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Kamchatka, nature as it should be

Bears bears bears - Written by Stephanie Sears & all photos are copyright Stephanie Sears.

Gulls, cormorants, puffins, ducks swoop and race ecstatically over the calm surface of Avacha Bay between coastlines reminiscent of an Arnold Böcklin painting. Just forty minutes away by boat from Petropavlovsk, the capital of Kamchatka, is Tirhaia cove, with marine grottos coloured turquoise by the sunset, carpets of greenery under rune-like birch trees, teaming rookeries on offshore islets, 'spy-hopping' seals; This is perhaps exactly as it appeared to the Russian navigator Ivan Elagin who first prospected the bay for Vitus Bering in 1740. This far eastern Russian peninsula extends out between the western Sea of Okhotsk and the eastern Bering Sea and Pacific Ocean as if wanting to separate itself from the rest of our crowded and polluted planet.

In the last century particularly, Homo sapiens has been something of an environmental pariah but at this very moment it becomes almost possible to imagine the world without him. And yet only man on this planet can praise its beauty. Therein lies the singular dilemma that we continue to perpetuate.

Indigenous people

Modern civilization has caught up with more sustainable modes of living among Kamchatka's indigenous Chukchi, Evenes, Itelmen, Koryaks, Aleuts, and delivered its usual lot of economic temptations and/or needs. Despite the majestic setting of Petropavlovsk, the desolate-looking Soviet era buildings of the ex-URSS naval base (open to the world since the 1990s) and its rough and ready commercial front and traffic testify to the potentially disfiguring influence of human presence.

10,000 bears

Luckily, just beyond the capital's drab neighbourhoods the landscape soon reverts to nature. A human population of 321,000, mostly concentrated in the city, still allows for huge tracts of road less wilderness (11.58% of Kamchatka's total 472 0000 km2 is rigorously protected). By helicopter, the principle mode of transport beyond the very sparse road network, one discovers a lyrical landscape of smoking or lacustrine volcanic craters, tundra dappled with large patches of ice even in these very warm August temperatures, dense forest between which flow the silver ribbons of rivers, streams and cascades. Here roams the Kamchatka brown bear, seemingly as ubiquitous as pigeons in Venice and the object of constant warnings to not wander off alone, (Vladimir Mosolov, Science Director of Kronotsky Federal Nature Biosphere Reserve puts their total population at 10,000).



Here roams the Kamchatka brown bear, seemingly as ubiquitous as pigeons in Venice and the object of constant warnings to not wander off alone. Copyright Stephanie Sears.



Salmon

In the peninsula's unpolluted rivers, from which I drink regularly with a sense of immense privilege, swims the other star of Kamchatka's rich biodiversity, the wild north pacific salmon. Some ten species come here to spawn (the Chum, Coho, Pink), so numerous are they that while sitting in a crystalline stream to escape the equally omnipresent mosquito, I catch a large specimen, bare-handed, as he

Poaching

One far more anxious question, however, comes to mind: for how much longer will this Eden last? Poaching has reared its ugly head and over-hunting now endangers wild reindeer and bighorn sheep. Despite legal bear hunting outside of reserves

from August 20 to December 18, illegal hunting persists for meat, for the supposed medicinal virtues of gall bladders and for head, skin and paw trophies (some 400 to 500 bears are poached every year). And notwithstanding an open fishing season from June to November outside of protected areas, salmon poaching - mainly for the highly commercial red roe - is, according to V. Mosolov, rampant across the peninsula.

The answer to my question lies somewhere within the grasp of environmental organizations and their ability to be heard by federal and regional governments, of legislation and implementation, but most of all perhaps, it depends on whether or not regional public opinion will see its best economic interests in giving priority to renewable resources. If so, the proper management of the valuable natural assets to bound the head Kamchatka's economy in the environmentally and sustainably sound direction: geothermal energy and uncontaminated sea and fresh water.

