

Siberia – 5,000 km away – Thoughts on nature and national parks

Uwe Wegener

Travel Group and Organization

Since 1995 a soil - ecological excursion through western Siberia has been offered; the author has been able to take part on this excursion twice. The excursion leads by a scientific team from the Institute of Soil Science and Agro chemistry in Novosibirsk under the leadership of Dr. Pavel Barsukov. The coordinator of the German part was Dr. Christian Siewert from the Institute for Ecology, Soil Science Department at the Technical University of Berlin. On this trip, the author wanted to experience not only the immense steppe territory, the Siberian mountain ranges and their the rich plant worlds, but he also wanted to interview the other participants about their impressions of the land and find out their opinions about the wilderness, their views about the national parks in Germany and other large protected areas and similar land uses.

The travel group consisted of 29 participants, who were mainly students, scientists, and teachers of the subjects of ecology, geo-botanic, soil science, geology, and land and forest work management. The participants belonged to the following age groups:

20 – 29 Years:	16 Participants
30 – 39 Years:	4 Participants
40+ Years:	5 Participants

25 participants have given their impressions and comparisons according to protocol.

Travel route through the steppes, forests and mountains

To better understand the questions answered, here is a short description of the travel route.

We arrived in Novosibirsk and traveled northwest to Chebula, experiencing here the steppes and forest steppes and seeing the cultural impact on the land.

A few days later we crossed the Salair Mountains, which are the lower mountains in front of the Altai Mountain Range, and saw the ancient forests of the Black Taiga at various elevations and then traveled on the Ob River up to Barnaul. From here we split away from the river, moving into the forests of the northern Altai and followed essentially the main source river of the Ob, the Katun, which eventually flows next to the Schumisch River. In the middle of the Altai, the forest draws back, giving way to the steppe landscape. In the central Altai we found forests that were normally found in the northern edges or at riverbanks. In the high valley of the Chagan-Uzun, the prairie steppes began to be replaced a desert steppe variation, with yearly rainfall of less than 100 mm; this area of the steppes really is a mountain desert. Above timberline, the high Altai consist of mountain meadows (which in the past were used as pastures), boulder and gravel shoots, snow covered peaks and glaciers. Huge glacial rivers have carved the high mountain areas, digging out moors and mountain lakes. Here is the particularly picturesque Karagem valley, with walls that rise to over 2,500 m. The reliable passes, or “streets“, in the Altai are not often frequented. People generally prefer to follow to the routes through Aktasch, Schemal, Gorni-Altai, and Barnaul.

Contents of the Interview

The interview had four main points:

- How did the Siberian landscape affect the participants and what sorts of emotional reactions did it initiate?
- How was the cultural impact on the territory appreciated?
- How would this experience in nature be ranked?
- What similarities with Central European countryside can be drawn, how can the sense of nature in Germany be furthered, and the acceptance of the national parks be improved?

The interview took place while the participants were still under the impressions of the Siberian landscape and this close daily connection with nature naturally led to the development of a certain group dynamic. It is therefore quite understandable that the wish of more wilderness protection and further development of the national parks in Germany was far stronger here than if this interview had been conducted in Germany.

Evaluation of the Interview

Impressions of the Siberian Landscape

The question as to what about the Siberian countryside the participants found impressive had multiple answers.

With 14 entries, the dimension and width of the countryside was most highly rated, followed then by its undisturbed and primordial wilderness (10 entries). At the same time, the various past influences from mining, water-use, hunting, terrace landscaping, and the some agricultural land use were often observed. Compared with Central Europe however, these anthropological influences were very limited and spread over an enormous territory.

Also amazing was how quickly the landscape changed levels - from the steppe to the forest-steppe, to the ancient forests, and then the prairie steppe followed by the desert steppe in the inner Altai, then desert and finally the snow topped high Altai Mountains which were over 3,300 meters. This variety of the countryside meant there was an incredible range of different plants types, many of which are totally foreign to Central Europe.

The question concerning which part of the territory was the most impressive was answered with 17 entries (multiple answers were possible) the high Altai, which was also hardest place to reach. In second place with 12 entries was the 14 km wide unsettled riverbank of the Ob, near the industrial city of Barnaul. This river has been flowing along its natural course for well over 1,000 years, which in Central Europe is something unimaginable. The area above timberline in the northern Altai and the half desert of the Altai near Chagan-Uzun both received 6 entries, presumably because they have no equivalent in Central Europe.

Camping in the feather grass steppes 80 m above the Ob river also posed a memorable wilderness experience - the seeds from the feather grass kept appearing weeks later in our luggage. The virgin land constantly amazed the soil scientists, which was totally free of the residue from the agricultural chemicals and the slag from previous mining. The activity of the

soil bacteria in the surface soil is so intensive that often 1,5 m high shrubs groves can be totally decomposed over one winter.

