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St. Petersburg VIP Island Could Get Protected Status

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Some deputies and ecologists have denounced the proposal to make Kamenny Ostrov into a nature reserve as a means to create a VIP-zone for the posh island's residents.

Senior officials and millionaires from St. Petersburg could be symbolically equated to endangered species if the local government pushes ahead with its proposal to designate their elite residential area on a centrally located island a nature reserve.

The St. Petersburg city legislature's commission on urban planning has compiled a list of about 30 sites that would be mandated by law as sites required to go through ecological tests to determine whether they should be declared nature reserves. Last week, however, St. Petersburg Governor Georgy Poltavchenko vetoed this list. At the same time, vice governor Sergei Kozyrev put out a proposal to give Kamenny Ostrov this status without any prior tests.

Some deputies and ecologists have denounced the proposal as a means to create a VIP-zone for the posh island's residents.

"It seems we need to create special conditions for them to survive and multiply," said Alexander Karpov, director of EKOM, a St. Petersburg-based center of ecological expertise.

The 108-hectare island, dubbed St. Petersburg's Rublyovka, has some of the city's most prestigious real estate, with price tags in the millions of dollars. Some of the reported occupants of the island's elite houses and dachas include chairman of the board of directors at Gazprom Viktor Zubkov, former chairman of the Federation Council Sergei Mironov and several shareholders of Bank Rossiya.

Despite its elite residents, Kamenny Ostrov remains open to visitors. Transportation and walks on the islands by non-residents could be limited if it is given the status of a protected area.

"It will be quiet there. There will be birds singing and rich people will be walking around," said Alexei Kovalev, a legislative assembly deputy who serves on the urban planning commission. "They are putting their personal interests ahead of the interests of the city."

Ecological tests that would study local species and see what actions need to be taken to protect them, such as limiting transportation or construction, were not carried out on the island. Karpov said that the area holds little value in terms of nature because it has been so built up.

"The experts are shrugging their shoulders," Karpov said. "There are zones that need this status much more. Kamenny Ostrov is at best 10th on the list."

Karpov said that the proposal to make Kamenny Ostrov a nature reserve was probably intended to raise the value of its real estate, since the status would limit or restrict further construction in the area.

Kovalev sent a request to the vice governor last week to ask why such a proposal was made, though he added that he is pessimistic about the response. He also warned that if the sites that the governor vetoed are not inspected, construction work would destroy their natural habitats.

"These areas are now only 10 to 15 percent built up," Kovalev said. "But in two years it will be too late to save them."

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