



Altai Land Surveying & Registration Project Special Report, Summer 2008

Your \$7000 in contributions are paying for the surveying and registration of 87 hectares of traditionally Altai land.

This is a great start! Other Altai groups are holding hope of protecting their equally-threatened traditional and sacred lands.



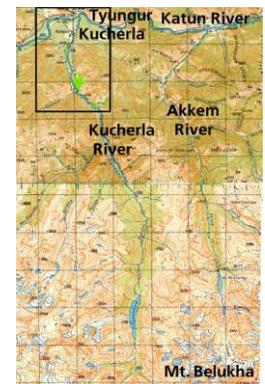
Svetlana Katinova with "Kara Su" collective members

"Kara Su"
lands

Russian
land law

Collective
members

What next?



Donations are used directly for programs in Altai

Contribute at www.AltaiMir.org

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Altai Mir University is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization

The "Kara Su" lands

Generous donations from around the world this past winter are enough to pay for the surveying and registration of about 87 hectares (218 acres) for the "Kara Su" collective (shown in green on the map).

These lands are essential to the cultural survival of the Altai people, who are herders and subsistence farmers. We selected these particular lands, located on a main trekking route to sacred Mt. Belukha, because of

- high interest in the area by outside tourism developers
- lack of other possibilities for funding
- outstanding local volunteer activism to accomplish the task

The "Kara Su" collective consists of nine indigenous Altai people (or their heirs) who live in Kucherla Village in the Ust-Koksa Region of Altai Republic. The land has been traditionally used by this group to provide for their livestock (horses, cows, sheep, goats), and consists mostly of pasture (пастбище), but includes hayfields (сенокос) and ploughed fields (пашня).



Co-sponsors: Siberian Academy for Public Administration – www.sapa.sib.ru | UNESCO | NCP Siberian Education-Consulting Center "Connect" | Foundation for the Law of Time - www.LawOfTime.org | Meditation Center "Portal Belukha" – www.Belukha.ru

The field pictured at the top of the first page is a 180° view of the collective's pasture land. The Kucherla River is just beyond the field, and Black River (*Kara Su* in Altai language) runs down on the right side. One of the two main trails to Mt. Belukha crosses the land. It is about 5 kilometers from the village, and is accessible by horseback or 4-wheel drive automobile.



The tracts assigned to members of our collective are marked in green on the top map to the right. However, especially in the case of the ploughed field, many other locals are also assigned the same tract, and those who register first get their choice of land within the tracts to which they have been assigned. These four maps telescope into each other to show the location.

This land is used for winter pasturing. Members of the collective take turns living in the pictured cabin for ten days at a time, to tend their herds in winter weather that can be -30 degrees for months at a time.



The land will be sufficient for their herds because the usable lands are effectively much larger—boundaries are drawn to include only fields and not the interspersed forest areas (which remain Federal property).

New Russian land law

In 1991, Russian Federal government moved to privatize land which had been held collectively under Communism, and provided some funding. Not only was the designation and assignment of the land a huge task, but neither Russian citizens nor officials had any experience with privately held lands and there was no case law to guide legal decisions. American land laws were modified for Russian realities, and needless to say, the situation is extremely complex.

As I currently understand, the pasture and agricultural lands around the villages were divided in 1991 into parcels of various sizes, labeled according to use. Adult villagers were each assigned their proportional shares, totaling 10-15 hectares. With the larger tracts, such as the “ploughed field” marked here, many people were collectively assigned the same tract. Within each tract, those who survey/register first get their choice of land. In all regions of Russia except Altai Republic and Chechnya, the land was surveyed and registered to privatize it.

It is not completely clear why this was not done in Altai, but several possible reasons have been mentioned: lack of understanding/competence within the Altai Republic government; Federal interest in keeping the land because of Altai's strategically valuable border with China; and/or obstruction because of the high land value for tourism.

