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Preserving the Symbol of Siberia, Moving On: Sobol' and the Barguzinsky Zapovednik (Part I)

By Elena Agarkova

LAKE BAIKAL—I started researching this newsletter with a plan to write about the Barguzinsky zapovednik, a strict nature reserve on the eastern shore of Baikal, the first and the oldest in the country.¹ I went to Nizhneangarsk, a small township at the north shore of the lake, where the zapovednik's head office is located now. I crossed the lake and hiked on the eastern side through some of the zapovednik's territory. I talked to people who devoted their lives to preserving a truly untouched wilderness, on a shoestring budget. And along the way I found myself going in a slightly different direction than originally planned. An additional protagonist emerged. I became fascinated by a small, elusive animal that played a central role not only in the creation of Russia's first strict nature reserve, but in the history of Russia itself.

More than a thousand years ago *Martes zibellina*, sable, or *sobol'* in Russian, was unlucky enough to become a highly coveted luxury item because of its lustrous, dense fur. Since then hunters shot and trapped uncounted millions of these animals to satisfy the world's appetite for "soft gold." Hunted all across northern Eurasia, sable brought enormous revenues to the Russian government for centuries. Amazingly, if not for sable, Russia may have never colonized Siberia, or would have done it much later. Over hunting of sable in western Russia and the ever-increasing demand for sable pelts became the main reason for Russia's expansion east of the Ural Mountains in the 17th century, into wild Siberian taiga where sable and other fur-bearing



Zenon Svatosh (1886-1949), one of the founders of the Barguzinsky zapovednik, holding two sables. Svatosh, a talented zoologist, came from a Czech family that moved to Russia five years prior to Zenon's birth.

animals still existed in great abundance.

The Barguzinsky zapovednik, established in 1916, owes its existence to sable or, to be more exact, to the near-extinction of sable by the beginning of the 20th century. So I believe it fitting that before looking at the current state of Russia's oldest nature reserve, I take a closer look at

¹ As I wrote in newsletter #8, Russia developed a unique form of nature reserve called "zapovednik." Such a reserve offers the strictest kind of protection known in the world to flora and fauna, and keeps humans, with the exception of scientists and researchers, out. Zapovedniks take natural areas permanently out of commercial use.

the animal behind it. The fate of sable has been inextricably intertwined with the history of fur trade in Russia, and with the development of Siberia.

A Short History of Fur Trade in Russia

Fur, and sable fur especially, has been an important source of income for Russia for a long time. In medieval Muscovy people used fur not only for the obvious purpose of protecting themselves from the cold, but also to pay taxes, fines, passenger fares, school dues and dowries. The state paid its officials' salaries in fur, and gifted furs to foreign kings and diplomats. In 1635 Moscow sent to the Persian shah a royal gift of live sables in gilded cages. Catherine II, Empress of Russia from 1729 to 1796, once sent a sable cloak to her pen-pal Voltaire, as a sign of her high esteem. This tradition did not disappear along with the empire. Two centuries later Nikita Khrushchev, in an unusual display of his gentlemanly side, gave a sable cape to Queen Elizabeth II (along with sundry other gifts to the royal family and members of the government, to prevent the British from canceling a planned visit by Khrushchev to their country).

By the 10th century fur had already become a prime commodity in Russia. Not only merchants, but Russian nobility, boyars and dukes, traded furs at internal markets and auctions, and exported them to neighboring countries. Furs were especially valued in the Muslim East. Constantinople, previously Byzantium, had one of the greatest fur markets of the time. Historians report that Byzantium had been the great fur market of the world for 1,400 years, and the present-day skin and fur market in Istanbul stands in precisely the same spot as the old Byzantine fur market.

For several centuries, fur also served as currency in Russia. *Kuny*, or weasel furs (the weasel family, Mustelidae or Mustelids, is a large and diverse family of carnivorous animals that includes mink, otter, marten and ferret) preceded silver coins in medieval Russia. The fur was cut into small strips for small payments. The strips had different names and different value, depending on the part of the animal's skin from which they were cut. Half of an ear served as the smallest coin, or petty cash. A strip from the nape of the neck, or *zagriook* in Russian, was called *grivna*. Later on *grivna* became a ten-copeck coin, which does not exist anymore, but a Ukrainian unit of currency is called *hryvna* to this day.

