Environmental Security of the Russian Far East: Domestic, Transnational and Regional Dimensions

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Abstract

This article examines the environmental issues of the Russian Far East (Pacific Russia) in the context of Northeast Asia. The author deals with problems such as military-related and nuclear factors of environmental security, excessive exploitation of forests and marine biological resources, the ecological risks of big energy projects, environmental conditions in urban areas and trans-border aspects of environmental security. Political, social and economic factors affecting environmental decision-making in the Russian Far East are analyzed.

Keywords: environmental security, the Russian Far East, Northeast Asia, multilateral cooperation.

Introduction

The Russian Far East,[2] with its territory of 6.63 million sq km (roughly two-thirds the size of the United States), plays a vital role in Northeast Asia's environmental security. This Pacific area of Russia is important in mitigating climate change, maintaining biological diversity, and providing a reservoir of natural resources for future generations. It also serves as an example of how domestic, transnational and regional factors affect an environmental situation.

The Far East has always been viewed by the Russian government as the country's strategically and militarily crucial Pacific bulwark. Consequently, many military facilities and installations, some of them environmentally hazardous, are concentrated in the region. The Far East has traditionally functioned as a storehouse of natural resources for the Russian state. The region's main natural riches include fish and other seafood, timber, and nonferrous metal deposits. In recent years, exploitation of hydrocarbon energy resources, particularly oil and gas on the Sakhalin Island shelf, has increased. Moreover, major oil and gas pipelines running through the Far Eastern territories are now under construction.

The impact of transnational and trans-border factors on the ecology of the Russian Far East is considerable. The region shares borders with the People's Republic of China, North Korea, and Japan, each of which affect the environment of the Russian Far East through their economic activities. Furthermore, North Korea poses a potential threat because of its nuclear ambitions, which, in the worst-case scenario, could lead to

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[2] The Russian Far East includes the Pacific territories of Russia and some territories of eastern Siberia, east of Lake Baikal.

violent armed conflict or the use of weapons of mass destruction, spelling environmental disaster.

Finally, it is necessary to take into account the hierarchy of priorities in political and economic decision making in Russia. Various high-level legislative and executive acts declare environmental protection as one of the main interests of public policy in Russia.[3] However, in reality environmental protection has never been a top priority of Russian government policy. There are a number of reasons for this. The states generally begin to deal with environmental issues after they enter a post-industrial stage in their socio-economic development, that is, when they gain sufficient financial and technological resources necessary for effective green policies. One can refer to Japan and rich Western countries as an example. If a nation is not post-industrial and wealthy, it is difficult to expect it to pursue a vigorous (and costly) green policy, unless the environmental problems are so dire that they immediately threaten the national well-being, people's health and economic growth. This is certainly the case with China, which has to act on the environmental front, even though it is not a rich developed country by all accounts.

Russia's relative indifference with regard to ecological concerns is also caused by the structure of its political culture, which is state-centric. The core value has always been the survival and physical strength of the Russian State as a totality rather than the quality of life of its citizens as individuals. Thus the main threats are the ones which affect the territorial integrity of the State, its political sovereignty and its military might. Environmental issues have been, and continue to be, viewed as something less serious, largely linked to human, as opposed to State, security. Therefore they get less attention.

On top of that, the central government in Moscow has traditionally cared less about ecological concerns in the distant and thinly populated Far East compared to Russia's core western regions, especially since the Pacific coast is still viewed by some as a kind of natural resource–rich appendage rather than a genuine part of the country.

Military Aspects of Environmental Security

Nuclear issues

Except for the Bilibino power plant in Chukotka Peninsula, the major nuclear facilities in the Russian Far East have military significance. These include holding strategic and tactical nuclear weapons, maintaining active-duty and decommissioned nuclear submarines, and storing submarine-spent nuclear fuel materials. The presence of such installations and facilities causes an increased risk of nuclear accidents and leaks. The most serious accident of such a kind happened in 1985 in Chazhma Bay of Primorskiy Krai (Maritime Province), not far from the city of Nakhodka. The submarine's active reactor exploded during refueling. Ten people were killed and more than 260 people were exposed to radiation. The bay and nearby shores were contaminated with radioactive substances.

