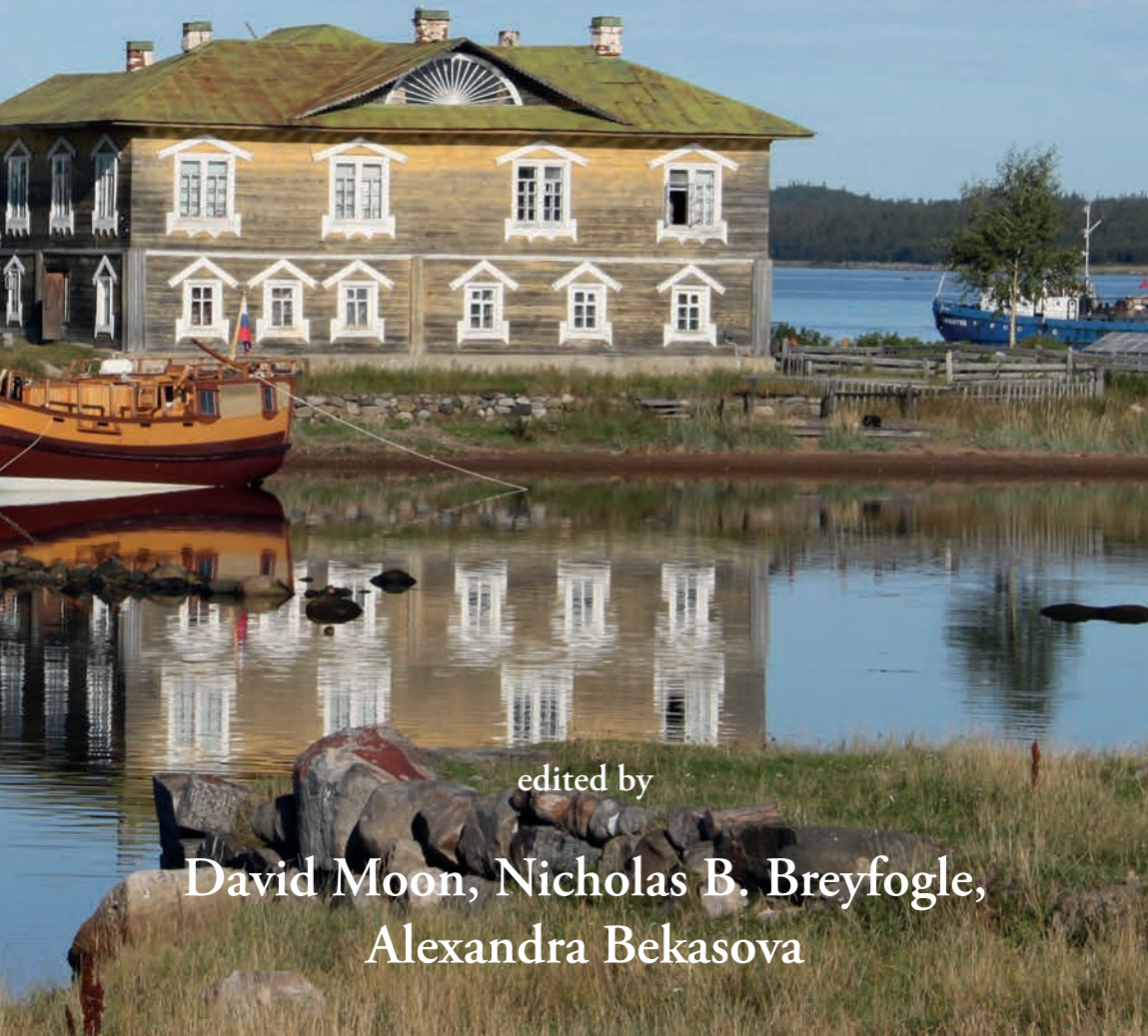


# PLACE AND NATURE

ESSAYS IN RUSSIAN ENVIRONMENTAL  
HISTORY



edited by

David Moon, Nicholas B. Breyfogle,  
Alexandra Bekasova

Excerpts from the Introduction to

PLACE AND NATURE:  
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Cover Image: The small stone harbour in the Solovetskii rural locality, including the old building of the Solovetskii Biological Research Station and a replica of the ship used by Peter I on his 1694 visit to the islands (front cover) and part of the Solovetskii Maritime Museum (back cover). Photograph by Nicholas Breyfogle, Solovetskie Islands, 2013.

