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Black-and-White Photos Show that Green is Great

By Anya Aseeva

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Kyrgyz shepherds coming to Kazakhstan on horseback in search of work. **Matthew Webb**

Melting ice caps and drowning polar bears have become iconic images of the climate change debate, but though powerful, they do not necessarily engage people with the issue.

The "Green is Great: Carbon Journey" photography exhibition by British-born Matthew Webb brings the viewer closer to the idea that climate change comes from everyday activities and is something people can respond to on their own terms.

Webb's photographs, on display at the State Darwin Museum, are inspired by the personal stories of people he has met while traveling by train across Russia, the CIS and Georgia.

Working as the head of greening at the British Embassy in Moscow, he has the task of reducing carbon emissions in British embassies across eastern Europe and central Asia. He said he hopes the selected images will bring the idea of reducing carbon emissions closer to

home.

“Whether buying local, seasonal produce from a marketplace or commuting by public transport such as metro, there are real ways in which we can all reduce our carbon footprint,” he told The Moscow Times.

Each black-and-white photograph places the abstract idea of carbon emissions — one of the most harmful greenhouse gases and the primary cause of man-made climate change — in the context of ordinary lives. From office to farm to army to industry, in rural areas and in cities, the photos show how individual efforts, whether intentional or not, have led to greener lifestyles.

Webb’s intention is not to decorate reality or search for a special angle or moment but to present real situations as they are caught on camera. Inspired by Alexander Rodchenko and Martin Parr, Webb’s subjects are archetypes with which the viewer can identify.

“People recognize objects of their own affection — those images of country life, giant snowy fields, frozen Baikal, old markets. Here is a simplicity and modesty so familiar to many,” Masha Naimushina, artist and art curator said at the exhibition’s opening. “Through those images of the familiar and beloved, Matthew makes the viewer understand the issue he is trying to communicate.”

Webb said he aims to initiate discussion and reflection about greener lifestyles. “Russia is an intellectual country and the debate is the most important thing,” he said.

The photographs also reflect his interest in the relationship between modernization and traditional life — what we carry forward and what we leave behind. Green legacies of the Soviet past, such as collecting makulatura (wastepaper), spring cleaning, dacha culture and efficient public transportation systems have lessons within them that shouldn’t be ignored, he said.

The Culture Ministry and Moscow’s culture department have highlighted this exhibition on their websites, perhaps because the photographs are full of optimism and ideas.

“Most people, when thinking about green and low carbon, think about large symbolic infrastructure projects, whereas it doesn’t necessarily just mean that. It means being efficient, reducing the amount of energy that is consumed,” Webb said.

He added that most people are generally willing to embrace low-carbon lifestyles whenever the surrounding facilities make it possible to do so.

“Individuals playing their part can collectively make a big difference globally,” he said. “If we each took one less flight a year, for example from London to Moscow, we’ve already saved the equivalent of 723 kilograms of carbon dioxide. That’s a very significant saving.”

Low-cost or no-cost measures to reduce resource consumption can save a great deal of money. At the British Embassy in Moscow, measures such as energy-saving light bulbs, recycling, reductions in heat usage and limitation of staffers’ air travel have saved the equivalent of over 30 percent (approximately 2,000 tons) of carbon dioxide — roughly equal to 100,000 trees — and 200,000 pounds ($305,040).

Webb said he believes Russia can be green and can also profit through the green economy.

In Britain, where greening has become mainstream, the Confederation of British Industry estimates that one-third of the country's economic growth in the last fiscal year is likely to have come from green business.

He said that when people discuss ecology or low carbon they often focus on problems, whereas it is important to find a balance because otherwise people will avoid the topic and not benefit from the opportunities.

This is perhaps what makes the "Green is Great: Carbon Journey" exhibit so interesting. It succeeds in engaging the viewer on a personal level.

"Here you look at the photographs, you read the text, you are thinking. They evoke feelings of sympathy and reflection," Naimushina said. "Images of dead animals and oil spills cannot evoke such a state. Instead, they make you want to get away."

The idea of low-carbon living has been popularized in Russia's Year of Ecology. Many awareness campaigns, exhibitions and shows are planned in 2013, such as the Green Week in Manezh in May, at which Webb has been invited to exhibit.

"The Moscow department of environment and the Culture Ministry are very interested in this topic, and I think people here in Russia are also interested," Webb said. "There are challenges ahead, but when people see the opportunities both financially and environmentally, it can only get better."

The "Green is Great: Carbon Journey" exhibit runs until March 17 at the State Darwin Museum, 57 Ulitsa Vavilova, www.darwin.museum.ru. Tel. +7-499-783-2253.

Contact the author at artsreporter@imedia.ru

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