One of the region's most serious problems is the Pacific Fleet's decommissioned nuclear submarines. The USSR had some capacity to handle decommissioned submarines, which were removed from active service under the planned schedule. However, after the Soviet collapse, Russia inherited an excess of submarines, which the crisis-stricken national

[3] See, for example, *The National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation*, signed by President Dmitriy Medveded in May 2009: available at http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/99.html (in Russian, accessed 6 August 2009).

economy could not afford to maintain. Furthermore, international agreements obliged Russia to reduce its strategic nuclear forces, leading to a large-scale decommissioning of the Russian Navy's submarines, including those based in the Far East.

According to official Russian sources, the radio-ecological situation along the Pacific coast of Russia can be described as normal. Radioactive contamination of the environment, accumulated during the course of the lengthy nuclear operation of the Russian Pacific fleet, has not spread beyond administrative borders of the Pacific Fleet units, except for the aforementioned Chazhma Bay accident. However, experts point out that the potential for an accident may be significant because of the technological difficulty of dismantling nuclear submarines (Press release 2002).

The problems of handling decommissioned submarines grew especially acute in the mid-1990s. By 1996, dismantlement work halted because of the lack of necessary technical equipment for submarine cutting and defueling. Previously used floating repair and maintenance facilities were dilapidated and no longer functioned, and Russia lacked adequate financial resources to fund the dismantlement. International cooperation was the only way to solve these problems. Thanks to US aid given under the Cooperative Threat Reduction program, modernization of the existing Pacific Fleet submarine dismantlement infrastructure began. In 1999, Russia and the United States signed a contract that created an entirely new system for unloading spent nuclear fuel.

Japan also gave Russia a significant amount of aid for safe submarine dismantlement. Whereas the United States was mostly concerned with the dismantlement of strategic nuclear submarines capable of carrying intercontinental ballistic missiles and posing potential military threat, Japan, because of its proximity to the Russian Pacific Fleet bases and nuclear facilities, was more anxious about environmental threats than strategic ones. For example, Japan allocated 36 million USD for the construction of a floating facility for liquid radioactive waste reprocessing. The Japanese were supportive of this facility because low-level liquid radioactive waste had been released into the Sea of Japan without any treatment before this facility came into operation.[4]

Over the past decade, most of the 75 decommissioned nuclear submarines in the Russian Far East have been dismantled. As of 2009, 10 submarines are left that await dismantlement. It is expected that the task will be completed by 2010. Although Russia itself has provided the bulk of the funding and could solve this problem on its own, budget constraints meant the process might be lengthy. International aid helped speed it up. The biggest donors have been Japan, the US and Canada, while Australia, New Zealand and the Republic of Korea made financial contributions as well. The international funding goes to financing the dismantlement activities as well as building infrastructure to treat and secure waste from the decommissioned and dismantled subs.

Non-nuclear military-related environmental hazards

Numerous non-nuclear military facilities and installations scattered over the region also pose serious environmental threats. Submarine dismantlement, radioactive waste reprocessing, and other nuclear aspects of environmental security have received attention and funding from the Russian and foreign governments, but the environmental hazards emanating from more conventional arsenals in the Far East are viewed as somewhat less important. Although conventional weapons are not perceived as strategic threats in

[4] For more details, see: Chuen C and T. Troyakova. 2001. *The Complex Politics of Foreign Assistance: Building the Landysh in the Russian Far East.* The Nonproliferation Review 8, No. 2: 134–149.

military and political terms, the environmental risks they generate may be even more menacing than their nuclear counterparts.

