezh

The boreal comes to Chelsea

Watch out, there could be a boreal forest in your garden this spring! There certainly will be one in Chelsea, due to the admirable efforts of John Kennedy's Landlab, a Scottish-based landscape architect company. John has begged, borrowed and been donated what he needs to build a Boreal Forest Garden at the 2005 Chelsea Flower Show.

The garden aims to demonstrate the value of the boreal forest ecology to the world. He is working in conjunction with the Taiga Rescue Network (TRN) to bring boreal-forest-dependent people from Canada and Russia to the event and also to draw on their traditional knowledge of plant uses and craft skills.

Visit the Boreal Forest Garden at the 2005 Chelsea Flower Show, 24-28 May 2005

BREN has directly assisted by linking John and TRN with Alexei Zhukov, a forest ranger from Ada Timova on Sakhalin Island, in the Russian Far East.

In BREN's next newsletter there

will be a full feature article on Alexei and the Boreal Forest Garden at the Chelsea Flower Show. Currently work is already underway in creating this unique forest garden exhibition. Volunteers are needed to help install the garden between 15 and 23 May. If you can help, please contact John Kennedy. If you can't volunteer, then go along to the Show itself and give the crew some support for their fantastic work.

Contact

John Kennedy
Tel. + 44 (0)1556 505970
Mob. + 44 (0)7841 483157
Email: john@landlab.co.uk

Baikal Wave

Stephanie Ward, a member of NGO Look East, is currently spending a year volunteering in Irkutsk, Russia, for the NGO Baikal Environmental Wave, an environmental education centre and campaigning group for the Lake Baikal Region of Siberia.

Baikal Wave was one of the first environmental NGOs to be created in post-Soviet times and has been in existence since 1990. It is involved in a wide range of projects involving environmental education work with schools and local communities.

This work includes projects on ecological footprinting; promoting sustainable development; supporting National Parks around Lake Baikal; working on projects to record land use with GIS technology; and campaigning against oil pipeline developments that threaten the National Parks and World Heritage Site of Lake Baikal. Baikal Wave publishes various educational materials, documentary films, and a journal, *Volna*.

Stephanie, who is funded by European Voluntary Service, a part of the EU YOUTH Programme, has spent a year living in Irkutsk and working with Baikal Wave. She has worked on several environmental education initiatives during her time in Russia, including helping to develop materials in Russian on the

'ecological footprint' concept. She also took part in an educational work camp in the Tunka National Park in summer 2004.

Each August sees the annual Baikal Day festival and Stephanie was involved in organising the 2004 event, including establishing the first ever 'Baikal Night' in a local night club – an event which resulted in considerable publicity within the local community.

Her work has also involved assisting with the translation of various publications and grant

applications. Stephanie has been very impressed by the vast areas of Siberian wilderness and their global importance and, following her return to the UK in April, is planning to offer talks on her experiences to interested UK groups, along with a mobile exhibition of photos.

Contact

Baikal Wave
Russia, 664033, Irkutsk, PO Box 21
You can send an email from the website: www.baikalwave.eu.org

Look East

Look East is a newly-formed, UK-based voluntary initiative which encourages global awareness and local action on topics such as environmental conservation, sustainable community development and environmental education by providing a forum for networking and sharing of information between local community organisations and NGOs in the UK and similar organisations in Eastern Europe, Russia and Central Asia.

Our planned activities for the future include the creation of a web-based list of contacts for grassroots organisations working on sustainability issues; support of NGOs in Russia and Eastern Europe through links with UK networks and organisations; study visits and exchanges; and collection and dissemination of relevant materials and information. We are able to offer advice and contacts for those wishing to find out more or to volunteer with environmental organisations in the regions we work in.

Contact

Katy Harris, Look East Co-ordinator
Email: katy@lookeast.org.uk, Website: www.lookeast.org.uk

New friends in Kondopoga

Lynne Young and her friend Ann Dyball undertook a courageous journey by car to Kondopoga, Karelia, in North West Russia in autumn 2004. It was part of the Friends of Kondopoga Programme run by UK-based charity, the St Gregory's Foundation.

