

Sacred Sites and Sanctuaries in Northern Russia

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... apart from the ritual itself, there is another reason for visiting sacred sites, which is the opportunity to feel one is part of the present community, of this human space. The entire family or clan gathers together, and we can see what it is we share, how many of us are left, and what kind of changes have come about since the last time we met. Then you are forced to think about your life and about tomorrow.

Yuri Vella, Khanty writer¹

Indigenous hunters and gatherers, fishers, and reindeer herders of the Arctic have traditionally been keen observers of their ecosystems. Surviving among other species in the most extreme natural surroundings, indigenous languages and cultures have been important assets of the Arctic peoples for thousands of years. One of the keys to ensuring cultural survival is the preservation of sacred places. However, achieving this goal requires overcoming not only a variety of difficult socio-political problems, but also some very important theoretical and methodological ones. Despite an impressive cultural resilience, research reveals an increasing knowledge gap between generations. Some elements of the culture of the reindeer herders in the Russian North, such as ancient beliefs and cult objects, are now retained only by members of the older generation. A significant change in the lifestyle, customs and culture of the people has led to a situation in which the young are no longer able to describe many ceremonial activities or to name the cult objects. Furthermore, customary rights of indigenous peoples to use, manage and protect their sacred sites as part of their heritage are rarely recognized or put into practice.

The protection of sacred sites of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic has been largely ignored so far, although the leaders of RAIPON (Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North) and others have often noted the threats facing these sites and the culture attached to them. At the sixth meeting of Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF) in Nuuk in 1997, the issues of sacred sites of indigenous peoples in the Russian Arctic were discussed, and it was suggested that their protection could be enhanced through closer links with CAFF's biodiversity conservation initiatives, such as the Circumpolar Protected Areas Network (CPAN). The need to develop a specific project to enhance the protection of sacred indigenous sites had been earlier expressed at Arctic Council meetings by Sergei Haruchi, RAIPON's President.

Sacred site *Numt Hanotorma*, Yamal

photo: Leonid Lar

In May 2000, two pilot areas for the project work were selected by RAIPON. These were the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region (Tazovskii district) and the Koryak Autonomous Region, in northern Kamchatka (Olyutorskii district). The Danish Environmental Protection Agency (DEPA) agreed to fund a fact-finding mission to the Koryak Region, to be conducted in the summer of 2000, building on an earlier fact-finding mission to the Yamal-Nenets Region in December 1999. These missions together constituted the initial phase of the project, the results of which were used to formulate the final project proposal and work plan.

The project was designed to support the integrated conservation of Arctic biodiversity and the cultural heritage of northern indigenous peoples by documenting the biological and cultural significance and status of indigenous sacred sites and sanctuaries. It provided a fascinating opportunity to look at indigenous perspectives on landscape, biology, ecology, and conservation. With this in mind, the project aimed to explore topics such as: What makes a site special to an indigenous group? What does “sacred site” mean to indigenous people? Are there different types of sacred sites for different purposes? Are sacred sites distinct from their surroundings, or are they perceived as part of a broader landscape that has many spiritual dimensions? What is the relationship of sacred sites to conservation, and how can sites best be protected? What is the relationship of sacred sites to other cultural practices? How is the concept of sacred sites linked to other

spiritual practices of the group? What is the ecological and biodiversity significance of sacred sites? How important is this “natural” dimension in identifying sacred sites? How does it correspond to Western notions of biodiversity conservation measures?

The project has sought to answer all these questions, not only by documenting and mapping sacred sites, but also by inserting the results in a broader context that respects the needs and concerns of the indigenous peoples themselves. For conservation, as we move toward greater involvement by people and local communities, it is essential that we develop a better understanding of the various ways people see the environment.



Even graves of author's family, Ayanka, Penzhinskii Rayon, Kamchatka
photo: Alona Yefimenko

Preparatory steps

Initially, a project committee with representatives from RAIPON, CAFF and the Indigenous Peoples' Secretariat (IPS) was established to oversee and guide the process. Indigenous participation and involvement in the whole research process was emphasized. The National Coordinator was Mikhail Todishev, a lawyer by profession who is himself an indigenous Shor and Vice-President of RAIPON. On the recommendation of the associations of the indigenous peoples of Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug and Koryak Autonomous Okrug, Michael Nikolaevich Okotetto (Yamal), and Albina Viktorovna Yailgina (Kamchatka) were appointed as regional coordinators.

