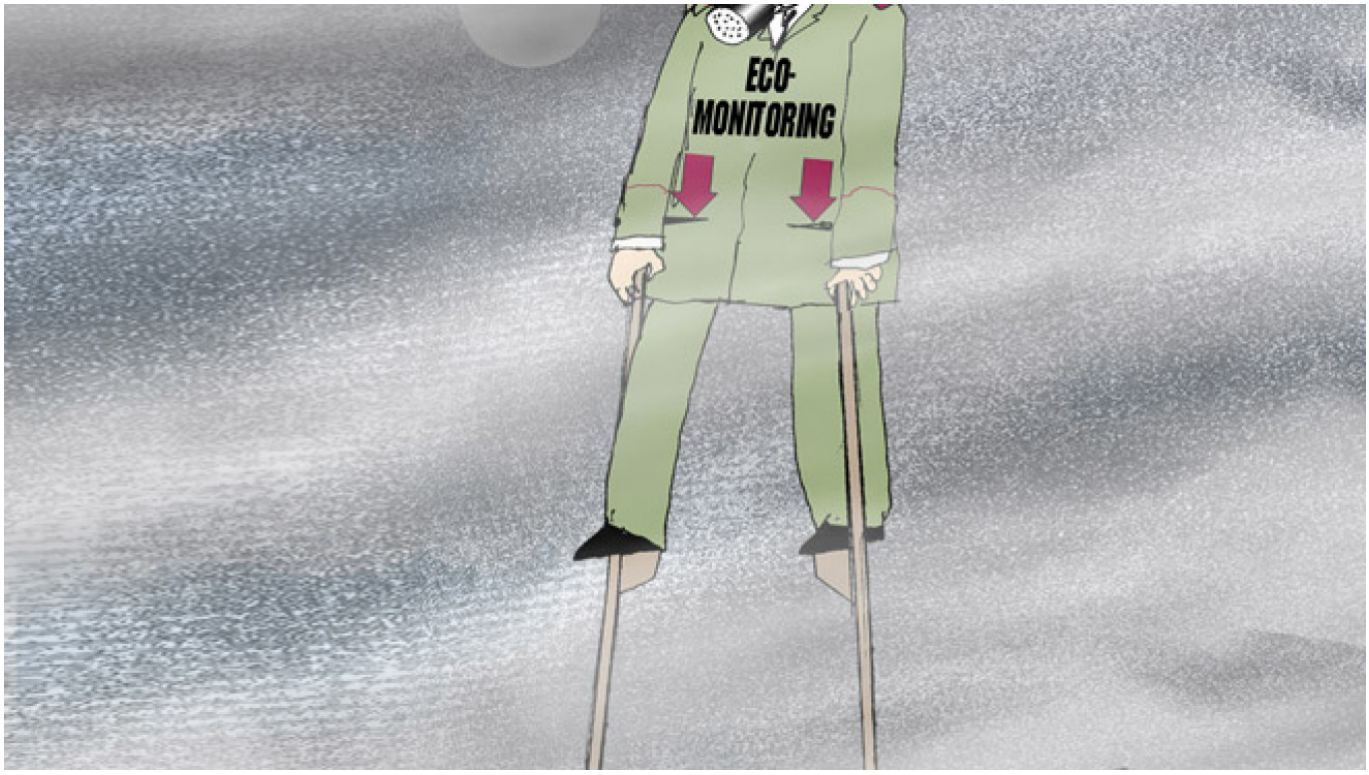
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Corruption Blights Russia's Natural Heritage

By Ivan Sukhov

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Russians have long been known as a people not given to worrying about life's various discomforts, especially at moments of imperial euphoria, or, conversely, imperial shame — these moments follow one after the other like the pattern in a kaleidoscope.

But smoke from forest fires has once again descended on Moscow, and it is difficult not to pay attention to that. All the more so, since after the apocalyptic summer of 2010, the authorities swore that they would never allow anything like it to happen in the capital again.

Russia's environmental degradation isn't for lack of laws, but lack of enforcement, writes columnist Ivan Sukhov.