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## PLACE AND NATURE: AN INTRODUCTION

**David Moon, Nicholas B. Breyfogle, Alexandra Bekasova  
and Julia Lajus**

This book offers new perspectives on the environmental history of the lands that have come under Russian and Soviet rule by paying attention to ‘place’ and ‘nature’ in the intersection between humans and the environments that surround them.<sup>1</sup> Through a series of carefully selected, linked case studies, the book highlights the importance of local environments and the specificities of individual places in understanding the human-environment nexus. This focus is accentuated by the fact that the authors have travelled extensively in the places they write about. They have first-hand experience of the specificities of local natural systems, and have gained a sense of how these places look, sound, taste, feel and smell. They have met, talked to, interviewed and in other ways engaged with members of the local populations, including the specialists in a variety of disciplines who study these places and ecosystems and the people who manage and administer them. In this way, our collective research also makes an important methodological intervention to the research and practice of environmental and perhaps also other fields of history: that to write robust history, historians need to embed themselves in the places and environments they study. In this way, our work underscores that ‘place’ and ‘nature’ are both topics of study and theoretical models and methodological approaches for scholarship.<sup>2</sup>

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1. For recent historiographical analyses of Russian environmental history, see Breyfogle, ‘Toward an Environmental History of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union’; Lajus, ‘Russian Environmental History’. On the representation, or misrepresentation, of Russian and Soviet environmental history in global environmental histories, see Moon, ‘The Curious Case of the Marginalization or Distortion of Russian and Soviet Environmental History in Global Environmental Histories’. On climate history, see Bruno, ‘Climate History of Russia and the Soviet Union’.
  2. For an application of such an approach in another part of the world, see Coates, Moon and Warde (eds), *Local Places, Global Processes*.

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The essays primarily consider the period from the early nineteenth to the early twenty-first centuries and, where appropriate, delve back further in time. They investigate continuity and change across multiple political systems: from the rise of modern Russia under the tsars, through the Soviet era and into the first decades of the post-Soviet Russian Federation. These centuries saw Russian imperial expansion into the far reaches of Eurasia, greater human mobility as a result of developments in transportation infrastructure, more intensive exploitation of natural resources with the onset of industrialisation, which gathered pace in Soviet times, and a growing sense among some scientists, political figures and members of the wider public of a need to protect and conserve 'nature'.<sup>3</sup> The geographical focus of the book is more distinctive and serves to complement and enhance the scope of existing works on the environmental history of this part of the world. The chapter studies are located in two important, diverse and, in the context of environmental history, relatively under-researched regions: 1) the Northwest and the European North of Russia, extending from St Petersburg through Karelia to the White Sea and Kola Peninsula; and 2) Siberia and the Pacific Far East.<sup>4</sup>

### Place and Nature

The importance of 'place' and 'nature' in human and environmental history is a central analytical theme and methodological approach of our research on Russia and the Soviet Union. In our book, we are interested in how human engagement and input transforms the wider, undifferentiated 'spaces' of the natural world into culturally meaningful and technologically-differentiated 'places'. Here we build on the foundational work of Yi-Fu Tuan on the differences between 'space' and 'place'. As he argues, 'space' is more abstract than 'place': 'What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value'. For Tuan, 'Place is security, space is freedom ... and places are centres of felt value where biological needs, such as those for food, water, rest and procreation, are satisfied'. In an earlier book, he analysed the concept of 'Topophilia' – or love of place – which he summarised as the 'affective bond between people and place or setting', which is 'vivid and concrete as personal

3. See Oldfield, Lajus and Shaw, 'Conceptualizing and Utilizing the Natural Environment', pp. 1–15; Breyfogle (ed.), *Eurasian Environments*. For global comparisons, see McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun* and McNeill and Engelke, *The Great Acceleration*.