The programme aims to assist parishioners' work in that region of Karelia. The initial connection was made in 2002 by the charity. Lynne decided to make her journey more worthwhile by taking items that might be needed in the parish, such as clothing and shoes, medical supplies, computers, sewing items, tapes and videos, towels, zimmer frames and more.

Their supplies appear to have been gratefully received by the various communities and households they visited during their stay in the region. The following extract from Lynne's diary of the journey illustrates just how much is needed, and what a difference to people's lives even the simplest of things such as a zimmer frame can be.

"In Girvas, some 45 minutes from Kondopoga, the old people's home and hospital are being renovated from

their very run down state. Painting and re-flooring are under way in the home, but much is needed there in the way of new beds and bedding, washing machine and driers, mobility aids, not to mention the stimuli which would be taken for granted elsewhere: pictures, magazines, music, TV are entirely absent.

The only jobs to be had are at the local paper mill, which is notorious for its polluting sulphuric acid smell

"To put this old people's home in relative order will cost about £2,200. The residents are at present housed in the 'hospital', which is similarly rundown and deprived in the same

ways: the women there were pitifully pleased to see visitors and are obviously inadequately provided for: each just has an old bed and precious little else. The whole environment is gloomy and barren. Doctor Elvira, who is responsible for 3,000 local inhabitants, is desperately anxious for help.

"One day we went to visit an elderly woman, who lives in one of the houses near to the church, who had for some time been too unsteady to get out and see her friends and neighbours. We gave her one of the zimmer frames from Queen Mary's Hospital in Roehampton. She took it eagerly and was clearly going to use it a lot."

The level and diversity of poverty in

Kondopoga is symptomatic of the problems in this area of Karelia. The town of Kondopoga suffers from 50% unemployment with all the attendant problems. Every day Lynne joined everyone else for meals in Parish House.

"There was always a considerable company for lunch – the family, the visitors, the architects, the carpenters, not forgetting those who come to the soup kitchen: up to 70 men, women and children every day of the year, bringing their own makeshift food containers and eating outside... they live rough, often in basements near heating pipes."

The only jobs to be had are at the local paper mill, which is notorious for its polluting sulphuric acid smell, its almost tangible effluent in the lake and the unchecked sprawl of the factory buildings.

The Parish sawmill provides a cheering contrast, just 12km from Kondopoga. It is on its way to being self-sufficient, positive signs include the fact that workers are increasingly keeping away from alcohol, sawdust is exchanged locally for dairy produce, aiding the local economy, ear protection is worn in line with health and safety regulations (routinely breached in Russia).

It is clear that the people of Kondopoga are keen to rebuild their community racked with the problems of poverty. The appreciation for the help from St Gregory's Foundation was immense.

There is a great deal of work to be done, enough people are keen to do it and they just need the means. This trip to Russia was followed by fundraising events in the UK to obtain money and materials for the numerous initiatives occurring in Kondopoga.

For further details about ways in which you can assist the people of Kondopoga contact Lynne Young.

Saint Gregory's Foundation works to bring hope to the needy in Russia and the former Soviet Union by supporting active and socially responsible local people, who are working to help themselves and others

Contact

Lynne Young

lynne.m.young@bopenworld.com

www.charitynet.org/~stgregorys

Russian Karelia

Kondopoga is marked with a black cross



All aboard the Eco-tour Bus

For eighteen days last summer twenty children and four adults from schools no. 32 and no. 8 boarded their very own Eco-tour Bus and travelled around the island of Sakhalin in Russia's Far East.

Tired of spending their summer holidays picking up rubbish on beaches as part of school summer camps, these children had decided to tour their native island and act out an ecological message to numerous officials, adults and, of course, other children.

They worked with the local children in each area where the Eco-tour Bus stopped. The theme varied from place to place, depending on the environmental issues relevant to that location and included water, forest fires and biodiversity. Together the children devised performances, made masks and costumes and organised parades and performed plays on environmental themes.

They also arranged round-table talks with local environmental officials and authorities to identify the

sources of the problems. In October the children submitted a report to the authorities of their own analyses of the water in each area where they performed.

This was the first year of the Eco-tour Bus. Two teachers, Tatyana Vaganova and Tatyana Muravieva, were encouraged by its success and hope that applications for funding will enable there to be an Eco-tour Bus in each district of Sakhalin in the future.