Also fascinating was our look into the “ice box” of Siberia – the permafrost, laying 2 m deep, remains year round, even when temperatures climb to over 30°. We could observe the considerable ice build-up, study of the “Pingos” of the shoved ice lenses as the frost erupts out of the ground in Sarlik and finally, as high point, the glacier activities in the Altai. But also here nature is endangered: as the large glacier begins to soften, smaller glaciers are breaking off, leaving patches of open land in between. However it was not only these gigantic natural events that fascinated the participants. We were also impressed by the amazing sunsets and sunrises, the morning fog in the river valleys, the violent storms in the high mountains, the mirages created by the warm air rising over the steppes and sudden color changes over the half desert. The sounds setting of the steppes were also very distinct with the chirping of the crickets. And one had the fragrance of the Artemisia in their nose for weeks after - every steppe formation had their own special scent. All of this was free to experience, whenever and wherever we wanted – time constraints thrown to the wind.

Often the question arose: Could this be how Central Europe looked in between the Ice Ages?

The developing tourism is also proving problematic for the Altai. Heavy off-road vehicles bring pontoon boats to some mountain rivers. Trash and excrement are left behind – for right now it fairly un-noteworthy stuff happening at the edges of this huge mountain range and cannot be compared to the tourism in the European mountains.

Interesting were the replies to the question concerning which areas (including both natural and cultural landscapes) elicited emotional reactions:

- 15 – the vast, unsettled areas of the high mountains
- 13 – the immense steppe regions
- 12 – the banks of the Ob River in the foothills
- 12 – the Altai villages and their surrounding “cultural landscape“
- 10 – the river areas in the mountain range

There were other entries with various answers.

Which emotions did the wilderness areas inspire?

For Central Europeans, a view 20 – 30 km wide without any signs of settlement is almost unthinkable. An unsettled area of 100 km² cannot be found in any of Germany’s national parks. Especially interesting was that, in comparison to the participants’ feelings about these vast areas of Siberia, the West Siberians considered this the “well settled“ area and thought of the middle and high Altai regions as sparsely settled. With 21 entries, this feeling of amazement over the immense size of the area was the strongest emotion. Thereafter followed the feeling of curiosity (12), and also the feeling of joy that was possible to experience this area. The participants were also asked about feelings of loneliness or fear; only one person answered in the affirmative; due to concern if the Russian expedition could lead the group back safely. There were many other positive feelings noted as well, such as awe about nature’s creations, respect and thankfulness, thoughts about eternity, and that which is beyond control. There was also an impression of being small and insignificant. Many of the participants found that in such a surrounding it was far easier to let go of the problems of everyday life, which become so pressing when in Germany.

People coming together

Nature forms people in many different ways. Under the impression of the violent, constantly changing wilderness a group dynamic developed:

- Between the participants
- With the Russian guides
- In coming closer to the Russian people, as far as language would allow.

As to share interests in the group, there was naturally an overall interest in nature, and, in spite of the varying ages, the group grew close very quickly. Evenings around the campfire, trekking together, visiting Banjas (Russian sauna) and almost daily swimming in the lakes and rivers all brought the group together that much more. Through sleeping in tents, or for that matter sleeping in sleeping bags in front of the tents, one also feels much closer to nature. Nothing is prettier than sitting next to a dying campfire and being able to watch the stars without any interference from artificial light. Sadly none of our national parks in Germany are free of this "light pollution."

The Russian team was well prepared in the topics of soil science, geobotany, cultural development, and agricultural and forest management. The management of the excursion has been perfecting itself over the years and the food prepared was extremely good, including the vegetarian dishes. The excursion leaders and the cooks used considerable skill improvising when needed and stayed very easygoing, no matter what situation came up. A troublesome automobile would be taken apart and put back together on the side of the road; cool water was carried in milk cans to douse on the motor when it overheated on the way over the steep slopes of the mountain passes. Vera healed colds and constipation with various herbs and other homeopathic remedies. This competence shown by the leaders led to a general feeling of security, which enabled the participants to fully concentrate on their projects and research or simply sit back and enjoy the surrounding nature.

In several evening seminars the excursion leaders shared with us much information about the settlements in the area, discussed many social questions and also touched on the increasing practice of Shamanism and its coexistence with Buddhism and the Russian Orthodox Church. This excellent preparation combined with the fact some of the participants knew Russian allowed us to come in contact with the Siberian people not just at markets, but also in the little villages along the way and near the Mongolian border. The question remained open as to whether or not the people who have been here for so many generations and live in harmony with nature – considering they now have electricity, radios and some computers - actually are poor. The question can clearly not be answered in comparison with Central European standards. However the situation has significantly improved over the last five years and now one can find a food stores in most places, including the small towns. Much more difficult is the situation in the bigger cities where subsistence farming is not possible.

