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Elena Agarkova is studying management of natural resources and the relationship between Siberia's natural riches and its people. Previously, Elena was a Legal Fellow at the University of Washington's School of Law, at the Berman Environmental Law Clinic. She has clerked for Honorable Cynthia M. Rufe of the federal district court in Philadelphia, and has practiced commercial litigation at the New York office of Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy LLP. Elena was born in Moscow, Russia, and has volunteered for environmental non-profits in the Lake Baikal region of Siberia. She graduated from Georgetown University Law Center in 2001, and has received a bachelor's degree in political science from Barnard College.

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The Crane-Rogers Foundation
4545 42nd St. NW, Ste 311
Washington, D.C. 20016

Tel: 202-364-4068
Fax: 202-364-0498
E-mail: icwa@icwa.org
Web: www.icwa.org

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Clear waters of Chivyrkuy Bay, one of the most popular places for fishing on Baikal and the second biggest bay on the lake after Barguzin. Chivyrkuy Bay occupies 270 square kilometers, or 168 square miles.

Raise Your Hand if You're a Poacher

By Elena Agarkova

UST-BARGUZIN, LAKE BAIKAL – “Who should I contact to talk about poaching around here?” I asked.

“You can start with me,” said N, my friend from Ust-Barguzin, the village on the edge of Zabaikalsky National Park (ZNP).

His answer did not surprise me. From my earlier visits and talks with the park inspectors and locals I got the impression that most of the able villagers, including the people whose job involved protecting the park's resources, poached. Many people did not seem to attach any moral weight to the issue, or, if they did, drew a difference between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ poachers (those who poached ‘a little bit,’ for their personal use and according to traditional hunting rules, and those who did it for profit).

Local scientists estimate that poachers catch

almost as much fish as legal fishermen. But why has poaching become so blatant on Baikal? Who are these people and what drives them to break the law on such a widespread basis? I went to Ust-Barguzin to take a closer look at fishing on the lake. It appears that the reasons behind poaching run a wide gamut, from a simple need to survive, to a desire to make a quick buck, or to a pure sporting interest. Poachers are more numerous and often have better transport than the inspectors. Corruption, system-wide failures on the enforcement side, lack of meaningful market regulation, and disrespect for what locals see as arbitrary quotas, sustain the permissive atmosphere surrounding poaching. And when those in power take advantage of their official positions to overfish, for fun or for profit, an average Baikal villager can easily excuse himself for breaking what he sees as an unfairly applied law, for dire need. Just like in other aspects of life on Baikal, a distinct sense of freedom, a de-

termination to choose right and wrong in a specific situation without following the letter of the law blindly, drives poaching or allows it to prosper.

Ust-Barguzin provides plenty of good opportunities to study poaching. Here, enforcement issues get more complicated because the prime fishing grounds lie within national park territory. The village inhabitants have fished since the time of its founding and continue to do so today. Historical chronicles describe the Barguzin River and the bays surrounding the Holy Nose Peninsula — Barguzin and Chivyrkuy — as teeming with fish. The Barguzin River serves as one of the main spawning grounds for omul, a Baikal endemic of the salmon family. Locals — and I agree with them — consider omul, in salted or smoked form, a

delicacy. Nineteenth-century descriptions of omul spawning times said (with some exaggeration, no doubt) that one could walk from one shore of Barguzin to the other over omul backs.

This fish has served not only as the mainstay of the local diet but as one of the primary food sources for the people living around Baikal. Omul's relative abundance and popularity explain the fact that it accounts for more than half of the total Baikal fishery.

But people overfished the Sacred Sea well before our times. Omul stocks crashed in the middle of the 19th century, and then twice in the 20th century, before the Soviet government entered a complete ban on fishing omul in



1969. Other human activity contributed to the decline in fish populations. Logging on the shores of Baikal and along spawning rivers clogged valuable spawning grounds. Construction of the Irkutsk Hydroelectric Dam, which raised Baikal's water level by more than a meter in the 1950s, flooded spawning shoals along with coastal bays and lowlands. Today it is difficult to ascertain the extent of the dam's damage to Baikal and its fish spawning grounds. According to a famous Russian biologist Felix Shtilmark, this topic was not popular in the scientific literature of the time. For his part, Shtilmark reported that the population of the Baikal sculpin, one of omul's main food sources, has dropped precipitously since the 1950s.

The omul stock has recovered somewhat since the latest crash in the 1960s (although it is nowhere close to its early 19th-century volume), and fishing quotas have taken place of the ban. Nonetheless, scientists do not consider the omul population to be stable enough to support commercial fishing on its own. Because of the importance of fishing around the lake, three government-subsidized fish hatcheries work on Baikal, releasing over a billion omul larvae into the wild each year. Hatchery specialists estimate that about 30 percent of caught fish comes from artificial stock.