Risks from conventional sources have drastically increased since the early 1990s, when the army and navy units in the Russian Far East began undergoing a considerable reduction. As part of this process, less and less money was allocated for the maintenance of military infrastructure, including arsenals containing numerous piles of weapons accumulated during Soviet times. This, along with a lack of central control and management, and a reduction in the numbers of the Russian armed forces, has contributed to the deterioration of morale and discipline among servicemen. As a result, there has been a considerable rise in military-related accidents, dangerously affecting the security of people and the environment. For example, in 1992 a conflagration broke out on the grounds of the Pacific Fleet's ordnance arsenal in Vladivostok. The equivalent of 1,300 railway cars of artillery shells exploded. Shell splinters struck nearby apartment buildings, breaking windows and slicing through people's homes. One person was killed and six people were wounded. Unexploded shells were scattered all over the neighborhood. In 1994, a Pacific Fleet air force arsenal exploded at Novonezhino village, not far from Vladivostok. The Pacific Fleet commander was sacked in the wake of the accident. However, the situation did not improve and the accidental explosion of military arsenals continued. In July 2003, another of the Pacific Fleet's arsenal exploded in a rural suburb of Vladivostok, injuring twenty-seven people. In October 2005, a Pacific Fleet arsenal that stored decommissioned munitions near the city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky in Kamchatka exploded. More than seven thousand local residents were evacuated (Rian Online 2005). When such accidents are investigated, the military usually claim that an acute lack of funding makes it difficult to properly maintain arsenals and dispose of old weapons and chemicals.

Grave environmental threats also emanate from military stocks of various chemicals. For instance, as the local press reported in 2000, a Pacific Fleet storage facility in Vladivostok contained 280 tons of highly toxic missile fuel. The old tanks were corroding and the missile fuel was gradually evaporating. According to experts, if there had been a major leak from the storage facility, more than one million Primorsky Krai residents could have died (Sablin 2000: 5). In October 2003, another shocking accident was reported at the Barsovy wildlife reservation south of Vladivostok. This unique reservation is a habitat for the last thirty Far Eastern leopards on earth and a number of other rare animals. It was also home to an army storage facility containing napalm and other toxic chemicals. The military abandoned the facility and it was left unguarded. A group of local residents who made their living gathering scrap metal for trade entered the storage ground and emptied approximately 800 metal drums of chemicals onto the ground. These chemicals ignited, which badly damaged 385,000 square meters of the reservation's territory (*Eho-DV* 2003).

Fuel contamination accidents from the navy and army units also occur, including major ones. In September 2005, forty-three tons of fuel oil from the Pacific Fleet's tanks in Vladivostok was officially reported to have leaked into the sea, contaminating the city's beaches and coastal waters.[5] Minor leaks are reported almost every year in Vladivostok and other Pacific Fleet bases. In July 2009, an oil slick emerged in one of the city's bays where the warships were conducting exercises in preparation for the naval parade.

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[5] According to some unofficial estimates, as much as 300 tons of oil leaked into the sea.

Environmental Problems of Marine Biological Resources and Forest Exploitation

Exploitation of the sea and forest's biological resources is one of the mainstays of the Russian Far East's economy. However, overexploitation of these resources leads to depletion, reduction of biological diversity, and the total extinction of a number of unique species. Many of the problems connected with fishing grew especially acute after the Soviet Union collapsed and effective government control over the fishing industry ended. It became very hard to verify Russian and foreign fishing companies' compliance with environmentally justified quotas, especially as fishery supervisory authorities were (and remain) notorious for rampant corruption. Fishing enterprises in the Russian Far East were quickly privatized in the 1990s, often with gross violations of the law. The structural composition of the fishery catch also changed. Priority shifted to the exploitation of species such as sea urchins, crabs, and other sea animals that could be sold at high prices in foreign markets, producing huge profits. Excessive fishing beyond legal quotas and illegal sales of the catches at sea and at foreign ports became common. As many formerly state-run fishing enterprises closed down, largely because of mismanagement and lack of investment, rising unemployment and deteriorating economic conditions resulted in widespread offshore poaching among local populations.

