The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Q&A: WWF, Greenpeace: A Tale of Two Environmental Giants

By Alexey Eremenko

December 11, 2014



Igor Chestin of WWF riding horseback through the wilderness in 2005.

Russia is one of the few big economies whose biological resources are growing — though no thanks to state policies, environmentalists say.

Environmental problems are many and evident, starting with global warming: Russia is warming up 2.5 times faster than the global average, according to official figures.

Russian virgin forests have shrunk between 8 and 10 percent since 2000, thanks to manmade wildfires and logging, according to a study by the Russian NGO Transparent World.
The country may run out of commercially harvestable timber in 10 to 20 years, loggers warn.

Greenpeace

Ivan Blokov

Though Russia has signed up to international obligations to set aside 17 percent of its land for nature reserves by 2020, it is unlikely to meet the goal, experts say.

Moreover, the government is tapping into existing reserves, slating them for commercial or material use for geopolitical reasons. In the Altai Mountains, a gas pipeline to China is set to pass through a snow leopard habitat, and in the Arctic, oil drilling has begun not far from nature reserves, and military bases are going up in the UNESCO-protected "polar bear nursery" on Wrangel Island.

President Vladimir Putin's government has an unimpressive track record on environment, starting from his ascension to the Kremlin in 2000, when one of his first decrees was to abolish the State Environmental Protection Committee, a powerful watchdog.

Environment protection is currently handled by a ministry whose main mission is ensuring the maximum income from the extraction of natural resources. That push-me-pull-you combination is not found anywhere else in the world, said Ivan Blokov, program director of Greenpeace Russia.

But the government is not the last line of defense for the environment: Russia has a strong tradition of grassroots — if state-endorsed — eco-activism dating back at least to the 1950s.

Homegrown groups have been overshadowed in the post-Soviet era by Russian branches of Greenpeace and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), which make the biggest environmental waves in the country.

Life has not been easy for them, as independent NGOs struggle in Russia, and foreign affiliations only make things worse.

USAID was expelled from Russia in 2012, and many domestic groups involved in "political activity" (defined vaguely enough to have been applied to a bird conservancy) and receiving donations from abroad are slapped with the derogatory Soviet-era tag of "foreign agents," mired in crippling red tape and occasionally vilified in state media.

But both Greenpeace and the WWF are so far going strong (both dodged the "foreign agent" tag), even though they differ in approach and reputation in Russia, as everywhere.

WWF Russia

Igor Chestin

Greenpeace Russia, which only accepts private donations, has a reputation as a troublemaker over its runs-in with authorities. Even their most innocent stunts, such as an activist dressed up as a polar bear sailing down the Moscow River on a fake "chunk of ice," do not go unnoticed: The "bear" was briefly busted under the Kremlin walls. And last year, the crew of Greenpeace's Arctic Sunrise icebreaker spent months in Russian custody on criminal charges for picketing a Gazprom oil rig in the northern Pechora Sea.

The WWF, on the other hand, accepts corporate funding, is promoted by Russian music stars, and its panda logo appears on high-profile state-backed conservation projects.

They differ, too, in their estimate of how bad the state of Russia's environmental protection is, though not by much.

"[Environmental] legislation was ruined, but now it is slowly being rebuilt," says Igor Chestin, 52, head of WWF Russia. Chestin is a big man with a trimmed beard, and his size and taciturn concentration lend him a slightly bearlike appearance.

"With a single exception — lead concentration in the air — there's no improvement, things are either stable or getting worse," said Blokov, 53, a much more outspoken and animated

man, who, however, is as careful with words and also big ("that's what quitting smoking does to you," he reflects, stroking his belly).

The Moscow Times sat both men down to chat about Putin, tigers and wildfires. We did so in separate interviews, but the questions were the same, giving Russia's two topmost environmental champions a chance to show where they really agree and differ on how best to maintain Russia's biocapacity.

What are Russia's main environmental problems?

WWF (Igor Chestin): Same as any other socially important field such as science or culture, I guess. To speak systemically: Legislation, ruined over the past 15 years, though it is slowly being rebuilt — with our active participation. Institutions: The environmental control system we once had is disrupted, gone. And staff: We are critically short of people.

Our Favorite Things

Favorite book:
Blokov: indicated a shelf of books ranging from Norbert Wiener's "Cybernetics" to bestselling thrillers
Chestin: Jack London, Hemingway, Dostoevsky, Marquez, Remarque

Favorite film:
Blokov: "Operation Y" (1965, a classic Soviet student comedy)
Chestin: Tarkovsky, Kusturica, action films ("Indiana Jones," Soviet classics)

Favorite restaurant:
Blokov: Taras Bulba (Ukrainian)
Chestin: Dzhon Dzholi (Georgian)

Source: Alexey Eremenko

Legislation rebuilding has been going on for about five years. Putin's economy ideologues have always posited that environmental limitations hamper the economy and must be removed. So away they went, and by the end of the 2000s it became clear that they hadn't been the hampering factor — it was corruption, lack of judiciary independence, etc. And when that became clear, why not bring the legislation back?

