



Fifth Annual Conference

Contesting Nature in Central Asia

*ABSTRACTS*

September 16-17, 2016

Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

economically motivated, environment and climate related factors do play a significant role in migration dynamics. Indeed, economic push factors of migration often have strong but hidden environmental causes. The high economic dependency on few economic activities such as agriculture and animal husbandry increases the population's vulnerability to environmental changes and shocks. In order to cope with environmental problems negatively affecting livelihoods, individuals and households often use international and internal labour migration as an adaptation strategy to increase income. This phenomenon entails both negative and positive consequences for rural communities. On the one hand, it allows households to increase their income and provides the youth with new opportunities to gain skills and independence. On the other hand, international labour migration causes an array of social problems in rural communities, such as the "children left behind" phenomenon, progressive depopulation of some areas and entails negative "reverse effects" on the environment.

This research also uncovered a paradox concerning migration decision processes associated with dangerous environmental factors such as landslides, which claim lives almost every year in Kyrgyzstan. Indeed, even though most people living in dangerous locations are well aware of risks and dangers, only a minority decides to migrate to safer areas despite the availability of state assistance to do so. This is mostly due to the widespread perception that areas intended for relocation are less advantageous in terms of livelihood opportunities.

## **Authoritarian legacy, anti-elite discourses and the formation of anti-mining resistance in Talas province, Kyrgyzstan**

*Asel Doolotkeldieva (Manas University, Kyrgyzstan)*

In the past decade, social mobilizations in the field of extractive industry became widespread in Kyrgyzstan despite their largely early stage of exploration and thus the limited damage done on environment and local livelihoods. Current approaches such as resource nationalism, actor-network analysis, and class-based thesis contribute partly to the explanation of on-going resistance towards mining projects. To these useful approaches I would like to add another dimension, the one of authoritarian legacy, that sets up conditions for resistance even towards projects that are currently in the explorative phase. Drawing on the ethnographic material collected in Talas province between 2010 and 2015, I propose that much of the resistance is pre-structured on the basis of lived experience of authoritarian politics that has promoted unethical and non-transparent business in the past. Precisely under the Bakiev regime, some foreign investors have adopted an elite-centred local politics, which advantaged only the local bosses and gave consequently rise to strong anti-elite sentiments among the residents of affected areas. This authoritarian legacy continues informing today open and latent resistance of those residents whose habitats and immediate economic activities are put under jeopardy by mining projects even in the early explorative phase.

## **Environment, climate change and migration in the Kyrgyz republic**

*Damira Umetbaeva (AUCA, Kyrgyzstan)*

This paper will present findings of one-year long research project that studied complex interactions between the environment, climate change and migration in the Kyrgyz Republic. This research has demonstrated that sudden-onset natural disasters such as landslides and floods, as well as progressive phenomena such as land degradation and water stress, do affect migration decisions at the individual and household levels, whether by forcing people to move because of danger and destructions, or by slowly enticing them to do so due to negative impacts on livelihoods and subsistence strategies.

Thus, even though migration in Kyrgyzstan remains mostly

## **Keynote speech: Thinking about nature/s, glaciers, tropes, and the everyday: reading the politics of contestation in Kyrgyzstan**

*Amanda Wooden (Bucknell University, US)*

This talk explores the ways scholars writing about Central Asia and elsewhere are thinking about nature as plural, complex, and social. In order to understand these relationships more, Prof. Wooden will look at cases primarily in Kyrgyzstan and focus on popular discourses, with some reference to other situations and events elsewhere in Central Asia and North America. Specifically, Prof. Wooden will explore changing meanings of glaciers in Kyrgyzstan and related meaning making of nations and patriotism. She will dissect tropes and labels some journalists, government officials, industry representatives, and activists use about each other. Neither these narratives nor the socio-environments are static. Thus Prof. Wooden will investigate changing perceptions and narratives used by these same actors, what we might call learning and adaptation processes, and overall dynamism of environmental politics and meanings of nature in Kyrgyzstan. In addition, she will discuss how studies of everyday experiences in Central Asia and the average community member's daily relationships with and within nature/s, reveal not only what life is like, but also provide insight into what issues become recognized as political at the national level. In addition to traditional sites of contestation, such as street protests or formal parliamentary disputes, much can be revealed about social understandings of nature, environmental concerns, emotional attachments to community and nation, by investigating places where we might expect social mobilization and it seems absent. This warrants attention to non-protests, to silence, to every day and quiet resistances.

