

For Conservation and Sustainable Development in the Altai Mountains

It's been more than a year since the Assistance Project published its first newsletter in December 2006. Our activities have increased every year since the first Altai-U.S. exchanges in 2004 - so has the workload.

As much as we like to keep in touch with friends and supporters, necessary chores always seem to take precedence.



So, here's an update for those of you who've been wondering. If you've gotten this newsletter and don't know who or what it's about, see the last page for background information.

Education has become an increasingly important direction. In 2006, AAP sponsored a short field course teaching Altai Nature Park Rangers to use GPS receivers donated by Syracuse ESF faculty member James Gibbs. That same year, another U.S. organization, the Altai Project, sent Adirondack Mountain Club Education Director Jen Kretser to the Altai to conduct a Leave No Trace wilderness ethics workshop.

The enthusiastic reception of these efforts led to a longer and larger course in 2007, "Biodiversity Conservation by Preparation of Tourism Guides", with ten unemployed students receiving 144 hours of classroom instruction and field work in the southern Altai town of Ust Koksa. Course content was developed by Foundation for Sustainable Development of Altai staffer Natalya Tokova, a professional post-secondary teacher, and others. Funding came from the United Nations Global Environmental Facility (UNDP/GEF), WWF, and Altai government job training funds. Graduates received Education Ministry certificates and, in the course of time, jobs. AAP sponsored internships to bring the two leading graduates at Yosemite National Park last November, but visa and personal problems prevented them from making the trip.

This year, classroom instruction has moved to the capital, Gorno Altaisk, with field work at Uch Enmek Ethnocultural Nature Park, and the course now includes 500 hours of rigorous instruction from mid March to the end of May. There are twenty-one students, about equally divided between the unemployed and people wishing to change or further their careers. Subjects include geography, history, recreational resources and nature conservation of Altai, tour guiding and organization, and marketing of tourist services. We expect to bring up to four of the graduates to the U.S. this fall for short internships in the Adirondack Park and Yosemite National Park.

Leave No Trace low impact wilderness education continued this year when FSDA staffer Natalya Yurkova spent a week in April at the Landmark Learning Center in North Carolina taking the LNT Master Educator course. This qualifies her to teach LNT at home, just in time for the course under way in Gorno Altaisk. So far as we know, she is the first certified instructor in Russia.

The seven Leave No Trace principles deal mostly with minimizing environmental impact. For the Altai, a eighth principle is also necessary – "Respect Local Culture" – since much of the Altai below the tree line is an inhabited, working landscape where tourists are guests on the lands of others.

Exchanges 2007

Led by Producer Toby McLeod, a four person crew from California-based Sacred Land Film Project spent most of June 2007 filming in the Altai on a lengthy, adventurous, and sometimes difficult expedition organized by FSDA Director Chagat Almashev. SLFP is widely known for its award-winning film on Native American sacred places, "In the Light of Reverence," which documents conflicts between traditional and modern uses of sacred sites across the

U.S. involving development schemes, mineral extraction, ecotourism, new age religions, rock climbing and even parks creation.

SLFP's new work in progress is "Losing Sacred Ground," which, when completed in 2009, will result in a multi-part public television series documenting contested cultural landscapes around the world. The Altai filming was the first; other locations include Australia, Peru, India, Ethiopia, Hawaii and northern California.

An eight-minute clip from the Altai footage was screened at a symposium at the American Museum of Natural History in New York in April, before an Altai presentation by Chagat, and the same clip is scheduled for screening at the World Conservation Congress in Barcelona, Spain, in October 2008, which is attended by eight thousand people.

The SLFP crew members wrote a series of fascinating blogs about their Altai trip, including two film clips, which are on the SLFP web site at www.sacredland.org/weblog/?paged=2 — Take a look!

In November, Chagat, Natalya Tokova, and the leader of the traditional musical group Altai Kai, Urmat Yntaev, came to the U.S. to meet with west coast based collaborators at various organizations including SLFP, the Altai Project, Christensen Fund, Pacific Environment, the Snow Leopard Conservancy, and Yosemite National Park. On the way home, there were meetings with supporters old and new in Washington DC and New York City.

The group also got to know some members of California's Winnemem Wintou tribe over a couple of days, learning about the problem of traditional lands submerged by the Shasta dam. They spent a day of prayer at the tribe's sacred spring high on Mount Shasta which is, unfortunately, easily accessible from a paved road. The film *In the Light of Reverence* showed how the spring has become a magnet for modern seekers of spiritual experience who engage in practices which often amount to desecration in the minds of the spring's traditional owners.



AAP Exchanges and Visits 2008

Chagat Almashev and Matt Foley attended the American Museum of Natural History's Spring Biodiversity Symposium in New York City in early April, which drew participants from all over the world. As mentioned, Chagat gave a presentation on the Altai, while Toby McLeod showed work-in-progress Altai video footage.

A scheduled performance at the April Symposium by Altai Kai had to be canceled when the group was unable to obtain U.S. visas in time.

