



Tuvans ride horses and gather for a wrestling festival close to the Mongolian border on Lake Tere Khol - the beginning of the Gobi Desert can be seen in the background

BALANCING ACT

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, there has been a resurgence of cultural life in Tuva, but there is now a new divide between the old nomadic ways and the lure of a more contemporary lifestyle.

The sun is setting on Sacred Mountain, close to the border with Mongolia, in southernmost Tuva, one of the least-known regions in Siberia. In a rocky alcove inside the mountain, a group of female shamans conduct a traditional ceremony. One woman, clothed in long furs and a headdress made from the feathers of predatory birds, offers food to fire spirits. Behind her, another shaman ties prayer flags to a tree – white to symbolise air; green and yellow for earth and water.

Ringed by 2,000-metre-plus mountains and far from the major trade routes, Tuva’s ancient civilisation has remained largely intact. A vast expanse, which includes some of the most remote and unspoiled natural beauty

in the world, it is also home to endangered species such as the snow leopard and the mountain ibex.

Since the demise of the Soviet Union there has been a resurgence of cultural life in Tuva. Nomadic lifestyles and migration patterns have returned and shamanism and Buddhism are once again flourishing. Interdependence with Nature is deeply ingrained in the Tuvan psyche and fundamental to the Tuvan way of thinking. There is a strong tradition of respect for natural places: every person has an *ee*, a master or spirit guardian.

Saya Chopuy, who now lives with her family, sheep and cattle in a yurt homestead in the Erzin Kozhuun district, says, “We were told during Soviet times that our



traditions were those of a backward people. But I am happiest when we are moving. A simpler life is best. I want my grandchildren to grow up knowing about their culture – to respect older people and to worship the spirits of Nature.”

But Tuvans now face a new dilemma. The area is rich in minerals such as iron ore, bauxite, coal, gold and cobalt. There is the potential to start a very profitable mining industry. Plans to build a railway to service the mining industry and create jobs are under way but opinion is deeply divided. Those in favour say it could create jobs and lead to the eventual construction of a passenger railway, which could open up the country to tourism. Critics, including the Minister of Labour, are sceptical and believe the potential for corruption is huge. In addition, the proposed train route would go through one of the most famous burial grounds in Siberia, dating back to ancient times.

The Tuvans’ respect for Nature means they are circumspect about developing a mining economy. Acutely aware of their position as custodians of one of the great natural wildernesses, they believe that if they are encouraged to forget and undervalue their own culture and environment, then their traditions and core values – which are already under threat – could be lost.

Dalana Kadygo is the Tuvan co-ordinator of a new joint project by World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Russia and Oxfam, which aims to promote new and sensitive patterns of economic development in Tuva whilst protecting traditional ways of life.

“Many of Tuva’s goods are now imported,” says Kadygo. “Our chickens come from the US and our milk from the Netherlands. Imagine this for us Tuvans who pride ourselves on being an agricultural society! All these imported products are replacing traditional

produce. We need to increase our own productivity and thereby create jobs.”

Planned activities include improving the quality of traditional breeds of livestock, reintroducing abandoned traditions such as felt-making for clothing and yurts, and the restoration of local crafts, and improving access to local and regional markets. External support will be provided in the form of advice and micro-finance.

“This project is so needed and relevant right now in Tuva,” says Kadygo. “Traditionally, Tuvan people are very hard-working. They are used to providing everything for themselves. So we believe that this project will allow local economies to develop as small businesses grow up, and our hope is that people will return to their traditions understanding that, with hard work, they can improve their lives.”

Oxfam and WWF’s work will also provide protection to rare species such as the snow leopard and the argali wild sheep, with a view to taking some pressure off wild resources through improved economic prospects. Activities will include involving local communities in national park planning and development, training and supporting national park staff to offer better protection and conservation of wildlife.

“This project will build more sustainable livelihoods for rural people, and improve the local economy and the value of agricultural produce,” says Nicholas Colloff, country director for Oxfam Russia.

“The challenge will be integrating rural sustainable development with conservation, but if we develop a vibrant model for this in Tuva, WWF Russia will replicate this work in many remote, impoverished parts of Russia where Indigenous people live precarious existences.”

Angela Robson is a writer and BBC broadcaster.



Female shamans gather at Sacred Mountain to perform a ritual, making offerings to the spirits

PHOTOGRAPHS: KATE BOOKS

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– Nicholas Colloff (Oxfam Russia)