High demand for sea urchins, Kamchatka crabs, shellfish, jellyfish, clam and, particularly, trepang in East Asian countries caused large-scale poaching by both coastal populations and fishing firms. Exhaustion has been happening so quickly that these formerly prevalent Far Eastern species are becoming rare. Primorskiy Krai's waters (in the south of the Russian Far East) suffer the most from poaching of invertebrate sea animals, followed by the waters surrounding the South Kuril Islands and Sakhalin. Illicit fishing and poaching activities are common, even in state-guarded reservations. The amount of illegally procured salmon caviar has also drastically increased.

The population of the Kamchatka crab has been hit particularly hard. Further exploitation threatens its very existence. Illegal exploitation of the trepang reduced its population in the Russian Far East to critical levels. The gray sea urchin is also endangered. The numbers of *nerka* (sockeye salmon) off eastern Kamchatka are declining and have already reached dangerously low levels. The Kamchatka populations of other salmon-like species, such as *kizhuch* and *chavycha* have also declined.[6] Illegal catches in the Russian Far East are far bigger than the officially and environmentally approved quotas. In 2007, for instance, according to the Federal Fishing Agency, 500,000 tons of salmon species were actually caught in Russia's Pacific waters, whereas the quota was just 360,000 tons. The amount of sea urchin catch exceeded the environmental quota by six times (Yarmoshevich 2008).

The main destinations for illegal fish exports are Japan, China and South Korea. Russian officials complain that the governments of these countries are reluctant to effectively cooperate with Russia on combating the illegal fish trade, even though they are aware that much of the fish and seafood their companies are buying is caught in Russian waters illegally. For example, even though crab fishing was officially banned in Russia, Japanese traders in Hokkaido continued to purchase the crab originating from Russian waters.[7] Japan, Korea and China do not apparently want to damage their industries, which greatly depend on Russia's marine resources.

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[6] Personal interviews with environmental and law enforcement analysts, October 2005: Vladivostok.

[7] Interview with a Vladivostok-based fishing company manager. Vladivostok, July 2009.

The degradation of the Far Eastern forests also causes severe environmental problems. The state authorities are unable to exercise effective control over the timber business, which is characterized by major violations of environmental and fiscal regulations. Illegal timber felling and the cutting of tree species that are protected by law are common. The volume of timber cut far exceeds officially authorized limits. Large amounts of timber are felled without official permission or licenses. According to WWF estimates, illicit logging constitutes approximately 40 percent of the total volume of timber cut in the Russian Far East. According to the Federal Forestry Authority, 2,500 violations of environmental regulations, mainly illicit felling, were reported in the Russian Far East in 2008 (Wood Online 2008).

Seeking higher profits, timber businesses often cut the most valuable tree species, leaving behind less valuable fallen timber. According to some estimates, from 25 percent to 50 percent of cut timber is left rotting. Environmental and safety violations often lead to fires ravaging vast tracts of woodland. In some cases, forests are set on fire intentionally to conceal illicit logging.[8] Illegal and environmentally harmful timber cutting activities are mainly driven by high demand from foreign markets, above all China. The illegal timber business generates huge profits, which are then shared with corrupt officials.

Environmental Security and Energy Projects in the Russian Far East

Energy projects related to oil and gas extraction and transportation have also become major factors impacting the ecology of the Russian Far East. The most important of these are the development of the Sakhalin Shelf's oil and gas resources and the construction of an oil pipeline from Eastern Siberia. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, international oil companies were allowed to exploit offshore oil deposits in the Russian Far East, particularly off eastern Sakhalin in the Sea of Okhotsk.

In 1999, under the Sakhalin-2 offshore oil project operated by Sakhalin Energy consortium, the industrial extraction of oil started. The Molikpak platform, after being used in the Canadian Arctic waters, was installed in Piltun Bay. Thus far, there have been no major accidents or disasters associated with Sakhalin oil and gas projects. Yet some conservationists, along with indigenous peoples' organizations and local communities' municipal governments, continue to insist that the environmental risks are extremely high. The Sea of Okhotsk is one of the world's most biologically productive seas. The waters near northeastern Sakhalin provide a habitat for the endangered western gray whale. Given the difficult weather conditions in the Sea of Okhotsk, there is the potential for a large oil spill, which can be caused by damaged or overturned tankers or disruptions in oil-pumping equipment. The damage to fisheries, marine mammals, and seabirds is potentially enormous. Environmental activists and the Sakhalin indigenous peoples staged several actions of protest, including blockading oil and gas infrastructure facilities on northern Sakhalin.