4. On Russian environmental history, see the bibliography that the Leverhulme Project team developed: Moon (ed.), 'Russian Environmental History'.

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experience'.<sup>5</sup> In a fashion, what Tuan describes is what we have tried to do in our explorations and research: focussing in on particular places, getting to know them better through personal experience and differentiating them from the wider, and more abstract, spaces that surround them. We learned how the 'places' we visited and studied had acquired meanings over time, how they shifted from 'spaces' to 'places' as their inhabitants used them to provide sustenance and shelter and endowed them with spiritual significance.<sup>6</sup>

The term 'nature', also central to our book, has a long history during which its meanings have been slippery and ambiguous. In some definitions, humans are distinct from, indeed somehow above, nature or the natural world. In this sense, 'nature' is either a resource to be controlled and used without concern by humans for their purposes or has been degraded by human activities and deemed worthy of protection or conservation to mitigate human influence. Just as prevalent have been meanings of nature that encompass human bodies.<sup>7</sup> A solution to this dilemma, that mirrors the distinction between 'space' and 'place', has been proposed by environmental historians Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde with their concept of 'environing': under human influence, 'nature' transforms (in an ongoing process) into 'environment'.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the chapters here explore how abstract 'spaces' acquired meanings and became 'places'; whilst in a similar process, 'nature' became (and continues to become) the 'environment'.

As environmental historians, we are first of all studying places that are known for their particular natural value: reserves where 'wilderness' or rare biological species are protected; places and regions whose natural beauty took on cultural importance through centuries of admiration and appropriation, such as Lake Baikal or Solovki, and where that cultural and natural importance is considered threatened by human economic activities. We are also interested in studying in detail the shared process, across multiple locations, of the transformation of 'natural' places into 'unnatural' exploited landscapes and the long-lasting legacy that such a transformation produces. When we arrived at these different places, we brought with us concepts, myths, predispositions

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5. Tuan, *Space and Place*, pp. 3–4, 6; Tuan, *Topophilia*, p. 4.

6. A great deal has been written about 'place', 'space' and 'history'. See Casey, 'Boundary, Place, and Event in the Spatiality of History'; Casey, *Getting Back into Place*; Gandy, *The Fabric of Space*; Adams, Hoelscher and Till (eds), *Textures of Place*.

7. For recent discussions, see Ducarme and Couvet, 'What Does "Nature" Mean?'; Warde, 'The Environment', pp. 32–46; LeCain, *The Matter of History*.

8. This concept is discussed by Kraikovski and Lajus in this volume.

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and prejudices that we obtained through scholarship and previous experiences of field visits.

After ‘the new spatial turn’ it is no longer possible to continue ‘taking space for granted’.<sup>9</sup> Although the materiality of landscape, environment and heritage is real, space and place are constructed during the human encounter with them and re-constructed by analysis and writing. Through practices of writing we inevitably come to the well-established understanding of the existence of contact zones between the outside observer or writer and his/her objects of study.<sup>10</sup> With such a notion of a contact zone, one of the most productive aspects of our methodological approach – namely that we not only see the places with our own eyes but also communicate with local experts – turns out to be a bit less straightforward. Local experts mediate between outside researchers and the environment-cultural heritage nexus. They also actively form our visual perceptions through field excursions and our writing through narratives they produced. For instance, at the Barguzin *Zapovednik* at Lake Baikal, we found ourselves in the decayed Davsha settlement of an almost abandoned natural reserve. The memory of the *zapovednik*’s heyday was mostly locked in a small museum, surrounded by smog and the smell of forest fires that were rapidly engulfing the forests and mountains around us.<sup>11</sup> But the narrative that was repeatedly told us was one about wilderness and wild bears that might be looking at us from beyond each tree.<sup>12</sup> Confronted with the evidence of changing atmospheric and lake conditions, it was often difficult to sustain this narrative that was built to serve the gaze of outsiders.