Jen Kretser spent two weeks in the Altai in late May and early June. She first taught Leave No Trace principles at the guides' course with Natalya Yurkova and then traveled around the Altai, speaking to school groups and investigating possibilities for forging institutional links between local institutions and her current employer, the Natural History Museum of the Adirondacks, where Jen has recently become Program Director. She also got a look at some of the rapid unplanned and unregulated development taking place in northern parts of the Altai along the Katun River and the foot of Lake Teletskoye. These areas, easily accessible by car from Barnaul, Novosibirsk, and other big cities near and far, are rapidly losing their rural character and coming to resemble roadside tourist traps in other parts of the developed world. The official Altai government estimate of the number of tourist visits to the Altai in 2007 is 800,000 people. The Republic's population is 200,000.

Last year, we gave partial financial assistance to two U.S. ecotourism organizations willing to send a staff person to the Altai for an exploratory trip. This year, one of them, Pack, Paddle & Ski of Rochester NY (www.packpaddleski.com) is taking clients to the Altai July 9 – 20 and will be doing live posts on the PPS web site while there.

AAP has funds available to sponsor exploratory trips again in 2008 and is now looking for U.S. professionals with demonstrated expertise willing to risk some of their own money.

Another Altaian coming to the U.S. this year, besides those already mentioned, will be Maya Erlenbaeva, who has been inventorying and documenting places of cultural and spiritual significance in Kosh Agach and on the Ukok Plateau for more than a year in order that they might become legally protected and preserved under Russian law. The purpose of her visit here will be to gain some understanding of how such places are, or are not, protected under various laws in the U.S.

More Americans will go to the Altai this year on AAP sponsored visits still in the planning stages.

Other Visits

Paul Smiths College will send a group of a dozen students on a three week trip to the Altai in August, led by Professor Karen Boldis; their Altai guide will be Nataya Yurkova.

The Altai Project, a west coast based nonprofit organization also working in the Altai, is putting on a Strawbale Workshop in Altai Krai from about August 18 through September 3, 2008 (www.altaiproject.org/strawbale.html) and looking for participants from the U.S.

This will be a unique educational event for natural building enthusiasts, designers, architects, builders, and anyone with an adventurous spirit, faith in sustainable human habitation, a desire to bridge cultural gaps through productive cooperation, and a good sense of humor.

The workshop will be hosted by the Altai State Technical University's Institute of Architecture and Design, and will construct a "Creative Dacha." This will be a public structure serving to raise awareness of the advantages of strawbale construction among students, professors, and other visitors to the site.

Register NOW if you're interested! The registration price goes up after June 30th, and no more registrations will be accepted after July 15th.

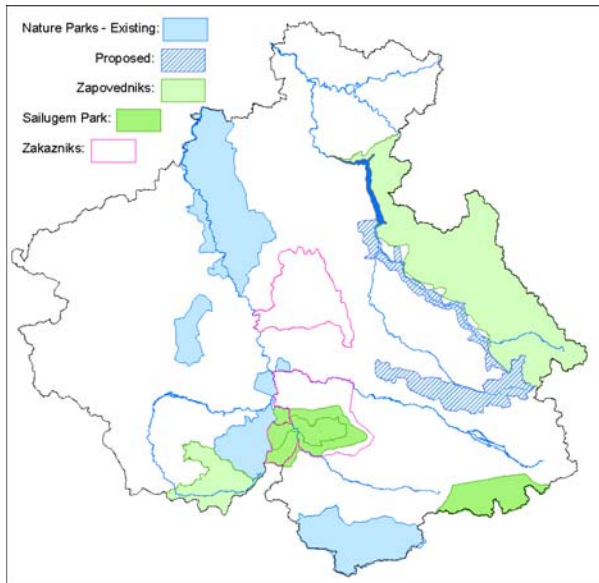
Altai Parks

In 2005, AAP began sponsoring periodic meetings which allowed Nature Park staff people and others interested in Altai parks development and environmental conservation to get together for a couple of days twice a year. The meetings have been quite successful and there will be two more in 2008. The fall meeting will be larger than usual since it will include participation of the Altai Republic Ministry of Economic Development and Investments, which is awakening to the desirability of ecotourism as a means of improving livelihoods of people in remote areas with minimal levels of monetary investment and few adverse social and environmental effects.

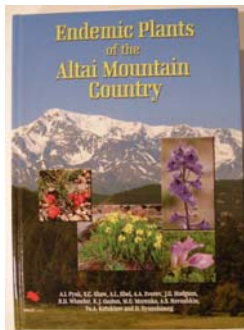
AAP has allocated aid money to Argut Nature Park, to be used to build a yurt visitor center at Park headquarters in Inegen village. Among Nature Parks, Argut tends to be neglected because it is small and its headquarters village, Inegen, has no phone service and is only reachable via an unreliable suspension bridge over the Katun River or horseback over the mountains. Argut's environmentally important purpose is habitat conservation for snow leopards as well as the ibex and argalli which are the leopards' prey base. It is also likely to be expanded eastward into the vast Shavlinsky Zakaznik in the future, and is a northerly buffer area for the proposed Sailugemsky National Park.