Out of the three omul sub-species that exist on Baikal, one comes from Chivyrkuy Bay. I came to Ust-Barguzin in early June to talk to the local fishermen and the fishing patrol inspectors, and to participate in some patrol raids, if possible.

For several days in a row I woke up at dawn only to look out the window and see rain or stormy clouds. This meant that the inspectors' old patrol boat would not be going out. The poachers' boats stayed ashore as well. Baikal is a dangerous body of water, with unpredictable, rough weather that can change in a matter of minutes. Just one week before a boat with two regional inspectors and their guest from Ulan-Ude capsized in Barguzin Bay. The guest started to swim, hoping to reach the shore. In an ironic twist, a poachers' boat spotted his orange floating vest in the water and picked him up. The boat went to retrieve the inspectors. By the time they arrived, one of the inspectors, who also tried to swim to shore, had drowned. The other had been holding on to the capsized boat for almost five hours, in frigid water. The poachers barely pried his fingers loose from the boat. He has been hospitalized "in a grave condition."

I heard this story from Volodya, one of the young ZNP inspectors, on a cold, cloudy morning when the park's "Amur," an open motor boat that fits four people, made another attempt to go out to Barguzin Bay. We went half an hour away from the shore until the waves got rougher



Volodya reads a fishing license in one of the plastic bottles we found in Barguzin Bay during the inspection.

and our captain decided to turn back. *En route*, the inspectors checked one-liter plastic soda bottles bobbing in the water. Fishermen tie them to grounded nets to mark the spot and also use them as waterproof containers for fishing licenses. During inspections, ZNP inspectors drive up to the bottles, open them and check the documents inside. Often a fisherman with a legal license will try to get around the law by beginning fishing several days earlier or finishing several days later than the period prescribed by his license, by installing more nets, or using nets longer than the ones authorized.

The game of cat and mouse continues all year. In winter fishermen try to hide their nets under ice during nighttime. The law prohibits fishing inspectors from working outside after dark (and, as the head of ZNP's patrol division explained to me, if one of the inspectors died while on duty, the park would have to pay lifetime salary to the employee's family, something the park cannot afford on its present budget). So the inspectors go out on ice during daytime, often running into poachers as they leave Baikal to come ashore. "Often we waved to each other before going in opposite directions," a friend of mine told me, a native of Ust-Barguzin who used to fish often in his younger days. If the inspectors fail to find poachers' nets, the poachers return at dusk to check for fish. But, according to my friend, the fishing inspectors put their own nets out. And if they did not catch enough, they would drive over to the regular fishermen, to "check their licenses."

In this small universe no clear lines separate the guards from the criminals. Also, in a tight community personal connections often take precedence over official responsibilities and duties. M, a ZNP employee, told me that the fishing inspector who drowned the week before my arrival at the village was good friends with M's father-in-law, a regular fisherman — and a poacher (after a while

these two notions began to appear as synonyms to me). M recounted a story from his student days, when he came to Ust-Barguzin to intern at the park for a summer. The inspector and the father-in-law visited him on the Arangatuy wetlands, an important bird preserve in ZNP, where M spent his internship. "They came on a boat. The inspector had a broken arm, so he didn't fish, but me and my father-in-law did not leave that boat for three days straight. It was spawning time." Any kind of fishing is strictly prohibited during a spawning season. "I made more money in those three days than what I received from my university stipend in three months," said M.

M also told another story, of three ZNP employees stopped by the local police several years ago on their way out of the park. They had fish in the trunk of their car. "They were stupid enough to admit that they caught it [illegally]. They could have said anything, that they bought it, for example. There is no way to check that kind of story. But they confessed, honestly. After a trial all three received conditional one-year sentences and were prohibited from working in any nature-protection jobs." M said that one of them could not find a job, so he continued to fish. "Sometimes we see him [fishing illegally], but what are we going to do? So we just let him go. The man has to eat."

This legally perverse sense of justice and fairness may stem from the corruption that permeates not only the arbitrary enforcement of environmental laws (personnel of every enforcing agency on the lake have been caught fishing illegally), but also the underlying system of licenses and quotas. "This year a company from Ulan-Ude showed up in ZNP with a 'scientific license' that allows them to take any kind of fish, during any season, for 'testing' purposes," M went on, indignantly. "How are we going to regulate that? So they'll be providing the testing laboratory in Barguzin with plenty of fish, and supplying themselves as well."

