

1 of 1 DOCUMENT

IPS-Inter Press Service

August 4, 2000, Friday

## ENVIRONMENT-RUSSIA: **PIPELINE COULD RUIN SIBERIAN PLATEAU**

**BYLINE:** By Danielle Knight

**LENGTH:** 1011 words

**DATELINE:** KHABAROVSK, Russia, Aug. 4

A proposed natural gas pipeline and accompanying road from southern Siberia to China would destroy the ecology of a plateau that is internationally recognized for its abundance of rare and endangered species, warn environmentalists meeting here this week.

Known as the Ukok Plateau, this area near the intersection of Mongolia, China, Russia and Kazakhstan provides a critical habitat for one of the least studied predators in the world, the snow leopard, and many other endangered species including the argali mountain sheep, the black stork and the steppe eagle.

The plateau is one of several areas that make up the "Golden Mountains of Altai" UNESCO World Heritage Site created in 1998.

"Building a road and pipeline in this region will drastically change a region held sacred by indigenous peoples and destroy critical habitat for endangered and rare species," says Alexander Yumakaev, with the Fund for 21st Century Altai, an environmental advocacy group based in Barnaul.

He says the road will open up large areas to mining, poaching and logging, both legal and illegal.

Yumakaev is here in the Russian Far East city of Khabarovsk, this week along with about 30 other Russian and international environmentalists to discuss the ecological impact of infrastructure projects, logging and industrial development in Siberia and the Russian Far East.

While by law the plateau is protected from industrial development as a "Quiet Zone," Yumakaev says the elevated status of the region is being completely ignored by Russian officials.

In March 2000, an association of government leaders in Altai, known as the "Siberian Accord," voted to approve the road and gas project. Russian President Vladimir Putin enthusiastically supports the proposal which is being put forward as critically important to the economic development of Siberia.

Russian scientists and the Fund for 21st Century Altai immediately condemned the announcement. They say that the region is home to over 20 endangered animal species, like the snow leopard.

Snow leopards are endangered throughout their entire range in the high mountains of central Eurasia. Hunted for their bones and fur and encroached upon by the expansion of human settlements and infrastructure, wild snow leopards are estimated to number between 4,000 and 7,000.

Central Asian researchers regard the snow leopard as an "indicator species" or one that indicates the general health of a particular environment. Since the large cat lives at the top of the food chain, if there are abundant and healthy snow leopards in an area, the entire ecosystem is also probably healthy, say scientists.

Besides endangered wildlife, the plateau also contains one of the highest concentrations of endemic plants in Russia -- at least 212 varieties, according to Dave Martin, who coordinates the Siberia program of the California-based Pacific Environment and Resources Center (PERC).

The plateau is located in the republic of Altai which has a population of 200,000. Nearly half the population is made up of Altai and other indigenous peoples, who consider the Ukok Plateau sacred.

The area has been inhabited for more than 300,000 years, being the crossroads for migrations of Turkic, Mongolian and Kazakh peoples. Burial mounds, petroglyphs and stone carvings date back thousands of years. Archaeological remains are being studied, especially since the discovery of a mummified Scythian "princess" in 1996.

The landscape is covered with sacred healing springs, and the Republic is home to sacred Mt. Belukha, the highest peak in Siberia and headwaters of the Katun River.

Yumakaev argues that the road and pipeline project will incur enormous costs in both construction and maintenance since it would go through highland marshes, tundra, permafrost areas, mountain passes and elevations of up to 2,600 meters.

"This is hardly an economically sound project," he says. "It will forever employ the road building companies."

The Fund for 21st Century Altai and international environmental groups, including PERC and the Massachusetts-based Sacred Earth Network, are urging local authorities to instead build the pipeline along an existing road that goes from the Altai capital of Gorno Altaisk to the village of Tashanta on the Mongolian Border.

The existing route continues into Mongolia and could be routed to go into China, they argue.

"Improving this road would be a much wiser choice economically and ecologically," says Martin with PERC.

But Yumakaev says that local authorities are shunning this proposal and want to work only with China, not with Mongolia.

Russian law requires that an environmental impact assessment (EIA) of the project be completed by federal authorities before construction begins. "But I doubt that the study will influence the project since the politicians have already stated their support," says Yumakaev.

Russian law also makes provisions for a public EIA that is conducted prior to the federal process. This public review is organized by citizens groups and gives them access to all project documents and feasibility studies.

But Yumakaev says since May when President Putin abolished two key federal environmental agencies, the State Committee on Ecology and the Forest Service, the procedure for the public EIA has become unclear.

"This used to be done in consultation with the State Committee on Ecology, so now we don't know who we will be working with or how," he says.

The Fund for 21st Century Altai is one of more than 50 Russian environmental groups that are protesting Putin's decree which transferred the responsibilities of these two environmental agencies to the Ministry of Natural Resources that has a mandate to exploit, not protect, resources.

Environmentalists throughout Russia are currently trying to obtain enough signatures from Russian citizens to force

ENVIRONMENT-RUSSIA: PIPELINE COULD RUIN SIBERIAN PLATEAU IPS-Inter Press Service August 4,  
2000, Friday

a nationwide referendum so that the whole country can vote on whether or not these agencies should be re-established.

**LOAD-DATE:** August 5, 2000

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

Copyright 2000 IPS-Inter Press Service/Global Information Network