Along the same lines are the questions concerning how to further lasting land use in the steppe region to feed future population and about producing for special kinds of markets. The massive production areas of "Kolchos" and "Sovchos" gave too little consideration to the natural reality of business and thus collapsed when Soviet subsidization ended. The horrific privatization soon came to an end also however, so the agricultural production of the area as of now has returned to the small, family-run farms, which can only produce for a very limited market. The participants had the impression that the most economically practical course of

action would be developing a state supported (but not regulated) work plan which would help fit the natural working conditions into an effective, lasting business plan.

Also more wilderness in Germany

Also asked was whether or not Germany should establish more wilderness areas (9 affirmative answers). 12 participants did not differentiate between national parks and wilderness areas and 18 people were for more wilderness areas to be added to the already existing nature protection and biosphere areas. Without a doubt the heavy influence of the cultural development in Central Europe are clear, however over a short amount of time many scientific advances have already been accomplished in the national parks. The acceptance of the National Parks is growing slowly – when asked about the value of National Parks, 17 participants chose “moderate“ and only 5 chose “high.“

For the questions about improving the acceptance of the national parks, 22 participants answered that the parks should work harder in the areas of public relations and environmental education. This wish is foremost for the National Parks! 12 participants referred to the importance for better financial support and 5 participants named catastrophes as the trigger for the development of better environmental consciousness. Referred to were the repeated instances of flooding along the Rhine and Oder Rivers (the flooding along the Elbe River had already begun at the time of the questionnaire, but the outcome was not yet known).

Also interesting was the question concerning the effects of cultural history in Germany. 8 participants (mainly students) wished that the “harmonious“ ways people once used land in the 18th Century could be brought back. However, they wanted these forms of land use to be paired with the “living level“ of modern times.

All of the participants were united in recognizing that one cannot attribute all of the modern agricultural development to the market economy (specifically the timber and agricultural businesses). What is labeled “extensively used“ farming areas in West Siberia can barely be compared with the intensively used areas in Germany.

In the “cultural landscape“ of Siberia there is still a relatively soft conversion, which Alodo Leopold painfully missed during his trip to Germany in 1935.

Most land subdivisions in Siberia are not exact, but rather fit into the natural contours of the landscape. The spread of the forests in the Steppes correspond with the ground water supply. The agriculturally used areas stretch out the years of abuse and in good years renews the soil again. This is broken up with areas of forest completely free of human influences, but like the farmed areas, these too are very dependent on the amount of available water. This is in no way a cultural landscape of rice boards.

All of the participants were familiar with the protection process concept of “leaving nature to nature“ and this was ranked by 23 of the people as something positive.

24 participants were of the opinion that the wilderness areas in the biosphere reserves should be increased. At the same time, Central Europe needs to recognize that a biosphere reserve is an important protection category.

Summary

Under the impression of the vast steppe territory of Siberia and the forests, valleys and canyons of the Altai Mountains as well as the high mountain steppe, half-desert, and glacial areas of the Upper Altai, the participants made numerous interesting comparisons with Central Europe concerning both the natural landscape and the cultural use of the land. There was a clear desire for more biosphere reserves, national parks, and wilderness in the culturally marked land of Central Europe.

The natural and cultural landscape of the area traveled to triggered many emotions and feelings, including respect for the astounding achievements of nature and thankfulness for the feelings of eternity. All were feelings that are usually lost in everyday life, except for the instances when one takes the time to rediscover these impressions in the national parks – like one enjoys in the national parks in America.

This wish for more wilderness areas and national parks is coupled with the desire to improve the overall acceptance for these areas. Running parallel to this is the demand for an overall lasting ecological use of the land, also outside of the protected areas with scattered “wilderness islands“ like little biotope oasis’s in a desert of farmland.

The goal of the questionnaire was also to act as a stimulus for future travel, lectures, and travel organization in Siberia. Many, many thanks to the Russian team taking part on the excursion, especially to Elena Smolentseva, Vera Phrolova, Pavel Barsukov, Nikolai Lashinski, Sascha Babenko, Dmitri Chernikh and also for the excellent organization which mapped out our route of travel, the scientific assistance, the care, for the fulfillment of countless personal wishes, and finally for the travel equipment.

To Accompany the Article from Wegener – National Park Newsletter

1. Virgin forests, mainly consisting of Siberian Fir, over the Seminskij Pass in the Northern Altai.

Photo: Wegener

2. Near timberline in the High Altai in Altaisky Zapovednik

Photo: Wegener

3. The Altai – Akelei (*Aquilegia altacia*) above timberline

Photo: Wegener

4. The desert area of Chagan-Uzun (which receives less than 100 mm of precipitation) in the southern Altai

Photo: Wegener

5. The group during a geological presentation about permafrost, in the high valley of Chagan-Uzun at 30°C.

Photo: Wegener

6. / 7. The group during the ascent of a glacier in the High Altai

Photo: Wegener

8. “Group dynamic” – the evening around the camp fire at the steppes and in the mountains

Photo: Wegener