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ECOTOURISM AND POST-INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE RUSSIAN PERIPHERY

Victoria Fomina

Abstract

This paper draws on the case of Komsomolsk-na-Amure, a planned city built in the 1930s in the Khabarovsk Region, to explore interwoven moral imaginaries of industrialization and nature in Russia's Far East. Widely celebrated in the Soviet press as 'the City of Youth' built by communist volunteers who traveled from all over the USSR to construct an urban socialist utopia in the taiga, Komsomolsk's mythos has historically been defined by the trope of triumphant subjugation of the unruly wilderness. In the 1960s, as love of one's region and its natural splendor became central to Soviet patriotic visions, Komsomolsk's hinterland witnessed a rapid development of ecotourism, designed to provide residents with local recreational alternatives to distant resorts in the Western part of the USSR. The city's enterprises, including shipbuilding and aviation plants, played a key role in financing and maintaining the ex-urban summer camps, sanatoria, and ski resorts. However, economic decline and massive depopulation since the 1990s have left the city's (peri-)urban infrastructures in ruins. By exploring attempts to revive these leisure enterprises on a commercial basis in the post-Soviet era, I illuminate the challenges associated with the market-oriented transformation of what were once considered state-provided services, and analyze the potential trajectories of profit-generating nature tourism for the development of sparsely populated and hard-to-reach places like the Khabarovsk Region.

Keywords: Russian Far East, post-socialist transition, deindustrialization, ecotourism

Introduction

Over the past two decades, ecotourism has emerged not only as a rapidly developing sector of the global economy, but also as a new paradigm for envisioning a "sustainable future" in locales hit hard by recession and the long-term trend of deindustrialization. Coinciding with a growing global awareness of the urgency of environmental conservation and biodiversity protection, ecotourism's numerous advocates – from international financial

institutions to national governments and NGOs – celebrate the practice as an effective alternative to extractive industries and polluting manufacturing that can benefit local communities, improve the quality of life in developing regions, and help protect fragile ecosystems by supporting projects that promote responsible consumption (Carrier and Macleod 2005; Fletcher and Neves 2012). Inherent in the ecotourism paradigm is an attempt to address the pressing issue of human-induced environmental degradation by redefining the relationship between nature and value production. "While extractive industry creates value by transforming natural resources into commodities that can be transported to their point of consumption, conservation, by contrast, seeks to commodify resources in situ, necessitating particular mechanisms to generate value sans extraction," observe Fletcher and Neves (2012: 64). Such a redefinition of nature as a valuable resource in its own right is imagined to serve the environmentalist cause by incentivizing conservation over other forms of land use (ibid.) and by promoting a moral framework that juxtaposes the virtues of ecotourism as a "sustainable" and "responsible" economic model with ecologically "dangerous" and therefore morally problematic industrial production. Such a Manichean view of ecotourism and industrial development, however, has little traction in many post-industrial communities, which see ecotourism development as an opportunity to supplement their declining incomes, but are unwilling or unable to give up hope of reviving their local manufacturing sector. In this essay, I draw on the case of Komsomolsk-na-Amure – a formerly "closed" military-industrial complex in the Russian Far East – to explore the promises and limitations of ecotourism in the context of Soviet-era planned cities. By exploring the historical entanglements between the varied imaginaries of nature and industrial development in the Russian Far East (RFE) during the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, I aim to shed light on the tensions involved in attempts to transform nature tourism from a state-provided service into a market for profit. I argue that in those regions whose remote geographic location and underdeveloped transportation networks make them unlikely candidates for conversion into international ecotourism hubs, the development of nature tourism remains highly dependent on the home market and its economic performance, as well as the stability of the national middle class. In what follows, I draw on the case of the children's holiday camp industry around Komsomolsk, which entered a phase of decline in the 1990s, to illuminate the key role of industrialization in the development and maintenance of the nature tourism industry in the Russian periphery.