For a long time fur served as Russia's most important "foreign exchange

fund." The country exported every type of fur available, including sable, fox, squirrel, ermine, beaver and muskrat. Russian traders exchanged fur pelts for valuable commodities, including silks, gems, spices (especially pepper), woolen cloth, and, most importantly, silver, for minting native coins (only in the 17th century did Russians discover silver deposits on their own territory).

The King of Furs

Sable stands apart from all the other fur animals. Its silky, long, lightweight fur has been a coveted luxury item since the early Middle Ages. Furriers and scientists have been unanimous in their adoration of the skinned animal, calling it "its royal majesty," a "jewel," "magnificent" and "aristocratic," superlative in every respect: the most expensive, rare, luxurious, and elite. At several points in history high-quality sable furs cost more than their weight in gold. "Russian sable is the most valuable of furs, the most highly esteemed fur in this country for its softness and extreme beauty," wrote Richard Davey in his "Furs and Fur Garments," published in 1895 in England. "The painful chase of this animal is most pertinaciously persevered in during the depth of winter, amidst all the terrors of frightful snows, which might well daunt the hardest and bravest





A Barguzin sable

Photo by E. Darizhapov, courtesy of Barguzinsky zapovednik

hunters. Russian sable is mostly skinned over the mouth, without any incision being made in the body, and the feet and tail are left as part of the fur, so that no portion of it is lost or injured. The average length of the body is twelve inches, and of the tail about six inches, so that the cost of a sable cloak or coat is very considerable.” Back then, as now, the prohibitive cost of sable meant that only the very rich could afford a full sable cloak, and most sable pelts ended up in trimmings and decorative touches.

Sable’s natural habitat stretches across the entire Eurasian taiga zone. It used to inhabit a vast area, from Scandinavia to the Pacific Ocean and nearby islands. Most of sable’s natural habitat happens to be within Siberia and the Russian Far East. Small numbers of sable appear in Mongolia, northeastern China, Korea, and the most northern of Japanese islands, Hokkaido. Sable exists in Canada as well, but wild Russian sable fur, known for its softness and lightness, remains the most coveted and the most expensive kind.

Sable ranges from light sand to very dark brown in color. The darker its fur, the more expensive. The most beautiful, priciest, luxurious sable came from the Barguzin valley on the northeastern side of Baikal. It has exceptionally silky, dark chocolate brown, almost black fur, with even, silvery-tipped guard hairs. Barguzin sable, called crown or imperial sable, used to be reserved solely for the czar and his family’s use. In 1928 one Barguzin sable pelt fetched an enormous sum of money at a fur auction in London—12,000 rubles, or the equivalent of eight kilograms of gold. Today a coat made from Barguzin sable fur can cost US\$100,000 (and sometimes more). But by 1912, when Emperor Nicholas II expressed his concern for sable’s future and ordered establishment of sable nature reserves, only several dozens of Barguzin sables remained in the almost impassable taiga.

Perhaps the sentence above should say that at least *some* Barguzin sables survived—compared to their less-lucky relatives in other areas of Siberia. In addition to the

remoteness of Barguzin mountain ranges, another reason for Barguzin sable’s survival may have been the fact that by law the hunting areas here belonged to native tribes. In contrast to luxury-seeking rich Russians and Europeans, indigenous people of Siberia considered sable fur to be “junk” and rarely used it for warm clothes, a necessity for survival in winter. Wolf or deerskins were warmer and more practical. Instead the natives used sable to line the undersides of their skis. Also, hunting rules that indigenous tribes followed differed from the ones established by Russians. Local hunters tried to retain the majority of the sable population, spared youngsters and pregnant females, and only hunted in a particular sable area every fourth year. Native fairy tales told of overly greedy hunters, punished by the spirits for killing too many animals. However, natives’ low regard for sable fur made them easy prey for unscrupulous fur buyers: the indigenous people of Kamchatka gave as many sable pelts in exchange for a metal cauldron as would fit into the vessel.²

As mentioned earlier, before the “Great Fur Rush” gripped Russia in the 17th century, sable populated practically the entire enormous territory of Siberia. By the beginning of the 20th century ravenous harvesting of this elusive animal led to a drastic reduction of its habitat, to a bare ten percent of the original range. Only discrete and isolated islands remained. Conservation efforts, establishment of sable and mink farms, and a drop in market demand allowed sable to re-populate some of its habitat, but to this day sable lives in only half of its natural range.

