

Arctic Indigenous Peoples and Traditional Way of Life

RAIPON contribution to the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting, Inari, 9-10 October 2002

Traditional lifestyle of indigenous peoples is the commonly accepted way of their life and their specific livelihood, based on historic experience of indigenous peoples and their ancestors in the sphere of land and natural resources use, traditional social organisation of their communities, unique ancient culture, continuous practice of the traditions, religion and beliefs... (an excerpt from the Law "On Guarantees of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in the Russian Federation")

The Sustainable Development of the Traditional Lifestyle (SDTL) has been proposed as a solution to the problems, which indigenous peoples of the Russian North, Siberia and the Far East have to tackle with. "Our destiny is in our hands and we are willing to continue and develop our traditional way of life" - this message was discussed and approved in 2001 by the Congress of the indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and Far East in the form of Charter of Indigenous Peoples of Russia.

Role of indigenous peoples in the process of sustainable development was thoroughly discussed at the recent Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. It becomes evident that they are unified and resolute in their political position in respect to sustainable development. This position has been expressed in the proposal submitted to the Declaration of the Summit:

"We reaffirm the vital role of the indigenous peoples in sustainable development"

Main Principles of the STDL include the following notions:

1. Indigenous peoples as well as their relevant lifestyles are subject to and objects of development. Here we consider concept of "development", distinguished from the concept of "preservation". The terms "protection" or "conservation" are characteristic for stabilized conditions and could be applied to the natural objects, such as nature, animal and plant life. The development of nature is evolution, development of social phenomena, including peoples is a transition from past to future, called history. Such transition could be very rapid, and if it is not rooted in the past, it will inevitably fail in the future.
2. Economic development, scientific and technical progress is both necessary and desired. But new environment and living conditions may cause new problems and may negatively affect the human or environmental health as more conservative and evolutionary systems. In last decade history and values undergone serious revision and social transformations came through all kinds of assessments, criticizing the so-called "life standards", such as summary national product per capita, number of TV sets or fridges in a standard home, number of rooms, cars etc. We witness the changes in values and image orientations at present. It is more widely recognized now that forms and ways of life may be highly diversified, development itself might be regarded as synonym of evolution and distinguished from the technocratic model of development. Sustainable development is associated with the environmental protection and social justice, and indigenous peoples have an extensive knowledge and common practice that is worth of consideration and appreciation. Indigenous peoples have inherited a rich culture, including that of social and ecological behavior, their ancestors accepted a code of conduct that may serve as a basis for sustainable development. This code is the core of traditional knowledge and way of life.
3. Incorporation of traditional knowledge, based on rich spiritual intellect and practice, is a precondition for elaboration of the strategy of sustainable development, in particular, in relation to indigenous peoples and their traditional lifestyle. When we speak of indigenous

culture, we usually mean the native language, but first of all, we need to refer to conceptual vision of indigenous peoples – traditional philosophy, knowledge and wisdom. Traditional way of life of indigenous peoples includes subsistence economy, environmentally sustainable land use and utilization of natural resources; these practical skills ensured preservation of the natural and cultural heritage in the vast areas of the North for the future generations, and have protected intact and pristine nature for the global civilization. We are proud of aboriginal resilience and adaptation capabilities, insuring survival in extremities of harsh climate and fragile Arctic ecosystems. In fact indigenous peoples have created efficient subsistence economy and continue to develop it in a sustainable manner.

4. Holistic vision and perception, peculiar features of traditional philosophy are the fundamentals of the concept of sustainable development elaborated by indigenous peoples. Human being is a part of nature, a component of environment – this is the traditional attitude of the aboriginal peoples. Holistic approach is an ideal for the modern, integrated and highly specialized and differentiated science, that is still not capable “to grasp” a problem in its complexity and propose an integrated way for its solution. Integration of the science and traditional knowledge would be mutually beneficial and is highly needed. Science and traditional knowledge are to nurture each other and this cooperation might create new prospects for sustainable development of the traditional way of life.
5. Development of traditional way of life foresees adaptation and integration of new types of activity into traditional subsistence of indigenous peoples. Such new types of activity at present may include:

- integrated social and environmental monitoring, including reflecting changes in population structure, employment, biodiversity, climate etc., based on the integration of traditional knowledge and western science;
- environmental management, rational land use and utilization of natural resources;
- organization and participation in environmental impact assessments; public education and awareness;
- protection of the natural and cultural heritage; establishment and management of the protected and traditional land use areas;
- organization and servicing extreme, ecological and ethnological tourism;
- processing and marketing of the traditional food and by-products with the use of high and environmentally sound technologies;
- development of alternative energy sources;
- traditional transportation and its further improvement;
- modern communication, networking etc.

