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Application for CASI Research Grant

Research Project:

Discourses on “Nature”: space, local dynamics and national reserves

In the proposed research I intend to investigate and analyze the evolution of the concept of “Nature” (*Jaratylysh*) in the public discourses of Kyrgyzstan. In post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan “Nature” has been quite a controversial and debatable issue not only as environmental or political matter at the national level but also as a symbolic issue on the local level. On one hand, people have special attachments to the land and pastures, marked as a part of their cultural heritage; while “development” threatens ecology and livelihoods of the households. On the other hand, local communities are often demanding economic benefits and expecting considerable incomes from the same land, in these case-pastures of Song-kul Lake.

This research will be based on a case-study of the natural reserve. My evidence will be collected in the Karatal-Japyryk State Natural Reserve (mostly part of Son-Kul lake) and the surrounding administrative districts (Kochkor and others). These are potential sites to understand interactions of social discourses, dynamics in local economy and pastoral practices.

Along with pastures, national reserve is another case of social interactions and spatial usage, which can also reveal Soviet impact on linkages of nature and society.

In this research project I will try to answer the following questions: How these natural and “economic space(s)” correlate with local perceptions and practices? To what extent does a Soviet legacy of environmental attitude still matter? What is the local dynamics of the interaction between pastoral practices and symbolic ones?

Given recent conflicts arising from both mining and tourism projects that use and pollute water and pastures on a large scale, I will also analyze government conceptions of socio-environmental relations, their contradictions and their consequences for both the social distribution of resources and the environment.

Finally, I am interested in the collection of oral stories on pastoral practices and the change of pastoral itineraries concerning the Song-Kul lake.

Research methods will include in-depth interviews to understand discourses, and surveys to understand local opinions and map the spatial practices. I intend to map households from Kochkor and Jungal sides around Song-Kul lake to understand the regional dynamics, in terms of increase of households, relatedness to tourism and also awareness about environmental values and practices.