Some key advantages to having indigenous researchers involved were that this strengthened indigenous “ownership” of the research process and initiated an active research partnership. Also of crucial importance was to build trust-based relationships and processes driven by indigenous knowledge. The latter improved the quality of documentation regarding sacred sites, while acknowledging the complexity and, at times, inaccessibility of such knowledge were of crucial importance. Among the challenges faced in carrying out the first phase of the research were building the capacity of the research team to ensure standardized approaches, identifying effective research methodologies, and overcoming logistical problems related to travel, limited funds and large distances. The Project Committee soon identified a number of appropriate methodologies. These were in part based on data-collection methodologies that have been used elsewhere in the Circumpolar Arctic to document traditional knowledge, customary use and ritual practices.² Basic components included questionnaires, an interview manual, an interview matrix, and a report manual. In-depth interviews with selected elders, reindeer herders, hunters and fishermen were conducted. Community meetings and focus group discussions provided broader feedback from the particular communities involved. The initial project proposal considered in-depth studies in two or three regions. Alona Yefimenko, from the Indigenous Peoples’ Secretariat, and Thomas Köhler, a Danish consultant, undertook feasibility study tours. The following questionnaire was applied:

1. What is a “sacred site?”
2. What do you know about sacred sites/sanctuaries in your area?
 - a) What kind of sacred sites do you have (common, clan, family etc.)?
 - b) Are some sites distinguished according to their spiritual energy (some good, others bad)?
 - c) Where are sacred sites generally situated? What are the explanations for selection of the sacred site location (beauty and biodiversity, landscape, presence of stones, trees of unusual form, internal feelings of the person, other reasons, or a combination of several reasons)?
 - d) Purpose of the sacred site?
 - e) Are there sacred sites on the routes of seasonal reindeer migration? Which sacred sites?
 - f) Are there any prohibitions (limitations) on visiting the sacred site (if yes, who is not allowed to visit)?
 - g) Are there sacred sites for women? How do they differ from other sites (rituals, ceremonies etc.)? Purpose of such sacred sites.

3. Do you know any sacred sites?
4. What kind of sacred sites are they (see 2a)?
5. How old are they?
6. Location of these sites? Are there *zapovedniks*³ and *zakazniks*⁴ around the sacred site? Indicate the co-ordinates of this place.
7. Why are they situated where they are?
8. Size of these sites? How do you define size?
9. What are the biological characteristics of these sites (describe the landscape, fauna and flora)? Do the sacred sites differ biologically from the surrounding areas? If so, how?
10. Why makes these sites sacred? Is it because of the biological aspect or religious beliefs of the indigenous people?
11. The purpose of these sites?
12. How often do you visit them?
13. Who visits them?
14. Any connections to legends, fairy tales, myths? What kind?
15. Are there any rituals connected to visiting the sacred site? What kind?
16. What does the sacred site mean to you (subsistence, religious meaning)?
17. Does the sacred site have biological importance with respect to biodiversity conservation?
18. Is it necessary to protect the sacred sites? Why?
19. Which is better for the protection of the sacred site – knowledge of its existence, or secrecy?
20. Do you know any measures taken by the administration of the okrug to protect such sites? Are they effective?
21. What kind of measures should be taken to protect sacred sites (local, regional, federal levels)?

In April 2001, RAIPON hosted a capacity-building and methodology-testing workshop for the regional researchers in Moscow, attended by the Project Committee members (RAIPON and IPS). During the workshop, the goals and objectives of the project were set, methodologies were tailored to the specific research conditions, basic documents were compiled, and the questionnaire was approved. The project coordinators provided document files, office equipment, and tape recorders to the regional investigators. The local associations of RAIPON had already selected community assistants for the research process: Leonid Alekseyevich Lar, Galina Pavlovna Kharuchi, and Roman Hasavovich Yando for Yamal; and Nadezhda Semenovna Kuznetzova and Larisa Georgievna Khamidulina for Kamchatka. Larisa Grigorievna Paoutianina, a resident of Khailino village, was involved as a volunteer assistant. Workshops were held to train

regional assistants in basic interview skills, note taking and general data collection. Each assistant received a file containing necessary equipment to carry out the fieldwork: an introduction to the project and project description; an inquiry form to be filled in by interviewees; a tape recorder, microphones, tapes and batteries; general instructions on how to begin, conduct and finish an interview for the purpose of the project (interview manual etc.). Researchers prepared interview schedules together with the community assistants on a weekly basis.