Greenpeace (Ivan Blokov): That's a tricky question, because there are two ways to approach it.

One is, you look at what could do the most harm. Put that way, the main problem is the nuclear industry. If a single nuclear station goes up — I don't think I need to elaborate. Climate change would be in the same category, but we can't say we are the only ones to blame: The U.S. and China each contributes more to global warming than Russia.

But the other approach is, you look at what cannot be restored. And that means protected territories first of all. Russian authorities have earned notoriety here — just take Wrangel Island. Forests in general fall into this category, they are problem No. 2, but a forest can be restored to its natural state — it would take 800-900 years, but it can do it. A protected area cannot. Still, forests are a major problem because of wildfires, which are getting worse because of climate change.

And what are you doing about it?

WWF: We've got more than 100 projects, which can be grouped into six main fields. The most expensive one is nature reserves and conservation efforts. The second most expensive group of projects is sustainable forest management; then sustainable fishing, in three seas: the Okhotsk, Bering and Barents. Then the climate change counteraction program, focused mostly in Moscow, largely an educational program. Then the green economy, a broad concept: Now we're focusing on the financial sector — we want the Central Bank to put out guidelines for environmentally conscious lending — and retail, mostly big networks, whom we want to use certified timber. And the last one is environmental legislation: We have a list of laws we're lobbying that need passing within the next five years.

Greenpeace: The main thing we do, that we want to do, is to have people know the truth. With the wildfires, the problem was being kept under wraps, people did not know about them. We spent several years shouting about it before people realized there was a problem. The same thing with oil spills — we spill 5 million to 10 million tons of oil a year, with 500,000 tons of it carried by rivers into the Arctic ocean. But the information is downplayed or hushed up by the authorities.

What is your relationship with the authorities and corporations?

WWF: With the authorities, it's a working relationship. There are some people we're friends with, and others we have to work with even if it's not nice.

There are people in both business and government that just don't want to work with environmentalists. They only do so because they have to. With what happened with the Arctic Sunrise, now some people have an excuse to cut Greenpeace out of any negotiations.

Annual Budget

WWF Russia: 500 million rubles ($10 million)
including 100 million rubles raised in Russia
($45 million from private donations, $55 million from corporate donations)

Major foreign donors: the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany

Greenpeace Russia: 100 million rubles ($2 million) of which $15 million comes from Russians, $85 million from foreign donors

Source: Alexey Eremenko

We get our donations from the middle class: small businesses, employees of big companies, officials, artists. We have our own top-five companies we're working with, too: Alfa Bank, Coca-Cola, MVideo, Tetrapak and Reso Garantiya. We don't take money from oil companies; we maintain relations with finance and retail sectors, but we still have to see where they make their money, to make sure it isn't the arms or nuclear industry.

Greenpeace: We're trying to get onboard any councils, any events that facilitate a dialogue. But sadly, dialogue is problematic with some companies, particularly [state-run oil giants] Rosneft and Gazprom. They're not at all open to dialogue, though many others are.

But sadly, the majority of our work has to do with protest, because much is being done that's not simply anti-environment, but plain illegal. The military base on Wrangel Island is one example. But we're trying for a dialogue with the authorities — for instance, on trash separation. We hoped Moscow and St. Petersburg would be the first to jump on the recycling bandwagon, but in actual fact, it's Petrozavodsk and Yekaterinburg [capitals of the northern republic of Karelia and Sverdlovsk region in the Urals, respectively].

We often run counter to the interests of officials and commercial companies, which is why you could probably call us radicals. But we just want a reasonable solution [to problems]. We're ready for discussion, and we're perfectly aware that sometimes you must compromise. And sometimes you definitely should not.

Has anyone accused you of being "foreign agents?"

WWF: We think our lawmakers are much worse "foreign agents" than we are, because they have assets and accounts and children studying abroad, and we don't. The conflict with the West has not affected us so far, and as for money we raise in Russia [see box for details — MT], our main donors are individuals, so there's not much change there. Government funding was scarce and is scarce, and that won't change.

Greenpeace: We're no foreign agents. We're a branch of an international organization. And as for problems, we're known throughout the country, and we don't have any explicit problems with being who we are.

What do you think of your environmental counterpart?

