

Into Soviet Nature: Tourism, Environmental Protection, and the Formation of Soviet National Parks, 1950s-1990s

Based on research from over 25 archives from Lithuania to Kamchatka, "Into Soviet Nature" analyzes the important connections between tourism and environmental protection in the USSR's last four decades and in the Russian Federation during the 1990s. From the end World War II through the 1980s, the Communist Party and the Soviet government sought to improve the standard of living of Soviet citizens to legitimate its rule as revolutionary enthusiasm became ever more distant. Affordable tourism for the masses became one of the hallmarks of the "Soviet good life" and Soviet leaders also increasingly asserted that the socialist system provided the foundation for a harmonious relationship to nature. However, these ideas came into conflict. By the mid-1960s, Soviet environmentalists viewed the visible scars from mass tourism as one of the greatest threats the USSR's natural beauty.

Environmentalists addressed tourism's environmental impact in two primary ways. First, while encouraging tourists to practice environmental conscientious behavior, they promoted tourist-led environmental protection initiatives. The promotion of national parks was the second means by which environmentalists addressed tourism's environmental impact. As Soviet tourists were visiting nature reserves (*zapovedniki*) in increasing numbers and leaving significant environmental damage in their wake, Khrushchev's policy of "peaceful coexistence" allowed Soviet environmentalists to join international environmental organizations, such as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The IUCN considered the promotion of national parks throughout the world as one of the most important environmental protection priorities.

Soviet environmentalists believed that national parks would not only relieve stress on nature reserves, but would gain desired international prestige for Soviet environmental protection efforts. Moreover, because national parks stood to accrue revenue from tourists and thereby make nature protection profitable, environmentalists believed that government officials would view them more favorably than nature reserves, which served largely as places of scientific research. At the same time, environmentalists believed that national parks would resonate broadly among Soviet citizens who wanted their tourism opportunities expanded. In turn, from the 1960s through the 1980s, the idea for Soviet national parks gained widespread appeal. Civic organizations, private citizens, scientific institutes, and the press promoted, planned, and lobbied for the establishment of national parks. In many cases, Soviet national parks were promoted as a means of transforming not only regional economies but also the consciousness of Soviet citizens. The Soviet Union's rapid decline and collapse and the economic chaos that ensued made the transformative visions for national parks untenable. While environmentalists had hoped that national parks would bring international prestige to Soviet environmental protection, by the 1990s, Russian national parks served as a painful reminder of the failure of the USSR and then the Russian Federation to protect its scenic treasures as well as the dependence of Russian environmentalists on the international environmental community.

While some scholarly works have addressed Soviet tourism and others have looked at different aspects of environmental protection in the USSR, "Into Soviet Nature" is the first work to consider the important connections between tourism and environmental protection. In doing so, "Into Soviet Nature" thus makes important contributions to Soviet environmental, social, and cultural history. Moreover, while national parks have been a popular subject among environmental historians of different regional specializations, almost no scholarly work has explored Soviet national parks. To date, the environmental history of the USSR has been shown largely in isolation from global environmental protection discourse and priorities in the late-20th century. "Into Soviet Nature" thoroughly repositions Soviet environmental protection efforts in the international history of environmental protection in second half of the 20th century.