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Abstract: Many remote regions currently experiencing economic development are going through reindustrialization. However, the impact of previous industrial projects on current ones is not well documented. Using the example of the Evenki community in the Kazachinsko-Lenskii raion of Irkutsk Oblast, this article discusses the cumulative impact of the Baikal-Amur Mainline, Power of Siberia gas pipeline, and multiple forestry companies. We document encounters of Evenki with industrial projects in their settlements and along several pathways: traditional subsistence trails and tracks, the railroad infrastructure, geological clear-cuts, and forest roads. The analysis and observations are based on materials gathered during summer 2019 field work, which included interviews with local leaders, hunters and fishers, travelling by different transportation modes, and participating in local subsistence activities.

Indigenous Encounters with Remote Infrastructure

Few areas untouched by human exploration and development persist in the world today. However, to the extent that they exist, these places remain remote, less accessible and, as such, less affected by fragmented infrastructural development. In addition, in remote Arctic and Subarctic territories many transportation pathways have a seasonal character, alternating between river water in the summer and winter and ice roads in the winter. Settlements in these areas often lack alternative kinds of transportation (Zamyatina 2019) or alternative economies (Eilmsteiner-Saxinger et al, 2016). While the negative impact of industrial development in remote regions is well documented, the impact of reindustrialization is less frequently discussed. Meanwhile, many remote sites of current economic development are regions of reindustrialization.

This article focuses on the Evenki, indigenous people in the Kazachinsko-Lenskii raion of Irkutsk Oblast, who live in the extreme North. Their traditional lands are now the site of the planned Power of Siberia gas pipeline construction. The Kovyktinskoie gas condensate deposit is expected to become the main supplier of gas that will be transported to China in the future. An agreement between Gazprom and the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) on construction of the Power of Siberia gas pipeline was signed at the highest level in 2014 and ranks as the biggest gas transportation network in the Russian East (Gazprom, 2019). The deposit was discovered by geologists in 1987 (Gazprom Kovyktinskoie, 2019), following the construction of the main part of another large infrastructural project, the Baikal-Amur Mainline railway. In addition, extensive logging and a growing number of forest fires have significantly affected local livelihoods.

The data for the analysis consists of field studies (interviews and participant observations) in the village of Vershina Khandy, its summer camp, and the Zhigalovo–Okunaiskii and Magistralny–Vershina Khandy roads, conducted in summer 2019, as well as public environmental impact assessment materials for the Kovyktinskoie gas deposit (FREKOM, 2013), and municipal reports.

Evenki encounter these industrial projects in their settlements and along several pathways: traditional subsistence trails and tracks, the railroad infrastructure, geophysical line clearings, and forest roads. Below I briefly describe these places and pathways.

Local Communities

Evenki, indigenous Tungus-speaking people, settled key parts of Irkutsk Oblast thousands of years ago. In the 1930s the Evenki community consisted of 9-12 camps, with from 4 to 30 members in each. In 2002 there were about 71 Evenki in the raion, with 48 people in the Vershina Khandy village located on the territory of traditional land use (FREKOM, 2002). In 2017 a local Evenki leader estimated that the current population of Evenki in the area was around 70 people, of which only six lived in the village permanently (Viatkina 2017). Official population estimates for Vershina Khandy do not exist in Russia's municipal and statistical reports. While shrinking population is a common problem for many rural communities around the world, the Evenki community faces an even more difficult situation due to its traditional dependence on the local environment, whose wildlife population, Siberian pine nut trees, and berries and herbs provided local food supplies and reliable sources of income.

Fifty seven kilometers from the current location of Vershina Khandy is Kazachinskoie, a village founded by Cossacks in 1776 on the Kirenga river with a population of 2609 in 2018 (Irkstat, 2019). Numerous inter-ethnic marriages between residents of these two villages led some Evenks to move to Kazachinskoie. These mixed families now frequently make use of the Evenki traditional land.

The population of Kazachinsko-Lenskii raion, where these two settlements are located, increased from 4400 in 1970 to 19,000 in 1979 and peaked at 29,400 in 1989 due to the Baikal-Amur Mainline construction. Magistralny (population 6296 in 2018) is the BAM settlement now closest (thirty nine kilometers) to the village Vershina Khandy included in this study. In 2018 about 16,700 people were registered in the raion, down considerably from the 1989 peak with migration out-flow. Some of the Evenki and Cossacks who had long lived in the region moved to the BAM settlements and found employment there that went beyond their traditional subsistence activities.

Traditional Roads for Subsistence Activities

Evenki traditionally used reindeer for riding and transporting goods. With their livelihood centered around the reindeer herds, the Evenki maintained a nomadic life and migrated in the taiga forest subsisting by hunting, fishing, and gathering. The first documented land-use disputes between Evenki and Russians occurred in 1823 (Ragulina, 2000). In the 1920-1930s, documents show that the Evenki complained about the small sizes of their hunting plots and the poaching and predatory behavior of neighboring Russian and Buryat hunters. About the same period, they lost their reindeer and began to subsist on hunting, fishing and gathering only.

According to Milana Ragulina (2000), the Evenki had a strong attachment to the land not only through subsistence activities, but by spiritual rituals and sacred places. Traditions of land use were preserved during the Soviet period and in 1990 the Evenki "Khandisnskaia neighbor territorial obshchina" was organized. This community group was the first in the region to whom the Irkutsk regional government granted territory for traditional land use. This Evenki territory of 299,067 hectares is located within the boundaries of the Kovyktinskoie gas condensate deposit exploration tract. In 2009 the new Federal Law "On hunting" delegated responsibility for control and monitoring of wildlife to the land users, in this case – the obshchina. While for many other obshchinas such responsibility became unmanageable, the Khandy Evenki have been able to keep their lands mostly thanks to compensation paid by extractive companies.