WWF: It seems like Greenpeace's radical approach [with the Arctic Sunrise] made things worse in Russia. The problem was not solved, and people spent time in jail. This does not decrease my personal admiration and respect for the guys who pulled it off, but strategically speaking, it has made things worse. I realize the Russian side was wrong too — they opted for a strong-arm scenario, which I think was totally idiotic — but if you're talking about consequences, they were negative. A year later, they've started drilling anyway, while the Russian office [of Greenpeace] was out of the loop for months because they had to sit in Murmansk and help their detained comrades. And astonishingly, while you would expect mass protests in the West, such as the Netherlands or Germany, nothing happened, and that was a very bad signal internationally.

Greenpeace: The WWF are not "compromisers," they just have a different approach: They don't rule out state or corporate money, and unlike us, use them to fund nature reserves or forest ranger brigades. They're basically tracking the money so that it's used efficiently, because I'm not sure that the state is efficient when uses the money directly.

What needs to be done for environmental protection in Russia?

WWF: We have a document on environmental policy signed by [ex-President and now Prime Minister Dmitry] Medvedev, for which we lobbied. This is a foundation, something you can work with; otherwise, as the saying goes, all paths are wrong if you don't know where you're going.

But the government thinks very short-term, and focuses on concrete things. They lack a long-term strategy, the rules of the game change every year, and they employ a project-driven approach to legislation. As in, [Rosneft head] Igor Sechin comes to the president and says: We want to drill, but we need three laws to be canceled that currently prohibit me from doing so, and I want money I'm not entitled to, and I want to fire people but bypass the Labor Code. And they create a new code tailored to Sechin's project.

And management is getting de-professionalized nationwide: We've got two professions: economist and lawyer, and we believe people with those degrees can handle any kind of job.

But at least people are becoming more active than in the 1990s, when everybody had to work hard just to feed their families, and had no time for activism. And we're working on concrete things, too, with something to show for it: New nature reserves are being created every year.

Greenpeace: We can't do anything if people don't care. People need to start caring about the environment, and that will force the authorities to act.

As for the government, several firm moves are needed. First, we need a separate, well-staffed state agency to protect the environment. Second, we need adequate laws, and they need to be simple, transparent and easy to check. And lastly, you need to remove barriers to state oversight. Currently, controllers always need to be looking over their shoulder to think, am I harming someone big here? Regular people get busted if they park on the grass, but when a big company is polluting the environment, you'll have to sue them, and it'll be a struggle.

It feels like it's got tougher now. In the late 1990s, they listened to us, just because they listened to all kinds of sensible arguments before making decisions. Now the arguments are

not always considered, and it's harder to be heard. But it's not all pointless, we can still achieve something, even compared to the 1990s or 2000s. Such as trash separation: Wait and see, we really hope it will be introduced in at least some cities.

How did you end up in this job?

WWF: I've been playing at expeditions to the Amazon since I was a kid, and I always wanted to be a biologist. I was in an environmental protection group during my study at Moscow State University, too. I did my PhD on brown bears of the Caucasus in the 1980s, spending four, five months a year in the field — [now] I've got an office job, and I still miss it — and I did my Master's in environmental control in Manchester in 1990-91. But when I got back, there was no money in science, only in environment. So when they had this job opening at the WWF, I thought, I'm spending 80 percent of my time on environmental projects anyway, so why not? I applied, and here I am, 18 years later.

I'm not very prone to reflection. I know what I want and where I'm going.

Greenpeace: It all started when I was studying at the physics faculty of St. Petersburg University. The Soviet Union had a powerful environmental movement, and by late Soviet times, there were several hundred student environmentalist groups, one of which I joined.

I've been at Greenpeace for 20 years. They invited me from St. Petersburg for three years in the beginning, we worked on Russia's first ever application for a natural site to be included on UNESCO's World Heritage list — the virgin forests in the northern Komi republic. We have also battled a terrible oil spill in Komi, some 200,000 tons, by our estimate, and campaigned against nuclear weapons tests, along with many other countries.

What have been your worst and best single impressions from the job?

WWF: The worst thing was the liquidation of the State Environmental Protection Committee in 2000. It was unexpected, and we couldn't change it despite collecting signatures etc. It was painful.

And the best is every time we can create a new wildlife reserve. How we are changing the world all together. There were no aurochs [wild oxen], and now we've got some 300 in central Russia. We've preserved tigers, too, and spent three years preserving a part of the Far East for the leopards.

And also collecting signatures for a bill to protect the seas from oil spills. We'd never done it before, we didn't know how it would work out, and we needed 100,000 signatures — but we got 120,000 in three weeks. That was important.

Greenpeace: The best were the seven nature reserves and protected areas created with our participation. That's more than 20 million hectares of protected land!

And the worst was in 2002, when we collected 2.5 million signatures for a referendum on restoring a separate environmental agency, but the referendum was not allowed to take place.

Contact the author at a.eremenko@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/12/11/qa-wwf-greenpeace-a-tale-of-two-environmental-giants-a42225