

In the Country of Volcanoes

For the indigenous peoples of the Kamchatka Peninsula, the 'fish province' of the Russian Federation, fighting for their rights to access fishing resources is crucial

There are 40 communities of indigenous peoples living in Russia who are labelled under Russian law as "Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation". This is a collective term for peoples with a population of fewer than 50,000 each, who inhabit two-thirds of the Russian territory in the Arctic and Asian parts of the country. The number of indigenous peoples of the Russian North is less than

the Bering Sea and the Pacific Ocean. Kamchatka is called 'the country of volcanoes', because the peninsula is located in the seismic zone. Kamchatka is also the 'fish province' of Russia as it is well known for the wealth of its fish and other aquatic bio-resources. Kamchatka is one of the regions of the Russian Federation with a highly developed fishing industry. The fishing industry dominates the Kamchatka's economy. The Okhotsk, Bering and Pacific coastal waters of the Kamchatka Peninsula belong to the most productive fishing zones of the world's oceans. The share of the Kamchatka region in the total fish harvest of the Russian Far East is more than 32 per cent and comprises about 21 per cent of the total fish harvest of the Russian Federation. Kamchatka's fish-processing industry produces about 700,000 tonnes of fish and fish products annually.

The main rivers of the peninsula are renowned for their abundance of salmon. The local indigenous peoples depend on hunting, reindeer herding and gathering but, historically, fishing has played a key role in their traditional sources of livelihood. Their most important occupation during the summer is salmon fishing.

Local stakeholders

At the same time, the fishing industry is the basis of the general local economy and is one of the main contributors to the regional budget. Thus, access to fishing grounds and fish quotas is a crucially important issue for all local stakeholders, including the government, businesses and indigenous peoples. The indigenous communities have become unwilling competitors with the big fishing

0.2 per cent of the Russian population in total (approximately 250,000 to 300,000). Their traditional livelihood is based on fishing, hunting, reindeer husbandry and gathering. More than two-thirds of them continue to live in rural areas where these activities are still indispensable sources of food and income. Due to their traditional livelihoods, most of the indigenous peoples of the Russian North, especially those who preserve a nomadic way of life, need much more territory for subsistence than other populations of the country. The indigenous peoples of Russia remain among the poorest of the population in terms of social and economic development, as well as life expectancy, which is far below the national average.

The Kamchatka Peninsula, located in the northeast of Eurasia, is washed by the waters of the Sea of Okhotsk,

The indigenous peoples of Russia remain among the poorest of the population...

This article is by **Dmitry Berezikov** (arctic.consult@yahoo.com), of Arctic Consult, Tromsø, Norway

companies since they both depend on the same resources. Often the indigenous rights to fishing resources in Kamchatka are violated by the government or commercial companies who grab the traditional indigenous peoples' fishing grounds, practise an inequitable distribution of fishing quotas which favours big business, and develop unfair legislation that restricts the indigenous peoples' rights on fishing.

Consider the case of the Itelmen community of Kovran, which is located in the northwest of the Kamchatka Peninsula on the coast of the Sea of Okhotsk. The Itelmens are the most ancient people in Kamchatka. The oldest settlements discovered by archaeologists show that Itelmens have been living in Kamchatka for about 15,000 years. Since ancient times the main occupation of the Itelmens has been salmon and smelt fishing in the Kamchatka rivers, and fish has traditionally been a year-round source of nutrition.

During the summer, the Itelmens used to catch and dry the fish, and sour it in special pits for the long winter ahead. For smelt fishing, they would use devices that trap the fish without human intervention. The soured fish was fed to the dogs which have historically been the only form of local transportation. The Itelmens also hunted seals along the seashore and bears in the forests. Their main holidays were during the spring celebrations when the first salmon appeared in the rivers, followed, in the fall, by the great Alhalalalay holiday dedicated to giving thanks to the Earth for its gifts.

The Itelmens have lived across the whole territory of the Kamchatka Peninsula, from the north to the south. Due to conflicts, diseases and assimilation into the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, the Itelmens' population declined dramatically over time. Today there are only a small number of Itelmens. Only 3,000 Itelmens live in Kamchatka today. Kovran village, which was a centre for the forcible resettlement of indigenous population in the Soviet regime, is the only community

where the Itelmens form a majority of the population—around 300. The Itelmens' language is fast disappearing and there are only a few alive who can speak Itelmen. Today the main language of communication is Russian.

During the Soviet era, the main population of Kovran village worked in the local state fishing enterprise (*kolkhoz*) which served the public needs of the Soviet state, drawing on the Itelmens' traditional fishing grounds and tools. As compensation, the state provided salaries, education and other state services for the local population. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the economy crashed, the Itelmens' fishing enterprises were privatized and they had to learn to survive without any support from the state.

At the start of the 1990s, the local people decided to organize their own fisheries enterprise and fish for themselves on their traditional fishing grounds on the Kovran river. They delivered their catch to the processing factories in the neighboring Ust-Khayrusovo village. They got back half their catch as frozen fish, which they then sold to commercial ships around the Kamchatka coast.

The Itelmens also started to restore their ancient traditional cultural ceremonies like the Celebration of the First Fish or the Alkhalalalay holiday, which attracted researchers, and tourists. In 1998 the community

OLEG ZAPOROTSKY



Kovran village fishers setting up *Zapor*, the traditional indigenous fishing tool for Kamchatka in Kovran river

teamed up with the regional government to establish a traditional territory, called “Thsanom”, which became the first official territory in Russia specially designed for the development of indigenous peoples’ traditional economy, culture and governance. Based on that experience, the Federal Government of Russia later developed the special federal framework law “On territories of traditional nature use of small-numbered indigenous peoples of the Russian North, Siberia and the Far East”

The community, in co-operation with the regional government and environmental NGOs, began to develop their own plans for the local economy and governance of Kovran, including establishing a network of information centres, educational programmes, and security posts to fight illegal fishing.