## **Understanding biodiversity in Kyrgyzstan: descriptive and normative aspects**

*Elena Popa, James Plumtree (AUCA, Kyrgyzstan)*

Connecting current debates in the philosophy of ecology to biodiversity research in Kyrgyzstan, this paper analyzes how biodiversity is defined differently in ecology and economics, and explores how central presuppositions of these disciplines are reflected in understanding biodiversity.

Relevant in the delimitation between economics and ecology is the distinction between descriptive and normative aspects. Given the widespread assumption that science is descriptive and value-neutral, ecology would not involve normative aspects such as questions of ethics. Norton (2011) pointed out that often such concerns are left to economists and ethicists. A crucial aspect of this distinction involves the presence of the human subject: descriptions of phenomena or natural systems are ideally independent from the experimenter's point of view, while norms are not observable in nature, being part of the subject's reflection. With certain caveats, as such, defining biodiversity can involve the ecological system being viewed as a relation between species (descriptive), or a broader view on resources measurable under a benefit/cost analysis (normative).

This framework is vital for addressing contemporary understandings of biodiversity in Kyrgyzstan. A study on public perception of biodiversity in walnut forests (Jalilova & Vacik, 2012) noted that the most common view of biodiversity was as being 'diversity of living organisms and their interactions with each other', the second being "a natural wealth providing everything necessary for people's lives". The former view, shared by respondents with higher levels of education, fits the 1992 Rio convention definition of biodiversity that the authors described as a 'western concept of biodiversity'; the latter, we note, displays an assimilation of economic interpretation. This is, we claim, a split between the descriptive and the normative. The normative, economics-oriented view on biodiversity involves the human subject's needs and their relation to natural systems.

We further hold that this division in popular understanding of biodiversity in Kyrgyzstan reflects the gap between the two fields. While Jalilova and Vacik imply historical background and experience to be the reason for this split, there may be more to the issue than merely striving towards a common understanding of biodiversity (problematically labeled 'western'). Since ecology and economics are defined by the absence and, respectively, presence of human perspective, an important issue is integrating normative aspects into the understanding of biodiversity. Consequently, any contesting nature in Central Asia will require a considered delimiting between these values (some of which cannot be subject to economic valuation), and inquiry into the extent to which such values should be subsumed to economics or to other fields making normative claims.

## **Lay perceptions of ecological and health risk in post-Soviet mono-industrial Temirtau**

*Xeniya Prilutskaya (Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan)*

Temirtau is a mono-industrial post-Soviet city in Central Kazakhstan. Its large steel mill has caused serious environmental pollution for several decades already. This paper focuses on how residents of Temirtau think about and deal with environmental and health risk and what historical background these processes might have.

Based on the analysis of the media discourses on environmental problems and industrial risks in Temirtau starting from the 1980s until the late 1990s, I argue that although Temirtau has not experienced natural or anthropogenic disaster such as those witnessed in Chernobyl or Fukushima, nevertheless Temirtau residents experienced a breakdown in public trust over the period from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. This breach of trust was connected with Perestroika and Glasnost. However, this breakdown in Temirtau manifested itself not only in the rise of environmental activism, but also in a process by which there was rethinking of ecological knowledge and expertise. Residents gradually came to understand that the knowledge on environmental risk and measures to reduce it that residents possessed so far was inadequate. I argue as well that after the period of breakdown in trust laypeople had to find a way of coping with the remaining problems while having less than ever hope and trust that the city can handle environmental problems. Some people left Temirtau, though it was not only because of the ecology, but also due to economic decline. Residents who stayed had to develop strategies how to live with the new perceptions of ecological risk in a situation where ecological problems became evident and could not be concealed and explained as potentially easy solvable any more.