Thus, the most obvious question we needed to ask ourselves was: does the wilderness and even nature itself exist? For more than twenty years, environmental historians have underscored that wilderness is a social construct, that, in the well-known words of William Cronon, there is ‘trouble with wilderness’ and we are ‘getting back to the wrong nature’.<sup>13</sup> Scholars, such as Sörlin and Warde, have also argued that nature no longer exists. ‘Nature’ came to an end after being gradually transformed by technologies invented by people. In its place, humans have created ‘environment’ and the process of ‘environing’ is

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9. Baron, ‘New Spatial Histories of Twentieth Century Russia and the Soviet Union’, p. 381.
  10. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*; Bravo and Sörlin, ‘Narrative and Practice – an Introduction’.
  11. On the fires, see the essay by Bryce Stewart in this volume
  12. See the essay by David Moon in this volume for the stories about bears.
  13. Cronon, ‘The Trouble with Wilderness’, pp. 7–28.



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going on rapidly and, in some ways, irretrievably.<sup>14</sup> However, when we arrive at a place that we expect still to be ‘wild’, we all-too-often forget this theoretical knowledge. We are so much touched by stunning landscapes and tales of local guides who, consciously or not, produce the narratives that we as scholars try to avoid. This clash of personal experience with theory, which we cannot help but undergo during field research, makes place-based environmental history a difficult endeavour, although a very transformative one.

Through our several years of place-based research, we have experienced the ‘multiplicities of nature’: how controversy around one place and even one object arises because experts produce multiple versions of the place-object.<sup>15</sup> When we study ‘place’ and ‘nature’, we see simultaneously many layers that history formed there. How should we deal with that kind of multiplicity? Do we consider the place or landscape as a kaleidoscope or palimpsest or do we conceptualise it as a conglomerate bearing scars?<sup>16</sup> How can we discern between an environmental legacy that humans consider valuable and has become a recognised, celebrated cultural ‘heritage’ and a legacy that humans perceive as a burden – such as a pollution – that should be overcome and eradicated? How can we organise our personal and group ‘assignment of meaning to place’ through reading, mapping, observation, learning of names and contacts with local knowledge and memories?<sup>17</sup> The editors hope that the chapters in this book may contribute further to such discussions.

Environmental historians are well placed to analyse these concepts and to locate them in specific places over time due to the multi- and interdisciplinarity that lies at the heart of ‘environmental history’. Our team of authors includes scholars who trained specifically as environmental historians, and others who came to this branch of history from other branches, such as social history, cultural history and the history of science, or from other disciplines including the natural sciences. In these chapters we have brought our areas of disciplinary expertise and combined them with personal engagement with these places.

‘Place-based environmental history’ has been a developing field in recent years, based on a recognition that meaningful environmental histories are difficult to write solely from conventional research in documentary and other types of evidence, and can only be enhanced by personal experiences of the places we study and encounters with peoples who live and work there, learning from their

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14. Sörlin and Warde, ‘Making the Environment Historical – An Introduction’.

