

Field work in Environmental History

David Moon, 3 September 2013

In July 1927 the American soil scientist Curtis F. Marbut wrote to his daughter and son-in-law about an excursion he had just led by an international group of scientists. Delegates, including Soviet scientists, who had taken part in the first International Soil Science Congress in Washington, DC, spent a month travelling all over north America to see different types of soils. The excursion was particularly important for Marbut as he was instrumental in the adoption of the theory and methods devised by Russian soil scientists in the late nineteenth century by the soil survey of the U.S. Dept of Agriculture. At the Congress and on the excursion, he was able to deepen his contacts with the Soviet soil scientists, in particular Konstantin Glinka.

Marbut wrote to his daughter and son-in-law:

The trip is over. I bade ... goodbye [to some of the delegates] a little while ago and am now at the apartment all alone and lonesome. Lots of them left Friday noon, immediately after reaching here [i.e. DC], Konstantin Glinka among them. Some of the Russians are still here and I shall see them tomorrow but they will go in a day or two. ... The trip was much more than I dreamed it would be. Everything went off without a hitch. I made hosts of fiends I think. I have gotten many suggestions (scientific) from the excursionists and I am convinced they have had some from the trip. It was fully worth while from the scientific standpoint and from the personal standpoints, pleasant for everyone. (The State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri, Manuscript Collection, Marbut papers, C3720, Folder 32, Correspondence, 1927, Curtis Fletcher Marbut to Louise and Leroy Moomaw, July 24, 1927.)

Our trip to the Solovetskii islands was shorter, our group smaller, and we represented fewer countries. Nevertheless, I learned a great deal from the trip and from talking to the rest of the group, and hope others also felt it worthwhile. In our project, our group of American, Russian, British and other European specialists will undertake further field trips or excursions to the Chernobyl exclusion zone in Ukraine and Lake Baikal in Siberia. By adding field work to conventional historical research we aim to enhance our understanding of the environmental history of this part of the world.

One of our aims is to develop a methodology for environmental history by combining conventional historical research and academic discussions with field work in specific places in 'the environment'. The aim is that the field trips will serve as case studies, thus providing further material for research. The field trips, it is hoped, will also stimulate new perspectives and additional questions. Thus, the network's methodology will enable it to provide new answers to older questions, and also to formulate new questions and approaches to answering them.

While I am still digesting our experiences on the Solovetskii islands and thinking about what we have learned from our visit, I thought about the approach of building in personal experiences of place in the recent book by Jane Costlow: *Heart-Pine Russia Walking and Writing the Nineteenth-Century Forest* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012). Jane Costlow draws on her own experiences of visiting and walking through many of the forests of central and northern Russia she discusses (and in one place compares Russia's northern forests with the countryside near her home in Maine). She also recalls conversations with Russians, specialists in a variety of fields and members of the public, during her frequent visits to Russia. She is quite open in putting herself and her experiences into the book, thereby adding another layer to her reading of the texts and paintings she analyzes, while making it a book about her researching and writing it as well as an analysis of the significance of forests in Russia's culture and history.

In further thinking about what we are doing, I was struck by the introduction to Anne Gorsuch and Diane Koenker's book, *Turizm: The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006). The editors note that 'socialist tourism' 'sought to overcome the inequalities and inefficiencies of the market with rational, centrally-planned guidance for individuals' encounters with new territories and new experiences.' 'Socialist tourism was purposeful'. Soviet tourism activists in the 1920s and 30s insisted that 'turizm was meant to involve work, the enhancement of one's intellectual and physical capital, not leisure.' 'Socialist turizm' was intended to educate socialist tourists about the accomplishments, economic achievements and superiority of socialism, but may not of course have achieved these goals. Intourist, the state travel agency which catered for foreign tourists in the Soviet Union, tried to 'sell socialism' to foreigners.

In our project, thankfully permitted to organise our own trips rather than rely on Intourist, we are trying to be purposeful and enhance our understanding of the environment in the context of Russia's history and to 'sell' Russia's environmental history to a wider audience.