

Me and My Salmon Friends

A programme of ethno-ecological education among the youth of rural Kamchatka in the Russian Far East strives to revive traditional indigenous knowledge in salmon fishing

The Pacific coast of Russia—or the so-called Russian Far East—is rich in diverse indigenous cultures for whom salmon is the main source of subsistence. Neighbouring Alaska is the Kamchatka peninsula, one of the Russian Far East regions which, for the most part, remains proud of its pristine and untouched nature. A land of volcanoes, rivers and brown bears, Kamchatka is also the homeland of five indigenous groups—Chukchis, Koryaks, Itelmens, Aleuts and Evens—who practise either traditional reindeer herding or fishing.

Kamchatka is a spawning ground for all six species of the Pacific wild salmon. The local people have yet to taste farmed salmon and they seem in no hurry to do so in the near future. Over the last decade, with rising pressure on Kamchatka's salmon resources—from overfishing, poaching, and gas and oil exploration—a number of environmental organizations, along with groups of indigenous peoples, have united their efforts to raise awareness about the processes that threaten salmon populations and to seek possible solutions. This has resulted in various salmon conservation programmes. An important component of those programmes is the emphasis on the use of traditional indigenous knowledge aimed at sustainable use of natural resources.

Work with the indigenous youth population of Kamchatka in the area of salmon conservation has thrown up some examples of successful programmes and some ideas for future work to facilitate more responsible use of salmon resources.

In 2003, an indigenous organization, the Ethno-Ecological

Information Centre Lach or EEIC Lach ('Lach' means 'sun' in the Itelmen language) started a youth programme specifically aimed at raising awareness of the dangers of the depletion of salmon stocks. It was the first organization to work on the ethno-ecological education of the children of the north. Since then, every year EEIC Lach has held some kind of educational event. The main aim is to encourage indigenous youth from rural areas to use salmon resources more responsibly, based on the traditional ancestral knowledge

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EEIC Lach's first big project was called "Me and Salmon". It was a two-year project of poster and composition competitions throughout the peninsula on the topic "Me and Salmon". By offering this challenge to the children, we at EEIC Lach wanted them to start thinking about how their lives are related to salmon and how they depend on the ecological status of their environment. These contests were meant for children and youth between three and 23 years of age.

Children's works

We received over 180 entries for the contests. Children expressed great interest in the topic and their works reflected the lifestyle of the

*This article is by **Tatiana Degai** (cbdraipon@gmail.com), co-ordinator of educational and art programmes at the Ethno-Ecological Information Centre Lach*

TATIANA DEGAI / EEIC LACH



Salmon being dried on racks in Kamchatka, Russia. Salmon is one of the essential subsistence foods for indigenous peoples of Kamchatka

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indigenous peoples of Kamchatka for whom salmon is one of the essential subsistence foods. The submissions revealed that knowledge of the disappearance of salmon is not confined to grown-ups and that children also care about subsistence and livelihoods.

In their compositions, rural children described vividly the problem of salmon poaching that occurs in the rivers near their homes. They proved that they understand the problem, and are aware of the need to be more responsible about the use of salmon resources. They also realize that mass poaching leads to hunger and the extinction of indigenous peoples who have traditionally used natural resources without damaging the environment. The “Me and Salmon” project demonstrated that an indigenous person in Kamchatka cannot imagine a life without salmon.

The results of the contests were declared during the conference titled “Nature and Society of Kamchatka: Looking for Ways to Solve Ecological Problems”, held in the main city of the peninsula. As a follow-up, the posters were sent to various Kamchatkan villages as a travelling exposition.

The poster and composition contests had a huge resonance in Russia and, as a result, the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples

of the North (RAIPON) offered to include the works of the children in a publication—“Me and Salmon”, our first children’s book.

In 2004, we started a new project called “Legends About Salmon”. The idea was to get youth to co-operate with elders to record legends or make up their own stories about salmon. The competition aimed at encouraging youth to start thinking not only about issues related to salmon—its use and value, and the problem of poaching—but also about the ancient connections between indigenous peoples and the gifts of nature. Thanks to the project, children learned about how salmon migrate, and they also got acquainted with the etymology of the names of salmon species, which are derived from indigenous languages. Many participants described the salmon life cycle and the traditions of salmon fishing among native populations. They also described traditional fishing methods, the restrictions on the allowable catch of salmon, and why salmon is important for the region. The contest also attracted some entries from the neighbouring salmon communities of Sakhalin and Magadan.

In planning these contests, we wanted to facilitate conversations between the children and the holders of native wisdom, who were encouraged to share ancient stories about salmon that are still alive in the communities’ collective memory. We also hoped to get not only children but also their parents to start thinking about more sustainable uses of salmon. One unexpectedly successful achievement of the project was to initiate similar programmes in the neighbouring regions of Sakhalin and Khabarovsk. Another outcome of the project was the publication of a book, in 2006, of stories sent in by the contest participants. Titled “Legends About Salmon”, it went into a second edition in 2007.