Project implementation

Because research and writing of the report was carried out over a relatively short time period, there was little time for primary investigations. Extensive use was made of existing literature, such as legislation and regulations on the indigenous peoples in both Yamal and Koryak Autonomous Okrugs. Literature about the local ecology, material and spiritual culture was reviewed to present the broader social, biological and historical context of the research results. This also entailed retrieving data, old maps and ancient descriptions of sacred sites in local archives and museums. In Penzhinskiy rayon (district) of Koryak Okrug a local department of land had very interesting handmade maps indicating the sacred sites and cremation places. Accounts of foreign expeditions to the areas were also analyzed when possible. In reality, only limited materials were available for the regions concerned. These included work on the sacred sites of indigenous peoples on Vaigach Island (Nenets Autonomous Okrug), on Yamal Peninsula (Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug) and in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug. Key information of relevance from this literature review is presented in the broader regional profile.

The questionnaire (see above) contained questions of both private and public character. The quality of the responses differed widely, reflecting the complexity of the issue and the difficulty of obtaining this type of information through questionnaires. The interviews represented an important complementary methodology to obtain more detailed information from the “specialists” in the communities. The community assistants, who were often indigenous residents of the same settlements, prepared for these interviews by noting facts about the history of the person concerned, as well as requesting permission for interviews. Fieldwork was undertaken between June and September 2001. Due to the limited budget and the expensive air-tickets, researchers made use of ‘alternative’ transportation opportunities, such as flights delivering goods to remote settlements and medical and mail-delivery flights. Local authorities and transportation companies extended their support to make this possible.



Yamal reindeer herders mapping sacred sites

photo: Mikhail Okotetto

The regional coordinator visited all field sites in order to undertake meetings with community leaders, elders and local authorities. RAIPON requested support from local authorities in order to facilitate the implementation of the project, which enabled detailed discussions about its goals and objectives. At a later stage, a draft of the project report was discussed at the community level to verify collected data. Finally, copies of the final report will be submitted to each community covered by the project. Regional coordinators have also sought to stimulate debate and discussion through interviews and articles on television and in newspapers.

Policy dialogue has been an integral part of the action research agenda. In both regions, meetings were undertaken with regional leaders and Duma representatives to assess the preliminary results, the broader policy environment, and the opportunities for strengthening that environment. Meetings with the regional associations of indigenous peoples were undertaken as part of this process, as well as with other stakeholders, including protected-area managers, mining companies and scientists. This enabled, for example, the emergence of strong local agendas to enact legislation and protection measures.

The danger of disclosing secret knowledge and information related to the use, protection or location of sacred sites was highlighted early in the research process. Therefore, feasibility studies were undertaken to determine the overall relevance of the studies. Furthermore, communities and individuals interviewed were carefully informed about the research pro-

cess, its goals and purpose. This issue was raised again later by the international consultant Peter Bille Larsen. He particularly pointed to the danger of revealing specific site locations to the broader public, as this might go against the general will of the communities, risk abuse of sacred knowledge, and facilitate further looting and externally-driven “ethnotourism”. Experiences from other countries, where indigenous peoples operated with tiered levels of information access, were suggested as a possible solution to this problem. It is possible to secure public recognition and commitment to the protection of sacred sites without revealing specific location. To assure security, public offices and industrial actors are expected to consult with the indigenous peoples concerned before initiating exploration or extraction activities.