The different agencies that should protect Baikal's natural resources often catch each other's employees red-handed. Anti-poaching raids have led to arrests of nature reserve employees, fishing patrol inspectors, and scientists. For example, last October Buryatia press reported that Buryatia police, together with the Eastern Baikal environmental prosecutor's office, conducted a raid in the ZNP which "revealed blatant poaching in the Chivyrkuy Bay." The environmental prosecutor's deputy described two instances of office abuse by representatives of the very agencies entrusted with protecting Baikal's fish. The raid discovered a motor vessel officially belonging to Baikalfishwater, a regional office of a federal water agency, fishing in Chivyrkuy Bay without a license. Apparently the vessel left the agency port without notifying its management. The raid also discovered more than 2,500 fish (omul, whitefish, grayling and burbot) on board of a motor vessel belonging to the national park. The prosecutor's office told the press that an employee of Baikalfishwater engaged in fishing off the vessel under a 'scientific purposes' license. Apparently the scientist fished much more

often than two times a week permitted under his license. Since the amount of fish on the boat did not correspond to the declared quota, the prosecutor's office started an investigation into the matter.

No wonder locals sometimes say that the main poachers on Baikal are those entrusted with its protection. One of ZNP top inspectors who previously worked in the Ulan-Ude police department, Pavel Vorobiev, said to me: "We can bring to justice a regular person for poaching; we can fine him. But it is much more problematic with VIP persons. Since the prosecutor's office lost its power to conduct independent raids in the park, they've been coming here to 'inspect our work' incessantly. The park is like a bone in everyone's throat." Another park employee said that all enforcement agencies have to coordinate their raids with ZNP and must take park personnel along if they enter the park's territory. "But do they obey that rule? When policemen need fish, they go out and simply 'confiscate' some from the poachers."

A local journalist reported in 2002 that when he heard that the director of ZNP began to 'fight for the purity of his employee ranks,' he asked the director, "Is it true that you established a rule under which an employee who broke environmental laws must be fired on the spot?" Vladimir Melnikov, the director, apparently replied that it was indeed true, but he could not follow through on his good intentions. "We made it part of the collective bargaining agreement, but it turned out to contradict Labor Law. So it appears that you can fire someone for being three hours late to work, but cannot fire him for poaching."

One obvious reason for poaching by the very people who should be protecting the fish lies in their miserably small salaries. Many ZNP employees I know try to earn extra money in their spare time, often by guiding private tours, hosting tourists at their houses, or both. Alexander Beketov, the head of the ZNP patrol department, told me that recently the park lost most of its Chivyrkuy Bay inspectors. "They can make more money fishing. You don't have to fight with anyone; to the contrary, everyone loves you because you have fish to give to others" (sharing their catch with the people on the shore is a common custom among local fishermen). Beketov himself runs a popular bed-and-breakfast at his home, down the street from the park's office.

An inspector's average salary amounts to 6,000 rubles, or US\$200 under the current exchange rate. But the prices in local food stores often top those in Irkutsk (not a cheap city by American standards), because Ust-Barguzin lies about five hours north from Ulan-Ude by car, and almost all goods sold in the village have to be imported. Roma O., a local poacher I tried to interview on Chivyrkuy Bay (with mixed results, due to his intoxicated state at 11 a.m.) kept saying, "I have to live on something." He also said, "You know the situation in the village. There are no jobs. But you go to the store and you're out of a thousand rubles. I have two little kids. I have to feed them. And buy myself some liquor." He had two illegal nets in the Chivyrkuy



Alexander Beketov (right), the head of the ZNP patrol department, and a local fisherman Roma. Beketov drove me to the Chivyrkuy Bay and introduced me to Roma, saying "There is one poacher you can talk to."

Bay, and two more in the Barguzin Bay.

According to Beketov, a poacher like Roma runs the risk of making no money for a period of time, or can make between 15 and 20 thousand rubles a month (the same as a member of an official fishing crew). But Beketov disagreed with the notion that there are no jobs in the village. "Roma is a freeloader. He can put his nets in whenever he feels like it, he can check them or get drunk, he doesn't have to show up for work every day. He used to work in logging, and he can work hard, but his drinking has gotten the best of him."

We talked as we drove over the long, narrow sandy strip that separates the Holy Nose from mainland. The peninsula used to be an island, but over time the Barguzin River brought enough sediment from upstream to connect the Holy Nose to land, and create the Arangatuy wetlands. A trip over the pothole-filled road across the sandy strip can take as long as two hours, and acts as another deterrent to mass tourism and poaching in the park.

Beketov came to work at ZNP one year after the park's founding, in 1987. He described the park as being well equipped at the time. At its inception, the park had a new fleet of cars and boats. Since then the fleet has fallen into disrepair because of budget cuts. Almost each time I talked to Beketov and asked about coming along on a raid, he would reply that he would look into it: "We need to go out to patrol, of course, but our last functioning car has broke down." A friend of mine who works for the park told me that some of the best support that ZNP has received over

the years has come from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Service gives small grants to nature protection areas around the world. "These were some of the best and easiest grants that we have written," said Andrei. "We didn't have a snowmobile, so we wrote a grant proposal titled 'Winter transport for protection of Lake Baikal.' The FWS gave us money for a snowmobile. Then we needed a new boat, so we wrote a proposal titled 'Water transport for protection of Lake Baikal.' We got money for a boat. These grants are concrete and to the point. All the other places request 'innovations' from us. What kind of innovations can we implement if we don't have the means to do our main job?"