This paper is based on MA research data gathered in qualitative interviews with factory workers, inhabitants of workers' neighbourhoods in Temirtau and ecology specialists. I tried to diversify the range of opinions by taking a variegated sample, including respondents from different social, ethnic, educational and age groups. I also tried to combine anthropological methods of interviewing with the historical method of content analysis of newspaper articles.

down from a global to a local scale, and whether this is changing local perceptions of natural landscape. Based in the multidimensional discipline of political ecology I will make use of the concepts of ideology, discourse and cultural hegemony in order to analyze and discuss the cultural transmission of ideas, values, and perceptions from a macro level down to a micro level.

Based on field research in the Issyk Kul region, the essay explores how tourism influence local perceptions of natural landscape. A comparative analysis of two villages, one where the tourism is in its infancy and one where tourism is more developed, is be carried out to investigate the questions raised above.

### **Waste and Environment in Bishkek**

*Zheenbek Kulenbekov, Eldiyar Mirlanov (AUCA, Kyrgyzstan)*

The environment is an integral part of social life, and environment itself is to be considered the main system in which all social activities are to be observed. This presentation focuses on Bishkek residents' and Tazalyk's (municipal garbage service's) relationship to waste, and on what types of policies are made -- or to be made -- to make waste and its management better. The attitude of people to waste disposal is controversial. In media and other discussions Bishkek residents are criticized for their "unwillingness to dispose waste properly," for leaving it near the disposal areas or for their inability to even put waste in the proper places. Bishkek residents pay 22 som (approximately \$0.3) per month and companies pay 225 som (approximately \$3.2) for the work of the Tazalyk department. In comparison to other post-Soviet Central Asian countries the aforementioned prices are the minimal for the services provided and such a price policy does not cover the expenses of Tazalyk. Moreover, out of 1,3 million residents only 600,000 people (which is less than half of population) are actually paying the aforementioned taxes. This is an indicator of the relationship of residents towards the cleanliness of their city and the problems faced by the department that has to collect the waste. Based on this and other examples we argue that solid waste management in Kyrgyzstan is uncontrolled and inadequate and that notwithstanding the attempts to improve solid waste management, the irresponsible attitude of Bishkek residents towards both solid waste and the environment their city remains the main challenge.

### **Ideological and national myths in the discourse on sustainability of the commons (CPRs) in Norway and Kyrgyzstan**

*Natalya Khokholova (AUCA, Kyrgyzstan)*

This paper explores the way the State's ideological and national myths together with institutional practices shape, influence, and, at times, challenge the discourse around people's everyday habits and attitudes towards the *commons* (CPRs), towards the whole biosphere including man himself. By now, there have been tangible developments in building a dense and seemingly comprehensive scholarship attributed to the subject of biodiversity and nature conservation policy-making, as a part of economic solution strategies to improve the existent situation in the modern day Kyrgyzstan. However, one publication after another reveals an interdisciplinary self-sabotaging pattern of working with the hard facts, (which are often dated and often irrelevant to the subject matter), but almost always slipping into the post-imperialist sublime lyricism of neoromantic sentiments and ethnographical descriptive practices of Kyrgyzstan's social groups and living customs and conditions. Therefore, this particular research focuses solely on the mythmaking around the commons and collectively shared space of biosphere (nature and man) in Norway and Kyrgyzstan, in order to boost self-educational aspect of the new national self-image development within the framework of sustainability as a part of social hygiene, a new pathway to the quality of life.