In 2006, the Russian government charged Sakhalin Energy with gross violations of environmental laws. The authorities in Moscow even went so far as to threaten Sakhalin Energy with criminal prosecution and annulling its operation license. In the wake of these much publicized accusations, in December 2006, the Sakhalin Energy shareholders, Royal Dutch Shell, Mitsui and Mitsubishi, agreed to sell a majority stake to Russia's

[8] Interview with an environmental protection officer, September 2006: Vladivostok.

government-owned Gazprom. This led some analysts to the conclusion that environment-related charges were just a trick to wrest control of a lucrative business from the foreign companies. One may see this case as an illustration of a highly selective enforcement of environmental rules in Russia.

Environmentalists are also alarmed by the project of a grand pipeline from eastern Siberia to the Russian Pacific coast, which is now being implemented by the company Transneft.[9] They believe the Eastern Siberia–Pacific Ocean (Eastern pipeline) project, which is to pipe 80 million tons of oil to Asia Pacific markets annually, does not take into account all ecological hazards. Environmental experts point out that the territories that the 4770 km long pipeline would cross have a complicated geological structure and rugged terrain, including permafrost and highly seismic areas. There are numerous mountain ridges, rivers, and lakes on the pipeline route. In this respect, the engineering difficulties of the construction are similar to those of the Trans-Alaska pipeline. Environmentalists were especially alarmed that the Eastern pipeline would run in immediate proximity to Lake Baikal, the world's largest freshwater reservoir and a unique natural treasure.

There was also a controversy over the terminal point of the pipeline. Transneft insisted that Perevoznaya Bay, not far from Vladivostok and just near the Russian-Korean border, is the best place for the terminal site. However, many environmental groups and experts argued that this option involved high ecological risks. Environmentalists were especially worried that the terminal construction and operation would inevitably damage unique Perevoznaya Bay's marine and littoral ecosystems and the larger Bay of Peter the Great, where Russia's only preserved marine habitat is situated. It could also endanger the habitat of the rare Far Eastern leopards. Environmentalists claimed that they did not reject the pipeline, but wanted its planners to be more responsive to ecological concerns.

Vigorous campaigning by environmental groups appears to have made some impact on the pipeline planners, who introduced corrections to the initial project. In particular, the pipeline route was moved north, further from the Lake Baikal, thus reducing dangers for its unique ecosystem.[10] In addition the final point of the pipeline, which included an oil terminal, was transferred from Perevoznaya Bay to the less vulnerable Koz'mino Bay, near the city of Nakhodka.

Environmental Issues in Urban Areas of the Russian Far East

Approximately three-fourths of the Russian Far East's population lives in cities. Vladivostok, the largest city of the Russian Far East with a population of around 700,000, exemplifies the environmental problems confronting the urban areas of the region. One of the most important environmental concerns in Vladivostok is the absence of sewage treatment facilities. More than 90 percent of sewage goes into the sea without treatment, polluting the coastal waters. Moreover, waste from ships and port facilities is often dumped straight into the sea. According to environmental officials, 85 percent of the water area of the Golden Horn Bay, the main Vladivostok harbor, is biologically dead (Konnov 2003: 3). Only two beaches in Vladivostok are officially approved by sanitary authorities for

[9] Transneft is a state-owned monopoly operating all long-distance pipelines in Russia via which oil is exported to other countries.

[10] The decision was finally made after President Vladimir Putin personally intervened and ordered to shift the pipeline away from Baikal. See, for example, Krashakov Alexei and Sergey Kez. 2006. "Ekologi dobilis' svoyego," *Nezavisimaya gazeta.* 4 April.

bathing. They warn that swimming at other city beaches may be harmful to health because of excessive water contamination. The construction of the sewage treatment installations in Vladivostok only started in 2009. However, this welcome move was motivated by the political necessity to improve the city's image ahead of the APEC summit, which is to take place in Vladivostok in 2012, rather than by environmental considerations *per se*.