So it was the insatiable quest for sable pelts that fueled Russian colonization of Siberia (similarly, Russia’s interest in sea-otter pelts drove its explorers across the Pacific Ocean to Alaska). Until the 16th century only limited numbers of traders and trappers made it over the Ural Mountains in search of furs. The European demand for fur, especially sable, greatly increased once Russia began trade with Western Europe across the White Sea, in the second half of the 16th century. China became an export market as well.

At the height of fur harvesting, fur accounted for a third of the Russian empire’s budget revenue. In just 70 years, from 1621 to 1690, trappers and hunters killed more than seven million sable in Siberia. The Siberian coat of arms, granted to the region by a royal charter of 1690, fully recognized the importance of fur trade in the development of Siberia in the 17th century. On the coat of arms, two sables, standing on their hind legs, hold the crown



The official emblem of Irkutsk features a Siberian tiger holding a sable in his mouth.

² The Russian crown’s colonization of Siberia, whereas not as violent as the European conquest of the Americas, still resulted in abuse not only of the environment but also of its native people. However, this grave subject deserves separate and more detailed treatment.

of the Siberian kingdom in their teeth. The artist made his point exceptionally clear—two intersecting arrows pierce the animals. In the same vein, sable appeared on the official emblems and seals of nine Siberian cities.

As Moscow needs and appetites grew, it found new ways to get more fur. The state not only took *yasak*, or tribute paid in furs, from the indigenous people of Siberia (prior to Russia's assertion of control over Siberia its native tribes paid the tribute to the Tatar Khanate of Sibir), but also sent special regiments of soldiers and exiles to harvest fur-bearing animals. If in the beginning of Russian expansion into Siberia the Russian crown demanded "one sable per bow," later the *yasak* went up to seven pelts, and up to twenty per person in certain areas. In 1697 the state instituted a state monopoly on buying valuable furs, retaining it until 1990, when private firms took over breeding farms and the fur trade.

Any fur hunter needed special equipment, called *uzhina*, which included gear and a "stockpile," or food. The minimum *uzhina* for one hunting season consisted of 20 *pudy* (almost 706 pounds) of rye flour, one *pud* (or 35 pounds) of salt, 2 axes, 2 knives, 70 feet of sweep-nets, a 3-pound copper pot, a homespun cloth coat, a warm fur coat, 23 feet of homespun cloth, 35 feet of burlap cloth, 2 shirts, a pair of pants, a hat, 3 pairs of gloves, 2 pairs of special winter shoes, a blanket, 10 deer skins (for lining hunting skis), a special net for catching sable, a gun, and sometimes a dog.

Hunters created crews from 2-3 people to 30-40 in size. They rarely went out alone. A hunter either followed animal tracks, most often with a dog's help, shooting the animal with a gun or a bow, or catching it in a net; or installed one of the several types of traps available. In some areas of Siberia indigenous people never used traps, hunting exclusively with a bow. In others they developed many varieties, from ones that use their weight to keep the animal down, to crossbows and snares. Non-indigenous Russian hunters sometimes used steel traps, which were expensive.

Hunting fur animals is not a comfortable job. The men stayed in the taiga for months until going home. Sable hunting began with the first snowfall and lasted until the middle of winter, when the temperatures fell drastically or the snow got too deep. Frigid cold affected not only the hunter, but could ruin his gun or bow. And even the best hunting dog could not keep up with the light sable in snow deeper than 70 centimeters (more than 27 inches). At the end of the winter the snow crust became too thin for hunting with a dog—a sable could still run very fast, whereas a dog fell through the crust, cutting its paws. The rules of sable hunting have not changed much since the 17th century, and despite the deprivations, in today's Siberia men still take up their guns and traps to spend several weeks or months following sable tracks through the forest snow.

Not surprisingly, the insatiable demand for luxury fur



(above) Sergei Ivanov, my friend's dad, holding up his trophy, a sable. (below) In the village of Ust-Barguzin men still use Siberian huskies to hunt sable.