The inspectors' job has gotten more difficult over the years for several reasons. As Beketov explained, "Our patrol duties used to be easier because there was less bureaucracy. Now, when we write out an infringement notice, we need two witnesses. We have to take confiscated fish to an organization specifically licensed to accept it from us. The fish has to pass a sanitary inspection, and the licensed organization has to keep the fish as 'material evidence' for a period of time in case we institute legal proceedings. Before we could just donate the fish, for example, to a kindergarten." I asked who accepted confiscated fish in Ust-Barguzin. "No one at the moment," replied Beketov. "No one wants to deal with it. You have to keep it refrigerated until the proceedings are over, and no one wants to bear the expenses."

The park inspectors also used to carry weapons. But over the years the rules have gotten more strict and, ac-

After introducing me to Roma, Beketov left his van on the shore as he went away in a boat with a pair of German tourists. Two hours later intoxicated Roma, who decided to drive up and down a narrow beach in his Jeep, perhaps in an effort to show off, smashed his car into the van.



According to Beketov, it became more difficult and more expensive for the park to keep up with regulations. "The cost of safekeeping our weapons became too high. We would need a special room that needs an alarm system monitored by the police. The amount of money that the police office requested for its services was more than the cost of all the weapons in that room." Now only members of the park's emergency response unit carry weapons. Ust-Barguzin lies in a traditional hunting area, and most households own several guns. "Of course you feel more confident when you are armed," said Beketov. Now, when dealing with armed or simply hostile poachers, inspectors must rely only on their powers of persuasion. And even though violent confrontations between patrol personnel and poachers are relatively rare, they do happen.

For example, in September of 2004 poachers attacked inspectors of the fishing patrol and the editor-in-chief of the Severobaikalsk television. The attack took place at night, on the shores of Upper Angara River. The journalist, Vladimir Pritchkin, and one of the inspectors, Vladimir Gordeev, died as a result of heavy bodily blows. The poachers attacked the camp when everyone was asleep. The previous night Pritchkin participated in an anti-poaching raid further upstream on the Upper Angara. He managed to capture on film an unsuccessful attempt to apprehend a group of fleeing poachers. Pritchkin died on the way to the town hospital. Local police and press speculated that the poachers may have attacked to get hold of the videotape of their flight from the inspectors.

During one of my visits to the ZNP office I asked Beketov for a phone number of Vladimir F., a fishing crew boss who also happens to be a suspect in a criminal case involv-

ing arson. Last year someone set fire to a park inspector's house in the early morning hours, while everyone inside was asleep. Luckily, Kolya somehow woke up, and helped his wife and young child escape unharmed. Kolya leads the park's emergency response unit and has a reputation for being an incorruptible inspector. This spring several of Vladimir's employees waited for Kolya outside of a new restaurant that just opened in Ust-Barguzin, where park personnel celebrated a holiday together with some of the fishermen. After a severe beating Kolya ended up in a hospital. His wife now worries constantly for his life.

When I asked for Vladimir's phone number, I did refer to him as a poacher. Beketov did not seem amused, retorting, "He is a licensed fisherman." A second later another park employee stopped by the table and, upon overhearing Vladimir's name, exclaimed, "Ah, our main poacher!"

When I contacted Vladimir to ask for an interview, he surprised me with an immediate, enthusiastic response: "I've been wanting to talk to a journalist forever!" Several days later, when he returned to Ust-Barguzin, we arranged a meeting. He came to the house where I've been staying, which belongs to my friend Andrei, a ZNP employee.

Vladimir turned out to be a tall, broad-shouldered man in his mid-30s, with close-cropped hair. He drove up to the house in a black Land Rover-type car. When, in the best traditions of Russian hospitality, I offered him tea, he declined. "Don't worry, I'm not shy. If I wanted it, I would say so." As he talked, I found myself surprised not only at his eloquence, but also at his level of self-awareness. This man seemed to know perfectly well when he

broke legal and social norms, but had full confidence in his own reasons for doing so. Later in the interview, when Vladimir described himself as ill-tempered, saying that it is better not to upset him, I wondered whether I should have chosen a more 'neutral' location for our interview. "They should not ignore our problems, because one thing can lead to another, and next thing you know, there could be a fire, someone could get hurt..." He looked at the recorder and changed the subject.

Vladimir wanted to talk to the press because he wanted to voice his disagreements with the park. One of the points of contention stems from ZNP's late arrival in the area. The park formed in 1986, but its territory has been traditional fishing grounds for centuries. In recognition of this fact, and in acknowledgment of local economic realities, the government allowed restricted fishing to continue in the park, under the "traditional resource use" exception. But whereas 'traditional resource use' normally allows fishing for personal consumption, often by minority or indigenous peoples, in ZNP 'traditional use' encompasses commercial fishing by several fishing crews, including Vladimir's. Because these fishermen have gone out on Barguzin and Chivyrkuy Bay well before ZNP inspectors arrived at Ust-Barguzin, they often think that not only they have original rights to the fish, but also that they know the resource better. They feel that existing fishing quotas are not supported by reliable scientific data and that federal regulations, drafted in Moscow, are removed from realities of fishing on Baikal.