15. See Jørgensen, ‘Environmentalists on Both Sides’, 51–68, p. 53.

16. Storm, *Post-Industrial Landscape Scars*.

17. Bassin, Ely and Stockdale (eds), *Space, Place, and Power in Modern Russia*, p. 16.

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'local' and 'expert' knowledge. There are different approaches to such studies. A few years ago, a team of British-based environmental historians researched the histories of a series of places in collaboration with the organisations responsible for managing them, including a private water company, the state forestry administration and nature conservation organisations, and in dialogue with local inhabitants. The findings of this team both reinforced and challenged their understandings of their places and their trajectories in space and time.<sup>18</sup> A group of scholars in the environmental humanities travelled to the Island of Lundy in the Bristol Channel, between Southwest England and South Wales, and found that the visit 'encouraged us to reflect on questions of boundedness and connectedness; identity and belonging; isolation and community; and how disciplinary habits both frame and unsettle our responses to a new place. This might be characterised as an exercise in provocative dislocation.'<sup>19</sup> A more specific list of reasons for 'place-based research' have been advanced by Heather D. Green: '1) it provides insights not accessible otherwise; 2) it allows us to build relationships over time; 3) it offers opportunities to collaborate with locals; and 4) it provides an ongoing connection to our sites of study'.<sup>20</sup>

A specialist in the Soviet and post-Soviet space who has made exploration a central part of her research is Kate Brown. She has emphasised the limits of text-based research and of prioritising the temporal over the spatial. Reflecting on her approach, she has written:

My adventures have often gone catastrophically wrong. I rarely find what I am seeking. I get lost, make mistakes, pursue foolish assumptions, and commit culturally insensitive blunders. In the course of these hapless misadventures I have relied on the kindness of strangers ... to show me the road, and to tell me their stories. ... The premise of this book is that travelling can be a form of negotiation, an unravelling of certainties and convictions and a reassembling of the past, aided by strangers who generously open their doors to reveal histories that are in play, contingent, and subjective.<sup>21</sup>

Brown's work guided our own explorations into place and nature in Russia's environmental history.

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18. Coates, Moon and Warde (eds), *Local Places, Global Processes*.

19. Howkins et al., 'An Excursion in the Environmental Humanities'.

20. Green, 'Problems of Place'. For illuminating and thought-provoking reflections on place-based research in environmental history by graduate students and early career scholars who identify as women, trans and non-binary, see *Environmental History Now*, 'Problems of Place'.

21. Brown, *Dispatches from Dystopia*, pp.1–2.



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... (text omitted here) ...

**Chapter Summaries**

The book opens with a rich and thought-provoking essay by Alexei Kraikovski and Julia Lajus that explores the Solovetskie islands – or Solovki – in the White Sea in the European North of Russia. Together, the two authors have

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long experience studying the islands, which they have encountered from the perspectives of scientists, historians and the tourism industry. This gives them the unparalleled ability to analyse the natural-scientific and historical-cultural story of the islands. They emphasise the importance of distinguishing between ‘nature’ and the ‘environment’. They describe the interactions with the ‘nature’ of Solovki by settlers and visitors through both religious and scientific practices. The gradual ‘environing’ of the islands through human activities can be seen from the development of the monastic economy through the terrible Gulag times to today. It is these social practices that have turned ‘spaces’ of Solovki into the ‘places’ that take centre stage in the essays that comprise this book.

Andy Bruno takes us to another place not too far away from Solovki: Lake Imandra, above the Arctic Circle on the Kola Peninsula. He presents a biography of the lake, going back deep into geological time to explain its origins and in historical time to chart its interaction with its human neighbours. For many centuries, these were indigenous Sami people, but centuries later, during the Soviet period, newer arrivals caused the lake’s pollution as a consequence of mining and industrial development. Locating the local concerns of this lake in Russia’s European North in the global context of accelerating human impact on the environment, Bruno indicates the value of focussing on specific places to explore the implications of the onset of the Anthropocene.

Alan Roe’s essay links a place – a vast area of old-growth forest straddling the border of Karelia and Arkhangel’sk Oblast’ – and a person, Ukrainian-born Oleg Cherviakov. Following a life-changing visit in the late 1980s, Cherviakov campaigned tirelessly to protect an area of this forest from the Soviet timber industry that was relentlessly felling trees across northern Russia. For Cherviakov, protecting the forest had cultural and spiritual meaning, and he believed promoting tourism could make it economically viable. Based on his personal acquaintance with both the place and the person, Alan Roe charts the establishment of the Vodlozero National Park in the difficult years around the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The final chapter of the book’s first section takes us from rural environments to an urban one: St Petersburg. Once the capital city of Imperial Russia and, as Leningrad, the second city of the Soviet Union, its identity and experiences have been shaped by its founder’s choice to locate his new city in the low-lying delta of the Neva River, where successive generations of inhabitants have transformed this marshy space into a place they call home. Robert Dale offers a watery perspective on the city’s landscape by comparing the great floods of 1824 and 1924 and how the city’s government and inhabitants responded.

