

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A PRIVATE, NON-COMMERCIAL PROTECTED TERRITORY: THE CASE OF MURAVIOVKA PARK OF SUSTAINABLE LAND USE IN AMUR REGION, RUSSIA

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IDENTIFICATION OF THE CASE

This case study, which comes from the Muraviovka Park of Sustainable Land Use in the Tambovka District of the Amur Region in Russia, relates to two types of renewable natural resources: Watersheds and biodiversity (including endangered species of cranes and storks).

The Amur is the world's largest free flowing river. The Amur River Basin is the meeting place of the Palearctic and Oriental biogeographic regions, creating a mosaic of outstanding biodiversity. After the recent political changes in the former Soviet Union, wide expanses of pristine areas are now threatened with destruction. Central and regional governments are unable to provide financial support for wildlife conservation. Because of the present economic crisis, there are thousands of unemployed citizens and many families living in poverty. Additionally, the region has experienced an increase in alcohol and drug abuse and a growing number of orphanages.

THE INITIAL SITUATION

Vast wetlands and croplands 60 km east from Blagoveshchensk (capital of the Amur Region) provide excellent habitats for a number of migratory birds. The land was operated by collective and state farms which destroyed critical wildlife habitats for economic reasons. Local people in the early 1980's had low but guaranteed income and government gave essential support to social programs. No information was available about importance of the territory for endangered species.

Efficiency, Equity, Sustainability and Accountability

Tambovka District is famous for the best soils and climatic conditions for crop growing in the Russian Far East. Due to poor farming practices, however, agriculture here, as everywhere in the Russian Far East, is unprofitable. During the last decade, because of the crisis in Russia's economy, agricultural production diminished in the Amur Region three to four times. Over 90 percent of the machinery needs to be replaced immediately, while enormous areas of crop fields are out of use and heavily covered by weeds. To be a farmer, an agronomist or a veterinarian has become a symbol of primitive labor and life. There are no agricultural classes in high schools and very few teenagers want to stay in their villages.

Legislation in Amur Region seems to apply to ordinary people only. Even after the designation of Muraviovka Park, the game refuge officials, army and police continue shooting and fishing inside the 'protected' territory.

Residents of the region share a deep conviction that economic development normally brings about a certain destruction of the environment, and that they are not to worry since the Russian Far East has unlimited natural resources. A high percentage of the local population is represented by recent migrants

who came to Siberia from western Russia to make quick money and return to their homeland. Their poor farming practices caused damage to soils, wildlife, human health, and economy but many people are still looking for short-term benefits, ignoring any kind of restrictions or improvement in their activities.

History of the Damage in the Amur River Basin

In 1982, an expedition from Moscow State University, led by the author, began its research near Muraviovka and found that a combination of wetlands and farmlands provided excellent breeding, roosting and feeding habitats for more than 200 species of birds, including 23 species enlisted in the Red Data Book. Agriculture fields near wetlands where crane pairs breed and where large flocks roost, often provided excellent feeding areas. Some agriculture activities, like burning straw or extensive use of herbicides and pesticides, were detrimental for both people and wildlife. The existing game refuge could not stop illegal hunting, wild fires, pollution and conversion of wetlands into croplands. That is why we proposed, through changes in land use practices, to make a better environment for wildlife and improve quality of life for people.

Continuation of existing practices of land use inevitably will follow in habitat loss, extinction of key habitats of endangered birds and spawning places for fish, deterioration of the environment for people, and further decrease in living standards.

THE CHANGE PROCESS

Through the AMUR Program of SEU we conducted a number of meetings with international and local communities. In 1994, with the financial support from the International Crane Foundation (ICF) based in Wisconsin (USA) and Pop Group corporation (Japan), SEU leased over 13,000 acres for wildlife protection, environmental education and sustainable development. In 1996, the Park became an independent private, non-commercial organization. In 1997, the Park leased an additional 300 acres of cropland with rich soils to establish a Demonstration Farm, build living facilities and an Education Center.

Becoming a Public (Or Private) Concern

Information about the AMUR Program and Muraviovka Park was published in local newspapers, popular newspapers and magazines (Christian Science Monitor, New Yorker, Outside, etc.), the ICF newsletter, distributed through radio and TV. New Jersey public TV made a video about the Muraviovka Park and summer environmental camp.

Key Actors in the Change Process

The Park was established by the AMUR Program of SEU in cooperation with ICF, Wild Bird Society of Japan (WBSJ), the Nature Conservancy (TNC), National Audubon Society. The staff of the Park is small but well educated, providing opportunities to develop diverse activities. Local students, teachers and educators participating in annual summer camps and seminars have become strong allies of Muraviovka Park within their villages.

At the beginning local officials and people were against the Park, but after realizing that the Park is helping their kids as well as local hospitals, schools, and orphanages, the community changed its mind and has been providing a growing support to the Park. In 1997, the regional government built a road to the headquarters, and the District government covered a part of expenses for summer camp.

THE OUTCOME

Key Institutional Changes

This is the first time in Russia since the early 1900's that a private, non-commercial protected territory has been established. Due to the AMUR Program's initiative the Muraviovka wetlands as well as other territories in Amur, Primorski, Khabarovski and Chita Regions were included in the Ramsar convention of wetlands of international importance. The Park introduced new forms and methods of environmental education that now are widely used in the RFE. Muraviovka Park as an independent private organization is responsible for administering the daily and other operations and arrangements.

The Impact of the Changes

As a result of better management and environmental education, during the last four years the number of cranes and storks have increased two and a half times. Local communities have changed their attitude and are involved in the Park's activities. The Park has provided substantial financial support to local hospitals, schools, orphanages and children from poor families, has hosted, during the last four years, over four hundred students and teachers in summer camps free of charge, has provided jobs for local people, and has distributed free vegetable seeds that have become source of a small but important income. The Park staff accomplished a threat analysis for a watershed management plan, and introduced a prescribed burning practice to protect grasslands and their inhabitants from wild fires. In 1997, in Victoria (British Colombia, Canada) the AMUR Program received the Distinguished Service Award from the Society for Conservation Biology for outstanding contribution to the science and practice of conservation biology.

The Expected Impact of the Changes

In 1998, Park will complete construction of the Education Center and will begin professional training in wildlife management, agriculture and handicraft to help the community and orphanages to raise income. An alternative way of natural resource use will be offered to the local community. The Demonstration Farm will introduce new agricultural practices and 'inoculate' rural youth with a good dose of respect for farmers' work.

THE LESSONS LEARNED

Don't try to force people to do anything, even good things. First identify their needs and start helping. Try to understand their mentality and background. Then try to win their trust, respect and cooperation.

Are The Lessons Replicable?

Educators trained in the Muraviovka Park have started summer ecological camps in Primorski and Khabarovski Regions. By-laws developed by the Muraviovka Park were used as an example to establish the private non-commercial Amur Zoo in Amur Region capital, Blagoveshchensk. The attempts to replicate the Muraviovka Park experience are being launched to establish private nature protected territories in Primorski Region.

While our work with children aims at a long-term benefits, some immediate conservation gains have occurred. The children that are becoming involved with wetlands and their wildlife share their concerns with their families with an effectiveness we could never match. Muraviovka Park is the first private, non-commercial nature protected territory in Russia trying to integrate human and wildlife interests.