Electricity provided by geothermal energy is the way to go here, declares a visiting scientist from Washington State who had just returned from the geothermal station of Vorkne Mutnovsky in the south of the peninsula. "Geothermal energy is the right choice", confirms Anatoly Dekshstein, Marine program coordinator at WWF Kamchatka and Vadim Kirichenko, engineer at the Kamchatka League of Independent experts, an environmental NGO. In fact, Kamchatka's landscape speaks for itself. It is riddled with volcanoes, thirty of which are active; the ground steams, bubbles and erupts with tectonic activity of which the famous Geyser Valley is but tourism's most popular showcase. The main disadvantage to geothermal energy is the initial high cost to install a station (drilling may reach down to 2300 meters). Geothermal technology is also still at an early stage and a station takes longer to build than a natural gas facility. However, unlike carbon-based energy, it produces a constant



Tirhaia cove has marine grottos coloured turquoise by the sunset, carpets of greenery under rune-like birch trees, teaming rookeries on offshore islets, 'spy-hopping' seals. Credit Stephanie Sears

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and renewable energy source which is also far less polluting, and once in swing it practically gives a free ride, without the high oil and gas operating costs and the need for constant new drilling to maintain a steady output.

For the time being two geothermal stations operate on Kamchatka, drawing energy from Mutnovsky volcano: Verkhne-Mutnovsky, operative since 1999 and Mutnovsky geo station, since 2002.

Floating nuclear plant

Competition is steep to provide energy to a region that suffered several severe heating crises from reduced coal subsidies. A floating nuclear plant to be in place by 2013 at Krasheninnikov Bay near the town of Vilyuchinsk (not far from Mutnovsky's geothermal station) seems to raise little public enthusiasm, not surprisingly, in an area that experiences daily seismic tremors.

However, it is pressure exercised by closely interconnected high level corporate and government interests to use oil and gas as main sources of energy that may slow down the development of geothermal stations the most. The first Sobolevo-Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky pipeline crosses Kamchatka from the Okhotsk seacoast to Petropavlovsk through a large portion of wild and protected areas. Begun in 2000, the construction was interrupted in 2002 then continued by Gazprom and finished in 2010. Much of the pipeline is still inactive yet its construction has stripped off a band of forest and undergrowth of wild iris and tiger lily that is evident near the scenic area of Vachkazets in a first assault on nature's previously unspoiled beauty.



By boat the lake's coastline appears dotted with bears. At a farther beach a regular convention awaits us: twenty of them are sleeping, sitting, standing on hind-legs. Five meters away from us, one individual is scouting underwater for salmon. More keep coming out of the woods. They seem indifferent to our presence, perhaps because we are few and silent enough to be either invisible to them or to fit harmoniously into the landscape. Credit Stephanie Sears.

Clean water

Clean water, the second fundamental asset depends greatly on how much more exploration and exploitation of oil and gas will occur, particularly in and around the Sea of Okhotsk which Anatoly Dekhstein describes as a major fish nursery and an area supplying close to 40% of all annual Russian fishing. Subject to frequent and violent storms, the sea of Okhotsk would be highly vulnerable to oil spills and drilling-derived mud waste contamination, would subsequently break the environmental backbone of Kamchatka since the diet of bear and of a number of other animal species depends on plentiful salmon. Finally, commercial fishing, which provides direct employment to 5% of the Kamchatka population and indirectly supports a larger portion of the work force, (some 170 000 in total) would suffer considerably from depleted fishery resources.

Mining & pollution

Rising prices in precious ores constitute another menace as they are likely to trigger a rapid spread of mining across the peninsula. Anton Ulatov, researcher at the Kamchatka

Research Institute of Fisheries and Oceanography says that, without proper regulation and strict control, mining will be a major source of environmental deterioration. Though the biologist thinks that most rivers in Kamchatka will remain clear for the next five years (99% of Kamchatka's fresh water remains unpolluted today) he has good reason to believe that the situation will deteriorate after that period. In the north of the peninsula, inhabited mainly by Koryak and Itelmen, the Vyvenka River, situated thirty kilometres from a platinum mine opened in 1993, continues to be contaminated by it to this day. Five years ago the chemical plant of Aginskoye that serves to extract silver and gold from the rock matrix also caused pollution when toxic waste seeped to the damp bedrock through a damaged tailings dump liner. The effects of this long-term contamination on salmon have yet to be evaluated.

