

The oil adventure and indigenous people in the Nenets Autonomous Okrug

A story of exploitation of hydrocarbons, federal laws and reindeers in northwest Russia. **BY WINFRIED K. DALLMANN AND VLADISLAV V. PESKOV**



In the Nenets Autonomous Okrug (NAO) - (Northwestern Russia) live approximately 6500 Nenets and 5000 Komi indigenous people, most of them somehow related to reindeer husbandry. Large portions of Nenets reindeer pastures, especially in the neighbouring Yamal area, were devastated by reckless oil prospecting in the 1960s to 1980s.

Recent years have witnessed an increasing interest in the hydrocarbon occurrences in the NAO. Naturally, people are worried about their future. How have conditions, policies and attitudes changed in modern Russia?

Bad preconditions

In addition to the high unemployment among indigenous peoples, the situation in the reindeer husbandry sector is deteriorating: decreasing numbers of reindeer, misappropriation, absence of appropriate marketing schemes for products. These and other factors provoke a general degradation of indigenous society.

A Federal law on land use rights for indigenous communities has been in force since 2000, but new political policies are developing, which try to remove

certain rights from the law. Legal norms for implementation are still absent, and a regional legislation on this issue does almost not exist in the NAO. In 2002, the Okrug administration developed regional regulations for the establishment of so-called Territories of Traditional Nature Use, and a few of such territories for reindeer farms were created. But this was mainly done on paper, and the regulations are not applied in reality. Land can be allotted for industrial and resource-extraction purposes, while users receive miserly financial compensations.

Until recent, the NAO administration was in charge of representing the interests of the indigenous peoples in these allotment processes. Participation of the indigenous peoples' organisations and representatives of the concerned communities and farms is a fairly new achievement. Processes result in agreements, where the amount of financial compensation is regulated.

Continuous violations

In an open letter of October 2002 to President Putin, the Association of Nenets People Yasavey complained about an uncontrolled situation, which has developed around the exploitation of hydrocarbons in the NAO, accusing oil companies for grave violations of ecological standards and Russian legislation. The letter expresses the impression that many companies, in particular Russian ones, have not changed their attitudes since the 1970s, especially in the southeastern part of the NAO,

where there seems to be no control whatsoever. Numerous oil spillages and other degradations of the upper soil layers occur periodically in the tundra during the summer season, inflicting irreparable damage to the Arctic natural environment.

Oil companies are not the only ones to be blamed for this situation, but the Okrug administration as well, which fails to fulfill their functions when it comes to surveying and monitoring.

Nenets and Komi in this region have for many centuries maintained a traditional way of life rooted firmly in reindeer husbandry in the area. These are the people who mainly suffer as a result of the attitudes of newcomers to the Arctic natural environment, in spite of all legal guarantees.

Transparent relations

The most effective means to achieve positive interactions between indigenous peoples, government and companies is the establishment of transparent contractual relations. Roundtable fora were held. Several oil companies participated in a constructive dialog, while others – including foreign ones – refused to attend.

The Yasavey Association and the Union of Geologists and Oil Workers of the North have established a work group to assess the overall problems of the NAO concerned with hydrocarbon exploitation. Oil companies are financing this group, but do not sufficiently participate in problem solving.

FAST FACTS

Polar pollution

Canadian scientists have recently made significant advances in the knowledge of atmospheric mercury in the Arctic.

Each year, just after the sun reappears after the long polar night (polar sunrise), mercury is converted to a different form. This new form of mercury is much more easily deposited onto the surface (usually snow or ice at this time of year) than the original form of mercury. The transformation and removal of this new form of mercury from the atmosphere onto the surface is called a Mercury Depletion Event (MDE). Measurements show that more mercury is found in the snow after an MDE, although some may be released back into the air from the surface.

Some of the new form of mercury in the surface snow dissolves in water, and may be converted into methylmercury – the most toxic form of mercury for wildlife and humans. This happens at the time of year when plants and animals are starting to prepare for peak summertime activity and when they are more vulnerable to picking up the toxic form of mercury.

Although first discovered in Canada, the same phenomenon has been seen at other northern locations e.g., Ny-Ålesund on Svalbard, northern Norway; Barrow, Alaska; and Amderma, Russia. It has even been found to occur in Antarctica.