Soon dry salted smelt fish became one of the most popular snacks in Russia. Prices began to rise and in 1999 the community decided to build its own fish factory in Kovran village to increase incomes. The regional governor supported the idea and the community even received some financial support from the state to buy the necessary equipment to freeze the fish. The case of the Kovran community and the Thsanom territory has since been looked up to as an example of the sustainable development of indigenous peoples in Russia.

However, in 2001 a new governor, who was a geologist and the head of the largest regional gold mining company, using a loophole in the federal legislation, rescinded the creation of the Thsanom territory, thereby undermining the self-governance of the indigenous community of Kovran. The community appealed to the courts and after several levels of litigation, in 2003 the European Court of Human Rights ordered the restoration of the Thsanom territory and the re-establishment of the territorial self-governance of the Itelmen community. But procedural technicalities prevented the court

from ruling on land issues, which it does not cover.

Another stroke of misfortune hit the Itelmen community later when it lost the official right to fish in the Kovran river. Since the river is not rich in salmon, for many years the big commercial fishing companies showed no interest in fishing there. But following the rise of the price of smelt fish, big business started to pay attention to the river and in 2003 the authorities decided to open up the river to commercial fishing. After years of fighting for commercial tenders, in 2008 the local community lost the right to fish in the river as the fishing tender was won by a large commercial fishing company. Once the commercial exploitation of the Kovran river began, the stocks of smelt fish started decreasing dramatically. The Itelmens now have only the right to fish for food on the seashore far away from their own village. Their native river now belongs to big business. The indigenous community has lost the right to sell fish and will be able to catch it only for their own consumption.

Today most of the male population of the village have no official jobs, as commercial companies prefer to hire fishermen from other regions. Alcoholism is rampant and the suicide rate in Kovran is several times higher than the Russian average.

New amendments to the Russian federal law on fishery in 2008 deprived the indigenous communities of their right to access the fishing grounds and required them to submit their bids as commercial tenders. A large number of indigenous communities across the Russian North, Siberia and the Far East have lost their fishing grounds because of this change. Many fishing grounds previously designated for indigenous peoples were re-classified as industrial fishing grounds and leased to third parties through commercial tenders.

Populated territories

The Itelmens, who live in the most populated and most assimilated territories of the Kamchatka Peninsula,

face additional challenges in pursuing fishing. In 2009 a new federal governmental decree was adopted that delineated the places of living and traditional nature use of the indigenous small-numbered peoples of the Russian Federation. According to the decree, only on territories included in the list can indigenous peoples enjoy rights to their traditional livelihood and lifestyle. There are some indigenous regions in Russia that have not been included into the federal list. An example is the Murmansk region where only some municipalities are included in the list. Sami who live in these municipalities have the right to fish, while other Sami who live in municipalities elsewhere have no such right.

According to the census of 2010, the total indigenous population of Kamchatka is 14,368 people (4.5 per cent of the total Kamchatka population). The federal government decree of 2009 marked the whole territory of Kamchatka as a place for traditional living and traditional nature use of indigenous peoples, including those in the most populated southern districts.


That was a great victory for Kamchatka's indigenous movement, which has been fighting for this goal for 20 years, ever since the fall of the Soviet Union. Soviet officialdom did not consider the southern districts of Kamchatka as territories where indigenous peoples live as these districts are the most assimilated areas of the Kamchatka region. Today, however, about a third of the total indigenous population can be found there. The 2009 federal government decree confirmed the validity of the indigenous peoples' claims on access to the fishery resources in the southern Kamchatka districts.

Under pressure from the big fishing commercial companies, the Kamchatka authorities organized an official petition to the federal government requesting a change in the federal decree to exclude the southern Kamchatka districts from the federal list, arguing that the decision of the federal government would lead to conflicts between the

indigenous peoples and 'authorized users' of natural resources (namely, the commercial companies that won access to the fishing grounds on commercial tenders) who are the main contributors to the regional economy and budget. Another argument put forward was that the indigenous peoples in the southern districts amount to less than 1 per cent of the total population. The companies also pointed out that these territories are rich in oil and are important for the security of the state, and so including them in the list could "encourage separatism among indigenous peoples" and could be "a threat to the energy security of the region".

To date, however, there has been no attempt to exclude the southern territories from the list as the authorities are afraid of massive protests by the indigenous population. But they have officially announced that a decision will be taken by the end of 2016. The indigenous communities of Kamchatka are understandably fearful of a negative decision, especially considering that in the recent past the Russian Federation has adopted several laws that prohibit protest actions.

The current legislation on self-governance and access to resources and lands is ineffective and not backed by the court system. Adding to the constraint are the restrictive changes to the legislation on resources and human rights legislation that have crept in over the last year.

Indigenous communities of the Kamchatka region can be effectively integrated into the business chains as the primary fishing links in remote regions—provided the legislation guarantees the communities' rights to access the fishing resources. If such rights are guaranteed, the communities can not only contribute to the fishing business but also develop activities to support themselves to eradicate poverty and social maladies. 

For more

bit.ly/1rqEkzg

Indigenous Peoples' Experiences and Perspectives on the New International Standards in the field of Human Rights and Corporations

site.uit.no/urfolksforum/fdcip-2014-indigenous-movement-in-russia/

New Political Realities for the Indigenous Movement in Russia

base.garant.ru/195535/

Russian Federation Government Decree of May 8, 2009 N 631-r About Approval of the List of Places of Traditional Residence and Traditional Economic Activities of Indigenous Minorities of the Russian Federation and the List of Types of their Traditional Economic Activities (as Amended)