Photos courtesy of Mikhail Ivanov.



and Moscow's policies led to a rapid over-hunting of sable in the European, and then in the Asian, parts of Russia. If Russian hunters caught 145,000 sable annually in the 1740s (and some sources give a much higher figure of 260,000 sable), by 1790s they caught only 42,000 animals a year.

The state did try to regulate sable trade and hunting. In the 16th century Ivan the Terrible made it a crime to export live sable from Russia (or "off with their head!"). In the second half of the 17th century the government declared certain regions of Siberia to be off-limits to non-*yasak* hunters (i.e. to private hunters who did not turn their furs over to the state as tax). Catherine II issued an edict prohibiting private hunting of sable and its export abroad "upon penalty of death" (despite the Empress' reputation as an "enlightened" ruler, she did not deviate much from her predecessors when it came to choosing punishments).

In the decades to follow state decrees would alternate between prohibiting and allowing hunting of sable in different areas of Siberia. A second wave of the Siberian "Fur Rush" came at the end of the 19th century. At that time a sable pelt cost 12 rubles, a sum for which one could buy

a cow and a horse. Hunters stopped following any regulations. As a result, in the first decade of the 20th century only 20,000 sable pelts came from Siberia, and as few as 6,000-8,000 by 1917.

Oleg Gusev, a Russian scientist who spent most of his life working in the Barguzinsky zapovednik, listed additional reasons for sable's near extinction by the beginning of the 20th century. At that time Russian hunting law protected the interests of sport hunters. Because of this sable remained on the 'outlaw' list, which allowed unlimited hunting of certain "pernicious animals." The law did not set any limits on the hunting season, types of permitted hunting devices, or any other norms for harvesting such animals. In 1897 the czar ordered creation of a Special Commission charged with drafting a new hunting law. As the new draft bounced around different government offices, the sport-hunting lobby succeeded in keeping sable on the "pernicious animals" list, despite the animal's obvious decline.

However, this draft of the new hunting law got bogged down in the government bureaucracy. In the meantime, Siberian regional departments of State Property Ministry, local fur sellers, hunters, scientists, and travelers kept sending requests to the government to take urgent measures for protection of the fur business. In Leipzig, one of the most important centers of world fur trade, fur sellers sensed a potential market crash. The Russian consulate in Leipzig sent worried notes back home.

A report to the czar from the Irkutsk governor for the years 1910-1911, confirming the dire state of sable hunting business, became the last straw. In April of 1912 the Council of Ministers passed a resolution stating that, as a result of "notes on the report by the Irkutsk governor," there existed "an absolute necessity of urgently establishing so called zapovedniks."

The notes in question were made by Nicholas II him-

self. The czar considered it necessary to extend the law protecting sable to Siberia, and to create "zapovednyie" areas, strictly off-limits to hunting.

Creation of Barguzinsky Zapovednik, a Natural Sable Farm

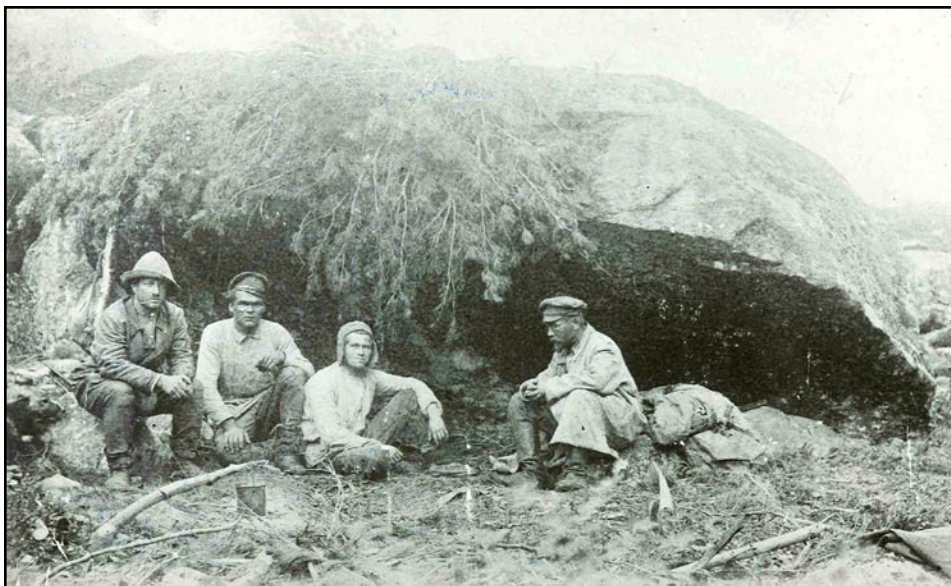
A law that completely prohibited any hunting of sable for three years, from February 1913 until October 1916, became the next step in sable protection. After that the "Law On the Establishment of Limitations on Hunting of Sable" allowed hunting from October 15 until February 1 of each year. However, a leading Russian hunting specialist wrote at the time that, "after not being able to hunt for three years, hunters would definitely pursue sable with double energy. They would quickly destroy the young sable born during the three years of hunting abstinence. To prevent wholesale destruction of sable it would be necessary to establish, in certain areas, zapovedniks, places which in the future would play the role of natural "sable farms." Zapovedniks need to be permanent and have a state-wide importance."