Down-hearted like other environmental professionals I met in Kamchatka, Anton recounts how his report on these two sites, illustrated by photographic evidence in the case of Aginskoye, resulted in his being banned from visiting either location again. The same report sent in 2007 to the Federal Service for Supervision of Natural Resources Usage (Rozprirrodnadzor) has until today received in return but lip service.

With even greater pessimism Anatoly Dekhstein and Vadim Kirichenko relate how other conservation petitions are likewise sucked into a bureaucratic vacuum marked by a lack of eagerness to meet with ecologists and to take action. Meanwhile, favouritism and the absence or easing of regulations undermine environmental interests and benefit large financial consortiums like Renova whose chief executive is owner of the mine near Vyvenka River and the Aginskoye chemical plant. The wealth of precious ore, sulphur and nickel present all over the territory will, indicates Anatoly, inevitably lead to the industrialization and, in such a context, to the probable devastation of wild areas.

Lack of legislation and control having already wreaked havoc in similar situations elsewhere in the world, one may wonder why a government would willfully permit the same mistakes to be repeated on its own territory. One can only hope that the cynicism so vigorously expressed by Anatoly and Vadim, is exaggerated. How, otherwise, would an undoubtedly lucrative ecotourism industry hold a chance against a background of nepotism and environmental negligence?

Ecotourism

For now Kamchatka's ecotourism is attractively home-spun and takes little room, receiving few visitors compared to the peninsula's American alter ego Alaska: some five thousand visitors a year for two million or so to Alaska. For local environmentalists, the surrounding nature still predominantly free of human population is a panacea for a sustainable economy based in good part on ecotourism. Consequently, there is talk about the need to put more money into tourism infrastructure to attract more visitors. One million a year are wanted.

To one who has delighted in this sovereign nature the prospect seems like a double-edged sword and a possible menace of another sort. Take, for example, my visit to Kourilskoe Lake after an hour and twenty-minute helicopter ride from Petropavlovsk with thirteen other people. The small ranger campsite surrounded by an electric wire fence comprises three or four modest wood buildings used by three rangers, a few volunteers and their tents, a couple of small motorboats to survey the lake and a bridge-like structure to count the millions of sockeye salmon that come to spawn in the lake and surrounding streams.

No intrusive human imprint in the shape of park billboards, garbage cans, boisterous nature presentations by the rangers, or knickknacks to buy. All is quiet, real and fascinating. Soon after our landing a bear and her three cubs pass along the wire. Shortly afterwards we go over to their side of it and spontaneously follow the family along the beach in Indian file.

Bears bears bears

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Would this be possible with larger groups? More frequent helicopters, any added infrastructure and systematization to what there is now will only diminish the magic of this encounter between people and the wild.

The first, but, thankfully, still easily remedied, signs of degradation near Kosveronika waterfall have already appeared. Reached by a four hour car ride and some walking, the wilderness here too is enchanting, but more accessible. A small picnic area by a stream has occasioned rather inconsistent and careless nature-lovers to leave behind a pair of socks, candy bar wrap, a few plastic bags. The beauty of the place looks already a bit frayed.

Fragile

Sadly, ecotourism does not guarantee the preservation of that wonderful but fragile state of grace in which nature presents itself to us on its own terms. To assure such a quality of conservation would require an exemplary collaboration between government, industry, advocates of ecotourism and to an extent, tourists themselves, based on an acute sense of the peninsula's most irreplaceable assets and a will to advantage nature's outstanding quality over commercial interests when necessary.

As a visitor, one is therefore inclined to suggest keeping a light and vigilant hand in the development of tourist infrastructures. A more tame Kamchatka conditioned by a well oiled but invasive tourist industry is not what eco-travellers will come out for. They will come to see nature as it should be and as they rarely see it elsewhere.

Stephanie.V.Sears © 2012