The imagery of vast natural expanses and mesmerizing wilderness has historically played a central role in the construction of popular representations of the Russian Far East. The imperial-era mythology of Eastern Siberia and the Amur Region strongly drew on the promise of bountifulness, with 19th century explorers and enthusiasts of colonial expansion depicting the region as an "inexhaustible source of wealth," rich in fish, sables, arable land, and precious metals (Bassin 1999: 21). Soviet representations of the Far East largely depicted the region as a frontier zone to be domesticated and incorporated into socialist modernity through the construction of railroads, electricity grids, and new urban settlements. The 1930s cinematographic and literary representations of the Far East and the Arctic drew heavily on militaristic metaphors of subduing the hostile, yet spectacular wilderness in order to carve out space for the new socialist society (Shulman 2007; Kaganovsky2017; Widdis 2000). During the Soviet era, the Russian Far East underwent rapid urbanization and demographic growth, driven both by expansion of imperial-era cities and establishment of new industrial centers such as Komsomolsk-na-Amure and Magadan. These proud new cities, along with other high-profile construction projects such as the Baikal-Amur Mainline, represented both the industrial successes of the Soviet state and the triumph of man over nature. The triumph, however, proved to be short-lived. Since the 1990s, following rapid deindustrialization, the retreat of the socialized state, and mass outmigration from the region, the temporarily subdued "wilderness" started to reconquer its territory, subsuming the numerous abandoned military garrisons, defunct summer camps, and geological exploration outposts scattered throughout the taiga. In the post-Soviet era, the Far East reemerged in the Russian popular imagination as a kind of *terra incognita*, harboring natural splendors and empty spaces waiting to be (re)discovered. This untamed image is reinforced by the Far East's status as Russia's most sparsely populated region: despite occupying more than one-third of Russia's landmass, only 5.6% of the country's population lives there, and this modest number is steadily declining each year.

Concerned about the depopulation and economic decline of this strategically important frontier region, the Russian federal government has implemented a number of policies aimed at increasing the region's attractiveness for investment and migration. Since 2015, the Russian government has sought to address the RFE's demographic problem by transforming it into "a territory of advanced development," or TOR, by investing in economic modernization and providing subsidies to

incentivize young professionals and businesses to relocate to the area. At present, extractive industries, including mining, oil, gas, timber extraction, and fishing, remain the bulwark of the Far East's economy, while manufacturing, mostly concentrated in the Khabarovsk and Primorie regions, accounts for only 5.1% (Min and Kang 2018, 55). The economic programs promoted under the TOR initiative aim both to support existing industries (especially manufacturing) and to revitalize the region's economic development by promoting (eco)tourism enterprises, which can supplement income from the declining industrial sector. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the terms "ecotourism" and "nature tourism" interchangeably to refer to any form of tourist activity (whether for sport, nature observation, pleasure, or education) that involves visits to wilderness and/or peri-urban areas. By analyzing the complex relational nexus between the environment, industrial production, and development in the Russian periphery, this essay traces the shifting practices of leisure and the transformation of nature in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, as well as the ways in which the rearticulation of these imaginaries can potentially reconfigure the struggling economies of former company towns.

Conquering and inhabiting nature

From its inception, representations of Komsomolsk-na-Amure have been inextricably linked to images of the boundless and impassable taiga that surrounds it. The city was founded in 1932 and was designed to foster the region's industrialization with a shipbuilding plant, an aircraft factory, and several metallurgical industries. Built with the participation of thousands of volunteers from the Communist Youth League, or *Komsomol,* the city's name was meant to commemorate the heroic feat of the Soviet youth. The fast-growing construction projects in the USSR's underpopulated Eastern borderlands required a steady supply of workers. The chronic manpower shortages in the region were partly remedied by widespread usage of prison labor provided by the expanding network of Gulag camps (Bone 1999). From the late 1930s onwards, the Soviet authorities actively encouraged the promotion of the region in the all-Union press and public culture with the goal of incentivizing migration to the frontier (Shulman 2007). The first years of Komsomolsk's construction became the subject of numerous newspaper articles, works of literary fiction, documentary books and films, theater plays, songs, and poems. These artworks often

portrayed the city's builders as fearless pioneers engaged in a deadly struggle with a merciless nature, transforming the vast wilderness around them into a habitable environment (Widdis 2000). These romanticized narratives of the city's creation and celebration of its *pervostroiteli*, or 'first-builders' formed the cornerstone of the local memory canon, which has long outlived the Soviet state (Fomina forthcoming).

Over time, as the city's urban infrastructure expanded significantly, the combative attitude of its builders and residents toward the great outdoors gradually gave way to a more contemplative and sentimental stance, one that mixed concerns about conservation with a desire to explore and experience the awe-inducing beauty of the taiga. This moment also coincided with the general paradigm shift in the USSR's approach to the environment, from the grandiose ambitions of the Stalin era to transform ecologies in accordance with the needs of Soviet society to an acknowledgement of the problem of resource overexploitation and a call for a more responsible and harmonious relationship with nature (Coumel 2013). The Khrushchev era witnessed a strong renaissance of the conservation and nature protection movement, including the establishment of the Nature Protection Commission (1955), the creation of different scientific associations engaged in conservation activities, and a shift towards greater coverage of pollution and environmental degradation issues in the Soviet press (ibid.).

