



## Original article

## Confrontation, coexistence or co-ignorance? Negotiating human-resource relations in two Russian regions

Florian Stammler<sup>a,\*</sup>, Aitalina Ivanova<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, PL 122, 96101 Rovaniemi, Finland<sup>b</sup> Faculty of Law, North Eastern Federal University, Ul Belinskogo 58, 677000 Yakutsk, Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), Russia

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## ABSTRACT

This contribution analyses relations between people and resources according to two principal logics which we identified during fieldwork in the Russian Arctic and sub-Arctic: the utilitarian logic standing for the idea that humans own, control and exploit the land, and the partnership logic standing for humans living as part of the land in a reciprocal relationship. We investigate the encounter of these two in the Russian industrialised North. In all cases we see people agree that the utilitarian logic prevails. The partnership logic can exist safely only in a narrowly circumscribed niche. State law governs this niche, based on the utilitarian assumption that resources have to be useful for human society. Drawing on data from Kamchatka and the Nenets Autonomous Okrug, we identify three scenarios of the encounter between those two logics in people-resource relations: confrontation, coexistence and co-ignorance. We analyse under which conditions this encounter assumes which form. We conclude that a partnership approach to land and resources can only survive as a marginal island in a world dominated by an extractivist mindset, but that indigenous people can preserve a niche for their partnership approach if they internalise the utilitarian logic, acknowledge its dominance and learn to play the extractivist game.

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## 1. Introduction

Any human existence on this planet relies on the use of the resources of the land. Relations between people and the land can be characterised as opposed between two logics, the utilitarian logic standing for the idea that humans own and control the land and extract resources from it<sup>1</sup>, and the partnership logic standing for humans living as part of the land among all other beings. States and industrial companies apply the first logic granting superiority to humans in deciding about the human benefits of a given land use type. This approach is prominently mentioned as a principle of human existence even in the bible (Genesis), followed by enlightenment philosophy, granting only to humans what Kant called “higher reason” (Kant, 1838), and later developed further with the Victorian belief in human superiority over nature (Rose, 1999). It was that same utilitarian approach that in the Soviet Union became specifically relevant for the Arctic, the resources of which were considered void of meaning and useless, unless man

opened them up, subdued and conquered nature for the benefit of the Soviet people (Bolotova, 2012). This utilitarian approach to land and the resources beneath the land prevails today worldwide, and is most recently described with the term extractivism (Acosta, 2013). In this utilitarian extractivist context, ownership gives entitlement to the resource.

Indigenous people, on the other hand, claim to embrace the partnership logic. The environment is considered as a total social fact (Mauss, 2002 [1924]), each element of which is animate (has a soul) (Vitebsky, 2005). From that follows that human relations with each element in their environment bear a social character. As all elements in the environment are animate, all relations among them are social. Rather than economic income from the resource, what is important in that relationship is the process, practice, experience and ways in which an action is carried out and its effects on the totality of other beings on the land. We see this approach present in ethnographic records among almost all Arctic indigenous cultures, and most prominently theorised by Ingold (2000) in his “dwelling perspective” of the “human-agent-in-an-environment” (2000:171). In this approach, as Anderson pointed out (1998), knowing (rather than owning) brings the entitlement to the resource.

This contribution analyses how these two logics interact in two northern Russian regions with resource extraction. The idea that local people may have enough power to accept or deny resource development carried out by external actors looks unrealistic to

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [fstammler@ulapland.fi](mailto:fstammler@ulapland.fi) (F. Stammler), [ivanovaaytalina@mail.ru](mailto:ivanovaaytalina@mail.ru) (A. Ivanova).<sup>1</sup> Nadasdy (2007: 223) calls this the context of management efforts. We see the foundation of this in what we call the utilitarian logic.

local people in our two field sites of Kamchatka (Russian Far North East) and the Nenets Autonomous Okrug (Russian North West, NAO hereafter). In both cases we see people accept that the utilitarian logic prevails, even if they acknowledge that it is not what their own worldview was based on originally. Based on our fieldwork, on ethnographic and legal analysis from Kamchatka and NAO, we show three scenarios of the encounter of the utilitarian and the partnership logic in land resource relations:

- 1) confrontation between indigenous people, the authorities and the large-scale fishing industry in Kamchatka,
- 2) coexistence between reindeer herders, the authorities and the large-scale oil industry in the NAO, and
- 3) co-ignorance among reindeer herders, the mining industry and the authorities in Kamchatka.

In this article we illustrate the main traits of character of these three scenarios. We identify five key factors that determine to which of these scenarios the meeting of the utilitarian and the partnership approach will lead. In doing so, we suggest a general analytical framework for characterising the relations between the crucial groups of actors (industry, authorities and indigenous peoples) in today's extractive industrial landscape in the North.