The Russian Far East also faces a problem with urban solid waste disposal. The garbage reprocessing plant in Vladivostok is capable of reprocessing only a fraction of the city's rubbish. The rest is transported to the smoking dump site, which sits on the seashore in proximity to the city. Just as with the sewage treatment case, the Russian government earmarked the money to relocate the landfill and build modern recycling installations in Vladivostok. Many other Far Eastern cities, which are not so lucky to host a major international event, will continue to dispose of their waste by just dumping it in the suburban areas.

Transnational Threats to Environmental Security

As a border region, the Russian Far East experiences significant pressure from transnational environmental factors. The most serious external threat to the ecology of the Far East is posed by China's explosive economic growth and overpopulation. While China itself has been seriously suffering from increasing economic activity, it has also inflicted significant environmental damage on the adjacent territories of Russia, as well as other Northeast Asian countries.

One of the most urgent problems is the pollution of trans-border rivers and lakes with industrial and communal waste generated in China, where waste treatment systems are virtually nonexistent. For example, in the Amur and Ussury river basins in Northeast China, there are scores of oil refineries, chemical and pulp factories, including Asia's biggest pulp and paper mill. None of them have proper waste reprocessing facilities (Ishaev 2006). This makes Russian border territories exposed to environmental accidents in China. The biggest one so far happened in November 2005, when over 100 tons of highly toxic benzole leaked from a chemical plant in the Chinese city of Tzilin into the Songhua River, which is the largest tributary of Amur, the great river shared by Russia and China. The toxic chemicals reached Russian towns and cities downstream threatening their water supplies.

Largely due to industrial and sewage pollution from the Chinese side, the environmental condition of Amur, as well as other trans-border rivers and lakes, is alarming. In the wake of the benzole accident in 2005, China has taken a number of steps to tackle the problem. In particular, Beijing allocated nearly USD$2 billion to deal with the pollution of the Songhua River.[11] Moreover, China agreed to set up a joint governmental commission with Russia to monitor the environmental condition of trans-border rivers and lakes and their basins. Hopefully, it will help remedy the situation, although so far there has been no visible improvement.

The China factor also contributes to the ongoing deforestation of the Far Eastern territories. China's Heilongjiang Province, which borders Primorsky Krai, saw a five-fold reduction of forest area over the past century (Valaam 2002). A similar process is currently taking place in Primorskiy Krai and other Far Eastern territories. The ban on

[11] See http://eco.rian.ru/nature/20081015/153195654.html (15 October 2008).

timber cutting in China has resulted in the transfer of Chinese timber business activities to the Russian Far East. Chinese dealers are willing to buy large amounts of timber from across the border and pay in cash. Depredation of forest resources is especially rampant in those rural Far Eastern areas, which are struggling with economic depression. For many local residents, illegal timber cutting has become the easiest way to earn a living.

Demand from voracious Chinese markets also threatens endangered wildlife species. The lion's share of the poachers' prey from the Russian Far East is smuggled to China.[12] These illegal wildlife exports include species like tigers, leopards, bears, deer, fur animals, pheasants, turtles, frogs, and their parts and derivatives. Marine and river species also fall prey to transnational poachers. Chinese fishermen use environmentally dangerous methods like chemicals, explosions, and electric shock, which do irreparable harm to biological resources.

Another cause for concern is the agricultural activities of Chinese farmers who lease land in the Russian Far East for growing rice and other crops. Russian rural residents are often reluctant to toil on their land, seeking higher pay and more profitable business, while Chinese laborers are willing to work even in harsh conditions and for modest money. That comes with a cost, however, as the Chinese agricultural firms are seeking to maximize their returns, often using excessive amounts of fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides and other chemicals. Such practices harm the soil and contaminate the ecosystems of rivers and lakes (Brazhina 2009).