The Soviet turn to environmentalism was accompanied by a reassessment of the role of nature in the national imagination. During the 1960s, love and knowledge of one's region and its natural splendor became central to Soviet patriotic visions, which promoted educational excursions and tours designed to cultivate a love and responsible attitude toward the environment. Although the relationship between conservation initiatives and nature tourism was not without tension, as the massive influx of visitors into previously "virgin" or underpopulated terrains created new dangers of anthropogenic pollution and human-caused wildfires, the Soviet environmental activists made considerable efforts to turn tourists into "fighters for nature" through promoting ecological education and the culture of "responsible" contact with nature (Roe 2016: 2). Beginning in the 1960s, the Soviet Union witnessed a rapid expansion of domestic tourism infrastructure managed by a variety of official bodies, including trade unions, which played an important role in subsidizing travel vouchers for their members (Assipova and Lynn 2014: 2018). Much of the government's efforts in the postwar period were specifically focused on

sponsoring children recreation and adolescent tourism, both to shape the new generation of loyal and healthy Soviet citizens and to demonstrate to domestic and foreign audiences the Soviet Union's ability to provide a happy childhood for its children (Tsipurski 2014).

Although the process of infrastructure development for travel and recreation was characterized by a strong geographical unevenness, with much smaller scale infrastructure development in the remote parts of the USSR characterized by low population density and extreme climatic conditions (Shaw 1991: 126), since the 1960s Komsomolsk's hinterland witnessed a rapid development of ecotourism, which aimed to provide residents with local recreational alternatives to distant resorts in the Western part of the USSR. The city's enterprises, including the Amur Shipbuilding Plant (ASZ) and the Yuri Gagarin Aircraft Factory, played a key role in the creation of ex-urban summer camps, sanatoriums, and ski resorts. Most of the summer camps and tourist bases created in the region during the Soviet era belonged to different factories that were directly responsible for their financing and infrastructure maintenance. Examples include the *Korabel* (1937) and *Delphin* (1990) summer camps of the Shipbuilding Plant, the *Kosmos* (1969) and *Shargol* (1975) summer camps of the Aircraft Plant, the *Amurchenok* (1964) and *Amurkaia Zhemchuzhina* (Amur Pearl) (1979) camps of the local metallurgical plant, owned by the *Amurmash* machine-building plant in Amursk, a satellite town of Komsomolsk founded in 1958. Along with the construction of camps, the practice of organized excursions into nature organized as part of *kraievedenie* initiatives – the popularization of the study of history, geography and ecology of one's region – were rapidly developing. In 1956, a regional branch of the Children's Excursion Tour Station (CETS) was opened in Khabarovsk. The Station coordinated children's expeditions, hikes, and camping trips throughout the region, often giving preference to the development of itineraries that had educational potential, such as hikes to remote settlements and villages with the aim of collecting oral histories and documenting material culture, geological and archaeological expeditions, and reconstruction of the routes of the 19th and early 20th century explorers of the region. In the late 1950s, about 45,000 students of the Khabarovsk region were involved in the work of the CETS, and the popularity of the movement continued to grow in the following decades (Davydova 2019).

Post-industrial developments

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing deindustrialization, Komsomolsk – whose entire economy revolved around the military-industrial complex – experienced a dramatic decline. After 1991, the city's industrial production suffered a major decline. Throughout the 1990s, Komsomolsk became a site of enduring protests and strikes, often supported by the local administration and industrial leaders who hoped to stall the pace of privatization and secure the subsidies from the federal center necessary to prevent the complete meltdown of the city's economy (Evans 2014). These protests often explicitly targeted the Kremlin, whose policies were popularly blamed for the city's economic crisis. The recovery of the Russian military-industrial complex by the late 1990s, coupled with the government's growing concern about the rapid depopulation of the Russian Far East, has led to the provision of new subsidies to the city's industries. While these measures have allowed Komsomolsk to escape the grim fate of the so-called "monotowns" – or single-industry cities, many of which have become ghost towns since the 1990s (Rockhill-Khlinovskaya 2015) – the city's continued to face declining demographics and shrinking industrial output. From 319,000 residents in 1990 to 239,386 in 2022, the city's population has decreased significantly – a trend that is likely to continue in the near future as Komsomolsk's younger residents find it increasingly difficult to envision a future in a city struggling with decaying infrastructure and an aging population.