According to Vladimir, the park began its existence inauspiciously. "When ZNP was formed, in 1986, no one really took much notice of it. This was perestroika time, it was chaotic, many businesses formed and subsequently disappeared in short periods of time. When the park opened, there were no loud events, no cutting of the ribbons, no speeches declaring it our common treasure. The park was seen as part of the forest service agency, nothing more." The park began to 'lay claims' to land and water resources only in the mid-90s. "Maybe they got smarter, maybe their time finally came in the sense that they first had to go through a period of adaptation, to shake out some organizational issues. They announced themselves by installing a road bar next to the entrance post, something that was not there before. Then the park inspectors began to check documentation, to regulate tourists. The park hung up price lists, entrance fees, camping fees etc."

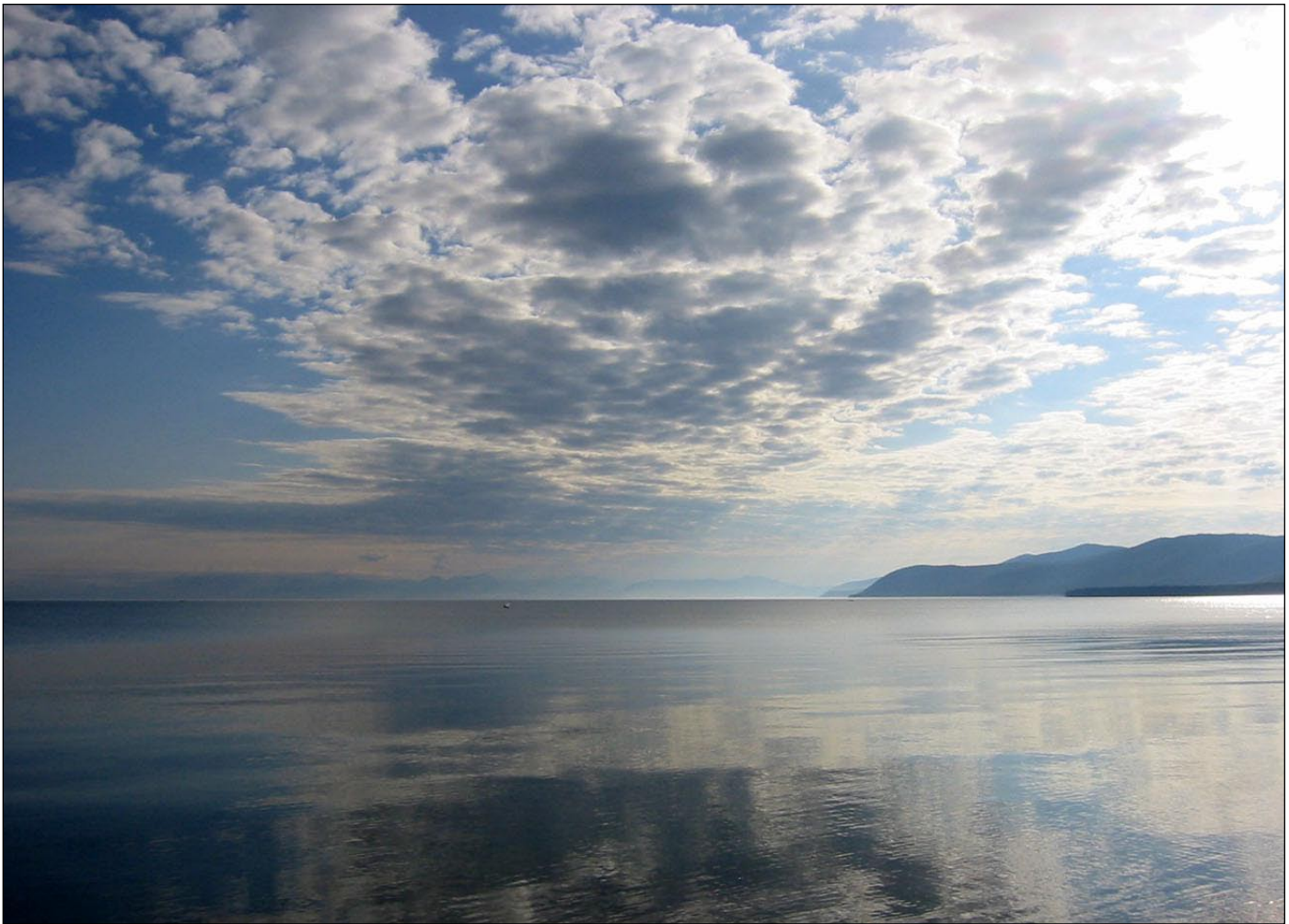
There is only one road that goes into ZNP (by land, that is). To get onto the park's territory, one has to take a rickety old ferry across the Barguzin River. The ferry cannot take more than nine medium-sized cars at the time. It operates from 8 a.m. until 9 or 10 p.m., depending on demand and the weather. During storms or even windy weather the ferry does not run at all. Most cars take a right on the road leading off the ferry and head to Barguzin, the region's administrative center an hour's drive away from Ust-Barguzin. If you take a left, you enter the park. The park's officials confirmed in conversations with me