Even when our collective's lands have been surveyed and registered, there are still a number of hurdles:

1) Until very recently, *all* requests for land registration in Altai Republic were simply refused by the registrars, and lawsuits were necessary in every case to force registration. This policy is apparently softening (we have heard of *one* tract that was recently registered without a lawsuit), and we are hoping to avoid this step. 2) The “Kara Su” group has further legal hurdles: there is apparently no legal precedent under the 1991 law to allow for ownership by collectives, and 3) difficulty has also arisen regarding documenting the legitimacy of heirs, which we are hoping can be resolved without suit—due in large part to Svetlana's stubborn persuasiveness.

Registration requirements are well beyond the financial reach and legal understandings of most families, and the provision expires in January 2010. The result of this wholesale loss of traditional land will effectively be genocide, because the Altai people and their pastoral/hunting culture are intrinsically tied to the land. For years, locals have sought some sort of solution, largely without positive result. The donations given through Altai Mir University—by people all over the world—are tangible evidence of the world's concern for this precious place, and provide a large measure of hope.

Members of the “Kara Su” collective

Kucherla Village is entirely composed of indigenous Altai people. It sits along the Kucherla River and is the closest settlement to sacred Mt. Belukha. The people live by herding, subsistence farming, and some hunting—living as part of the land, rather than *on* it.

Our Altai colleague **Svetlana Katinova** (right) is a not-so-quiet hero. After successfully registering the land to which she herself was entitled, she responded to the emerging cultural crisis by selling her own valuable land



to support her full-time volunteer efforts to sustain the Altai culture. The “Kara Su” collective is just one of her efforts. She is also collaborating with various Altai citizen leaders to create different kinds of cultural centers to sustain the several Altai languages and musically transmitted oral histories. She and her husband Alexander split their time between Gorno-Altai (the capital of Altai Republic) and the village of Tyungur, which is about eight hours by gravel road from Gorno-Altai. Alexander supports Svetlana’s efforts, so that their daughter Tolunay—now a university student in Novosibirsk—will inherit a strong, healthy, traditional culture.

A year ago, when Svetlana started negotiating with villagers regarding how we could specifically be of help, there were still 45 people (of a total 250 entitled in the two villages of Tyungur and Kucherla) who were potential collective members—people who had not either found the resources or already sold their land. Since then, Svetlana has worked tirelessly to support the formal development of collectives under new Russian laws, to maintain the traditional Altai lands in a way that is consistent with Altai culture.

During that year, most of the remaining villagers signed their land over to an investor who will pay for the surveying and registration and then lease the land back to the villagers. Culturally, this is a costly solution. And tragically, some of the land was sold for drinking money or living expenses. Svetlana said that the nine in our collective are the only ones whose land is still available to them under the original terms of the 1991 law.



Svetlana and I arrived in Kucherla late one afternoon in late May, to meet the collective members and make final determination that the “Kara Su” collective would be funded. We met at the home of Maria Kinova (left), in her a’il (a five- or six-sided wooden structure with a pointed roof, which is traditionally used by Altai women as a summer kitchen. There is a smoke-hole in the roof, and cooking is done over a fire. Maria joked that her skin was so dark because of the soot in the smoke). Maria, with her now-deceased husband, count for two of the nine spots in the collective. Her four daughters are now grown, and all live in other villages. However, they will be able to inherit her shares.

On the left is Nadezhda Matina with her baby daughter. Nadezhda is a single mother with a university degree in philology. She works professionally with young children. Her husband, Alexei Satushev, is in the collective, and was out tending herds when we visited. Alexei’s brother Sergei is also in the group, and he was also out with the herds. Sitting next to Nadezhda is Raya Kolbukova, whose one son is an Army commander in Chechnya.



Yevgenia Matveyeva (left) is a kindergarten teacher. She and her son Igor have two shares.

The last member of the collective is Iskomai Kanchina, who could not join us because she could not leave her invalid son at home alone. She has six children, three of whom are still at home. Sadly, her husband was one of those who sold his share and drank away the money.

