

### ***Tourism in Southern Yakutia among Indigenous Minorities***

Fieldwork: Research started in summer 2012 and continued in summer 2013, partly funded by the research center CEARC.

Visited places: Yakutsk (capital of the Yakutia (Sakha Republic), Nerungri, Iengra, Tynda and Pervomajskoe.

#### **Introduction**

The Republic of Yakutia (Sakha) is rich in terms of landscape variety – largely untouched. As an additional tourist attraction, Yakutia is rich in terms of cultural diversity: the Yakut people themselves and four minorities, the Evenk, Even, Yukaghir and Chukchi peoples. All of them have managed to preserve their native languages and traditional way of life relatively well in comparison to other Arctic first nations. For 20 years now, all of them have been facing repeatedly periods of economic crisis, a situation tourism could help to amend.

Yakutsk is one of the most advanced towns in Siberia (according to Western criteria) – thanks to the income from diamond and other extractive industries. From the early 1990s, new building sites have continued to be opened. This mission's aim was to produce a first report on tourism development among southern Yakutia's indigenous minorities.

#### **Tourism in Yakutia among Indigenous minorities**

Despite Yakutia's potential in terms of extraordinary natural sites and cultural diversity, the Republic of Sakha has not been developed very much in terms of tourism infrastructures so far. Recent history may somehow account for this situation. Besides the fact that Soviet policies did not favor the opening of the country to foreign visitors, tourism did exist within the Soviet Union. But activities concerned mainly Central Russia, its main towns (museums, monuments) and the coastal resorts. It is interesting to notice that during the interviews about tourism, representatives of the indigenous minorities were referring to their own touristic experience in Moscow, St. Petersburg and the coastal resorts in Crimea during the so-called "golden age" of communism (the 1980s), when herders had access to organized tours offered by the State.

#### ***Development initiatives by indigenous minorities***

The development of ethno-tourism or eco-tourism among Siberian indigenous minorities as an additional income has been ongoing for more than 20 years. Indeed, just after the collapse of the Soviet regime, during the so-called 'rebirth of cultures' appeared at the beginning of the 1990's in all Siberia, minorities have immediately identified tourism as an economy to be developed and to be adapted to Western criteria.

In the early 1990's, when the Family Cooperatives<sup>1</sup> were created in Yakutia, ethno-tourism was one of the envisaged economic activities. Many individual projects were submitted for funding to the Yakut governmental institutions, but without any success. Those projects aimed to create touristic bases with all conveniences satisfying western criteria, cultural constructions and so on. According to the interviews, some

---

<sup>1</sup> The Family Cooperatives are an indigenous mini-enterprise based on a familial network, dealing with traditional activities (reindeer herding, hunting, fishing, handicraft, etc.) recognised by the State and replacing the former State Farms (Sovkhoz).

very rare cooperatives were able to launch touristic activities thanks to commercial agreements with Western agencies.

### Major projects of the local State

At the time, the Yakut government made a great effort to improve the reception quality of foreign business partners (also seen as tourists) from extractive industries of the main town Yakutsk (luxury hotels, restaurants, concert rooms, modern buildings, news, important cultural centers on Yakut culture close to Yakutsk, etc.). It is interesting to note that local conceptions of cultural heritage are rather different from the Western ones, since, most of the wooden buildings built centuries before were destroyed to build modern business towers. Only in the city center of Yakutsk, a part of the old wooden Yakutsk was “reconstituted” for creating a touristic commercial center, using reinforced concrete structures covered by wooden paneling in the ‘izba’ style.

Another example of a major state project in tourism is the construction of “ethno-villages” related to some minorities. The local authorities invested several dozens of millions of rubles in a number of projects such as the construction of touristic stations including traditional habitat (conical tents, storage houses, concert rooms, houses for tourists, etc.) in an enclosed ‘natural’ territory close to the main towns. In most cases, this has proven a waste of money, since the centers were located far from indigenous communities. In addition, they were not very attractive for tourists, because of high prices for low quality, the sites being administered by people not representing the indigenous minorities. Tourists therefore did not find any real cultural interest in them, the sites not offering standard facilities, nor the opportunity to meet with representatives of the indigenous minorities.

### **Main obstacles/constraints on tourism development**

According to my fieldwork and analysis of interviews, it appears that there are a number of obstacles or constraints on tourism development plans among indigenous minorities of southern Yakutia.

- ☞ The most potentially interested clients are not Russians (as the interest in indigenous cultures of the Arctic is not widespread among Russian tourists who tend to be more attracted by Western countries, China or exotic destinations. So, there is a need to attract the foreigners.
- ☞ The visa system to enter Russia is rather complicated and a hemming factor for Westerners.
- ☞ There is a real problem of accessibility because of lacking transport services and infrastructures or the poor state they are often in (the roads are dangerous and uncomfortable and the trains are too slow for western criteria).
- ☞ There is a problem of language – it is almost impossible to travel in Siberia without speaking Russian (most people in Siberia do not speak English).
- ☞ In general, the hotels and other touristic services are nonexistent in the villages and of course in the nomadic areas.
- ☞ In the rare places, where there are/have been experiences of tourism among indigenous minorities, there are other obstacles like:
  - The high price of travelling to these regions for foreigners (that means only few people are coming per year).

- The conditions of the stay are not satisfying for western tourists.
- Too little profit to be made by the indigenous communities, for different reasons:
  - The share of the tourism agencies (western or local) is too high;
  - Most of the profit (and sometimes all of it) goes to the local company for reindeer herding.
  - The implantation of State ethno-tourism centers and the development of new projects is such that foreign tourists are insufficiently attracted by what is on offer.

### Conclusion

The fieldwork and analysis of interviews have revealed a real interest among the indigenous communities in developing ethno- or eco-tourism in indigenous communities or nomadic Family Cooperatives as an additional income to their subsistence economy. Further analysis shows that such tourism could represent a sustainable additional income contributing to the maintaining in a context of crisis traditional ways of life in villages and nomadic areas, **on condition that initiatives are lead by local stakeholders themselves.**

The number of those ready to participate is restrained by the competition from the regional governmental institutions and main local tourism agencies. The latter have important means at their disposal, including powerful networks, but their implantation among indigenous communities is not very well developed and they often lack effective marketing strategies.

Thus, tourism development in southern Yakutia is currently almost nonexistent despite some rare initiatives among indigenous communities. Yet, indigenous communities have been willing to participate in development projects for the past twenty years. (*see above*). At the same time it needs to be pointed out the Yakut government has made some efforts in recent years to develop ethno-tourism among indigenous minorities owing no doubt to the increasing interest among Western tourists in Arctic societies and their culture.

\* \* \*

**For quoting this paper:** Lavrillier A. 2013. Tourism in Southern Yakutia among Indigenous Minorities, *POLARIS project report 2013*, available from: <http://polaris.cearc.fr> (+date of access).