that the park opposed construction of a bridge across the Barguzin River, since the ferry unavoidably limits the number of people who enter ZNP. Shortly after the split in the road you encounter the park's road bar. These days the entrance fee amounts to 50 rubles (US\$1.75) per person per night, and a one-time payment of 100 rubles per car (US\$3.25). The park charges more for boats and day access to Ushkani Islands, a strict protection zone where Baikal seals come to rest and rear their young. ZNP is one of the few parks in the country that has been gathering entrance fees, thanks to a 1991 Buryatia ministerial decree that specifically gave the park this right.

Vladimir never stopped seeing the park and its employees as a "non-governmental organization," which to him appeared to stand for "unprofessional." He mentioned that the park does not have a fishery biologist (he left some years ago and the park has not found a replacement yet). "Whatever the park's personnel knows about their resources, they learnt through practice and talking to locals." He seemed to resent having to obey rules set by a newcomer. Glancing at a photograph of my friend on the wall, he said: "Andrei, for example, once told me that they should just 'close our shop.' It's as if they are solving global problems, protecting nature, saving national treasures, and we are nothing but worms, getting in the way, disrupting everything."

When I asked him how long he has been fishing, Vladimir, just like Roma the poacher earlier, said he had been doing it since childhood. Before privatization of businesses, when the state ran all fishing enterprises, Vladimir worked as a vice-principal at the local fish factory in Ust-Barguzin. The factory did not turn a profit but the government subsidized it because it produced canned goods for the military. Most of the supplies, including tin and fish, came from elsewhere since the local harvest supplied only a month of the factory's work. When the Soviet Union fell apart, so did the factory. "The old connections disappeared, prices of tin and the fish from the Pacific Ocean went up, the factory's commercial viability went even further down, it went bankrupt and ultimately all its assets were sold off in separate lots."

Today Vladimir has two fishing crews working for him. During the time of mass harvest, when the fish appear in large quantities, the crews grow considerably. People from nearby settlements, especially Ust-Barguzin, come around to participate. "Everyone who lives on the shore is to a certain extent a fisherman. They join in, whether to hold the net, help put it in or take it out. We need this temporary help to effectively take our fishing quota." Only a few people can handle the physical and psychological pressures of a fisherman's life on a daily basis. Vladimir's crews have a high turnover rate, and he said that only four or five people have stayed with him over the years. Looking out the window at a cold, rainy outside, he said, "This is June. Can you imagine what our winter is like? We had a huge snowfall in April. I know there is not much competition in my business. We live in bare-bones barracks for ten,



The beautiful Barguzin Bay, on the south side of Holy Nose Peninsula, occupies 700 square kilometers, or 435 square miles. Its waters can turn from placid to stormy in several minutes. Fishing on Baikal is a dangerous sport.

fifteen days in a row. It's impossible to get medical help. I can compare our living conditions only to institutions of confinement. A large percentage of my men have actually lived through certain deprivations before... The feeling of brotherhood is very strong. You have two people alone in the elements, you can die, you can drown, it happens. You have to depend on the person next to you. There is self-screening in our job, and there are very few people who stay. There is an ever-present element of self-sacrifice. You cannot let go of the thread, you have to hold on no matter what."

Why did he choose this kind of life? He said earlier that his father took him fishing since a young age. He also mentioned that he applied to medical college in Irkutsk (his father worked in Ust-Barguzin as a physician's assistant) but did not get in. "I'm a multifaceted person," he smirked. "But out on Baikal I feel more independent. I know that once I'm in the boat, once I push away from the shore, I am in my element. Given my knowledge and skills, it would be hard even for police to catch me out there." He has been smiling as he talked. "Perhaps deep down inside I am a poacher, an adventurer. The amounts of fish I can catch may be too much for someone else. Perhaps I am unique in my own way. Maybe it's about the adrenaline,

the rush I get." When he was younger, he envied the boys from Kurbulik, the fishing village on Chivyrkuy Bay. "It's like they were born on a boat. I tried to learn from them, to feel freer out at sea. This self-confidence came in time, with experience. I get on the boat and I leave all my problems behind."

