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Source: Mountain Research and Development, 31(4) : 390-391

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: https://doi.org/10.1659/MRD-JOURNAL-D-11-00085.1

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*Editors' note: Professor Dr Yuri Badenkov, a distinguished mountain geographer at the Russian Academy of Science and a member of* Mountain Research and Development*'s (*MRD*) Honorary Board, has long been influential in initiating and supporting mountain initiatives at the global level. He originally wrote the contribution presented here as a review of the article by Gertjan Plets, Woulter Gheyle, Ruth Plets, Eduard Dvornikov, and Jean Bourgeois, "A Line Through the Sacred Lands of the Altai Mountains: Perspectives on the Altai Pipeline Project," which appears in the MountainNotes section of this issue. However, in view of the insights it contains and the valuable perspective it offers, the editors suggested to Professor Badenkov that he submit his contribution to* MRD *for the MountainViews section.*

## Transboundary Issues in the Altai

Comment on Plets et al (2011): A line through the sacred lands of the Altai Mountains: Perspectives on the Altai pipeline project (MRD vol 31 no 4)

"A line through the sacred lands of the Altai Mountains: Perspectives on the Altai pipeline project," by Plets et al (in this issue), deals with an extremely relevant "hot" issue—construction of a gas pipeline from Russia to China via the Altai Mountain region located in the center of the Asian continent, a sacred and spiritual area also noted for its picturesque natural landscapes. The construction project has provoked tremendous feedback from the Russian and Altai communities and throughout the world, including international institutions such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

The transportation infrastructure project crossing the Altai Mountains and the Ukok Plateau (a UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site) has a 15-year history. In 1996, Chinese scholars published a paper that first proposed the idea of a railroad infrastructure project connecting the Chinese railroad system (INTECO) with the Trans-Siberian East–West Railroad in Russia. This proposal provoked heated discussion in Russian society and in the Russian academic community. As a result, the Altai Declaration (Anonymous 1999) was signed in 1998 during an international conference in Urumqi, Xinjiang Province, China, by experts representing 3 countries (Russia, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan). One of the key proposals of the Altai Declaration was the creation of the Transboundary Biosphere Reserve in Altai as a mechanism for reconciling development and conservation issues in this sensitive and internationally (UNESCO) recognized mountain territory. The idea of a railroad transportation corridor through the Altai—The Great Continental Bridge—was not realized at that time, although it is still alive in Chinese development planning as a postponed project.

An international workshop with the theme "The Frozen Tombs of the Altai Mountains: Strategies and Perspectives," held in the Altai Republic in 2006, issued a recommendation for a cooperative process among 4 countries (Tresilian et al 2008). It also recommended that the Ukok Plateau be included as part of a combined natural and cultural World Heritage site. One year later, a UNESCO expert mission to the Golden Mountains of Altai likewise mentioned the "outstanding universal value" of the area as it existed. It was considered a site that merited recognition for outstanding universal values associated with the features of its rich cultural heritage, for spiritual values embedded in Altai culture, and for exceptional natural beauty. It can be described as a mixed site and cultural landscape.

Later in 2006, Vladimir Putin, at that time president of the Russian Federation, announced during his official visit to China on 21 March a plan to build a gas pipeline through the Altai Mountains. According to the Master Agreement between Gasprom and the China National Petrol Corporation (CNPC), the pipeline was to be constructed for transportation of natural gas (30 billion $m^3$ annually) from the Northwest gas fields in Siberia through the Kanas Pass in Altai to Urumqi, and further to the eastern provinces of China. This plan aroused strong public protests in Russia (from environmental, social, and ethnic-focused nongovernmental organizations [NGOs]). The UNESCO World Heritage Center was also concerned by such a development scenario for the Ukok Plateau, which is one of 5 clusters of the "Golden Mountains of Altai" World Natural Heritage Site.

Apparently, this strong negative reaction was taken into account by the Chinese stakeholders—the Chinese public and the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation—who had become involved in the environmentally risky project and its potentially drastic impact on sacred landscapes and the UNESCO World Heritage Site. There is no information available on the planned route of the pipeline via the Chinese Altai. We know, however, that this area has an abundance of archeological sites that could be affected by the construction activities.

There are at least 2 parties involved in the decision-making process with respect to the transborder pipeline construction project: Gasprom (Russia) and CNPC (China). Other stakeholders include regional and local authorities, local public communities, international NGOs, and the UNESCO World Heritage Centre. All of these stakeholders have a vital interest in finding a solution that will reconcile environmental conservation and development needs. The lessons learned from this conflict of interests will have a much broader impact beyond the Altai region. This is particularly true in

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light of the upcoming Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (2012) and the "green economy" approach to sustainable development strategies in an era of global change.

Taking all these factors into account, the article "A line through the sacred lands of the Altai Mountains: Perspectives on the Altai pipeline project" is of relevance and of interest not only for the Russian and the Altai publics, but for the much broader regional and international mountain communities.

The article gives a comprehensive overview of the expected effects of the construction activities and the finished pipeline on the archeological and cultural landscapes that constitute a valuable heritage of the Altai, focusing on the sacred valleys of the Altai people, the Karakol and the Ursul, which is a new perspective. This overview can be summed up as follows:

- In addition to the impact of pipeline construction and its potential effects on sacred Altai landscapes and archaeological sites, the article touches on the fundamental issues of life and development in this special region. As already mentioned, in the perception of the broad Russian public, the Altai has a special image as a sacred and spiritual area. As for its indigenous people, Altai is a living spirit—*Altai Kudai*—which determines the lifestyles, behavioral patterns, and mentality of the Altai people. The article will therefore be relevant for a broader public, and its translation into Russian and Chinese, and publication in these languages in the form of a separate brochure (under the imprint of MRD), would be very desirable. There is no doubt that the article will be broadly used by international institutions, including UNESCO (World Heritage Centre and The Man and the Biosphere [MAB] Programme) first and foremost. Undoubtedly, the issues discussed in the article will be of relevance to other mountain areas of the world, particularly the Himalayas, where a research project on the impact of climatic change on Kailas sacred landscapes is already under way.
- The contents of the article are sound, and the list of references is adequate and reflects the key issues addressed in the article.
- The proposed strategy appears reasonable. It might be useful for the authors to propose an international meeting to discuss issues pertaining to infrastructure projects (pipelines or highways) from the perspective of their impact on cultural landscapes and archeological sites. Participation in such a meeting by representatives of the developers, Gasprom and CNPC, would be of critical importance. This is not an easy task, considering that Gasprom repeatedly ignored requests for exchange of information and discussions from the authors of the paper and from many other scholars and experts. I personally made several unsuccessful attempts to initiate a dialogue with Gasprom and other parties involved in the Altai pipeline project ("Giprospecgas," St. Petersburg). It would also be interesting and useful to have a discussion about projects being undertaken by the Chinese in Central Asia from the perspectives of environment and human history, including the construction of transportation corridors in the Pamirs and the Tien-Shan, which traverse the cultural landscapes of the ancient Silk Road and other valuable areas.

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