From these three scenarios we conclude that indigenous ways of living with the land have a chance only when people accept the niche that is assigned to them by the dominant actor, the state. With this, they need to agree terms and conditions stipulated by law, which follows the utilitarian logic that resources have to be useful for the majority of human society rather than considering indigenous partnership relations to the land. Thus the partnership logic in people-resource relations can only exist safely in this narrowly circumscribed niche.

## 2. Resource rights pluralism and negotiations: theory

Resource, as the word suggests, can be broadly defined as a source of life, what we live off. When we analyse relations between people and resources, we consider that regardless of where the resources are, using them establishes a human-environment relation. Resource use, resource extraction is always part of the bigger picture of our human-environment relation.

In order to use a resource, humans need to know it, and make it available for consumption. In the case of most resources, the process of making a resource available is called extraction. This is most typical for sub-surface non-renewable resources such as oil, gas, and minerals. However, we suggest extending the idea of extraction and include renewable resources such as fish, to which we shall refer in one of our case studies. With such a definition of resource extraction, what is then the difference between the dominant utilitarian approach to the resource and the partnership approach that our indigenous friends tell us is the base of their livelihood?

First, we acknowledge that dividing humankind into exploiters and partners of the surrounding environment bears the danger of simplification. We know that one does not have to be indigenous and live a subsistence way of life to embrace such a partnership approach. The approach has also become popular in contemporary environmental philosophy (Heyd (ed) 2005: 7–8). Merchant (2003) has explicitly suggested what she calls a “partnership ethic” between human beings and nonhuman nature as a possible underlying principle for human-environment relations. Nor do we fall victim to the idea of the noble savage, of arguing that just by being indigenous, people live *per se* in harmony with nature. The reason why we use this dual concept of utilitarian versus partnership approach—apart from clarifying our arguments—is that this dichotomy is discussed very animatedly among indigenous practitioners and activists alike in the regions that we have

studied for this article—Kamchatka and the Nenets Autonomous Okrug in Russia. What we call the partnership approach is subsumed under the legal category of the ‘traditional way of life’<sup>2</sup>, as stipulated in the main framework law “on the guarantees of rights of indigenous peoples of the North” (Zakon 82-FZ, 1999).

Having established this, we explicitly state that even in a partnership approach to the resources and the land, extraction is happening, as we shall show on the example of fishermen and reindeer herders. However, the main difference is that the utilitarian approach to the resource follows an extractivist logic only, with the explicit goal of extraction being the creation of commercial surplus. In the partnership case, the extraction of a resource—e.g., plants as feed for reindeer, which in turn are consumed by humans, or fish as food for humans—is embedded in a relationship that is not only reciprocal, but also interdependent with the total social environment. There, humans alongside all other components are animate and the borders between the human and the non-human world are blurred (Willerslev, 2007; Helander-Renvall 2010).

What happens if indigenous livelihoods centring on flexible practices and processes on the land and their cyclical worldview are pressed into laws made with an utilitarian logic? Among many indigenous peoples in the Arctic, defending the land (or water body) as an economic resource is something that they have had to learn only with the advent of colonisers or large-scale industry (Stammer, 2005a). However, the reality of global resource extractivism is so omnipresent that there is hardly any place left on the planet where people would be able to practice their reciprocal relationship with the land in isolation. Moreover, all places where indigenous peoples live today, in the Arctic and elsewhere, are part of larger nation states, where the economy and the state budget depend on the income from resources extracted, which in turn leads to an exploitative surplus-accumulating approach. Indigenous practitioners therefore always face the challenge of finding a niche for their partnership approach within the surrounding dominant utilitarian worldview.

Paul Nadasdy (2003a,b, 2007, 2011) has shown using examples from the Yukon (Canada) that it is very difficult, if not impossible to make the worldviews of indigenous peoples compatible with the approach of the state to the environment and its resources. This becomes obvious in co-management negotiations and land claim settlements involving indigenous peoples and the state in Canada. Nadasdy's main argument (2003a,b) is that indigenous peoples in land claims negotiations have to learn, or adopt the Euro-Canadian approach to land and resources, factually distancing themselves from their own worldview in order to achieve a good deal with the dominant power. Correspondingly, all the beautiful talk about partnership, co-management and indigenous rights still leads to subordination of the indigenous worldview to what Nadasdy terms the dominant ‘western managerial context’. The result of such negotiations and co-management regimes is that indigenous peoples have to accept a niche for their own livelihood granted by the superior agent (the state or industry).

These agents base their utilitarian approach on the idea of scientific knowledge, which Nadasdy (2011) shows is an entirely different way of knowing from the perception of the resource among indigenous peoples. Using such knowledge, they approach resources as something to be extracted and managed, rather than something to partner and interact with. Nadasdy argues (2011: 132) that the “application of scientific knowledge entails the production and imposition of one nature/society and the erasure of others”. In our confrontation case study outlined below, the state and the extractive fishing industry impose the utilitarian surplus-

<sup>2</sup> *traditsionnyi obraz zhizni*.

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