In Rovaniemi during the Arctic Council anniversary we made our first attempt to share with you the perception of sustainable development as seen by indigenous peoples in Russia. We made this attempt to show the possibilities for integration of traditional indigenous knowledge and scientific simulation techniques. The following Table 1 presents our concept for five inter-related goals of sustainable development.

This Table, designed as a tool for defining specific tasks of the sustainable development for indigenous peoples at the global, regional or local levels, takes into consideration the nowadays situation, problems and objectives of the sustainable lifestyle development. In addition to the commonly identified 3 pillars of the sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) we find it necessary to introduce two other aspects, highly important for indigenous peoples – spiritual (cultural) and decision-making (political) spheres.

One of the new activities in the decision-making sphere is an involvement and active participation of the indigenous peoples in the Environmental and Social Impact Assessments.

The capacity of indigenous peoples in ecological observations and impact assessment can be demonstrated by the survey, that RAIPON have organized on the basis of the UNEP/GRID-Arendal project on “Local Health and Environmental Reporting by indigenous peoples in Russian Arctic”. Method of data collecting in this survey has been selected on the assumption that structured interviewing will be a rapid and sufficiently reliable instrument for documenting perception of indigenous persons on human impacts and negative environmental consequences for their traditional way of life and well-being. First results of such structured interviewing demonstrated great concerns of indigenous peoples about their lifestyle and changing environment. Computer database with 459 questionnaires filled-in by indigenous respondents from 10 settlements located in different geographical, ecological and ethnic regions is now available at the RAIPON office in Moscow.

In the preliminary report on this project 6 settlements with approximately 50 interviews in each community have been selected for the representative analysis (see Fig. 1 - Map). All of them are formally registered as “natsional’nyi posyolok” - areas of traditional land use and lifestyle for indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and Far East. However, they greatly differ in their physical environment, geographical location, size, proportion and ethnic structure of indigenous population, accessibility, communication facilities, administrative status etc.(see Fig. 2) In these 6 settlements live approximately 8,000 people, including over 3,000 indigenous persons. The survey covered every 10th of the indigenous residents, or 15 per cent of the adult indigenous population. Eleven different indigenous nations within six multi-ethnic communities are registered in the pilot study.

Fig. 2. Main Characteristics of the Ethnic Settlements

The largest settlement is the regional center Lovozero, located in 200 km from city of Murmansk (Kola Peninsula) and connected to the latter by a good automobile road. This is the principal residence area of Saami people in Russia (23% of the total population in the settlement and about 80% of the nation’s population).

Next in size settlement is Ugut with the surrounding villages (communities) administered by the Ugut district authorities, it is located at the south of Khanty-Mansiysky autonomous region. Town of Surgut, the nearest regional center, is over 150 km away and accessible by river route. Ugut district population comprises 2,600 persons, including over 900 Khanty people (35%). The local Khanty people live in isolated communities and families migrate around Ugut at distances over 200 km from the settlement.

Settlement of Krasny Yar (about 650 inhabitants) is located in the Pozharsky district in the north of Primorsky kray, over 100 km from the regional center of Luchegorsk. This is the principal settlement of Udege people (80% of the local population and half of the total ethnic group), there live representatives of the Nanais ethnic group as well.

Kovran settlement (about 400 residents) is under Tigil district administration in the middle part of the Kamchatka peninsula, located not far from the Okhotsk Sea coast. Communication and roads are provided via Ust’Khairuzovo – the seashore settlement. This is also almost mono-ethnic community (80 % are Itelmen people).

Mongol settlement in the lower part of Amur river (Khabarovsk region) is a home for some 150 persons, almost half of them (55%) are indigenous Ulchi people, along with other indigenous groups. To make a representative survey (around 50 questionnaires) several respondents were added from the adjacent larger settlement of Savinskoe (over 400 residents, including 30% of indigenous population).

Kuyumba settlement of Baikit district in Evenkiysky autonomous region is located in the heart of Siberia and geographically centered in Russia. It is over 100 km from the regional town, accessible by river transportation (motor boat). Over half (57%) of the total population is Evenk people.

The structure of the questionnaire in this survey suits well to our tasks of local reporting and a review of indigenous observations oriented not only to the registration, but mainly to the assessment of social vulnerability and the elaboration of the local adaptation strategies and recommendations on regional environmental policy. We very much hope that further research will identify specific sensitive issues in Arctic traditional lifestyle systems, the impacts that are likely to result in adverse consequences, and strategies to avoid or cope with such impacts.