With those goals in mind, from 1913 through 1915 the tsarist government organized three sable expeditions: one to the northeastern shore of Baikal, with Georgy Doppel-mair as its leader, one to the Sayan Mountains (to the south of Baikal), and one to Kamchatka. The expeditions had to explore areas of sable habitat, find the best places for creation of zapovedniks, and develop projects of the future protected areas. As a result of their fieldwork, in 1916 the government established the Barguzinsky zapovednik, and two more soon after.

The zapovednik currently occupies 374,300 hectares, or 925,000 acres (it began with 200,000 hectares in 1916). The territory includes the western slope of the Barguzinsky Mountain Range up to its ridge, with absolute heights up



*Zenon Svatosh,
one of the
participants
of the
northeastern
Baikal
expedition.
Photo courtesy
of Barguzinsky
zapovednik*



*Some of the participants of the northeastern Baikal expedition under a makeshift shelter.
Photo courtesy of Barguzinsky zapovednik*

to 3,000 meters (9,843 feet) above sea level. At its southern border, it borders the Zabaikalsky National Park. In the high mountains one can find large amphitheatres with crystal-clear alpine lakes, rhododendron meadows and lichen-covered rocks. Dark coniferous fir and cedar forests comprise the middle mountain taiga in the zapovednik, and light, open larch and spruce forests spread in the lower mountain belt. Thickets of elfin, or dwarf cedar woods, present almost unsurpassable obstacles to a chance human.

Sable, which seem only to avoid extremely barren, high mountain tops, love spruce, cedar and larch forests. Primarily carnivorous, they feed on mice, chipmunks, squirrels, bird eggs, small birds, and even fish. When these primary food sources are scarce, sable resort to eating berries, cedar nuts, and vegetation. The Barguzinsky Mountains are perfect sable land, and the zapovednik's first spectacular success was to bring the rare Barguzin sable back from the brink of extinction, in less than 20 years. Tsarist expedition of 1914-1916 estimated that about 40 Barguzin sable survived in the wild, in the most hard-to-reach mountain taiga. By 1930s their population had become stable enough for the zapovednik to switch from concentrating on sable to preserving the entire ecosystem on its territory.

Just ten years after the establishment of the reserve sable began to appear on the eastern slopes of the Barguzin Mountains. By 1940 some sable reached the Barguzin valley, south of the Zabaikalsky National Park. Russian scientists report that as of today, the number of sable in the zapovednik has reached its natural limit, and depending on the year varies from 800 to 1,200 animals.

The reserve's remoteness helps keep Barguzin sable safe. As the head game warden at the Barguzin zapovednik, Alexander Fedorov, told me, nowadays it's easier to hunt sable on the western side of Baikal. As we crossed the northern tip of the lake on the zapovednik's boat, on our

way east, he motioned back, to the mountains we left behind. "Here, right by Severobaikalsk, hunters can go out and easily catch sable. It doesn't make sense for them to do a 4-5 hour trek across the lake."

Sable Farming, Foreign Spies and Gorky Park

In addition to saving the Barguzin sable in its natural habitat, the zapovednik supplied sable "stock" to sable breeding farms and sable "resettlement" or "dissemination" programs in other regions of Russia. To this day, Russians retain a monopoly on raising sable in captivity. The animal has proven difficult to study, and human attempts

to breed sable succeeded only in late 1920s. It happened thanks to Peter Manteifel, a Russian biologist and a talented teacher who had a passion for not only studying, but also directing nature. He became one of the founders of a "science" Russians called "biotechnia" (devoted to breeding fur-bearing and other "useful" animals in natural conditions).