I am going to be using as a case study, on the one hand, the post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan and institutionalized Soviet practice of collectivization, and on the other hand, in juxtaposition Norway, and its cultural phenomenon known as 'allemansretten,' 'everyone's right to roam.' This research endeavors to pose and answer the following questions: How myth-making, both political and primordial, is ideologically designed in the discourses attributive to the subject of sustainability? And how it shapes the perception of oneself in relation to nature and culture? Can the Soviet "collectivist" past remains to be only a negative residue, after all, in regards to the new awakening environmentally charged consciousness in the modern-day Kyrgyzstan? And how its socialism-driven foundation is similar to the communities-centered doctrines of Norwegian practice *allemansretten*? The theoretical framework of this paper is based on the socio-political models developed by Elinor Ostrom in *Governing the*

Commons (1990), *The Quality of Life: A Study Prepared for the World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER) of the United Nations University* (2005) edited by Martha Nussbaum, and Jurgen Habermas' *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981). This research should encourage developing both scholarly and public awareness of environmental hygiene and sustainable development, as a part of public educational movement, including teaching, research, operations and outreach programs in Kyrgyzstan.

### **The highland Naryn river: an absent presence?**

*Jeanne Féaux de la Croix (University of Tuebingen)*

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Naryn province and Naryn town, on the Naryn river. It outlines the role of the river as a dangerous boundary and crossing point on historic trade routes, as well as reflecting on the river as an 'absent presence'. While dominating the valley over the course of 300 kilometres, the topographic relief allows for little direct use of the river e.g. for irrigation or extracting drinking water. My findings reveal that while the small rivers intakes of the river are vital to people's livelihoods, the Naryn river itself is viewed mainly as a potential source of hydropower, and its flow viewed as 'wasted' if it reaches users downriver. Drawing on these findings, I reflect on the fit of emic river concepts with analytical concepts such as waterscape, environmental system and water basin, and find a surprisingly strong 'resource-orientation' in thinking about and using water among Naryn valley residents.

### **Mysterious and abundant: many meanings of the river in northern Tajikistan**

*Mobira Suyarkulova (AUCA, Kyrgyzstan)*

This paper presents preliminary fieldwork findings regarding the many meanings of the river for various actors in Khujand city and Sughd province of Tajikistan. Most Khujandis see the river that flows through their city as 'mysterious' ('sir' meaning 'a mystery'), seemingly quiet waters that flow slowly yet harbour hidden currents, its bed overgrown with weeds that scare a careless swimmer, while the sudden rush of icy waters paralyses them as whirlpools draw them to the bottom. Old legends talk of Sirdarya's waters as harbouring unknown monsters, requiring human sacrifices. Sughd

political effects, on both the social distribution of resources and the environment.

### **The meaning of mountains: perceptions of nature as a tourism resource in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan**

*Anne Gry G. Sturod (University College of Southeast Norway)*

The United Nations has announced 2017 the year of sustainable tourism for development. Tourism as a development strategy is not new, however. Tourism has been promoted by governments, donors and international organisations as a possible pathway towards increasing foreign investment and poverty alleviation since the 1980s. Many poor countries, with few other means to develop, see tourism as a priority area of which to attract revenues.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Kyrgyz republic in Central Asia was left as one of the poorest countries in the world. With few other natural resources than water, the country had, limited opportunities of economic growth. At the same time, Kyrgyzstan is blessed with a breath taking nature, constituting more than 90% mountains. Nature based tourism was hence promoted as one of the potential sources of income and many western donor-led projects were initiated to encourage tourism.

