

Forests Growing in Quantity, Not Quality

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Viktor Grishenkov, deputy director of the Ugra National Park, demonstrating how to plant an oak seedling.

UGRA NATIONAL PARK, Kaluga Region — Viktor Grishenkov uses the weight of his spade to open a slit in the sandy ground, inserts a 30-centimeter oak seedling into the hole and packs the earth tight around it with his foot.

“All right. Come back in a hundred years and see how it’s going.” He takes one step forward and repeats the process.

It takes about 30 seconds and looks effortless — but is apparently going to save Russia’s forests.

Grishenkov is deputy director of the Ugra National Park, a 986-square-kilometer patchwork of protected land that borders a military installation in the Kaluga region, southwest of Moscow.

It's been chosen as the beginning of an ambitious project to reverse a catastrophic decline

in Russia's broad-leafed forests that has both environmental and economic consequences.

FOREST DEGRADATION

Unlike many countries Russia is not under threat of deforestation — if anything the country's forest cover is growing, rather than shrinking, said Yelena Kulikova, head of WWF Russia's forest program.

That's something of a miracle in a world that loses some 13 million hectares of forest per year. And it means that Russia — with 20 percent of all the woodland in the world and more than any other country — stands to be one of the main beneficiaries of tentative plans to reward countries that manage their forest cover.

But quantity is by no means the same as quality.

The apparent resilience of Russia's forests is largely down to the ability of temperate forests to recover quickly from clear-cutting. But the quick-growing trees that spring up after clearance or fire are no replacement for older, slow growing trees.

The result is what Kulikova calls "degradation" of forests — in both biodiversity and economic value.

"Pine, spruce and oak forests, the main sources of high-quality timber, are being replaced with commercially less valuable small-leaved saplings like birch and aspen," she said.

Unlike deforestation, the economic impact of degradation — the loss of various species — is almost impossible to measure. But experts agree that the phenomenon is hobbling what ought to be one of Russia's leading industries.

"It's absolutely true that we're running low on valuable trees," agreed Igor Novoselov, an analyst at LesProm Network, and industry group.

Russia has lost about 30 percent of its oak forest in the past three decades, through a mixture of human activity, climate change and disease, Grishenkov said.

"The only way to save the oak is human action," he said. And that means more than just preservation.

National park workers in Ugra have cleared a vast patch of existing forest to make way for fresh planting of oaks and pine in a bid to recreate mixed-leaf forests.

FOREST ENGINEERING

It's an unusual approach, Grishenkov admits — even in the West national park authorities are often happy to simply preserve rather than engineer their forests. But he insists it is to the benefit of everyone.

The 20- to 30-centimeter seedlings — looking little more than brown twigs with a fleck of green at the top end — are being planted in regimented ranks only about 60 centimeters apart, in columns alternating with pines.

For oak trees, which can reach 28 meters in height and 60 centimeters diameter by the relatively young age of 150, this would be an uncomfortably cramped living space.

When asked how great oaks are meant to live in such proximity to one another, Grishenkov laughed.

"That's not close together, because only about one in 10 are going to survive. We're hedging our bets, as it were," he said.

Grazing animals, disease and, of course, fires will claim a good deal of the saplings before they reach maturity. "The survivors will have plenty of space," Grishenkov said.

As a national park Ugra's upkeep is funded by the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry. But extra projects rely on private sponsors.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The planting is being supported by the Drinks Division of Wimm-Bill-Dann, which launched its cooperation program a year ago to harness the benefits of green credentials to market its "Russian Springs" brand of mineral water.

The company has donated 1.8 million rubles (\$65,000) so far, and is in for the long haul, said Maria Kristal, public relations manager at Wimm-Bill-Dann.

"The decision to fund it grew out of a survey of consumers; there was a clear demand and preference for an environmentally friendly brand," she said.

It's a long-term strategy: Oaks take about a century to reach maturity, and only about one in 10 will survive, Grishenkov explained. But in the end it is better for Russia and for its biodiversity.

WWF, which is adept at courting corporate partners to fund image-boosting green projects, says the involvement of a Russian company is a refreshing precedent.

"Eighty percent of our sponsors are Western companies; the fact that a Russian firm would get involved with this is a bit of a landmark," said Ivan Barchenkov, corporate fundraising coordinator with the group.

Because Ugra is a national park the oaks planted will never be turned into furniture or houses — logging is banned. But WWF argues that the replenishment of the nation's forests need not be confined to protected areas.

"We're not saying we should never chop down trees. It's impossible to imagine civilization without wood, and wood is much more environmentally friendly than some nonrenewable materials. But it has to be properly managed," Kulikova said.

MANAGEMENT IS THE KEY

But poor management is undermining what should be a profitable industry.

Forty-five percent of Russian territory is wooded, and the country has some 780 million hectares of forest containing an estimated 82.5 billion cubic meters of timber.

But WWF estimates that only about one-fifth of Russia's 780 million hectares of forest is both economically valuable and accessible for exploitation.

Add the fact that 40 percent of the country's forests is strictly protected "mountain woodland," and the loss of 1 million to 2 million hectares annually to fire, and it turns out that forestry resources are far from limitless.

Even so, it should be a major Russian industry, Kulikova said.

"Poor management means that it's basically impossible to find sufficient resources that could be exploited for the long term. And that's making companies very nervous about investing in Russian forestry," she told The Moscow Times.

Russia's forestry sector contributes 3.9 percent of Russia's industrial output and just 1.1 percent of GDP. It accounts for only 3.2 percent of national export revenues and employs just 0.6 percent of the work force.

Profit per managed hectare is estimated to be 10 times less than in Scandinavia. And while Russia leads the world in productions of "round" unprocessed timber, it accounts for just 3 percent of the total world timber trade.

"It's absolutely true that there are less and less valuable trees, and this is a problem for the industry," said Novoselov of LesProm, the forestry industry web site.

The industry has started to act. Some 50 timber companies are members of the Russian Global Forestry Trade Network, an informal association using about 30 million hectares of certified renewable forests — about one-fifth of the total under license in Russia.

They include Mondi, a Komi republic-based company that controls some 40 percent of the office paper market.

Diplomatic developments also offer hope. The European Union is about to close its market to any timber that not be proved to be legally sourced.

The EU Directorate of the Environment is currently in talks with the Russian Environment and Natural Resources Ministry to develop a domestic certification system that should help crack down on illegal logging.

Timo Makela, who is director of International Affairs and Environmental Finance at the EU's Directorate General for the Environment, and is leading the negotiations, said he has found the ministry "very receptive" to the idea.

And Russia stands to be the main beneficiary of the program for Reducing Emissions

from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD), a scheme currently being negotiated as part of the international climate talks that would reward countries that preserve their forests.

International diplomacy and regulation is a slow process, however. Almost as slow as an oak tree grows.

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