Youth camp

Since 2007, EEIC Lach has been actively involved in the organization of the ethno-ecological youth camp “Salmon Keepers”, together with the

main organizer, an information centre called “Aboriginals of Kamchatka”. In 2007 too, with the help of camp participants, we published a book titled “Kamchatka: The Land of Salmon”. It aimed to provide scientific information about salmon in a language appropriate for children. The book opens with an Itelmen legend about the creation of the land of Kamchatka, written by a native elder, and then goes on into colourful descriptions of salmon species and life cycle, in the form of a poster that can be easily taken out of the book and hung on a wall. Participants of the Salmon Keepers camp created educational puzzles about salmon for the book as well. The publication has been sent to villages where teachers and leaders of environmental clubs are using it for their lessons.

Each summer, the Salmon Keepers camp is held in different salmon spawning grounds, which are usually close to a native village. The camp is meant for indigenous teenagers who come to learn about salmon and its relation to indigenous cultures, from invited indigenous knowledge holders and scientists. Generous funding from the ecological non-governmental organization Pacific Environment (PERK) allows the camp to be held free for the participants. Usually, it is a two-week event, during which the youth live a traditional lifestyle on one of the Kamchatkan rivers.

The camp’s organizing committee consists of indigenous organizations such as Aboriginals of Kamchatka and EEIC Lach as well as scientific institutions such as the Kamchatka Research Institute of Fishery and Oceanology. As a follow-up activity, during the fall, Kamchatka hosts a “Salmon Keepers Festival”, a platform where children from different ecological clubs meet and compete over their knowledge about salmon. By tradition, the participants of the summer youth camp form their own team for the festival and present their own logo, in the form of an artistic composition like a poster, and they also participate in various competitions. All these projects are

supported by PERK, whose funding has made it possible to get more young people and rural teachers involved in the movement.

The youth programmes of EEIC Lach have been developing over the past years, and it is gratifying to see that they have initiated similar independent projects in various Kamchatkan villages. As a result, a number of ecological clubs and salmon museums have been initiated by local teachers. While organizing the contests, we have taken care to identify and award those teachers who have encouraged the participation of their students in the salmon programmes. It is important to support these volunteers and make them and their efforts feel heard, needed and appreciated.

In 2010, the International Year of Biodiversity, we joined hands with colleagues from “Kogolika”, the Informational Law Centre of Indigenous Peoples in the Tomsk area of Siberia, to organize an indigenous Russian youth poster competition around the theme “The World Around Us”. Children from Kamchatka and Tomsk were invited to present the ecological problems of their regions at the state level.

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Different areas

It was interesting to see the difference between the two Russian areas. In Tomsk, children worry about oil extraction, while in Kamchatka, for the most part, children are concerned about salmon issues. During the summit of the leaders of the Arctic countries in Moscow, we organized an exhibition where Arctic leaders had a chance to vote for the poster that best represented the theme. A small exhibition was also organized for the 10th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Nagoya, Japan.

TATIANA DEGAI / EEIC LACH



Children, known as 'Salmon Keepers' helping in conserving salmon stocks in Kamchatka, Russia. It is important for the future of Kamchatka to continue the education of children

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For all our contests we have tried to secure funding so that every participant gets to take back some kind of a special gift for participation, such as school supplies or camping gear, which are hard to come by in the rural areas. Winners get more substantial prizes. Each participant is also sent a copy of the publication dedicated to the contest. The publications are also sent to rural schools and libraries as background material for ethno-ecological education.

Our experience in conducting these various ecological events indicates that we need to increase attention on working with rural schools. There is a great lack of teaching materials for schools aiming

at ethno-ecological education that takes into consideration the local environment and people. It is important to continue providing publications that support teachers in their ecology or biology lessons in schools as well as in ecological clubs. Usually, such teaching is voluntary and teachers do not get monetarily rewarded for their impressive work. It is thus essential to at least recompensate them with some publications, contest events and youth camps to encourage and thank them for their work.

Poaching remains a big issue in Kamchatka. Many citizens are forced to go to the river and poach fish because it is the only way to earn an income in the summer. In the light of this, it is important for the future of Kamchatka to continue the education of children growing up in such an environment. We can also influence parents via their children, to some extent, which is our goal for future events.

For more



en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kamchatka_Peninsula

Kamchatka Peninsula

www.vulkaner.no/t/kamchat/people.html

Indigenous People of Kamchatka

www.raipon.info

Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East

pacificenvironment.org/blog/2011/02/beautiful-books-about-kamchatka%E2%80%99s-salmon-from-the-rivers-to-the-kitchen/

Beautiful Books about Kamchatka's Salmon; from the rivers to the kitchen