

## Bol'shaya Kokshaga Zapovednik Leads the Way in Environmental Education

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Bol'shaya Kokshaga State Nature Preserve (Zapovednik) lies in the small Autonomous Republic of Mari El, an enclave in the Russian Federated Republic. Just east of the Volga River and not far from the city of Kazan, the Mari El Republic is home to the Mari People, who have lived in the area for hundreds of years. Though now largely Christian, the Mari still revere the spirits of nature—of forest, river, and sun. In the countryside some practice a type of folk medicine based on pre-Christian shamanism.

The staff of Bol'shaya Kokshaga Zapovednik, formed in 1991, strives primarily to protect and study the native flora and fauna within its boundaries, as do all *zapovedniki* in the Russian system of protected lands. Recognizing the folk practices and traditions of the Mari, the staff of the preserve also seeks to preserve and study the cultural heritage of these indigenous people. Of particular interest to the staff are folk traditions related to the specific natural environment of the republic.

The Mari people, about 600,000 according to the most recent census, belong to a sub-Ural group, a mixture of European, Finno-Ugrian, and Mongolian. They also mixed with the nearby Turkic-speaking Bulgarians, the ethnographic progenitors of the Volga Tatars. Old Bulgaria was located south of Kazan at the confluence of the Volga and Kama Rivers. When Tsar Ivan the Terrible defeated the Volga Tatars of Kazan in 1552, he integrated Tatar and Mari lands into the emerging Russian Empire. The Russians, however, did not much disturb the material culture or agricultural practices of these native peoples until the twentieth century. Kazan became the major trading center of the empire, a place where East met West.

Rapid industrialization after the Great Patriotic War (World War II), with its conse-

quent urbanization, significantly impacted the environment of the Volga region. Underneath the surface of drastic economic change, however, Mari culture and economy still reflected a close kinship with their natural environment: a vegetational transition zone where coniferous forests typical of the taiga meet and blend with the broad-leaf trees of a mixed steppe-forest zone.

The continued subsistence of the Mari still depends on wise use of their natural environment. Outside their cities the Mari people supplemented settled farming and animal husbandry with hunting, gathering, fishing and bee-keeping. Their traditional material culture, especially wood carving and ornamental embroidery, continues to reflect an ingenious blend of nature themes and natural objects found close at hand.

Recently, environmental education specialists of the Bol'shaya Kokshaga Zapovednik devised a survey as a way of educating the Maris and of determining their attitudes toward their environment and the nature preserve. Some respondents close to the preserve worried that the preserve was locking up resources badly needed in these dire economic times, but generally the results of the survey encouraged the staff to pursue an aggressive program of environmental education. The younger respondents and those who lived further away from the preserve were quite positive about its general mission and specific goals for protecting the environment. (The survey instrument could be used to test attitudes about nature and to educate people surrounding other *zapovedniki* in the vast Russian system of protected areas.)

Independent studies, conducted by the preserve's environmental education specialists, suggested that many Mari traditional beliefs regarding nature could be made compatible with environmental protection. Indeed, the staff believes the Mari reverence for nature might provide core values for an effective environmental education program in other areas. An unanticipated fiscal crisis experienced by the Ministry of Education of the Mari El Republic has given them a chance to put their educational theories into action.

Budgetary short-falls prompted the Education Ministry of the Mari El Republic to eliminate what it considered "unimportant" programs, such as ecology and environmental education, from its secondary curriculum. The Ministry of Education even refused to participate in a Commission of Ecological Education established in 1993 by the Ecology Ministry. The Education Ministry's apparent indifference to environmental education occurs at a time when interest in this type of education is rising everywhere in Russia.

In response, officials and environmental education specialists of the Bol'shaya Kokshaga State Preserve decided on a bold and, in many ways, an unprecedented educational initiative. *Zapovedniki*, which primarily have the task of protecting and studying biological species within their boundaries, have rarely reached out with educational programs to populations around them, though many specialists have argued that environmental education programs would provide for the best long-term protection of natural areas. The Bol'shaya Kokshaga staff, however, decided to organize an environmental education outreach program for the whole Mari El Republic.

Environmental education specialists and scientific workers of the preserve recently established an ecology education center with its headquarters at the *zapovednik*. The center will provide ecology lessons and organize ecological field experiences for school children and sponsor seminars for biology and ecology teachers at all levels. Workshops for young and old, who want to know more about the ecosystems of the republic, the staff of the preserve will also arrange. To accomplish these ambitious goals, the center staff will need technical equipment and financial resources, but it is determined to push on, come what may.

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