Once seemingly powerless in the face of periodic surges of water from the Gulf of Finland, the city entered a new phase in its environmental history in 2011 with the completion of a 25-kilometre dam to protect it.

Spotlighting our theme of personal engagement with place and nature, the book's second section presents a series of concise 'postcards' or photo essays, in which the authors relate their experiences of particular places. Solovki's environment and long history are brought sharply into focus by Nicholas Breyfogle's description of his visit to these remarkable islands. Catherine Evtuhov narrates her travels around the Ural Mountains – traditionally the boundary between 'European' and 'Asian' Russia – to explore the local industry, mining and transport infrastructure, which she and her colleagues observed through the lens of the region's burgeoning industrial-heritage tourism business. 'Lake Baikal in peril' was the reaction of Australian marine biologist Bryce Stewart to his encounter with 'one of the world's greatest aquatic wonders' in the heart of Siberia. He learned that the lake's unique ecosystem is threatened by plans to dam one of the rivers flowing into it, warming waters in the lake, and forest fires that shrouded it in smoke whilst he and his fellow explorers were there. One of these, historian David Moon, uses a tale they were told by the Barguzin *Zapovednik* scientific director about starving bears resorting to eating each other during a desperately hungry winter to ponder the environmental history of this remote region from an ursine perspective.

The photo essays have brought us a long way from the European North of Russia to Siberia, and the essays that comprise the book's third part explore the places, spaces and environments of this immense region. Mobility is the theme of the opening essay by Alexandra Bekasova and Ekaterina Kalemeneva. They analyse how places along the route of the Trans-Siberian Railway were presented in guidebooks as 'landscapes of transportation' to the growing numbers of tourists who made the journey in the final decades of Imperial Russia. Whilst the railway was represented as a symbol of prestige, progress and power, the territories through which it ran – with their dense forests, mountains, rivers and lakes only lightly brushed by human habitation – were described as 'wild'. The railway made distant areas and landscapes, like Lake Baikal, accessible for larger numbers of business travellers, settlers and tourists. Along with rail services and modern conveniences offered on board express trains, the impressive views and panoramas from the railway around Lake Baikal also evolved into commodities that could be demanded and purchased.

The next chapter presents an invaluable local perspective on Lake Baikal by Arkady and Tatiana Kalikhman. The Kalikhmans are scholars based in Ir-

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kutsk, the largest city near the lake, and draw on their experience of more than four decades' active involvement in campaigns and programmes to study and protect the lake's environment. They offer a survey of the encounters between Baikal and the human populations who have lived around it, assigned spiritual significance to its waters, exploited its resources, studied it and posed serious challenges to its ecosystems. They conclude their essay with a guarded optimism for the future. Their essay nicely sets the scene for the following two essays, which offer detailed case studies in Baikal's contested environmental history.

The start of strict scientific protection of one part of the lake, its shores and its flora and fauna came in 1916 with the establishment of the Barguzin *Zapovednik* on its remote, northeastern side. In keeping with the theme of this volume, Nicholas Breyfogle, a regular traveller to Baikal, presented an earlier version of his essay at a seminar held in the *zapovednik's* meeting house in Davsha, only a few metres from the lake's waters (see Figure 12.1). His chapter explores the origins of Russia's first state-sponsored *zapovednik*, which began as an effort to protect rapidly disappearing sable from localised extinction and led to decades of ecosystem-based nature protection and scientific study. Breyfogle focuses especially on the interplay of human decision-making and non-human causation in the development of the nature reserve.