The economic turmoil that the city has experienced since the 1990s has had a devastating effect on the local children's tourism industry, as the factories that once owned and sponsored the pioneer camps have found it increasingly difficult to finance the upkeep of these sites. Although some of the summer camps and tourist complexes managed to continue operating throughout the 1990s, by the end of the 2000s, many had ceased to exist. The city's oldest summer camp, *Korabel*, which had been in operation since 1937 and was owned by the Amur Shipbuilding Plant, was "conserved" in 2010 because the factory could no longer afford to pay for its upkeep. Conservation, as opposed to outright closure, involves a commitment to protect the existing infrastructure of the site so that it may reopen in the future. The camp's territory continues to be fenced off and guarded against uninvited intruders – whether they are local residents visiting abandoned campsites in search of evocative photographs or teenagers looking to throw a party. While such conservation practices may

protect camp property from looting, vandalism, and accidental destruction by unsupervised visitors,[1] it proves powerless against the ravages of time. A series of photo reportages from *Korabel* and several other preserved camps by local journalist Dmitrii Nikolaev[2] documents the deplorable condition of the foreclosed camps: buildings with partially collapsed roofs, mold-infested walls, and rotting wooden floors. As this decay spreads, each day of the "conservation" thus increases the cost of the necessary renovations while diminishing the hope of reopening the camp.

Many of the camps that were transferred from the factories to city ownership met an equally grim end. Struggling to find the money to maintain the camps, the city administration was forced to auction them off. Some were subsequently acquired by private entrepreneurs who hoped to revive the operation of these sites on a commercial basis, but with little success. Such is the case of *Kosmos*, one of the largest camps in Khabarovsk region, located in the taiga hills about 38 km from Komsomolsk. The camp, which covers an area of 123,000 square meters and has 18 residential buildings as well as several outdoor swimming pools and sports fields, was built in 1970 for the children of employees of the aircraft factory and used to accommodate up to 800 children per stay (Kakarov 2015). Until 2014, *Kosmos* was jointly funded by the Yurii Gagarin Aircraft Factory and the Komsomolsk city administration. However, after the massive floods that hit the Khabarovsk region in 2013 severely damaged the camp's infrastructure, the aircraft factory declared that it could no longer contribute to the camp's upkeep. The city administration, unable to raise on its own the approximately 30 million rubles needed to finance the extensive repairs and modernization of the camp, which lacked a centralized power supply and had to run on an expensive diesel power plant, unsuccessfully attempted to transfer the camp to the regional government's balance sheet (Scherstobitova 2014). After failing to secure support from the regional budget, the city administration decided to "conserve" the camp, as it could not be reopened due to safety regulations, but since conservation also entailed significant costs, it eventually decided to auction it off. In June 2015, the camp complex was sold to a private entrepreneur, who intended to transform the camp's territory into a recreational tourist base, mainly aimed at adult visitors.[3] However, these plans did not materialize and the camp remains abandoned to this day, slowly being eaten up by the encroaching nature.

A similar fate awaited the *Amurskaia Zhemchuzhina* camp, located in a picturesque Ommi village near Amursk. The camp was built in 1979 by

the Amursk-based metallurgical plant *Amurmash* to serve as a children's vacation camp in the summer and as a recreational base for the plant's employees in other seasons. Nikolayev (2018) reports that in 1997, when the *Amurmash* factory was struggling with a lack of orders, it incurred a substantial debt for energy consumption and was forced to transfer the camp to the Amurskaia Thermal Power Plant (TPP) in lieu of the forfeited payments. Unlike *Kosmos*, *Amurskaia Zhemchuzhina*, which covers an area of 6.3 hectares, had a greater potential for commercial use, as it was originally designed as a large recreational complex for the entertainment of both youth and adults, with (in addition to the usual summer camp dormitories, sports fields, and swimming pools) a movie theater and disco hall, a well-equipped an indoors gym, roller and running tracks, and a football field. For the next 17 years after the transfer, the camp was run by the TPP on a commercial basis and even managed to generate enough profit to transform it into a separate open joint-stock company. By 2021, however, the camp's profitability began to decline due to the decreasing ability of local residents to pay and the growing cost of maintaining the Soviet-era infrastructure. In 2014, *Amurskaia Zhemchuzhina*, no longer able to cope with shrinking revenues, was forced to declare bankruptcy and shut down. In the same year, the camp complex was acquired by Khabarovsk businessman Fyodor Petrov. In 2018, as part of his investigative series on the fate of closed camps, Nikolaev published a short interview with Petrov, in which the camp's new owner described his plans to resume the camp's functioning. According to Petrov's estimates, renovating the camp would require about 40 million rubles, which he hoped to raise from private investors and the regional government.[4] Neither seems to have materialized, as in 2021 the camp was sold again, this time to an Amursk businessman who bought it along with a nearby (also abandoned) tourist base, *Rosinka*, in the hope of transforming these territories into a large recreational complex.[5] As of July 2022, neither site has resumed operations.