AAP is also buying a satellite telephone for use in wildlife conservation and monitoring expeditions to remote parts of parks (Argut, Shavlinsky, Sailugem, Belukha and Ukok). Phoneless Argut Park will have custody of the phone when not being used by others.

Development of an Altai system of protected areas takes a step forward this year with concrete steps to establish a **new National Park, "Sailugem"**, which is primarily intended to protect snow leopard and mountain sheep populations, the largest in Russia. With a total area of almost three hundred thousand acres, it is located in two high southern alpine regions, one just east of Belukha Nature Park and the other in southeastern Kosh Agach Raion. This new nature reserve, jointly with Sielkhem National Park in Mongolia, will be a part of the future Transboundary Russian-Mongolian Protected Area.



FSDA will conduct two field workshops, informational events, on the topic "Protected Areas and Local Population" in the villages of Kosh Agach and Mukhor-Tarkhata to explain and, hopefully, gather support for the new park. Some indigenous communities see it as a threat, a situation we think could be changed with public explanation and discussion. Workshops were requested by the Altai Ministry of Natural Resources. Further events will be co-funded and held by WWF-Russia.



"Endemic Plants of the Altai Mountain Country" is a fine new book, just published in England by Wildguides. It's a very nice production. Hardcover, about 6 1/2 x 8 inches, 368 heavy weight pages, full of color photos, includes the entire Altai ecoregion (not just Russia), and has lots of general information besides plants. The authors are eleven scientists from Russia, England, Mongolia and Kazakhstan. In English.

We have copies for sale at the publisher's price of \$60 each postpaid to North American addresses. Payment should be by check or money order made out to "Adirondack Sustainable Communities".

FSDA, the Foundation for Sustainable Development of Altai, celebrated its fifth anniversary last December with a celebration at the National Theater in Gorno Altaisk. Speeches were made, awards and letters of thanks were given out to many people who have helped along the way, and Altai Kai gave a fine performance. FSDA's founders all expressed their surprise that their germ of an idea had grown to become a presence in the Republic.



Natalya Tokova has left FSDA to found a new Altai NGO, "Center for Ecology and Culture of Altai". The organization will act to modify or oppose harmful development projects through legal and technical means, and will develop collaborations with regional NGOs and local citizens in pursuit of its goals. FSDA generally takes a collaborative, constructive approach toward working with governmental bodies, which has been quite successful. However, reliance on collaborative relationships with people in government makes vocal, public opposition to wrongheaded policies difficult. The Center for Ecology and Culture will complement FSDA's quiet approach by being more publicly assertive and, when necessary, oppositionist.

Both this organization and FSDA have received substantial Ford Foundation grants this year through the Altai Project (www.altaiproject.org).

FSDA will largely use its Ford grant in rural areas of the Altai Republic, helping develop local NGOs, augmenting citizen participation, strengthening local government capabilities, and building relationships among them and between these local actors and higher level governmental and nongovernmental organizations.

Victoria Tutkusheva, a recent English language graduate of Tomsk University, has been hired in Natalya Tokova's's place. She manages FSDA's Gorno Altaisk office, and also acts as guide for English speaking visitors.

FSDA also now has a Financial Manager, Zulfia Shadeeva, made necessary by the greatly increased stringency and complexity of regulations governing the operation of Russian nongovernmental organizations, particularly financial record keeping.

Who we are: The Altai Assistance Project (AAP) was started in 2003 by Chagat Almashev of Gorno Altaisk, capital of the Altai Republic of the Russian Federation, and Matt Foley of Wadhams, a small town in the Adirondack Park of New York State, USA.

The Project's work in the Altai Republic (www.altai-republic.ru) has the following goals:

- Strengthening the system of protected areas
- Promoting sustainable land use
- Demonstrating and promoting renewable energy
- Developing community based tourism network
- Strengthening Altai NGOs
- Conservation of natural and cultural heritage

The Foundation for Sustainable Development of Altai, an NGO directed by Chagat, is AAP's primary, but not sole, partner organization in the Altai. AAP receives financial support from private sources, most of which comes from the Trust for Mutual Understanding and the Weeden Foundation.

We work with a number of other nongovernmental organizations including The Mountain Institute, Pacific Environment, the Snow Leopard Conservancy, Sacred Lands Film Project, the Christensen Fund, the Adirondack Nature Conservancy, the Wild Center, and the Wildlife Conservation Society, as well as individuals too numerous to name. The continuing success of our exchange programs has also been made possible through the formal and informal participation of federal, state, and local governmental bodies in both the U.S. and Russia.

Thanks are also due to our bank, Champlain National, for donation of services, and the Environmental Sciences Research Institute for its invaluable donation of ArcGIS software.

The Altai Assistance Project is a special project of Adirondack Sustainable Communities, Inc. (www.adksc.org), a legally constituted 501(c)3.

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