During the Soviet period, nomads and nomadic culture were seen as backward by the ruling elite in Moscow. Thousands of nomads in the Central Asian region was forcefully settled in collective farms. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, however, the nature and nomadic culture is back on the forefront of Kyrgyzstans image. Beautiful nature and the Kyrgyz culture harmony with nature has become part of the national (outward) identity, an identity which tends to bring more and more tourist to Kyrgyzstan each year. Today Kyrgyzstan is held to be one of the upcoming travel destinations, prized in international glossy magazines for its "pristine nature" and "celestial mountains" and "majestic landscape"

The main question of the paper is how perceptions of nature and landscapes, and particular that of mountain landscape, are shaped by culture. By focusing on post-independent Kyrgyzstan the paper will explore if the transition from socialism to market economy has lead to a new valuation of nature. Finally, the paper will look into whether western discourses of natural landscape as a tourism resource, trickles

the artistic practice into an ideological weapon. It was simply impossible for Kyrgyz artists to create outside the frame of the dominant doctrine. The only direction to stream their creative energy was into neutral themes, such as the depiction of nature and spectacular mountainous scenery. The result was the creation of the most wonderful landscape masterpieces and development of the unique Kyrgyz painting tradition characterized by a bright yet very harmonic color palette.

1991 brought great changes to Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan became independent republic after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Changes came on all fronts: economy, social structure, culture and arts. In the context of a broken poverty, arts from politicized became commercialized. Kyrgyzstan opened its borders to tourists who travel to see the beauty of Tyan-Shan. Not surprisingly, there is a revived interest in the traditional decorative arts that can be sold as souvenirs and in the painting of mountainous sceneries, which distinguishes Kyrgyz painting tradition among other central Asian artists.

Nature and mountains of Kyrgyzstan always were and still remain the major inspiration for Kyrgyz artists of all generations. In this presentation I examine how natural forms and sceneries were reflected in the traditional decorative arts of Pre-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, in the paintings of the Soviet Kyrgyz artists, and in the works of contemporary artists after independence.

### **Discourses on nature: spaces, legacies and cultural heritage among Kyrgyz pastoralists at Song Kul Lake**

*Ruslan Rakhimov (AUCA, Kyrgyzstan)*

In this presentation, I intend to analyze the evolution of the concept of “nature” among Kyrgyz users of the Song Kul Lake where pastoralism, nature preservation and tourism are practiced simultaneously. Tourism in post-soviet Kyrgyzstan has a debatable space not only as economic issue at national level but also as a symbolic one at local level. I am interested in how these symbolic and economic “space(s)” correlate with local perceptions and practices? To what extent is the Soviet legacy playing a role? And what role do both pastoral practices and symbolism play? Given recent conflicts arising from mining projects that would use and pollute water and pastures on a large scale, I will also analyze government conceptions of socio-environmental relations, their contradictions and their

region’s many suicides choose untimely death in Syrdarya’s ruthless waters. The reeds along the river banks are seen as unsightly, a breeding ground for malaria bearing mosquitos. Yet, the very same reeds and marshes along the river create a site of abundance (‘ser’ meaning ‘plentiful’) for fishers and hunters. Tajik state authorities, farmers as well as international organisations also see this transboundary river both as a resource for agriculture and hydropower, yet simultaneously as a source of conflict and division.

### **Поверья населения Ферганской долины, связанные с водой**

*Adham Ashirov (Institute of History, Uzbekistan)*

Древние народы Ферганской долины веровали в «водного бога» и называли его «Эр Хубби». Когда воды было мало, или во времена паводков люди молились водному богу, приносили жертвы в его честь. Это мифический образ был известен в Хорезме под названием «Хубби».

Согласно поверьям узбеков Ферганы, вода и другие элементы могли делиться по половому признаку, как сами люди. Так, «ак сув» — «белая вода» считалась мужчиной, а «кара сув» — «черная вода» — женщиной. Также во многих районах долины «белой водой» называют горную воду, а «черной водой» — воду от дождей и снега.

Согласно традициям, распространенным среди местного населения, бесполезная трата, загрязнение воды, бросание в воду мусора и отходов считается большим грехом. Кроме того, вода считалась символом силы, поэтому местное население верило, что пьющий воду человек исполняется силой.

В общем, в Ферганской долине вода считалась не только средством утоления жажды людей, животных и растений, но почиталась также как средство исцеления. То обстоятельство, что вода являлась символом чистоты и живой силы, способствовали формированию положительного отношения по отношению к нему среди населения, а также развитию среди людей экологической культуры.