Yet, once again, there aren't enough forest rangers or firemen. Even worse, most of the city leaders who promised us that the smog problem would not return still hold their positions. Some faces in the administration have changed, it's true. Then-mayor Yury Luzhkov is now retired, and Sergei Shoigu moved from heading the Emergency Situations Ministry to the Defense Ministry.

Still, finding a solution to the burning forests and peat bogs could hardly be the responsibility of these two figures alone. Those who should have prevented the return of smoke to Moscow continue to smile at us from their comfortable chairs inside air-conditioned offices. Meanwhile, we're breathing smoke again.

It is particularly unpleasant to return to the scorching prison of Moscow from a vacation in Karelia, where, so near the Arctic Circle, the sun only comes out for a few hours every day, and cool northern rains drum on the tents of tourists on the shores of enormous lakes and rivers full of rapids.

Karelia is completely covered by forests, but isn't burning, nor did it burn in 2010, even though that region also suffered through an abnormal heat wave. It is still a refuge to retreat to away from the merciless Moscow summer. But visitors, whose growing numbers are likely due to increasing foreign policy difficulties, encounter a different problem here: filth.

For example, the campsites on the shores of the subpolar river of Keret are outrageously unsanitary. Pieces of broken glass, empty cans, plastic, and the simple organic waste of human activity all cover the shores of this popular river. In another three or four years, there simply will not be any room left to camp here.

The majority of tourists come via a dozen small Karelian companies that rent out equipment for active outdoor vacations, and also provide instructors and guides. It is these guides who, week in and week out, lead caravans of tourists to the same campsites.

Even the most conscientious tourists and the most ecologically minded guides are not capable of reducing the impact of improvised camping here summer after summer. Campsites that are advertised as the best on the river deserve, in fact, to be closed for several years to counteract the flagrant violations of sanitary standards there.

This doesn't happen, however, and the situation unfortunately looks hopeless. The tourism companies are motivated by profit, not ecology. Without strong government intervention, the merciless exploitation of these sites will continue, and any new sites that are added will quickly undergoing the same unfortunate transformation.

But unfortunately, Karelia's Natural Resources Ministry is entirely absorbed by more critical, and most importantly, more commercially profitable, activities: Issuing licenses for building stone and gravel mining in Karelian quarries and logging in the region's endless forests. A filthy beach is the last thing on the minds of this ecological agency's bureaucrats.

The only government representatives you have any chance of meeting on your visit are fishing inspectors, who are prepared to forgive any violations, including outright poaching, as long as the fines are paid right into their pockets and not to their agency.

It's no surprise that these bureaucrats, who spend days scanning with their binoculars for potential victims, are perceived more like tribute collectors for the Mongol horde than responsible government agents gently but firmly insisting on compliance with their regulations.

This is why nothing can be done about the trashed campsites on the shores of northern rivers, why the smoke has returned to capital, and why the Moscow metro can no longer handle growing passenger traffic.

It is a long-acknowledged fact that the severity of Russian laws is balanced by their poor enforcement. In other words, legislators constantly produce rivers of ink on new regulations, bans and orders, but there is simply no one to oversee their enforcement.

The key focus of specialized state organizations, rather, is the exploitation of the resources under their control.

Bids, tenders and licenses are a gold mine for corrupt officials, no matter the sphere in question, from oil and gas development to the outdoor tourism business in Karelia. These points of entry are a real cash cow for bureaucrats, the source of their prosperity. They are certainly far from the expensive, labor-intensive, and much less "beneficial" procedures of actual monitoring and oversight.

This is exactly why there is practically nothing to be done about the growing piles of trash dotting the previously pristine northern landscape. This is why any problems caused by human error may be followed by several resignations, but don't result in any systematic reform, which would minimize the risk of future failures. The lessons remain unlearned, and problems pile up.

Theoretically, when the control function of government atrophies, it can be taken over by civil society. The spirit of community solidarity and an understanding of the greater good and shared interests instantly transform the landscape anywhere they appear. When that train leaves the station, even bureaucrats begin to sense that it won't be possible to hold onto their role as tribute collectors anymore.

Alas, the Russian understanding of the greater good and solidarity still only appear when the issue under discussion is a lofty matter like an insult to imperial dignity from an external enemy. So we'll be breathing smoke and trying not to step in crap for a good long time yet.

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