In this presentation we are going to point out just one aspect of the indigenous people's perception - human impact and its adverse effects upon well-being and traditional land use.

Survey reflected that environmental problems are of great concern to the indigenous peoples, while speaking about their health conditions. For example, in Lovozero, (Fig. 1.1.2) ecological factors, affecting health occupy 3rd place (15% of responses) after the salaries (17%), and administrative assistance to the medical service (16 %). It is interesting to note, that 14 % of responses in Lovozero stressed also the importance of local and community self-governance. The respondents believe that this governance is to be more active and self-esteemed for improvement of the local health conditions. For Saami people (Fig. 1.1.2), the awareness "of ecology" (physical environment state) is greater than the importance of housing and living conditions. Only 7% of responses rank housing and living conditions as an important factor for health improvement.

Following analysis of the survey data will help us to distil the indigenous opinion on human impacts negatively affecting lifestyles of the indigenous peoples.

Majority of responses in all settlements to the question "What types of human impacts on the physical environment in your opinion most of all affect the well-being in your settlement?", named poaching. This is in agreement with the multiple responses that decreasing populations of animal and plant species are a serious problem. This latter evidence might be also associated with the climate or environmental changes, but primarily it is due to poaching.

Poaching is a very serious socio-economic factor in the Russian Arctic. It is also the main reason for the loss of biodiversity. Accordingly, the most efficient instruments for its control are of economic character. Five types of poaching and corresponding control measures could be identified:

- social poaching caused by social factors, for example, population (in particular indigenous peoples) marginalization. The indigenous peoples, deprived of subsistence and their traditional lands, lose their capability to sustain the local biodiversity, this tendency further leads to undermining of their culture and eventually, to either marginalization or assimilation. In the media and research there are publications about large-scale social poaching in the Murmansk oblast;
- commercial and recreational poaching – popular among the employees of the big extraction companies. The indigenous people have to oppose the ravaging hunting and fishing leading to local extinction of valuable species inhabiting their traditional lands. Bad reputation of the hunting association established by the "Lukoil" company, is an example;
- trophy poaching (the VIP and high officials elite). It was reported by several local papers about the helicopter hunting of the former Chukotka Governor and his aids;
- criminal poaching as a "shadow" economic activity. It was mentioned in some reports from the Nenets Autonomous region where extinction of the valuable fish stocks in the Belaya river is of a special concern. For fishing salmon the helicopters, acoustic and night vision devices are used (as well as armed personnel engaged);
- military poaching - associated with the poverty of the Army is becoming a significant social and economic factor in the environmental degradation of the tundra-Taiga ecosystem and its biodiversity. According to printed sources, hungry Russian soldiers poached wild reindeer to extinction at the northern end of the Kamchatka peninsula. The reindeer population in that area began to shrink in the 1990s following the demise of the Soviet Union and sharp

decline in its military budget. Financial problems prompted local commanders to look for ways to supplement rations of the soldiers.

Ranked after poaching are forest fires caused by humans. Poaching (along with the growing number of tourists) increases the pressure on ecosystems and due to a lack of environmental education and code of conduct contributes to forest fires.

Frequency and scale of forest fires, either natural or man-induced, are on rise. It is estimated to day that in the Tyumen region alone, which is now being intensively explored for natural resources, over 1.5 million ha of reindeer pastures have been destroyed by fire. One of the causes of escalation of fires in the tundra, forested tundra and the taiga zones might also be climate warming, especially consequent hot and dry seasons. Drought as a serious environmental disaster is perceived in all 6 settlements, but mostly in Khabarovsk kray (Mongol), Siberia (Kuyumba) and Russian Far East (Kovran). Climate change and especially summer droughts could increase the frequency and severity of fires, which further accelerate permafrost thawing.

Industrial timber logging is occupying 3rd place. In recent decades, commercial logging operations have advanced closer to the forested tundra across much of the boreal region. For example, in north-west Russia, logging operations were extended between the 1960s and the 1990s. The transformation of the northern parts of the taiga zone into a man-made forested tundra zone is going-on in Russia. Advanced logging has been an impoverishing factor for both biological diversity and reindeer grazing. Since the 1960s, forest management practices consisting of clear-cut logging have predominated in Russia.

Clearing of forests for firewood is on the 4th place. The fuel deficit is a reason pushing the inhabitants of Chukotka to illegal cuttings. Very serious ecological problem arise with cutting of forests for fuel in Kovran, Lovozero and Kuyumba (see [Table 2](#)).