Conclusion

Despite a broad range of worrisome problems, it would be something of a misnomer to characterize the state of the environment in the Russian Far East as utterly dire or disastrous. Most areas of Pacific Russia can boast relatively unaffected or even pristine ecosystems.[13] However, this is mainly due to their sparse population and low levels of economic activity, rather than effective conservation policies. Neglect of environmental protection is characteristic of central authorities in Moscow as well as regional and local governments and businesses. Awareness of environmental issues among the majority of the population is also quite low. The words like "green economy", "sustainable development" or "carbon footprint" seem to most Russians just another Western fad, having little to do with their real life concerns. This is not surprising. Many of Russia's regions and local communities are mostly preoccupied with survival and economic development. When one does not have decent housing, health care or job opportunities, one naturally tends to view environmental issues as of secondary importance at best.

Large-scale activities to protect the environment require significant financial resources which, it could be argued, could be channeled elsewhere. The findings of a public opinion survey are indicative of this attitude. Russians were asked how they would spend the money from the country's sovereign wealth fund. Most respondents suggested that the money should be used to raise senior citizens' pensions and increase the salaries of people working in education, health care, and other public services. Environmental concerns were at the bottom of the list. Only 4 percent of those polled supported financing

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[12] Interview with an environmental protection officer. Vladivostok, September, 2006.

[13] It is noteworthy that Japanese fish traders in Hokkaido prefer Russia's fish and seafood to those coming from Chinese and Korean waters, because they believe Russian fish is of higher environmental quality (interview with a Vladivostok-based fishing company manager. Vladivostok, July 2009).

environmental programs (Dengi Info Online 2007). According to another poll, conducted among residents of Vladivostok, just 7 per cent ranked environment as the most pressing issue.[14]

In a formal sense, Russia has a legal and administrative infrastructure for environmental protection. However, federal and local environmental agencies are not independent and exercise only limited influence. This situation is exacerbated by corruption. Environmental legislation is often enforced selectively and arbitrarily. Assessments of environmental consequences of projects made by government agencies are commonly based on considerations of political and economic expediency. Sometimes environmental safety standards are "forgotten", while in other cases environmental legislation is invoked to block the implementation of certain projects, or to blackmail certain companies.

Another problem is that many environmental organizations and groups active in Russia are funded by the West, so that they are often suspected of promoting foreign countries' political and economic goals to the detriment of Russian national interests. Such concerns are voiced even at the highest political levels. For instance, in July 2005 President Vladimir Putin, commenting on the issue of the Eastern pipeline construction, remarked: "Environmental assessments must not hamper the development of the country and national economy. Once we start doing something, they are always using environmental charges as one of the ways to block our efforts" (Kishkovskym 2005).

At this point, it would be naive to expect Russia and its Far Eastern territories to strictly comply with high environmental standards. Progress in environmental protection will primarily depend on Russia's achievements in economic and social development, as well as the formation of strong civil society institutions, especially those promoting green politics.

The environmental issues of the Russian Far East should also be seen in the broader regional context of Northeast Asia. Some of the problems can be effectively dealt with only at the regional level through collective action. For instance, combating marine poaching by the Russian authorities alone makes little sense as long as Japan, Korea and China continue to purchase the Kamchatka crab and other endangered species, fishing for which is banned in Russia. Unfortunately, Northeast Asia still lacks meaningful multilateral cooperation on environmental protection. This stands in some contrast to political cooperation on Northeast Asia's strategic issues, where the six-party talks mechanism has been established.

That said, there have recently been some positive developments in environmental collaboration in the region. In December 2008, during their trilateral summit in Fukuoka, the leaders of China, Japan and South Korea signed the Action Plan for Promoting Trilateral Cooperation (2008), which also includes a special section on environmental protection. However, the fledgling environmental partnership in a multilateral mode is still essentially limited to only three Northeast Asian countries, with Russia remaining outside. Engaging Russia would contribute to a more effective and robust environmental regime in Northeast Asia.

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[14] Far Eastern Consulting Center. Vladivostok, June 2007.

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