The examples of *Kosmos* and *Amursakaia Zhemchuzhina* illustrate the difficulty of transforming the industry of children's tourism rooted in the logic of the planned economy, into a profit-making enterprise in the post-Soviet era. One of the key factors hindering the development of the sector is the continuing demographic decline in Komsomolsk, caused both by the steady outmigration of its residents to other parts of Russia and by the so-called "demographic hole" of the 1990s – the sharp drop in birth rates in the early years of the post-socialist transition, which in the following

decades had a ripple effect on the educational system, as the shrinking cohorts of children and then students inevitably led to the downsizing of kindergartens, schools, and universities. This situation has also created a serious challenge for the children tourism industry. While the general economic downturn and the willingness and ability of families to finance their children's camp vacations can be partially remedied by the regional government's subsidy program, which reimburses part of the cost of the stay, the steady decline in the number of young people of the relevant age proved much harder to counter. Commenting on the upcoming auction of *Kosmos* and the camp's future after the sale, the mayor of Komsomolsk at the time, Andrei Klimov, admitted at a press conference that children's tourism was generally considered "unprofitable" by businessmen and that the camp was unlikely to be used for its intended purpose.[6] By 2022, only three extra-urban summer camps continued to operate in Komsomolsk – *Burevestnik* and *Amurchenok*, which remain registered as municipal property and are financed by the city, and *Zaslonovo*, which is owned by the Far Eastern branch of the Russian Railways Company.

The news of *Kosmos*'s sale, posted on Komsomolsk's city forum *komcity.ru*, provoked a flurry of angry comments from local residents, who saw it as a continuation of the market reform policies that throughout the 1990s have led to the privatization, sale, and subsequent foreclosure of the city's cultural and educational institutions, from houses of culture and sports complexes to kindergartens. While some commentators have pointed the finger at the Aircraft factory, shaming it for abandoning its social obligations, others have accused the city administration of trying to write off an important element of public infrastructure. Inevitably, many have interpreted the closure of the beloved and once popular local youth summer camp as just another sign of Komsomolsk's decline in the post-Soviet era. As one commentator put it, "As for *Kosmos*, I think its history is now over, and so is the history of the USSR's achievements in developing the city's industrial-ecological, social, educational, and wellness [*ozdorovitel'nyi*] potential."[7] The juxtaposition of Komsomolsk's current infrastructural decay with the city's rapid development during the Soviet era is also a common trope in discussions of the videos and photo images of the abandoned camps around Komsomolsk circulating on social media. Sometimes jokingly referred to as "traces of a more advanced civilization," these "ruins" function as material symbols of the infrastructural decline that former industrial frontiers like Komsomolsk have experienced since the collapse of the USSR. As such, these decaying

objects have a strong potential to fuel nostalgia for the Socialist era, which is remembered as a time of optimism and rapid development.

New ecological opportunities?

The imperial Russian, and later Soviet, project of colonizing the Far East was marked by an ongoing tension between the desire to transform the local environment into a suitable habitat and the concern to minimize the ecological damage caused by these transformations. Mark Sokolsky (2016) argues that both tsarist and Soviet governments saw the solution to this dilemma in the "rationalization" of nature management, hoping that a scientifically informed approach would allow for economic and urban development in harmony with the distinct, local ecology. Soviet attempts to reenact rationalized development, Sokolsky (2016, 35) argues, resulted in dramatic contrasts in the treatment of different territories, with some sites designated as "protected areas" and enjoying the highest forms of protection from anthropogenic impact, while others were "sacrificed" to the needs of the industrial economy. While the accelerated industrialization of the Soviet Far East helped to urbanize the region and significantly improve the living conditions of its inhabitants, it also came at a high ecological cost. In the late Soviet era, Komsomolsk – along with Khabarovsk and Yuzhno-Sakhalisnk – was included in the list of the 50 most polluted cities in the USSR (Pryde and Mcauley 1991). The dramatic decline in industrial production since the 1990s has partially remedied the situation, if not in the city itself,[8] at least in its surrounding areas, creating new opportunities to capitalize on the region's natural landscape. Building on the Soviet legacy of nature conservation, three additional nature reserves *(zapovedniki)* have been established in Khabarovsk since the 1990s. Today, a significant portion of the region's territory is covered by some form of protected natural area, and the region boasts numerous cultural heritage sites, six nature reserves, one national park, and 25 wildlife sanctuaries *(zakazniki)*. Observing the growing global popularity of ecotourism, local authorities have attempted to replicate its success, hoping that Khabarovsk's vast expanses of untouched taiga could make the region an attractive destination for domestic and international travelers.