Manteifel, born in Moscow in 1887, was an agrarian by training. In 1924 the director of the Moscow Zoo invited Manteifel to lead the zoo's ornithological section. Soon after Manteifel moved up to become the head of the zoo's science department. He also began to run the Zoo's Club of Young Biologists. The Club's alumni include not only many distinguished scientists, but also naturalist writers and even politicians (Alexei Yablokov, a prominent biologist, served as Yeltzin's advisor on ecology, and in 2005 headed Russia's Green Party). Manteifel's young biologists actively participated in the zoo's attempts at breeding sable. Their studies apparently showed that the animal's diet in captivity lacked certain essential nutrients that it would normally get in the wild. In 1929 a female sable called "Crooked Tooth" gave birth to a litter of pups in the Moscow Zoo. The government immediately classified the new sable breeding technique as secret, and even the official scientific publications contained falsified facts. A strict prohibition applied to the export of live sables.

Fur continued to remain an important source of revenue for the new government. From 1920s to 1940s Soviet exports of fur were behind only those of wheat and oil. Even though the global market went through a post-war slump, Hollywood beauties kept up the image of fur as a necessary part of a glamorous lifestyle. In 1941-1945 the U.S. bought up all of the Russian export fur. During the difficult war years fur sales accounted for almost 40 percent of "hard currency" revenue for the Soviet Union's budget.

In the years to come the government invested heavily

in breeding farms. Almost 250 existed on the territory of the Soviet Union. Since most of the Russian fur went for export, fur-animal breeding farms became concentrated in the western part of Russia. One of the biggest, the Pushkinsky breeding farm, is in the Moscow region. Its breeders created a new kind of sable, with almost black fur, bigger than its wild relatives. Pushkinsky black sable received a grand gold medal at the international fur exhibition in Leipzig in 1964. In Soviet times, the Pushkinsky farm grew to be the country's largest breeding farm and sold its exclusive black sable for a thousand dollars a pelt.

The state had a monopoly on fur trade. To regulate fur export, in 1931 the government created an organization called "Soyuzpushnina" ("soyuz" means union, and "pushnina" means fur in Russian). In its most successful decades Soyuzpushnina yearly sales amounted to US\$120-\$150 million. Even though Soyuzpushnina went private in 2003, it remains the only organization to hold international fur auctions in Russia.

Fur from the USSR rated highly for its quality and rarity. Wild sable still rated much higher than farm-raised, and in the 1960s hunters sold close to 200,000 wild sable pelts to government buyers.

Everything changed with the disappearance of the Soviet Union. Soyuzpushnina lost its monopoly on buying and selling fur, the government stopped subsidizing

breeding farms, and the quality of farm-bred fur declined drastically. (The Russian press reported that some animals had to subsist on a diet of cabbage instead of required scraps of fish and meat.) The majority of breeding farms closed down. The handful that remained began selling directly to foreign buyers in Denmark, Finland, and Germany. Chinese buyers started to buy pelts directly from hunters. In 2001 Soyuzpushnina sales amounted to a mere US\$14 million, climbing up to US \$30 million in 2004. The company's optimistic predictions of growing sales have not materialized, and its sales dropped to \$20 million in 2006. It just cancelled its September 2009 auction, due to the fact that it sold all of its fur supplies in the preceding 2008-2009 auctions (the implication is that Soyuzpushnina has not been able to attract additional internal fur suppliers to its auction).

Incredibly, Russia turned from a fur exporter into a country that imported more than 70 percent of the fur sold internally. Its current share of the world's fur market amounts to only 3 or 4 percent, and it consumes about a third of the world's fur production. China has taken over as the new leader of the global fur market. In just ten years China has increased its production of farmed mink ten-fold, from 2 million pelts in 1997 to 20 million in 2007. China has also been edging out traditional makers of fur products, such as Greece and Italy.