Both teachers commented on the change in the mentality of children, and the improvement in communication amongst everyone who participated. "It is important to target the children, they have the greatest influence and eventually parents get involved."

The \$12,000 funding for the project was awarded to the Eco-tour Bus project by the Sakhalin Energy Company and USAid. There are great opportunities here for environmental education organisations to develop links and possibly establish exchange programmes. The teachers coordinating the project would be very happy to hear from any BREN readers.

The Eco-tour Bus team gets ready to roll



Contact

Tatayana Vaganava
Email: gena@land.ru
Tatayana Muravieva
Email: murantz@mail.ru

The Blue Patrol goes green

The rivers in the Markarov District on Sakhalin Island are all the cleaner due to the enthusiastic efforts of the Blue Patrol. Markarov district is stricken with unemployment and its related problems since all the industries were shut down after the Soviet period. Now the only employment is provided by fishing.

The Blue Patrol started in 2001 on the initiative of Irina Vasilenko, Director of the Ogonek orphanage in Markarov. The orphanage opened in 1995 and houses 109 children from 3 to 18 years old. Each year since 2001 approximately 30 children between the ages of 11 and 16 have spent three weeks in the summer undertaking practical ecological training. The

training includes ecological games, hiking, first aid, leadership and group work.

The Blue Patrol is partially sponsored by a private body guard enterprise. Currently the local Governor is seeking ways in which to support the Blue Patrol in the longer term. The Blue Patrol is modelled on the youth movements of the Soviet period. Since the fall of the Soviet Union many teachers have voluntarily, and with few resources, established hundreds of summer camps to replace these youth movements and provide an educational environment for the children.

The Blue Patrol initiative is admirable for the chance it gives orphaned children, of whom there are

over a million in Russia today, to learn about working to restore and protect the environment. Already two of the Blue Patrol have gone on to university to study ecologically related subjects. Another former member now assists with the coordination and development of the project.

The continuation of the Blue Patrol's activities depends upon support, both financial and material (camping equipment, tools, educational exchanges etc) so if you can help in any way with this wonderful work, Irina would be delighted to hear from you.

Contact

Irina Vasilenko
Email: vin65@rambler.ru or
ogonek96@mail.ru



For a few salmon more

In late August 2004 a number of organisations and individuals gathered for the Sakhalin Salmon Festival in Artek, near Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, the island's capital city. The festival, organised by the Wild Salmon Center, Oregon, USA, in conjunction with a number of salmon conservation projects on the island, focused on tackling the problem of the

poaching of Pacific sea salmon for caviar. BREN wanted to take the opportunity to provide a couple of examples from the wonderful gallery of paintings by Sakhalin school children exhibited at the Festival. They illustrate an extraordinarily high level of sensitivity to the detail of the natural world. We hope you enjoy these paintings as much as we do.



Ecological economics conference

The Seventh International Conference of the Russian Society for Ecological Economics (RSEE), 'Globalisation, New Economy and the Environment. Business and Society Challenges for Sustainable Development', will take place on 23-25 June 2005 at one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in Russia, St Petersburg State University. The interdisciplinary and intercultural dimensions of the conference will help create links between academics geographically (globally and locally) as well as across the usual disciplinary boundaries.

The international conference will discuss advances in ecological economic approaches to environmentally sustainable policy-making in the modern conditions of globalisation, an enlarged European Union and current developments in the international environmental policy arena. Particular emphasis will be placed on international and regional environmental problems, the importance of the protection of the Baltic Region, the practical application of new methodological approaches of ecological economics, environmental psychology, as well as the role of information sciences and modelling in environmental-economic management.

Information about the conference together with registration forms can be found on the RSEE website www.rsee.org. Please send any enquiries concerning the conference by e-mail to Dr Stanislav Shmelev, RSEE 2005 Conference Secretary: s.shmelev@open.ac.uk.

Support BREN

To receive this newsletter regularly and support the activities of our members contact us at the address below. We are always pleased to receive articles, updates or other information for forthcoming newsletters

British-Russian Eco-Cultural Network
 Address: PO Box 28458, Edinburgh, Scotland, EH4 1ZH
 Email: info@brenweb.org, Website: www.brenweb.org
 We look forward to sharing your Russian passion!