Conclusions

The emphasis on indigenous participation and involvement in the research process was continuously hailed and underlined by local government officials and indigenous organizations as an innovative and positive approach. Simultaneously, the project partners recognized the accompanying challenges in terms of securing homogeneity in the approaches. To quote one of our assistants at length:

It is important for future researchers to take into account the fact that the researcher’s personality plays a significant role in filing and registering sacred sites. A male ethnographer, for example, may have easier access to sacred and religious sites being investigated (at least in the Nenets culture). Apparently, the most important precondition is obtaining permission to enter onto sacred sites, which ideally allows for filing graphic documents and fixing religious objects available on the site. No doubt it is not easy for an indigenous researcher (even a male one) brought up in traditional culture to visit a sacred site for the purpose of scientific investigation, taking pictures and making sketches. Native residents, especially elderly people, may disapprove of having such activities performed on such sites. According to traditional standards, some women may be barred from entering sacred sites, except for female sites and those open to general use. In modern conditions, the rule extends to indigenous researchers as well. Aside from restrictions on access, there are some restrictions relating to the questions a woman may ask a man, especially an elder. Naturally, elders will not reveal to a woman things she is not allowed to ask about. The distinction between “strangers” and “natives” has great significance, and applies even to indigenous researchers. Well-known

indigenous researchers are more likely to enjoy the confidence of interviewees. Local residents have always treated ethnographers with sympathy and indulgence since the latter are usually interested in “insignificant” things and quite harmless matters. Sometimes it is believed that an “alien” researcher (i.e. a stranger) can be trusted with more information than an indigenous one, especially when such an “alien” ethnographer asks intimate, delicate questions, which is absolutely impossible with an indigenous interviewer. Alien researchers may also receive deliberately incorrect information in order to frustrate the inquiry.

Galina Kharuchi, Yamal

Collecting baseline data about sacred sites remains a methodological and logistical challenge. There are no clear-cut definitions of sacred sites. Meanings and associated rituals differ from one area to another. Nevertheless, it is clear that identifying specific criteria and approaches to data collection, documentation and management remains of paramount importance.

The financial and logistical challenges facing those who wish to study the sacred sites of indigenous peoples in the North remain significant. Not all sites could be visited, and it was not always possible to receive up-to-date information concerning the sites that were documented. Knowledgeable people were not always present. These information gaps confirm the need to leave the sacred sites documentation process open, while doing everything possible to maintain accurate records about the local information providers and the type of consultation undertaken. To maximize the benefits to Arctic peoples, it is important to have a governance system in place that meaningfully engages local communities in the management of the sacred sites and gives them a meaningful voice in the protection of values important to them.

Acknowledgements

This article gives some idea of how fascinating, and at times challenging, the work was on both project development and the writing of the report. It was crucial to start the project as quickly as possible, as many of the elders who possess irreplaceable knowledge are leaving us one by one. By implementing fieldwork in the communities and among the remote reindeer herds, we satisfied the project objectives, learned how indigenous people see their own world, and found out about the role of the sacred sites. The project report was a collective product of the group of experts and individuals who contributed to it. On behalf of the Project team, I would like to thank elders and local people from the communities of the Koryak Autonomous Okrug and Yamal Autonomous Okrug, Peter Bille Larsen, an International Consultant of the project, Magdalena Muir, Executive Secretary of the CAFF Secretariat in Iceland, Christina Kincaid and Dr. Alexander King, at the

University of Aberdeen, Mikhail Todishev from RAIPON, the Danish Environmental Protection Agency (DEPA), and the staff of the Indigenous Peoples Secretariat in Copenhagen.

Notes

- 1 Severnye prostory, 1996, N3-4, p.18
- 2 Gwich'in Renewable Resource Board 1997. Nànĥ Kak Gwich'in Ginjik; Gwich'in Words About the Land. Gwich'in Graphics: Inuvik.
- 3 A *Zapovednik* is a strictly protected nature reserve under federal jurisdiction. All forms of commercial activity are prohibited. Human activity is restricted to scientific research and monitoring. Some *Zapovedniks* have small recreation zones. *Zapovedniks* are established to protect representative areas of a particular landscape or bioregion (Newell n.d.).
- 4 A *Zakaznik* is an area set aside for the preservation of smaller ecosystems and/or individual species. *Zakazniks* may be protected at the federal or regional level. Restrictions on commercial activities are sometimes only in effect during certain seasons. Categories of *Zakaznik* include zoological, botanical, landscape, geological and others. Many *Zakazniks* have been established in order to regulate commercial hunting and ensure that viable wildlife populations are maintained (Newell n.d.).

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