

Russia's Environmental Apathy Is Down to Cult of Putin

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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In the past month, Russia has slated two of its 10 natural UNESCO World Heritage sites for partial destruction in the name of advancing state policies. Warnings from environmental experts that other revered sites are also in danger have been met by the general public with apathy. While there are a number of factors behind this indifference, a key lesson is that one cannot worship two gods, a point illustrated by the choice in Russia between the environment and the Kremlin.

On Sept. 1, President Vladimir Putin announced Russia's readiness to revive the "western route," a planned gas pipeline to China set to cut through the Golden Mountains of Altai, a network of wildlife reserves in southern Siberia. The area plays host to ancient burial mounds and the endangered snow leopard, a personal favorite of Putin's. Nevertheless, a strategic alliance with China — bound to spite the United States and EU — seems to be worth the cost of a few big cats.

A week later, the Pacific Fleet commenced the creation of a naval base on Wrangel Island in the Arctic Ocean. The last of the woolly mammoths populated the island at the dawn of human civilization, and its uniquely rich tundra landscape is now home to 400 plant species, the occasional polar bear and the reintroduced muskox, furry Arctic beasts known for their curved horns and musky odor. Any human intrusion is likely to shatter the island's fragile polar ecosystem, but Russia is gunning for an Arctic race with 19th-century zeal, seemingly attracted not so much by the prospect of shelf oil and gas (whose extraction could cost as much as \$700 per barrel) as by good old-fashioned geopolitical prestige.

Russia's environmental track record since 2000 falls somewhere between dismal and disappointing. Deforestation occurs at speeds that would seem to imply the forest is a threat to national security; recycling and renewable energy are little more than words in the dictionary; and 5 million tons of oil are spilled each year. Against this backdrop, one could be forgiven for comparing the few token efforts to save attractive animals such as Amur tigers and snow leopards to Potemkin villages — and indeed, the plan to sacrifice the leopards for gas pipes only drives the point home.

It has not always been like this. The Soviet Union had a strong environmental streak, even though it did not always practice what it preached — in this, as in all things. And the early onslaught of perestroika was, in fact, championed by environmentally conscious citizens fed up with pollution and the destruction of nature, though the political wing quickly took over the reformist drive.

So where has it all gone?

It has been noted — by Greenpeace co-founder Patrick Moore, among others — that environmentalism in the Western world has become a sort of religion. Nature is very real, of course, and efforts to save it have an undeniable effect. But from a psychological perspective, environmentalism — like religion — provides devotees with a grand and deeply righteous cause to believe in, as well as the concept of sin, and rules to live by (recycle, save water, reduce the carbon footprint). Adherents can even wage vigilante crusades, freeing lab animals or harassing whalers, though it is possible to just be part of the eco-laity and derive moral satisfaction from turning off the tap while brushing one's teeth.

Meanwhile in Russia, the cult of Putin is stronger than ever. He was named the country's leading moral authority in a recent nationwide poll by the Public Opinion Foundation (see story, Page 4). The preachers of the evening news extol his superhuman virtues; his balaclava-wearing angels fend off fascist fiends in the holy war to return the "ancient Russian land" of Crimea; and the faithful recognize each other by the orange and black of their patriotic St. George ribbons.

This cult has its roots in Russians' entrenched feeling of being overwhelmed by the state — something much larger than them, and as powerful and capricious as the God of the Old Testament. And as long as the state — as personified by Putin — is merciful and generates patriotic bliss for the flock, they are unlikely to question the decision to sacrifice some leopards or tundra moss to advance the power of Russia.

Unlikely, that is, except where environmental destruction actually hits home, a phenomenon that has sparked protests as far out from the capital as the republic of Komi to far-eastern

Primorye — and this in a country where protest activity outside Moscow is practically unheard of.

When the bliss recedes, however, it may be time to hark back to those perestroika-era environmental champions once more.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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