

2009 Collective Land Registration/Surveying Project in Altai Villages Ak-Koba and Korunda

The villages of Ak-Koba and Korunda are in many ways typical for Russia: a couple hundred people living in unpainted log houses with blue window frames that remind residents of the sky; stave fences to keep grazing cows and pigs out of the substantial food-garden plots; dirt lanes; electricity but no plumbing; an elementary school (older children board at the high school); a poorly supplied clinic; a few general stores



And Ak-Koba and Korunda are somewhat different also: traditional steep-roofed, dirt-floored, pentagonal or hexagonal wooden buildings called *a'yls* squat in each side yard---used as summer kitchens by indigenous Altai people (smoke goes out a hole in the center of the roof); and these two villages are somewhat poorer than even the usual standard. More than usual, they are self-contained and self-sufficient; definitely not a “money” economy.

The people of these villages have heard about the new Federal land laws, but Moscow is a long, long distance away. They manage their village just fine, according to clan relationships: these new laws about land ownership are nothing more serious than the rattle of a very distant thunderstorm.



In the first round of land privatization laws, in the early '90s, officials made a list of all adults, and assigned plots (if somewhat carelessly) of the three grades of useful land around the village (agricultural, hay-fields; and grazing only) to clan groups at a total of 10-15 hectares (25-27 acres) per person. Specific individual plots were not assigned, and were not necessary.



Fast-forward 25 years: rumors reach them through extended family in other villages that now they may no longer belong to their ancestral lands. The thought is so bizarre that it cannot be integrated, and remedies cannot be conceived of within the cultural context.

Thus, the lands that feed the materially poorest of Russia's poor can be possessed by strangers. It is more confounding than the huge earthquake unleashed five years ago.

That, they knew, was due to disturbances of the Earth's energy fields by these strangers. The people know that Altai is a place that all the peoples of the world can consider home, but this foreign concept of people owning the land, rather than belonging to it, is absurd. And, having spent some time inside the Altai energy vortex, I can confirm that indigenous Altai realities make complete sense in the context of this mysterious, majestic place.

In all other rural regions of Russia except Chechnya, Svetlana Katnova has told me, the village lands were surveyed and registered in government programs. Why not in Altai? Perhaps it is too precious to leave in the hands of peasants. Maybe it is just an oversight, and the juggernaut of tourist development will pass them by, but who can risk it?

When Svetlana Katinova approached them, offering to help them with the process and to seek international funding for the fees if they would put together a collective, they scratched their heads (since they already *were* a collective) and agreed.

Why are these villagers, as ambivalent as they seem to be, worthy of international support? Because they are the keepers of an ancient way of life in a uniquely sacred and powerful place on our planet. Just as heritage seedstocks are important because an overplanted species can fail en masse and cause disaster, so our heritage cultures are important insurance against the substantial flaws of the dominant Western culture.

The Altai culture is at risk, and if we can prevent its destruction, we must. The world needs it.