The development of the region's potential as a major hub for ecotourism was given special attention in the regional government's programs. The government program "Development of Domestic and International

Tourism in Khabarovsk Region (2013–2020)" concludes that despite the region's high potential for attracting tourists due to its high concentration of natural reserves, the growth of this sector in the region's economy has been extremely slow – a trend that is attributed to the poor and unevenly distributed transport and hotel infrastructure, which leads to high-priced tours and low quality service standards.[9] The program proposes to revitalize the region's tourism industry through the development of the so-called "cluster" approach, which envisages the unification of already existing, locally popular, urban and peri-urban destinations that are deemed to have "high marketability" potential into packaged tours (Mirzekhanova 2015). The creation of "clusters" implies the use of public-private partnerships to ensure the improvement of existing services and the development of new services for tourism-related infrastructure – from hotels and restaurants to ethnographic museums and transportation networks on land and on the Amur River – around specific sites and territories. The program called for the creation of three such clusters: 1) "Khabarovsk agglomeration," selected for its proximity to the Chinese border, as well as for its rich architectural and historical legacy and high potential for "cultural" and "educational" tourism; 2) "Severnyi – Sikhote-Alin'" cluster, located on the territory of the Vanino and Sovietskaia Gavan' municipal districts near the Gulf of Tartary, in close proximity to the Okhotsk Sea, and featuring numerous thermal streams proposed to serve as a basis for health and ecological/sports tourism (fishing, hunting); 3) "Komsomolsk agglomeration," which has a unique intersection of different types of flora, fauna, and echinofauna, as well as a ski industry, is envisioned as a site for "extreme nature" and ethnographic tourism. In 2019, the regional Ministry of Culture worked with the Khabarovsk-based *Guberniia* TV channel on a project called "Khabarovsk Region – a Territory of Big Discoveries," which aimed to showcase the natural reserves and indigenous settlements in various, often remote, parts of the region through a cycle of documentary series. In 2021, a Ministry of Tourism of Khabarovsk Region was established as a separate institution with the goal of promoting the region's numerous natural reserves as a popular destination for Russian and foreign visitors.

The 2013–2020 program, like numerous other governmental documents related to tourism development, justifies its concern for the local travel infrastructure with statistics that place tourism among the most profitable industries in the global economy, accounting for up to 10% of GDP in many states. While this reference to global experience may suggest an ambition to replicate the success stories of the international

tourism sector domestically, in practice the regional government's plan for the sector is rather modest, especially when it comes to assessing the region's potential to become a global tourist destination. Of the three proposed tourism clusters, only the "Khabarovsk agglomeration" is imagined to have the potential to attract foreign tourists and visitors from outside the region, while the other two clusters are suggested as sites for intraregional tourism.[10] Such an approach reflects the harsh reality that the Khabarovsk region, despite its spectacular natural beauty, has a hard time competing for inbound tourists with the nearby Southern resort Primorskii Region, which is located next to the Sea of Japan and is more easily accessible via the port city of Vladivostok, which has a large number of cultural and historical landmarks as well as a better developed transportation infrastructure. The 2021 Russian National Tourism Rating[11] ranks the Khabarovsk Region 42nd (out of 85) – in drastic contrast to the neighboring Primorskii Krai and Sakhalin oblast that were ranked 6th and 20th, respectively. This focus on not only domestic, but specifically intraregional tourism, which seems entirely justified given Khabarovsk's remote location away from major international airport hubs and underdeveloped transportation networks, thus challenges the idea of making tourism a more ecologically sustainable alternative to industrial production. Rather than becoming a new driver of the region's economic development, the tourism sector, which is primarily oriented toward the domestic market, is bound to remain heavily dependent on the state of the local industrial economy.