I did not expect this tough guy who spent his days ordering fishermen about, many with a criminal past, to have mystical inclinations. But Baikal's unpredictability can strike awe into the hearts of men: "The essence of our profession, the way I understand it, of the relationship between man and nature, with Baikal as we see it, whether as a spirit or a power of some sort, is that we have to be in unity with it. Because it is in his power to give or not to give something to us. It depends on his acceptance of us. It can give us fish or not. It can reject us completely, create certain conditions for us, cause a storm, break our boats."

Vladimir's mysticism seemed to stop, or to work in his favor, when business details were at stake. He referred to the current process of setting fishing limits as "absurd." Previously one agency, Baikalfishwater, studied fish stocks, analyzed data, set fishing quotas, and performed control functions. Now different agencies perform these tasks. "It

so happened that the ultimate fishing quota for Baikal gets set by Moscow. I don't know how much these Muscovites know about Baikal, or whether they have ever been here. How they set the quota has always been a mystery to us. For example, when a year ends, our license runs out. It runs out on the 31st of December, and we have to sit and wait for two months until Moscow makes a decision. Two months!" The lake, according to him, can self-regulate human fishing. "This may be difficult to prove, but practice shows that Baikal will not allow humans to dredge it out. Of course, I am talking about traditional fishing gear, not about something like dynamite. We won't impoverish Baikal's resources with regular nets because it is too great and powerful. He lets out some fish into shallow waters, but most of it stays in the depths."

Only after our talk did I come across scientific literature stating that most omul live in shallow water.

But Vladimir's enthusiasm for Baikal's powers of self-protection had some limits. "Of course it's possible to undercut fish stock at spawning grounds, and that's a separate question. There we have to restrain ourselves because we understand that they are the foundation of everything." He compared fishing at spawning grounds during spawning time to stealing an infant from a maternity hospital. "I don't fish in rivers, on principle, whether in spring or autumn."

As the interview drew to a close, he mentioned that it

might be possible to see his crews at work. Unfortunately, the weather did not improve until I had to leave Ust-Barguzin, making it impossible to reach the fishing crews, which were stranded on the other side of Barguzin Bay. So that research will have to wait until later.

Whatever the 'unofficial' side of his business, Vladimir had valid reasons to criticize the existing system. In recent years federal regulation of fishing has been chaotic at best. 'Schizophrenic' gives a better description of the constant shuffling of responsibilities (and assets) between different agencies. Since 1995, the federal government "reformed" the fishing regulatory structures seven times. Each transition time meant that agencies lost months figuring out protection responsibilities. In the meanwhile, poachers got a reprieve.

When I asked my friend N, who I consider to be an environmentally-conscious person, why he poached, he replied: "We do it because legal opportunities to hunt and fish practically do not exist. For example, they do not give out fishing licenses when I want to fish for omul or any other fish, even though it is the most favorable time for fishing. I am talking about the end of January, beginning of February. It's the best time because the ice is thick enough for fishing with nets, and omul stays in deep areas [near the shore]. Later omul leave for deeper water and comes back only closer to May. But the licenses that should be given out at this time are almost always late, they arrive only in April or May when fishing is at its end because



Dead fish (here, a freshwater cod) caught in illegal nets often wash up on Baikal's shores.

the ice has practically melted.” N was talking about individual fishing licenses, but the same predicament applied to commercial fishermen. In recent years Buryat press has quoted local officials who complained about federal agencies that failed to set quotas and prescribe fishing rules in time for the winter fishing season. That meant that fishermen had to sit at home and wait for Moscow to make up its mind, missing out on one of the best times to make a profit. Or they could fish illegally.

It appears that the system used to work better: “Before it was almost always possible to get a license,” N told me. “One person could put one net out twice a month. Usually we organized in teams of three-four people, and put nets out four days in a row. You could buy a license in a number of places without a problem.” The rules changed in 2005, during yet another reform. In the chaos of that year no one received fishing licenses. “Starting from 2006 they began giving licenses only to private businesses, meaning organized fishing crews. But nowadays to receive a license you also need to have the right connections.” He described current estimates of omul population, on which regulating agencies base fishing quotas, as mere guesses. “No one has done reliable scientific studies of omul stock for a number of years now. For example, at ZNP they try to approximate population based on how much fish was caught that year. ‘Did we catch more than last season? Yes? Then let’s put down a number higher than the one we had before. How about twenty tons?’ But no exact figures of the catch actually exist.”

Similar arbitrariness applied to hunting licenses. “It is almost impossible for an average person to get one. There are many fewer of them now, and most of the time they don’t even make it to Ust-Barguzin — they stay in Barguzin, among a tight circle of buddies.” N also mentioned the never-ending reforms: “For example, the fishing patrol does not know from day to day which agency it will be

part of next. Inspectors get fired, hired, their department gets combined with others, then divided, and so on.”