The next one is water pollution by industrial wastes and discharges - also a severe negative human impact for most of settlements. Massive toxic contamination and pollution of water bodies, dwelling grounds for aquatic animals, destruction of fisheries and fish spawning places are damages clearly traceable in the traditional activities of the local population. This problem is most acute in Mongol. It is interesting to note, that the problem of water pollution, as it is perceived by the respondents, does not raise health concerns (in most settlements, with the exception of Mongol, indigenous peoples do not complain of the quality of the drinking water, usually taken from wells. But the most serious concern, apart from water pollution, is the contamination of the traditional food, especially fish.

Below we list the “Negative human impacts on the well-being of residents of the settlements.” ([Fig.3.7.1-6](#)). Three impacts of primary importance in each settlement are listed according to the opinion of the residents of each settlement.

Negative human impacts on the well-being of residents in settlements

Lovozero: Poaching - water pollution (both housing and industrial) – tourism;

Ugut: Poaching – air pollution - industrial water pollution;

Kyumba: Forest fires – clearing forests for firewood - water pollution (industrial and housing);

Kovran: Forest fires - clearing forests for firewood - poaching;

Krasny Yar: Poaching- industrial logging - road construction;

Mongol: Industrial logging - water contamination - forest fires.

Synergy of many factors inflicts environmental degradation and decline of traditional activities, leading to a universally dramatic situation for the peoples of the North. From the [Table 3](#)

“Consequences of human impacts on nature for traditional lifestyle”, we can see that most responses fall under the category “less fish”. Indigenous residents directly connect this fact with human impact on natural environment and these responses gained the highest rank in settlements of Lovozero, Kyumba, Krasny Yar, and Mongol. Fish is of great significance in the diet of the indigenous peoples. Among the ecological factors affecting this source of traditional food, principal role is played by the water pollution, causing decrease in fish population, and among human impacts, as aforementioned, poaching.

The second highest ranked problem for all surveyed settlements is the low harvest of wild plants. Wild plants and by-products play very important role in the diet of the indigenous peoples. In Kovran this problem is of highest priority and in Kyumba and Mongol main concerns are connected with the decreasing fish populations.

The next in rank problem is a low harvest of cultivated crops. Indigenous peoples nowadays are strongly dependent on the vegetables (potatoes in particular) that they grow on their own cottage land. That is why they indicate acid rains as an environmental threat, negatively affecting their harvests of vegetables. But there is a striking contrast between settlements in the responses to question on the most severe consequences of human impacts on their traditional subsistent economy. In Ugut, for example, where traditional hunting grounds dramatically shrink due to oil extraction, less harvest of wild plants, disappearance of wild animals, and less fish are most detrimental to the traditional lifestyle. In Lovozero, after the “less fish” response there immediately appears factors connected with the reindeer herding: pastures degradation; pasture areas shrink; reindeer herd decrease. Destruction of the traditional lifestyles of indigenous peoples is especially visible in the tundra and forested tundra zones. By 1998, the population of domestic reindeer in Russia had been reduced to almost half of the 1990 level. One of the main causes of this sharp decline is the degradation and shrinking of the winter reindeer pastures in forested tundra due to deforestation caused by logging and industrial pollution.

In general, this pilot survey revealed the outstanding capacity of the indigenous peoples to observe and register physical environmental changes interfering with their traditional lifestyle, to identify driving forces and transformations leading to negative impacts. This capacity could be enhanced in the new types of the sustainable activities for indigenous communities. It could be effectively applied in the EIA, social and ecological monitoring, elaboration of the local programs of sustainable development and the regional environmental policy.

Acknowledgements

This presentation has been prepared through the commitment, generosity and support of many indigenous persons who entrusted local knowledge and their environmental perception to RAIPON. We would like to express our great thanks to Dr. Nikita Kaplin, RAIPON vice-president, co-ordinator of the joint RAIPON and UNEP/GRID-Arendal project “Local Health and Environmental Reporting by Indigenous peoples in the Russian Arctic” who managed to collect extensive data and conducted a model survey in a very tight time frame and with communication and financial constraints. We appreciate principal input from Dr. Tatiana Vlassova, expert to RAIPON and leader of the NorthSet project, (Institute of Geography, Russ.Acad.Sci.), who ably responded to our many inquiries and shared her ideas, knowledge and skills on data analysis with us, and finally, extend our gratitude to Mr.Pavel Sulyandziga and Ms.Tamara Semenova who made their contributions to this venture.