While the children's summer camp industry proved unsustainable in the context of post-Soviet market reforms, the sports tourism sector has enjoyed some visible successes. The most emblematic example of this success is the *Kholdomi* ski resort, which opened in 2004 in the mountainous area of Solnechnyi Raion, about 40 km Northwest of Komsomolsk. The resort quickly became very popular among the region's residents and was twice awarded "The Best Skiing Resort in the Russian Far East" by the Moscow-based International Congress of the Skiing Industry in 2006 and 2007. In 2016, Kholdomi was included in the "Komsomolsk" Advanced Special Economic Zone (ASEZ) program, which is designed to incentivize economic investment in the region through temporary tax exemptions and other privileges, such as reduced rents for land, simplified inspection procedures, and favorable loan rates. The ASEZ paradigm was introduced in the wake of the 2014 Western sanctions in response to Crimea's annexation, as an ambitious model to stimulate

the development of production and industry in the Russian Far East (Min and Kang 2018). Established in 2015, the Komsomolsk ASEZ includes several development clusters in the city of Komsomolsk, its satellite city of Amursk, and the Solnechnyi municipal district, aimed at supporting and further developing local agriculture, food production, metallurgy and timber industries, manufacturing, and tourism and recreation.[12] Since its inclusion in the ASEZ, Kholdomi has been able to attract significant investments (more than 432.9 million rubles) in the development of its infrastructure (mainly new ski trails and ski lifts), which should increase its traffic to 2,000 visitors per hour (the goal was to receive 240,000 tourists per year).[13] Currently, the resort has 17 ski trails of varying difficulty, a two-story hotel, and several wooden lodges. Outside of the ski season, which lasts from November to the end of April and sometimes early May, the resort remains open during the summer, offering its guests climbing walls, a bathhouse complex, and a rope park. Despite the fact that skiing and snowboarding remain relatively expensive hobbies, Kholdomi' s steady development reflects a growing interest in forms of nature and extreme tourism in the region among the emerging middle class in the Khabarovsk region. Despite Kholdomi's undeniable success and economic importance for the region as a major sports tourism hub, the feasibility of such a model of private investment-driven commercial enterprises to replace Soviet practices of organized leisure activities became a subject of bitter debate in the local media after a tragic fire at the complex in July 2019. In order to supplement its income during the summer season, Kholdomi has been running a children's camp on its territory since 2015, which is designed to accommodate up to 250 children per stay, offering accommodation in both cottages and makeshift tents. On the night of 23 July 2019, several tents caught fire due to a malfunctioning portable heater, resulting in the deaths of four children. The subsequent investigation revealed massive mismanagement and violation of safety regulations by the camp authorities, who admitted more children than could be accommodated in the cottages and made the decision to house some of the children in the tents.[14] This incident has revived discussion about the state of the children's camp industry in Komsomolsk, with many commentators pointing out that it was the foreclosure of the numerous camps designed specifically for children that led to the rise of ad-hoc organized camps in places like Kholdomi, which lack adequate infrastructure to host large groups of younger visitors. Although the Kholdomi camp was permanently closed after the tragedy, the complex continues to operate successfully

as a ski resort. While Kholdomi demonstrates the economic potential of privately owned, commercial tourist sites that can create jobs and generate revenue for regional budgets, it also illustrates the limitations of such a model, which cannot be extended to the organization of children's tourism on a private, for-profit basis and must therefore be subsidized by state or local enterprises.

Concluding remarks

The argument for developing ecotourism as an alternative to declining industrial production in the post-Soviet era is not entirely without merit, and there are some successful local examples of such enterprises in the Russian Far East. In the early 1990s, a private international crane breeding reserve was established in Amurskaia Oblast near the village of Muraviovka. Melinda Herrold-Menzies (2012: 800), who has researched the history of the park's development over several decades, reports that the residents and local government of the village of Muraviovka were initially strongly opposed to the establishment of the park, viewing the park's foreign donors from Japan, Korea, the United States, and Canada, as well as their Moscow-based partners, as "colonizers" seeking to take over local land and resources. However, local attitudes changed dramatically over the next decade and a half, as the park became a contributor to the local economy and a provider of some services previously provided by the Soviet state, including infrastructure development, the establishment of an environmental summer camp for local youth, the donation of equipment to village schools, and the establishment of an organic farm that provided employment opportunities (ibid.).