The only share of the fur market that remains firmly Russian is sable. The country still exports 90 to 95 percent of its sable pelts, for about US\$20 million annually. (Russians prefer to wear mink.) And to this day the "top lot," i.e. the most expensive set of fur pelts, at Soyuzpushnina auctions consist of the best Barguzin sable. In February 2007 the top-lot stayed in St. Petersburg for the first time in the history of the auction. A Russian company acquired it at the cost of US\$2,400 per sable pelt. The company spokesman stated that they will use the top-lot to create a custom piece for one of their constant clients.

Sable continues to agitate the minds of men and women, from fashionistas to criminals. The plot of Martin Smith Cruz' bestseller "Gorky Park," which the *Time Magazine* called "the thriller of the 80s," centered around a scheme by an unscrupulous American sable-coat businessman and corrupt Russian bureaucrats to smuggle live sable out of Russia and establish a sable-breeding industry in the U.S. As I researched sable smuggling, I began to wonder whether Martin Smith Cruz got inspired by an earlier Russian novel called "Operation 'Sable'," published in the Soviet Union in 1968. Along with sable the book features Kamchatka foresters (who betray their motherland) and American spies who become enwrapped in an unsuccessful attempt by an American businessman to buy a dozen live animals for several millions of dollars.

These thriller novels began to come true in the raucous 1990s. Russian furriers tell stories of Danish (or, in some versions, Finnish) businessmen who tried to buy live sables from almost-bankrupt Russian (or Estonian) breed-



Barguzinsky larch forest in the morning fog.



A sign on a light post in Irkutsk by "Sable," a "society of hunters and fishermen," states that they "always buy" fur, mushrooms and berries, wild animals' horns, and medicinal herbs.

ing farms. In 2008 the industry insiders reported that Chinese buyers had been attempting to buy live sables from farms in the Krasnoyarsk region. So far these attempts have not succeeded. Sable is a notoriously finicky animal, and it is hard to maintain necessary genetic diversity with even 300 animals. But in contrast to Ivan the Terrible times, no law currently prohibits exports of live sables from Russia. The breeders act alone, refusing to sell live breeding stock to foreigners. It's not clear how long they will hold out without government support. Will the Russians lose one of their most profitable—and emblematic—sources of revenue?

Lack of government regulation affects wild sable as well. In 2006 the Federal Agency of Veterinary and Phytosanitary Oversight suggested instituting a state monopoly on sable fur trade, to fight poaching. The agency asserted that even though official licenses for 2001-2006 allowed hunting of 910,000 sable, in reality almost 2 million pelts were sold at fur auctions. Back then the agency representative blamed the difference on poachers: "Fur buyers have been looking for new distribution channels for undocumented fur. They get into Toronto and Seattle auctions, but most of the fur gets sold locally, to the Chinese. They buy up everything. China already

has a network of businesses that process Siberian fur. As a result, China, lacking practically any resource base of its own, is becoming one of the leading world exporters of fur products."

Soyuzpushnina's official report for the auction that took place in April 2009 reports that 169 thousand Barguzin sables were for sale,³ out of 193 thousand total wild sable pelts. Eighty-four percent were sold, at an average price of US\$86 (with a maximum \$1,300, and a minimum of \$19). Only 85 percent of all sable pelts were sold. The top-lot stayed in Russia again—an Italian furrier bought it for a Russian company (Russian furriers often lack expertise required for dealing with sable, a "complicated" fur, and send raw pelts abroad). It seems that the economic crisis has affected the industry significantly. Only a year before buyers snapped up all the sable pelts at the Soyuzpushnina January auction, at an average price of US\$146 per Barguzin sable.

The crisis has certainly made itself felt around the Barguzin Mountains. The head of the Zabaikalsky National Park inspection unit told me that almost no one poaches sable in the park. "It's not worth it. Chinese have brought the price of fur down so much, with their mink farms, and then they stopped buying [Russian fur]." Economic crises often turn out well for the environment (for example, when the Soviet Union collapsed, so did the level of pollution, including emissions of greenhouse gases). Perhaps yet again the resilient Barguzin sable can roam its land freely, using its luminous fur for nature's intended purpose, to survive in the cold snows of Siberia. □



My friend's dad thought this sable was dead when he found the animal in a trap. When the hunters took the sable into their winter hut, he came to and began jumping around. Photo courtesy of Mikhail Ivanov.

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³ Given my research into Barguzin sable, I wonder whether suppliers manage to mislabel less prestigious pelts as the rare Barguzin.