



On the Border, on the Brink

Hilary Parke with a tale of eco-forest travel

Along the Russian border something extraordinary was happening ... so much so that it had attracted the attention of the media. Arina, a student from Petrozavodsk, was holding steady a wicked tangle of rusting barbed wire so that April, from Scotland, could cut it free from the undergrowth. They were both so absorbed in their task of taking down part of the Iron Curtain that they failed to notice the cameraman from Moscow Television who was enthusiastically filming them.

This was the first ever John Muir Award international exchange expedition to Finnish and Russian Karelia. Ten UK participants and three UK leaders had joined up with leaders and young people from Finland and Russia in order to explore the wilderness on foot and by canoe, to experience other cultures and to carry out conservation work in one of the most remote old-growth forests in northern Europe.

The UK participants, aged from eighteen upwards, came from all walks of life and had not met until a preparation weekend in Perthshire. On the River Tay many had experienced their first taste of open boat canoeing ... and of capsizing!

On our arrival in Finland, we headed for Metsäkartano, one of Finland's excellent Youth Centres. Arriving in the early evening, we were welcomed by the centre's staff and offered a toast of forest fruits in beautifully-carved wooden cups, before setting off in canoes for an atmospheric paddle across the pine-rimmed lake to an old logging camp, where we were to sleep that night. Here we cooked supper on an open fire with the Finns, Germans and Russians with whom the residential was being shared, and on the following morning, in order to break the ice we played games, cooked traditional lunches and made forays into the forests to learn backwoods survival skills such as fire lighting, navigation and foraging for wild foods. Then it was on to Aittolahti, a rustic but well-equipped cabin in the woods where we experienced our first traditional Finnish sauna and were able to swim in the lake to our heart's content.

Finland is very much a forest culture, so it was fitting that the next day was spent in the forest, where officers from Metsähallitus, the Finnish forestry service, demonstrated their methods of sustainable management. We learned the importance of strimming saplings and leaving the brashings to rot down, of looking after the health of the many watercourses and conserving the few remaining areas of original old-growth timber. The leaders, who had planted pine trees during their previous 'recce' visit in May, were able to see how well they had grown, before we were taken on to experience another aspect of the forestry business, the logging and pulp mills. Here it was clear that Finland has sorted out its own forest economy, in terms of sustainable management, pretty well, but we felt considerable concern at the amount of irreplaceable old-growth Russian timber that was coming over the border to be pulped. A satellite image, seen the following day, at Kainu Nature Reserve, showed very clearly the difference between ancient (dark green) and younger (paler grey-green) forests: the line between the two types of forest faithfully followed the border between the two countries. On the Russian side, large pink scars betrayed the huge areas of previously untouched forest that are being logged daily and as we drove into Russia we passed a constant stream of fully-laden timber lorries heading for the

Finnish logging mills.

Sanna, our Finnish tour guide, had feared that getting a large multi-national group and a canoe-laden trailer across the border at Vartius would be difficult, but in fact it all went very smoothly, mainly because of her excellent organisation and also perhaps because the customs and border officials recognised some of us from May, when there had been much conferring and telephoning before we were allowed across.



On the road to Lake Paanajärvi. Hilary Parke

Once in Russian Karelia, we were welcomed at the trans-national Friendship Park at Kostamuksha, a large steelworking city which has now become the co-ordinating centre for the Kostamuksha Strict Nature Reserve. On the Finnish side of the border, at Kainu, we had visited the modern purpose-built and expertly laid out interpretive Nature Centre, featuring multimedia shows, interactive computer stations and topical exhibitions. Its Russian counterpart, housed in an old council building in Kostamuksha, clearly enjoyed considerably less funding but we were struck by the enthusiasm, ingenuity and dedication of the Russian staff for this wonderful wildlife initiative which transcends the borders built by man.