While ecotourism can provide a viable economic alternative for small settlements like Muraviovka, replicating the success of such a model on a larger scale in former industrial centers with higher population densities is hardly possible. Although the Khabarovsk Region possesses a large number of natural landmarks capable of attracting both domestic and international visitors, its geographical location and poor transportation infrastructure limit its ability to turn (eco)tourism into a critical industry. Moreover, the very thing that makes the region a suitable place for the development of so-called "extreme" nature tourism – a high concentration of beautiful but difficult to access natural landmarks – severely limits the

pool of potential tourists to experienced and adventurous explorers who are up to the challenge of traveling to "uncharted" territory.

The development of nature tourism in and around Khabarovsk is inextricably linked to the Soviet industrialization project, which, despite inflicting substantial damage to local ecologies, also made previously inaccessible areas accessible to large groups of visitors through the construction of roads and tourist bases. These developments were made possible by the logic of the centrally planned economy, which viewed nature tourism as a state-provided service designed to increase the well-being of Soviet citizens, rather than as an industry expected to turn a profit. The dramatic decline of Komsomolsk's peri-urban infrastructure since the 1990s, and the failure of attempts to revive the numerous closed summer camps and recreational complexes in the context of the market economy, point to the challenges of operating a tourism industry in sparsely populated, peripheral areas far from major transportation hubs and networks. Yet, in contrast to settings where such remoteness results in ecotourism operations that cater primarily to transnational (Western) tourists invested in encounters with "unspoiled" or "pristine" nature, or conservation projects that seek to banish humans from the wilderness, the paradigm of leisure tourism that has emerged in post-Soviet Russia eschews these modes of radical displacement in favor of a *modus vivendi* between industry and ecology as the way to an economically and ecologically sustainable future.

Endnotes

1 In practice, however, even these measures have often proved insufficient. Thus, in 2016, despite the presence of a guard, a conserved *Dzerzhinets* summer camp near Khabarovsk suffered a massive fire allegedly caused by the teenagers who have sneaked into its territory (*Guberniia*, 6 April 2016).

2 "Fotoreportazh iz Pionerlageria 'Korabel,' g. Komsomolsk-na-Amure," 2 July 2016, https://gorotskop.livejournal.com/74016.html (accessed 19 June 2022).

3 "Zakonservirovannyi Detskii Ozdorovitel'nyi Lager' 'Kosmos' v Komsomolske-na-Amure," 23 July 2015, https://gorotskop.livejournal.com/19885.html (accessed 10 June 2022).

4 "Istoriia Odnoi 'Zhemchuzhiny.'" *Dal'nevostochnyi Komsomol'sk*, 11 October 2018, https://dvkomsomolsk.ru/2018/10/11/istoriya-odnoj-zhemchuzhiny/ (accessed 10 July 2022).

5 "Novaia Zhyzn' Zabroshennogo Pionerlageria," 15 January 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PhLmvzYmcyU (accessed 10 July 2022).

6 "V 2015-m Godu Munitsipalitet Nameren Prodat' Lager' "Kosmos," *Komcity.ru*, 15 January 2015, http://www.komcity.ru/news/?id=18783 (accessed 10 July 2022).

7 17 January 2015. My own translation. Source: http://www.komcity.ru/forum/news/?id=49547&exclude_count=1 (accessed 11 July 2022).

8 In 2021 Komsomolsk was included in the list of Russia's 35 most polluted cities.

9 "Postanovlenie ot 26.06.2021 g. o Gosudarstvennoi Tselevoi Programme Khabarovskogo Kraia "Razvitie Vnutrennego I Viezdnogo Turizma v Khabarovskom Kraie (2013–2020 gody)".

10 The program also discusses the potentiality of establishing a fourth cluster dedicated to the development of cruise tourism industry along the Amur River that is imagined to have a high potential for attracting international tourists.

11 The yearly rating is compiled by the tourism magazine *Otdykh v Rossii* in collaboration with the Centre for Informational Communication "Rating" research group: http://www.travel.khv.ru/pages/218 (accessed 10 July 2022).

12 "Plan Perpektivnogo Razvitiia TOR 'Komsomolsk,'" https://erdc.ru/upload/ППР_ТОР%20Комсомольск_актуализированный.pdf (accessed 20 July 2022).

13 TASS, 23 July 2019, https://tass.ru/info/6692721?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com (accessed 13 July 2022).

14 "Pozhar v 'Kholdomi.' Troe Vinovnykh v Gibeli Detei Poluchili ot 4 do 9 let," https://aif.ru/society/law/pozhar_v_holdomi_troe_vinovnyh_v_gibeli_detey_poluchili_ot_4_do_9_let (accessed 23 September 2022).

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