The tension between conservation and exploitation of the waters and other resources of Lake Baikal in the period from the 1950s to the 1970s is analysed by Elena Kochetkova. Her essay reveals the tensions between different types of Soviet institutions. Industrial ministries and Gosstroï (the central State Committee for Construction) wanted the lake's resources to serve the cause of Siberian industrial development. To this end, pulp and paper mills were built on its shores and one of its feeder rivers. Concerned about pollution of its pristine waters, and unconvinced by the technologies employed, scientists in the East Siberian Branch of the Academy of Sciences spoke out, inaugurating the 'struggles for Baikal' that other local scientists, such as the Kalikhmans, joined in. The Baikal Pulp and Paper Mill finally closed in 2013, but it would be premature to conclude that this was the end of Baikal's encounter with the people who live around it.

Our journey from the islands, lakes, forests of the European North, and the largest city in northwestern Russia, across the Ural Mountains, along the Trans-Siberian Railway to Lake Baikal is completed by Mark Sokolsky. His essay analyses nature conservation in the province of Primor'e, on Russia's Pacific coast. After the Russian Empire acquired the territory from Qing China in 1858–60, Russian settlers encountered unfamiliar fauna, including

spotted deer, wild goats, leopards and the iconic Amur tiger. Sokolsky considers how the notion of conserving this distinctive fauna developed initially not from the scientific reasons that lay behind the ‘struggle for Baikal’, but from concerns among the region’s settler elites to protect the game they hunted for sport from poachers. Only later, Sokolsky demonstrates, did the cause of nature conservation in this far-eastern region acquire the broader motives, in particular scientific, that lay behind the network of *zapovedniks* established in Russian and Soviet lands. His essay thus completes our travels through the diverse spaces and landscapes that have come under Russian rule, and illustrates how the evolution of ideas of conserving nature in this particular place were part of a wider Russian, Eurasian and global story.

### Being There

Travel writer Kapka Kassabova has recently written that ‘history is written above all by those who weren’t there’. Her book on the border zone between Bulgaria, Turkey and Greece is an eloquent example of how travel writers can bring to life places and the histories of people who have lived in them.<sup>73</sup> This book is written by environmental historians who were there and who have sought to bring to life these places, environments and the experiences of their inhabitants. We could not have produced this book and its insights if we had not also hiked and biked through them, sailed across them, rowed around them, swum in them, got covered in mud, been swarmed by mosquitos and other insects and been observed by bears, who kept silent and made sure we could not see them. On other occasions, we hid ourselves so that we could observe rare and endangered species, like the nerpa, the endemic freshwater seals living on Baikal’s Ushkan’i Islands. Whilst we were there, we also met people who have devoted their lives to studying their places and environments, managing them, guiding visitors and campaigning to protect them from harm. They generously shared their time and knowledge with us. To get to our places, we flew in airplanes, travelled in trains, rode in buses and sailed across seas and lakes on ferries and multiple other boats. On one memorable occasion, we nearly did not get there (to Cape Khoboi on Ol’khon Island in Lake Baikal). The driver of one of our four-wheel-drive utility vehicles, an otherwise invincible Soviet-designed UAZ-452, omitted to engage the second axle and we got stuck in the sand. Digging it out taught us important lessons – ones we appreciated all the more after we were on our way.

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73. Kassabova, *Border*, p. xviii.

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*Figure 1.1: The photos show members of the research team exploring the forests and waters of the Solovetskie Islands and Lake Baikal in the summers of 2013 and 2015.*

*Group photo outside the Davsha meeting house in the Barguzin Zapovednik.*

*Back row, L-R: Arkady Kalikhman, Elena Kochetkova, Andy Bruno, Tatiana Kalikhman, Nicholas Breyfogle, David Moon, Catherine Evtuhov, Bryce Stewart, Boris Gasparov, Alexandra Bekasova, Julia Lajus.*

*Front row, L-R: Aleksandr Ananin, Ekaterina Kalemeneva, Hazel Long, Mark Sokolsky, Alan Roe.*