

Report from the field—June 2009

Ust Koksa Region



The Katun River, known as the “Mother of the World,” starts on the glaciers of Mt. Belukha

Ust Koksa region (Tyungur/Kucherla/Mt. Belukha)

The villages of Tyungur and Kucherla are, on a good day, eight hours by mostly gravel roads from Gorno-Altai. Nonetheless, their proximity to sacred Mt. Belukha makes them a major tourist destination—and a major target for external tourism development.



Svetlana Katynova and Carol dedicating land for an Altai cultural center on the bank of the Katun River near Tyungur, with fermented horse milk.

Svetlana Katynova has dedicated her life and all her resources as a volunteer to protect the Altai culture, and specifically the land of the Ust Koksa region. The situation with the extremely valuable lands in Tyungur/Kucherla is somewhat successfully resolved with the creation last winter of an agricultural collective called “Tyungur Plus.” This was possible because of the new Russian Federal law: #131 “Land self-management for traditional development.” By agreeing not to sell their land, villagers get the privileges of cooperative purchasing/selling as well as use of farm equipment owned by the collective. 126 people have joined, which is about a quarter of the population of those two villages.



The road to Tyungur

When villagers created the collective and each paid 7,500 rubles, then the village administrator and volunteers began to sort out the land registration documentation. It is a bigger job than in Onguday because less was done previously. That task is almost finished. Then, the collective’s lands will be collectively surveyed and registered, which reduces costs. The remaining villagers are free to sell their land, of course, although Svetlana continues her efforts to help them understand that, by selling, they will not only lose their own rights to their lands and livelihoods, but their children’s birthrights as well. For cultural reasons exacerbated by alcohol, this is apparently still not clear to much of the population.

Last year's collective of ten from Kucherla, for which \$7,000 was given in 2008, has joined the larger collective. These ten were the most vulnerable villagers, who could not, themselves, afford the membership fee. Part of last year's funds paid the membership fee for the collective. Another, larger part, had already gone to pay for a lawsuit to establish heirs' rights to yet-unregistered lands—which will set a legal precedent for all of Altai. That's still in process.

Another very difficult situation in Tyungur/Kucherla has also been resolved over the winter: One particular realtor was apparently coercing vulnerable villagers into signing over some of the villages' most valuable agricultural lands for \$4-\$16/hectare (\$1.60-\$6.50/acre). Svetlana and the village administrator got together, and were able to retrieve the land with a legal action.

This year's donations of \$15,000 for Ust Koksa region will support a similar but somewhat more expensive process for 13 high-risk villagers in Ak-Koba in the Uimon Valley, and for three farms in the village of Kurunda. These farms are important because they include some extraordinary, but otherwise unprotected, sacred sites. This will also fund some of Svetlana's considerable travel expenses to these very remote villages (eight hours each way/trip) to coordinate the documentation of all this, which she had been paying herself during her last three years of volunteer work.

Future plans

Svetlana seizes every opportunity to strengthen the Altai culture, which was radically suppressed during the Soviet era. In a huge new commercial development (complete with a new lake) planned for the Maima region near Gorno-Altai, she virtually forced the developers to include a traditional Altai village.

She envisions a sacred ring of cultural centers in key villages throughout Altai. The cultural centers will be laid out with teepees, a'ails, and yurts in the traditional horse-shoe format with horse-tethering post at the entrance. Each village will specialize in an aspect of traditional livelihood, supporting each other village as well as marketing the surplus and providing tourism interest. This past week, she received land from the Tyungur administration for the first of these centers.

Svetlana is particularly emphatic about the re-development of Altai oral history, which is conveyed through the practice of throat-singing. Shamans are emerging again with the awesome ability to directly access the epic history through Spirit and convey it directly (with the throat-singing) into the listeners' minds as images.

The prognosis for sacred sites is helped considerably by the successful registration of agricultural lands. What remains, however, is the painstaking mapping and documentation of the sacred places before the few elders who know their locations pass on. Mostly, these sites have more to do with Earth energies than with classical archeology, and are related to the physical stability of the whole planet, so it is in our best interests, worldwide, to support such documentation.



The circled area will be a new Altai village built as part of a huge new development near Maima on the Katun River.



Carol Helmer