Soon we were setting up our tents on a narrow peninsula between two lakes, getting a fire going and exploring the spooky decaying bunkers and watch towers that recall so poignantly a darker period of Karelian history. That evening, as the light slowly dimmed, we heard how the residents of the area had been forced to leave their homes and that where we were now there had once been houses and a church. Scarcely a trace of habitation remained in the overgrown forests but for those of us from Scotland, there were powerful parallels with the Highland Clearances.

That night was the first of many to be spent congenially around a fire or at banya, (the Russian equivalent of the sauna), swapping experiences and breaking down the cross-cultural barriers. Somehow we managed to get everyone on their feet dancing a hectic Strip the Willow, then the Finns taught us a Karelian folk dance and the Russians plied us with endless humorous toasts, to everyone and everything under the sun.

Award leader Ray Lamb in no-man's land. Sam Baumber.

The next day, Friday 17th August, my journal entry reads:

"In spite of a late night, we're soon on the road, armed with wire cutters and heading for no-man's land. We emerge blinking from the vehicles to find ourselves in 23° of heat, on a bleak fuel station forecourt that glares at us



in the harsh sunlight. Beyond it is the border control post, with a sentry-topped watch tower and two guards lounging languidly outside. Beside the parking area, behind a pile of huge rocks, the Iron Curtain threads its tangled red barbs through rising saplings and scrub, supported by a line of black, T-shaped posts. We watch, silent and overcome by the singular power of the occasion, as Sergei's chainsaw roars suddenly into life and begins ripping away at the tarred timber. As the first one topples we cheer, then there is a surge of energy as this multinational little team spreads out and sets to, snipping and rolling, unthreading and tugging, all the time cautiously liberating the young branches from the sprawling tendrils of wire."

That night, still sweaty and scratched, we arrived at our first Russian billets, in the private homes of the villagers of Voknavolok, to find banyas and supper awaiting. Over the next week, our lives became a patchwork of exciting journeys by canoe, meetings with strangers who soon became friends, bouts of practical conservation work, fascinating insights into rural lifestyles that have changed little over the centuries, and threaded through it all, the routine of life on the move.

As we neared the Arctic circle, the long bright days blended together, interfaced by fleeting periods of twilight. Cold, light nights huddled around camp fires gave way to scorchingly hot days as we paddled forth on the capricious waters of Lake Paanajärvi. Here we were deep into the true Karelian wilderness, passing seemingly endless old-growth forests, hearing the cries of sandpipers by day and owls by night, camping amid the massive trunks on deep, springy beds of cranberry and blueberry. Sergey and Julia, the National Park Rangers, were a fount of fascinating information on the history of the forests and of the Sami herders, whose survival depended entirely on their reindeer herds. Shamanism and superstition interlaced their lives; the trees seemed to have absorbed a sense of deep mystery and even half an hour spent in solitude in that vast wilderness brought a sense of real connection to the deeper aspects of life.

On our very last night in Russia we skipped going to bed altogether, in favour of spending our last few hours talking, singing and playing Toss the Birch Bark Slipper together. We had set out as a group of 23 very different individuals from extremely varied backgrounds but the challenges and shared experiences of our journey had transformed us... into a mutually supportive team and also into friends. So it was with a sense of real community that we shared both the delights and downsides of the trip, and expressed our deep concern that humanity should not despoil, through tourism, logging or any other activity, this last, vast but infinitely vulnerable northern wilderness.

At 2am we reluctantly doused the fire and began to gather our belongings together. "The only thing we haven't seen on this trip is the Northern Lights, but otherwise it's been totally brilliant", someone was saying, just as someone else, pointing upwards, gave a shout. Waves of light were rippling across the sky, radiating out from a point directly above us. The Aurora Borealis, light show of the gods indeed! What more perfect finale to our epic journey could there have been, than those five minutes of reverence and wonder?

* Hilary Parke is a volunteer leader for the John Muir Award.

Ray Lamb (above), an Award leader who was instrumental in setting up the trip, with a bit of the iron curtain. Ray is an Edinburgh based community education worker. The photographer Sam Baumber, also an Award leader, has just completed a geography degree at the University of Edinburgh.