As I carefully photographed, videotaped, and wrote notes so I could report all this, Raya teased that they were “a-bor-i-gin-e,” pronounced slowly. We all laughed belly-laughs. I do have a somewhat romantic outlook on their rather difficult lives, which I can maintain because I flee to warmer climates in the wintertime. Culturally, the power of their local shamans is a fascinating human phenomenon, but these women are equally worthy of interest and respect, because their lives, environment, and life-skills are the threads on which the fabric of shamanism is woven. Just as every living being is equally valuable in Nature’s web, so each human culture is an essential to the wholeness of humanity. We are honored by their contributions, and thrilled for the opportunity to ease their entanglement with Western legalities.



What next?

Shortly after our meeting in Kucherla, Svetlana told me that there is a very small, very isolated village in the Ust Koksa region called Acoba, whose people have no idea how to proceed with land surveying and registration. Somehow, they heard about Svetlana Katinova’s work, and asked for her help.

Altai Mir University has also received specific requests for help from citizen leaders in the Onguday and Kosh Agach regions of Altai for help in securing not only traditional subsistence lands, but also extraordinary sacred sites that are well known as lands sacred to the Altai people. Fortunately, Mt. Belukha area is already designated as a national park and an UNESCO World Heritage site. However, it is one of the most ecologically stressed areas of Altai because of tourism. But at least it is not immediately at risk of being privatized, sold, and fenced off.



Karakol Valley in Onguday

The sacred Karakol Valley, where there are many kurgans and standing stones, has already been designated a “nature park,” but it is not surveyed and registered, so it is still at risk.

Kurgans are considered by archeologists to be burial mounds, because bodies are occasionally found in them. However, the local elders say that they are made of iron-bearing stones that were precisely aligned to focus Earth-energies and act as acu-puncture needles for the planet. Of course, when they have been excavated, the stones are not re-aligned and the kurgans are then useless. The locals say that the 7.3 Altai earthquake in 2003 happened because so many of these kurgans have been disrupted.

Danil Mamyev, one of Altai’s most capable advocates for indigenous land rights, lives in Onguday. The former Director for Land Use in Onguday, he uses his expertise to set legal precedents to protect whole classes of land—such as “nature parks.” Danil now holds the position of Director of the Association of Nature Parks in Altai. He has the same objectives as Svetlana Katinova—to establish land collectives and get their lands registered communally. But he also feels urgency to protect the sacred sites both inside and outside of nature parks. Although he regularly gets modest international grants for various land-related projects, surveying and registration of both the collectives and the nature park are as yet unfunded.



Ukok Plateau in Kosh Agach

Danil said last winter that representatives from Kosh Agach had contacted him, asking for his help with land registration for both traditional lands and sacred sites. At particular risk is the Ukok Plateau, also a designated UNESCO World Heritage site. This high-altitude plateau is permafrost. In 1993, an extraordinarily preserved, tattooed and head-dressed, 2500-year-old mummy was found in a kurgan by Russian archeologists. Dubbed the "Ice Maiden," she was removed to Novosibirsk without local permission, and the Altai people have been unable to get her back. See www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1109463/posts and www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/transcripts/2517siberian.html. The Ukok Plateau is littered with kurgans. Last I heard, the area had been closed to archeologists.

But now a new threat has arisen. GazProm intends to construct a natural gas pipeline across the Ukok Plateau into China. It is a huge controversy, and the indigenous Altai people, who are now an ethnic minority in their homeland, have not been able to stop it. Sacred places that are not surveyed and registered are not considered to exist. Local activists have been working heroically to register the sacred sites that are in the path of the pipeline construction.

We have until January 2010 to prevent this disaster

It is heart-breaking to witness this sacrilege of Mother Earth. It cannot be repaired, so it must be prevented ... by the Altai people ... with sufficient international support. Altai Mir University is one of numerous international charities working together on this. It is huge task—to survey and register a people’s heritage, attempting to quantify a culture to keep it whole.

All funds received go directly to saving the Altai lands. Your generous contribution makes a difference. Contribute at www.AltaiMir.org or mailed to Altai Mir University, 12345 Lake City Way NE, Seattle, WA 98125-5401, USA. Questions to Carol.Hiltner@gmail.com