Very few radionuclides being released from European nuclear plants are reaching the Canadian Arctic Ocean.

New Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) are being detected and are rising in ringed seal, beluga and narwhal blubber.

Scientists are more concerned about the effects of the POPs on polar bears than any other wildlife species.

Arctic foxes feed at various levels in the food web but this does not appear to affect their levels of POPs. Most levels are quite low and, overall, Canadian foxes contain lower levels of POPs than Arctic foxes from Svalbard, the Norwegian mainland or Iceland.

Mercury levels have almost doubled in eggs of thick-billed murre since 1975, and has increased in northern fulmars by 50 percent. The higher levels are found in predatory birds such as glaucous gulls.

The levels of POPs are decreasing in eggs.

Plants in northern Canada contain only low levels of POPs and heavy metals. However, some plants near local contaminant sources e.g. goldmines may contain higher levels of certain contaminants such as arsenic.

Source: Canadian Arctic Contaminants Assessment II report

The choice is there

Up-to-date technology with clean production, however, is largely being employed by other companies such as Polynorve Siyanie (Russian-American) at Ardalinskoye, TotalFinaElf (French-Belgian) at Haryaginskoe.

So, the choice is there. But time is short, and appropriate attitudes towards environmental problems have still to be developed, both in the companies and throughout the authorities in post-Soviet Russia.

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Bringing sustainable development into better focus

The work of the Arctic Council has traditionally drawn its inspiration from the need to protect the sensitive Arctic environment. Our results in this area demonstrate some of the Council's best work. **BY GUNNAR PÁLSSON**

The work of the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme's (AMAP) working group, dealing with Arctic

pollution, is one example of how the Arctic Council is working to protect the Arctic environment. The report of

the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna's (CAFF) working group, of Arctic biodiversity and conservation issues, is another. Increasingly, we are devoting more attention to ways and means of eliminating pollution, through the Arctic Council Action Plan (ACAP), which has developed specific action programmes to phase-out harmful substances. However, one environmental project commanding the greatest attention at this moment is probably the so-called Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA), a regionally based study of climate change.

There can be little doubt that environmental issues will remain at the core of the Arctic Council. They are also likely to attract growing attention by the world at large, if only because the Arctic is increasingly being seen as an early warning area for other regions, in terms of both long-range transboundary pollu-

tion and climate change.

But we must never forget that the Arctic is not just environment. It is home to almost four million people, including more than numerous different groups of indigenous peoples. As it happens, many of the processes documented in the Arctic Council's environmental reports have begun to work their effects through the lives and livelihoods of the people of the region.

This is not a cause for alarm. The Arctic remains a clean environment, as AMAP's findings make clear. At the same time, some pollutants and changes in climate give reason for concern in certain ecosystems and for some human populations in the Arctic. Pressures are building in areas of the Arctic as a result of economic activities, including shipping, dumping and exploitation of oil and gas, aspects of which have been studied by our working groups on Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response (EPPR) and on the Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME).

All of those pose serious challenges to the inhabitants of the Arctic region. However, many of the diverse Arctic communities have demonstrated exceptional resourcefulness in adapting to the demanding circumstances of life in the Arctic. In addition, not all of the changes affecting the region will necessarily be negative.

Whether we look upon the Arctic in terms of peril and risk or promise and opportunity, there can be little doubt that the time has come to devote more attention to the social, economic and cultural life of the region. We need to address both sides of the equation, society and nature, to arrive at a balanced notion of sustainable development.

Responding to this need, the Arctic Council has launched several initiatives focusing on the people of the Arctic, their living conditions and the factors that affect these conditions. The Arctic Human Development Report (AHDR) and the Survey of Living Conditions in the Arctic (SLICA) are among the projects that come to mind in this context. Taken together, such efforts should not detract from the Arctic Council's work on the environment. On the contrary, they should reinforce that work and bring sustainable development in the Arctic region into better focus.

Ambassador GUNNAR PÁLSSON from Iceland is the Chair of Senior Arctic Officials. Iceland serves as Chair of the Arctic Council 2002-2004 and hosts the secretariat. The Arctic Council cooperates with international organisations. One example is the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), where the AC had a role in placing the problem of mercury pollution on the agenda. For more information about the Arctic Council visit www.arctic-council.org.