Baikal-Amur Mainline

Construction of the BAM is known as the “last large Soviet industrial project” and an example of the state moving large masses of people voluntarily. During the Soviet era, millions of young Komsomoltsy moved to the region and built dozens of settlements, hundreds of bridges, and 4300 kilometers of railways. As in many other parts of the world, traditional activities have come into conflict with infrastructural development: newcomers poached game, which almost went extinct during BAM construction. Neither Evenks nor old settlers could work on the project due to a lack of qualifications and the high supply of migrant labor. Nevertheless, proximity to the railroad has allowed Evenki and old settlers to sell their products in the BAM settlements as well as to passengers on the passing trains. For the forest companies, proximity to the railroad is also crucial for transportation of products, which are mostly timber, but also include wood pellets.

Geophysical line-clearings

Although the local Evenks blazed their trails and paths long before the arrival of geological parties, these prospectors were the first to deploy technology that changed the local environment. Geophysical line-clearings are easily recognizable from satellite imagery as they form straight lines stretching over long distances. The first line-clearings for oil and gas exploration were done in 1980 (FREKOM, 2002) after the beginning of the BAM construction. Construction of the BAM and the location of the line-clearings define current forestry development while the pipeline construction made necessary modernization of the Zhigalovo–Okunayski regional road. Baikal-Amur Mainline service roads and cuts were used by forest companies first for logging, then, for wood transportation. The roads are useful because they are generally straight regardless of the local terrain.

Forest Roads

As part of the forest industry, forest roads are regulated by Russia’s Rules of Design and Construction (SP 288.1325800.2016). According to regulations, these roads are not designated for public use and general vehicles. However, the absence of fences or gates allows people to drive on them almost without restrictions. When private forest companies rent specific forest areas, they can and often do construct check-points. In addition, during crises, such as forest fires, individuals who enter the forest without special permission, can be fined.

The state Forest service, Russian companies Rusforest and Kirenskles, and the Chinese company Eurasia operate in the Evenkis’ areas of traditional land use. According to the obshchina leader, only Rusforest pays them compensation (16,000 rubles plus wood supply annually) and hires local residents to work at the check-point in the summer.

Road to Vershina Khandy

Officially, Vershina Khandy does not have any roads connecting it with other settlements or large public roads. The existing road is not maintained by the local municipality. To get to the village, local residents used parts of the forest road currently rented by RusForest. The road is closed to the public in the summer, but the residents of the village are allowed to use it. However, the forest road ends about 15 kilometers from the village. During the BAM construction, the locals asked a bulldozer driver to make a track to the village. When the driver tried to oblige, he discovered that a bog about 8 kilometers from the village blocked moving efforts. While in the winter the bog freezes and it is possible to drive across the ice, in the summer, the residents have to walk across the inhospitable terrain. In 2017, after long negotiations, obshchina residents received

Commented [VK1]: I’m not sure how to say: he was just driving and falling trees on the way to make a track, so it’s not exactly construction

compensation from Gazprom in the sum of 5.5 million rubles that allowed them to pay rent for the territories of traditional land use (initially Evenki had access to their traditional lands for free, but since 2009 they must pay rent like other land users), and buy transportation vehicles, such as snow mobiles and swamp buggies.

Gas Exploration and Transportation Infrastructure

The main elements of current gas infrastructure include regional road construction and geophysical line clearings used to determine if there are subsurface gas deposits. Gazprom Dobycha is the company responsible for carrying out these tasks. It plans to build 14 bridges and construct 80 kilometers of gravel road (Dorogu, 2019) as part of the program to develop the Kovyktinskoie gas condensate deposit in the areas where the Evenki live. The road leads from the BAM railway to the Gazprom shift-worker camp, allowing for the movement of vehicles at regular speed, while on the rest of the road, not covered by construction (about 160 km to Zhigalovo) speed is around 20 kilometers an hour due to bumps and potholes in the summer. During the winter, when these obstacles are covered by snow, traffic increases. The geophysical line clearings in some areas reach a density of every 150 to 300 meters, so the whole territory looks like a plaid design in satellite images. Most of the work is conducted by sub-contractors, so Gazprom Dobycha does not take responsibility for any environmental damage caused by their activities. For the local Evenki, therefore, it is difficult to prove which company or individual caused disruptions.

The Overall Impact of Infrastructural Development on Local Communities and the Environment

According to local observations, there is a strong relationship between infrastructural development and environmental degradation that in turn leads to the loss of traditional cultures of land use. After geophysical line clearings were made in 2018, Evenki hunters found piles of cut wood on forest tracks and Khanda river sites where the timber had been cut. In addition, forest fragmentation led to changes of winds and migration routes for caribou and other animals. While sometimes infrastructural objects serve as barriers for forest fires, more often the vehicles and people travelling through the land cause those fires in the first place. Increased accessibility of the river and lakes attracts fishermen from neighboring settlements and raions in the winter. Hunters sometimes see more than 20 cars belonging to fishermen daily and occasionally hear gun shots that they relate to poaching. With recreational fishermen and construction workers, hunters see an increase in thefts from their hunting huts.

While local Evenki have experienced numerous infrastructural expansions, until now they have been able to regain some level of control over their traditional territories. However, the cumulative impact of multiple forest fires, continuing logging activities, and gas exploration have degraded biological resources to the extent that many Evenki must give up their traditions. As a result, we are witnessing the loss of unique ecological knowledge and a culture that takes seriously human-natural relations.

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