

# The Tender Tundra

Concealed under the tundra of northwest Russia, enormous oil and gas reserves are a potential source of great wealth. But for the indigenous people of the Nenets autonomous region, the reserves are a threat to their existence.

EIVIND SENNESET/TEXT

PHOTO/NENETS ASSOCIATION YASAVEY

NORWAY/RUSSIA

**GRAZING LANDS DESTROYED** | Vast areas in Nenets Autonomous Okrug have been taken over by drilling rigs, oil pipelines, bulldozer tracks and massive production facilities. The tundra and grazing land are being degraded and polluted on a large scale.



THE NENETS AUTONOMOUS OKRUG (NAO) is a Russian region in the north-eastern corner of the Barents Sea area. The region, roughly four times the size of the Netherlands, consists mostly of tundra. Here, the Nenets and Izhma Komi, the peoples indigenous to the region, have tended their reindeer and lived a subsistence lifestyle for as long as anyone can remember. The world is now turning its eyes on this stark landscape, not for the sake of the reindeer or the people, but for the enormous reserves of oil and gas concealed several kilometres below the tundra.

Vast areas, until recently only used by nomads and their reindeer herds for an annual migration from the forest-tundra zone in the winter up to the coasts of the Barents and Kara seas in summer, have now been taken over by drilling rigs, oil pipelines, bulldozer tracks and massive production facilities. The tundra and grazing land are being degraded and polluted on a large scale. For the indigenous people, the maintenance of traditional practices has become a fight to save their cultural heritage.

To make matters worse, the population of the district has not had the ability to track the effects of this development. This may soon change, however, as international scientists and the indigenous people of Russia are joining forces to document the changes.

## A NEED FOR KNOWLEDGE

"The indigenous people find themselves unable to substantiate their concerns towards the government authorities and the oil companies. They lack tools that can be used to document the situation," says Winfried Dallmann, a geologist of the Norwegian Polar Institute (NPI). He is the leader of a project aimed at gathering information on the situation in the Nenets Autonomous Okrug and publishing a database that can be used as the basis for constructive dialogue between oil companies, the administration and the traditional land users.

"The most important problem is the lack of information – people simply do not know what is going on in the country and in the region where they live," says Vladislav Peskov. Peskov is the president of Yasavey – the Association of the Nenets People. Yasavey is cooperating with the NPI on the project entitled "Monitoring of development of traditional indigenous land use areas in the Nenets Autonomous Okrug, NW Russia", as part of the International Polar Year (see Global Knowledge no.1 2007).

Yasavey helps people who live and work in the tundra to adapt to modern life. It provides information on the situation in the region and about new laws; it even provides el-

ementary legal aid as many people do not know their rights. "By utilising the knowledge of the indigenous people, we hope to create a tool to document traditional land use and associated issues. This can be useful, among other things, for settling claims of land ownership and similar problems," Peskov says.

"The project is essentially a monitoring project," Dallmann adds. "While the local government may have broad knowledge of the oil activities, they have paid less attention to understanding the needs and practises of the indigenous peoples. Yasavey on the other hand represents the interests of the indigenous population, but they have a hard time gathering information about the degradation of their pasture lands as a result of development."

## PEOPLE'S DATA

In order to overcome this problem, the project aims to publish a so-called Geographic Information System on the Internet. The GIS database is intended to contain data on geography, land use by the indigenous population and industrial activity, as well as reported ecological problems and changes in the indigenous population's traditional means of subsistence. The data is compiled from both published sources and new satellite images. A third and perhaps most important source of information will be the reindeer nomads themselves. Travelling throughout the partially devastated tundra, they can contribute exact knowledge on how industrial development has influenced traditional livelihoods.

A central part of the project is to instruct a number of representatives from villages in the NAO in how to conduct a questionnaire campaign in their villages. Such a course was recently held in Naryan-Mar, the administrative centre of the NAO. This seminar, led by Olga Murashko, the project's expert in anthropology, saw the training of four indigenous representatives who will each conduct 20-25 interviews.

"Having detailed data on the impact of the oil drilling will give the Nenets a completely different basis for action. This database can potentially be used to provide the authorities with documentation of the impact, and maybe even of illegal activities, and for negotiation of compensation claims with oil companies," says Winfried Dallmann.

Concerning the data, there is also the aspect of legality. "We have a duty to document the oil and gas industry in the area as long as it is creating problems. However, maps and GIS data of such infrastructure are often considered confidential in Russia," says Dallmann. Although all data will be acquired legally, their publication in an aggregated form may cause legal problems, the project team fears. In order to avoid legal prob-

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LACKING DOCUMENTATION | *The indigenous people of Nenets Autonomous Okrug lack the tools to document the destruction.*

lems for the Russian project partners, experts will go through all material before it is published.

Come the final phase of the project, all relevant data will be scrutinised by an international panel of scientists.

### NUMEROUS VIOLATIONS

From the 1960s to the 1980s large parts of the Nenets' reindeer pastures, especially in the neighbouring Khanty-Mansi and Yamal districts, were devastated by a reckless oil industry. Large-scale prospective drilling in the NAO started in the 1990s. Once again, it was the reindeer herders that suffered the most. So far a significant amount of pasture has been destroyed by the 25 oil companies operating in the region. "The loss is greater than simply that of the pastures that have been occupied by the different oil and gas installations," Dallmann says, "Because such infrastructure has cut off migration paths."

The oil companies are also suspected of grave violations of Russian environmental laws. "It has long been an uncontrolled situation. Numerous oil spillages and other forms of degradation inflict irreparable damage to the natural environment of the Arctic," Dallmann says.

ILO's convention No. 169 recognises rights to land and natural resources as central for the material and cultural survival of indigenous people. This is a convention that Russia has signed, though not yet ratified. In the Nenets Autonomous Okrug, land can still be assigned for industrial usage, while users receive miserly financial compensation. "Speaking to reindeer herders I have not heard one positive word on the presence of the oil industry in the region. As far as the indigenous people are concerned, the impressions are exclusively negative," Dallmann says.

Vladislav Peskov believes that both the oil companies and the

local government are conscious of the implications of the oil and gas industry for the indigenous people in the NAO. "However, everyone has different interests and goals. This project will hopefully help to improve communication and understanding between the indigenous people, the oil companies and the government," Peskov says.

### A MAJOR MINORITY

In 1929 NAO was granted the status of national okrug (in 1977 changed to autonomous okrug) because of the large number of Nenets living in the area. Some eighty years later, ethnic Russians constitute the majority, and the indigenous population of 7750 Nenets and 4500 Izhma Komi do not participate in public administration. The local government has also proven to be a difficult partner to deal with. Last summer, a new

governor was installed on direct orders from Moscow.

"The last governor was positive about our project. The new governor has now accepted its existence, but has also made it clear that his government will not contribute with information about oil and gas installations in any way," Dallmann says. In adding to the problems of gathering information, the new government has also made changes that more directly affect the lives of indigenous people. "The oil industry generates money that could potentially be used for the benefit of the indigenous people, and during the last administration there actually existed such a fund. The new administration, however, has put an end to this," Dallmann says.

Still, the project is hoping to have the best possible relations with the local authorities. "We depend on good relations to ensure that our advice will lead to administrative measures that can improve the situation." GK

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