

TAHOE-BAIKAL INSTITUTE
Buryatia Project Report
“Save Baikal Together: Developing Ecotourism in the Pribaikalsky Region”
Summer 2004

Six participants from the Tahoe Baikal Institute’s (TBI) Summer Environmental Exchange and a representative from the Geser hotel-tourist complex in the Buryat Republic contributed to the project “Save Baikal Together: Developing Ecotourism in the Pribaikalsky Region.” The project was conducted August 4–16 in the Buryat Republic.

Participants

- 1) Ivan Bratsev – project leader and marketing manager at the Geser hotel in Ulan Ude, Buryat Republic, Russia.
- 2) Krista Goff – TBI participant and recent graduate of Macalester College (St. Paul, MN) with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Russian, History, and Russian, Central and Eastern European Studies. She previously interned at the nonprofit organization Connect US/Russia (Minneapolis, MN).
- 3) Megan Kelly – TBI Participant and recent graduate of Vassar College (Poughkeepsie, NY) with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Anthropology.
- 4) Evgeny Suprunenko – TBI volunteer and third-year student in the physics department at T.G. Shevchenko State University in Kiev, Ukraine.
- 5) Stanislav Suprunenko – TBI participant and graduate student in environmental economics at Sumsky State University in Kiev, Ukraine. He currently works for the Center for Clean Technologies and the social organization “Living Planet” in Kiev.
- 6) Tatiana Trufanova – TBI participant and graduate student at the Geography Institute of the Siberian Department of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Irkutsk, Russia. Her specialty is social, economic and political geography.

Project Goal

Our project goal was to support development of ecotourism in the Pribaikalsky Region of the Buryat Republic (Buryatia). Ecotourism has become more popular in recent years. We believe it is preferable to “regular” tourism because ecotourism emphasizes the preservation and protection of the host region’s environment and biodiversity. In this spirit, we believe that ecotourists are those who positively contribute to the economic, social and cultural development of the place they are visiting; minimally and positively impact the local environment; and protect future generations’ ability to fulfill the same basic needs and goals. Ultimately, ecotourism is sustainable tourism.

In this spirit, we wanted to fulfill the following project criteria: support efforts to protect the Pribaikalsky environment and biodiversity; help lay the groundwork for a local ecotourism and recreation industry that will succeed economically and environmentally; and widely and responsibly disseminate environmental and ethnographic information about the Pribaikalsky region.

Methods

We identified three main tasks for our project: identify and describe tourist attractions, study the recreational potential of the region, and promote a heightened awareness of Lake Baikal's environmental issues among the local population. From our base on Lake Kotokel, we traveled to six villages in the Pribaikalsky region and met with governmental representatives, directors of health and tourist resorts, tour operators, teachers, activists from community organizations and others. We also visited localities of cultural, historical and recreational interest in and around these six villages.

Schedule and Travel Route

4 August – Ulan Ude and Lake Kotokel – arrived in Ulan Ude from Irkutsk and traveled to the Geser resort on Lake Kotokel, our home until 12 August. We outlined our project and schedule during an evening planning session.

5 August – Turuntaevo – met with the head of the Pribaikalsky Regional Administration, the deputy head of the department of social issues, ecology experts, the department of natural resources, the leader of the folklore performance group “Fantaziya,” the department of hunting and wildlife, hotel workers, bank employees, postal employees, and visited two archaeological sites near Turuntaevo.

6 August – Baturino - met with a nun at the Women's Monastery, climbed up Poklonny Mountain to survey a site of religious and cultural importance, and visited the neighboring village, Nesterovo, to confirm what services were available for tourists.

9 August – Turka – met with the village administration, owner of the Guest House, employees at the forestry service (who also lead local environmental organizations), and toured the local museum.

10 August – Goryachinsk – met with the head doctor and director of the Goryachinsk health resort, the organizers of horse tours in Goryachinsk and agricultural tourism in the Pribaikalsky region.

11 August –Gremyachinsk – met with the local administration, the head of the state fishery service, tour operators and fishermen.

12 August – Lake Kotokel – met with the administration at the Army and Geser resorts on Lake Kotokel.

13 August – Ulan Ude – moved back to the Geser Hotel in Ulan Ude to work on our report.

14 August – Ulan Ude and Selenga Delta – took a break and trip to the Selenga Delta.

15 August – Ulan Ude – worked on report during the day and departed for Irkutsk on the evening train.

16 August – Irkutsk – worked on project report.

17 August – worked on project report and prepared presentation.

Results

We collected and systemized information about initiatives for environmental education and preservation in the Pribaikalsky region, and the current regional tourism infrastructure. We used this information to analyze the region's recreational potential and write a bilingual (Russian, English) Pribaikalsky Region travel booklet. We hope this guide will be made available in Russia and abroad.

Discussion

The ecotourism industry and ethos is currently underrepresented in both the social and economic sectors, but the Pribaikalsky Region has many historical, cultural, and environmental resources. This is a positive indicator for the future of the regional ecotourism industry. Despite the fact that ecotourism is presently quite underdeveloped, we noted that several environmental initiatives and programs are gathering support. These are a few examples:

- The Pribaikalsky Regional Administration has undertaken several projects to establish a more extensive recreation infrastructure and further develop ecotourism options. This includes support for local initiatives and new environmental programs. One example is the administration's ongoing support for summer ecological camps for local youths. They would like these camps to be part of an international exchange network in the future.
- Some Pribaikalsky NGOs are also developing and expanding environmental education programs and projects for local youths.

The TBI-Geser project has also had a number of practical applications which have been useful for the Pribaikalsky region:

- The informational booklet will eventually be distributed in both Russia and the USA. Information about the region's cultural and historical heritage and recreational opportunities will reach a wider audience and hopefully generate more business for the developing Pribaikalsky ecotourism industry.
- The project has encouraged local public and private organizations to work on old and new environmental projects. Participants also helped regional organizations connect with one another. We hope this will lead to new partnerships and stronger projects.
- This project has initiated a new round of cultural and environmental exchanges between the Pribaikalsky region and the international community. We hope that these informational exchanges and connections continue to grow and expand.

As participants in this project, we have educationally, culturally, and cognitively benefited in several ways from our participation:

- Through our exploration of the region's history and environment, we gained a deeper understanding of local culture. We also learned a lot about how Lake Baikal shapes regional communities.

- We honed our research and linguistic skills because we daily collected and processed data in two languages.

Recommendations for further work

We recommend that the following steps be taken to support this project's goal of developing ecotourism in the Pribaikalsky region:

- Our effort to support the local tourist infrastructure and bring attention to the Pribaikalsky region should be expanded to include other villages, localities, and organizations in and around the region. Suggestions include: the Holy Nose Peninsula, Chiverkusky Bay and Baikalsky Bor Children's Camp.
- International organizations, such as TBI, should continue to work with the local governmental bodies and NGOs to help them gather information, make contacts and develop projects. Further work should be done to support local environmental NGOs. Specifically, support of their programs and activities should be provided in the form of informational and organizational assistance. This can include helping to organize or run a summer environmental camp on Lake Baikal, or partnering with a local organization on a restoration project in Turka.
- A more detailed study of folk crafts in the Pribaikalsky region, and the craftspeople and schoolchildren involved in the production of these goods.
- Information gathered in future projects should also be published and disseminated. This information is a valuable resource and we believe it has the potential to encourage future exchanges between Lake Baikal, Russia, the United States, and other nations.