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Research Report:
Native Mother: Nature and Wilderness in Modern Russia

I utilized my IARO 2000-2001 fellowship to conclude the initial major stage of research in Russia on *Native Mother: Nature and Wilderness in Modern Russia*, a proposed book manuscript. This is a social history of nature in Russia since 1861, as opposed to existing works that focus overwhelmingly on a combination of environmental policy issues and nature protection. The estimated date for completion of the manuscript is 2005.

Native Mother: Nature and Wilderness in Modern Russia departs significantly from methodologies previously utilized to examine environmental issues in Russia. Not surprisingly, Russian publications in both the sciences and social sciences that appeared during the Soviet period generally mixed paeans to progress with apologetics, and those that have appeared in the post-Soviet period are characterized more by the passionate feelings of the respective authors for the subject than by depth of scholarship. Since the late 1980s, both Russian and Western critics of Soviet approaches to nature have certainly accelerated the pursuit of Russian environmental history, but their predominant focus is the study of the interaction among state policy, scientific institutions, social organizations, and the politics of conservationism. This project, by contrast, begins by recognizing the common cultural roots of both the materialist philosophies that underlay state policy toward the exploitation of nature and the impulses toward conservationism exhibited by concerned scientists and citizens. The intensity of polarized passions on the subject therefore make perceptions of nature and wilderness in Russian society a promising and previously unexplored avenue for probing Russian culture. *Native Mother* will therefore focus not on politics and policy, but will examine the cultural context that gave rise to the conflict itself. In short, this book will argue that the history of the natural environment in Russia cannot be understood properly by continuing to employ only a state-versus-environmentalist framework of discussion. Proceeding from a view of culture brought forward by anthropologist Clifford Geertz—that culture consists of sets of strategies by which a given society explains and understands its collective experience—*Native Mother* will argue that the interaction between humans and their environment is multi-dimensional and, of greater importance, that the cultural facet of this interaction is at least as important as the physical and

material impact.

The research I carried out in archives and libraries of Moscow and St. Petersburg from September to November 2000 constituted an important step in the research plan of the book. In Moscow (September-October 2000) I consulted: Russian Center For the Preservation and Study of Documents on Recent History (RTsKhIDNI); Russian State Archive of the Economy (RGAE); and the State Public Historical Library. In St. Petersburg (November 2000), I consulted Russian National Library and the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA). By working in both archives and libraries, I was able to refocus the project to a more manageable scale, and as a result the library research turned out to be far more significant than the work done in archives. The archival materials are extremely rich and deep. Having already published two monographs grounded in materials from Russian archives, I recognized that my original research plan was unrealistic, in that it would require more than a lifetime to complete. Of greater significance, I was able to determine that *Native Mother*, given its social orientation, must be a work of synthesis that will bring together literary, anthropological, and existing historical works rather than an exercise in original archival research. This made the work done in the libraries of Moscow and St. Petersburg, especially my extensive examination of nineteenth century Russian newspapers and journals, the most important part of my research in 2000.

My preliminary conclusions are that the history of nature and the environment in Russian society and culture since the 1860s should not focus as much on short-term political and policy conflicts as on long-range continuities and changes in the tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet approaches to the use and exploitation of natural resources. If existing studies in the environmental history of Russia have concentrated on the exploitation and protection of nature, my IREX experience has convinced me that this book must explore not only the issues of state policy, institutional behavior, and the environmental politics, but also the cultural roots of Russian attitudes toward nature and ecology. Hence, the main foci of the book will include: literary representations of nature and wilderness in the tsarist and Soviet periods; pre-revolutionary scientific writings on ecology and the natural environment; the philosophy of materialism in Russia prior to 1917; environmental policy and politics in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods; successes and failures of conservationism; the competing and often conflicting goals of the utilization of nature and its preservation. In sum, this work will help illuminate not only the history of Russian state policies toward nature and the environment since 1861, but will make a broader

contribution toward our understanding of the continuities of Russian culture as well.