N, who now lives and works in Ulan-Ude, continues to hunt and fish around Ust-Barguzin not only out of his love for the sport, but also to supplement his income, and to provide fish and meat for his own household. He mentioned several villages around Ust-Barguzin, like Kurbulik (located on the territory of the ZNP), and Maksimikha, as ones where locals fully depend on fishing. “For these people fishing is a means of survival, a traditional resource use. They eat it and live off what they sell to tourists or buyers from Ulan-Ude and Irkutsk.”

If police truly wanted to put a stop to illegal poaching, they could inspect all vehicles leaving Baikal shores or entering the cities. But they do not. One can easily buy omul and other Baikal fish, including rare species (that fall under a complete fishing ban) like taimen, at local markets. As long as opportunities to make money off poaching exist, people will continue to overfish. But we should consider another important factor. I asked my friend N what would have to happen for him and others like him to stop poaching. “We have to change the entire system of how these resources get distributed, so that every fisherman, every willing person had a fair chance to receive a license, in something like an open tender. I agree that limits and quotas must exist, but the most important thing is for them to be distributed in an honest, transparent manner. Back in the day we could at least find out who received the licenses. These days if I go to Barguzin [the administrative center of the region] and ask about the licenses, the only answer I get is that they are already gone.”

I think my friend is right. Unless the system itself is just and fair, it has no moral right to demand more from those it regulates. Until then the cat-and-mouse game between VIP poachers and common folk will go on. □



Roma O., the poacher from Ust-Barguzin, coming back ashore after checking his nets.

Current Fellows

Elena Agarkova • RUSSIA • May 2008 - 2010

Elena is living in Siberia, studying management of natural resources and the relationship between Siberia's natural riches and its people. Previously, Elena was a Legal Fellow at the University of Washington's School of Law, at the Berman Environmental Law Clinic. She has clerked for Honorable Cynthia M. Rufe of the federal district court in Philadelphia, and has practiced commercial litigation at the New York office of Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy LLP. Elena was born in Moscow, Russia, and has volunteered for environmental non-profits in the Lake Baikal region of Siberia. She graduated from Georgetown University Law Center in 2001, and has received a bachelor's degree in political science from Barnard College.

Pooja Bhatia • HAITI • September 2008 - 2010

Pooja attended Harvard as an undergraduate, and then worked for the *Wall Street Journal* for a few years. She graduated from Harvard Law School. She was appointed Harvard Law School Satter Human Rights Fellow in 2007 and worked as an attorney with the Bureau des Avocats Internationaux, which advocates and litigates on behalf of Haiti's poor.

Eve Fairbanks • SOUTH AFRICA • May 2009 - 2011

Eve is a *New Republic* staff writer interested in character and in how individuals fit themselves into new or changing societies. Through that lens, she will be writing about medicine and politics in the new South Africa. At the *New Republic*, she covered the first Democratic Congress since 1992 and the 2008 presidential race; her book reviews have also appeared the *New York Times*. She graduated with a degree in political science from Yale, where she also studied music.

Ezra Fieser • GUATEMALA • January 2008 - 2010

Ezra is interested in economic and political changes in Central America. He is an ICWA fellow living in Guatemala where he will write about the country's rapidly changing economic structure and the effects on its politics, culture and people. He was formerly the deputy city editor for *The News Journal* (Wilmington, DE), a staff writer for *Springfield Republican* (Springfield, MA) and a Pulliam Fellow at *The Arizona Republic*. He is a graduate of Emerson College in Boston.

Suzy Hansen • TURKEY • April 2007 - 2009

A John O. Crane Memorial Fellow, Suzy will be writing about politics and religion in Turkey. A former editor at the *New York Observer*, her work has also appeared in Salon, the *New York Times* Book Review, the *Nation*, and other publications. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1999.

Cecilia Kline • CENTRAL AMERICA • January 2009 - 2011

Cecilia is a graduate of Georgetown University, Loyola University Chicago School of Law, and the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration. In 2007 she began with Casa Alianza in Tegucigalpa, Honduras providing outreach for youth living on the street. As an ICWA Fellow she will write about youth-service programs from several Central American cities as a participant observer.

Derek Mitchell • INDIA • September 2007 - 2009

As a Phillips Talbot Fellow, Derek will explore the impact of global trade and economic growth on Indians living in poverty. He has served for the past year as a volunteer for Swaraj Peeth, an institute in New Delhi dedicated to nonviolent conflict resolution and Mahatma Gandhi's thought. Previously he was a Fulbright scholar in India at the Gandhi Peace Foundation. He has coordinated foreign policy research at George Washington University's Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies and worked as a political organizer in New Hampshire. Derek graduated with a degree in religion from Columbia University.

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CONTACT:

Phone: (202) 364-4068

Fax: (202) 364-0498

E-mail: icwa@icwa.org

Website: www.icwa.org

STAFF:

Executive Director:
Steven Butler

Program Assistant/
Publications Manager:
Ellen Kozak

Administrative Assistant/
Bookkeeper: Meera Shah

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