## **Syr – tirishilikтин kōzi: Syrdarya as the source of livelihoods in the river delta**

*Aibek Samakov (University of Tuebingen, Germany)*

Based on ethnographic research in Syrdarya delta (namely, Kazaly and Aral districts of Kyzylorda, Kazakhstan), I claim that locals mostly view and engage with the river as a main source of their livelihoods. This interaction is not limited to just the river bed but rather includes a ramified network of ‘natural’ and ‘technological’ elements that stem from the river such as dams and dikes, canals, ditches and pumps, lakes fed by those canals and pastures, which are flooded in spring and fall. Local livelihoods include herding (cattle, sheep and goats, horses and camels), gardening (bakchalyk), fishing and reed harvesting. I claim that these livelihoods are river-dependent and that they are mostly run as common pool resources (aka commons). I am observing how people here share, negotiate the use of and manage those commons.

## **Naryn in the lower gorge: pre-dam stormy and post-dam pacified river**

*Gulzat Baialieva (University of Tuebingen, Germany)*

This research presents the fieldwork findings on how the "wild" Naryn river and its environment has been changed due to the Soviet hydroenergy policies in 1950s. Damming and hydropower projects industrialized the river which, therefore, bore a new town with accompanied kolkhoz and sovkhoz. Experiencing Soviet and post-Soviet envirotechnical regimes, the river accommodates industries and alters environment. Following the typical Soviet characterization of Naryn, people still describe it as capricious, fierce river to be tamed and exploited. Looking closer at cultural and political performances, pre-industrial and post-industrial Naryn is not just a commodity but a power with various symbols. Naryn connotes death and life, work and recreation, entails spiritual and economic means. Utilizing conception of Pritchard of nature being technological and vice versa, an attempt will be made to demonstrate interaction of the triad: lower Naryn, Uch-Kurgan GES and the residents (particularly first comers as dam workers).

## **Perception of the natural environment by nomads of the Eurasian steppes in the Early Iron Age**

*Karina Iwe (University of Tuebingen, Germany)*

Within nomadic societies of the Iron Age in Central Asia we can identify an intensive interaction between human societies and their environments. I would like to present archaeological material of the 9<sup>th</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC.

The emergence of nomadic horse-riders was accompanied by the appearance of a specific art style which dominated the Eurasian steppe belt for about 600 years. Nomadic life of Scythian horse-riders engendered a very intense perception of the natural surroundings. The Animal Style is, so to speak, its non-written document – a document of the interaction between nature/perceived environment and society. It reflects shared ideas of the human mind and the relationship between the individual, society and landscapes. How people have adapted to their environment? What effect did it have on their art and, furthermore, on their motifs which were preserved on different kind of materials? What can we infer about the society, modes of thinking, and beliefs by investigating art of the Scythian period?

## **Mountains in the visual arts of Kyrgyzstan**

*Emil Nasritdinov (AUCA, Kyrgyzstan)*

In the course of their history, Kyrgyz people experienced a variety of cultural influences: by ancient Skythians and Saks, by Karakhanids and Uighurs, by Mongols and Timurids, by Uzbek Khanates and Tsarist Russia, by Soviets and contemporary Western culture. But perhaps, the most serious changes in Kyrgyz culture took place during the Soviet rule, which lasted for seventy years from 1920-s to 1990-s and left very prominent imprint on the lifestyle and culture of Kyrgyzstan. From the very first years of ruling, Soviets aimed at the transformation of Kyrgyz cultural traditions. They introduced ‘new’ arts, such as painting, sculpture, opera, ballet, drama. This could be seen as positive because it gave Kyrgyz creative minds new medium for artistic expression. However, the new arts were strongly affected by the Communist ideology and were highly politicized. Soviet leaders – through very brutal methods, by killing, jailing, and repressing thousands and thousands of Kyrgyz intelligentsia – turned