



## Mapping an emotional topography of an ecological homeland: The case of Sakhalin Island, Russia



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### ABSTRACT

Attachment to local environments occurs worldwide, but especially where people use natural resources for everyday survival. On sub-arctic Sakhalin Island, Russia, subsistence and semi-subsistence resource use are increasingly important for many local and indigenous people since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. These people continue to struggle through socioeconomic, political and environmental transformation with minimal aid from the federal center while transnational hydrocarbon extraction in Sakhalin's offshore regions has transformed on- and offshore environments valued by the people of Sakhalin since the mid-1990s. Here, I explore and analyze narratives about emotions expressed about ecologies and resources from indigenous (Nivkh, Evenk) and local viewpoints. Through constant invocation and imagination of Sakhalin's ecological setting as an all-providing, nurturing environment by indigenous and local peoples, negative emotions are attached to current ecological transformation. Here, I argue that the concept of homeland – often explored culturally and politically in local contexts – must expand to include ecological aspects. Long-term subsistence use of Sakhalin's resources gives rise to understandings of the island as an ecological homeland with a specific emotional topography that can be mapped cognitively, providing new conceptualizations of emotional, ecological topographies.

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### 1. Introduction

Geographers concerned with understanding natural resources in different ecological settings inquire about social and ecological aspects of resource quality, access, and use, especially when conflicts in resource use and extraction exist (e.g., [Bebbington, 2009](#); [Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987](#); [Peet and Watts, 2004](#); [Robbins, 2004](#)). Increasingly, such inquiry focuses on the human experiences of multiscale resource use, especially where multiple kinds of resources, such as industrial-scale minerals and subsistence-level foods, are harvested in one place, but used among different peoples (see [Paulson and Gezon, 2005](#)).

Close analysis of these studies, however, shows that a neglected dimension of inquiry into resource use concerns the emotions we prescribe to ecologies and resources ([Sultana, 2011](#) is an exception). Current engagement with emotions across disciplines opens new spaces for considering the emotional geographies associated with ecologies and natural resources. If we understand that part of the human experience is lived through emotions, but within natural environments, then emotions about our ecological settings matter,

because they are “an intractable and intangible aspect of all of our everyday lives” ([Davidson and Bondi, 2004: 373](#)) and inform how we feel, think and act in our environments.

Where those inhabiting subsistence economies are concerned complex emotional geographies exist regarding natural resource access, use and conflict that are important to heed if we are to “understand the emotionality of the resources that exist in everyday struggles” ([Sultana, 2011: 163](#)). This is especially poignant when considering critical, or necessary, resources, such as food and water. Milton insightfully acknowledges “feelings are the prime motivators of human activity,” (2002: 3) and research into emotions about ecology and critical resources is crucial now that environments are changing more rapidly for subsistence users than ever before due to globalized(ing) production and consumption, rapid urbanization and the threat of anthropogenic climate change.

If emotions “affect the way we see...the substance of our past, present and future” ([Davidson and Bondi, 2004: 373](#)), then they must also affect how we move through and use places, our environments. Being *in* a place provides the ability to know or have a sense of that place, and knowledge and emotions about place are the “ingredients” of perception about places ([Casey, 2009](#)). Being *of* a place constitutes local knowledge about cultural and environment and lived experience provides embodied context for perceptions in and of places. Indeed, phenomenological

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geographers argue that we know the world through perception and practical, lived experience. By knowing places and creating a sense of attachment, or bond, to them we can constitute place as a “field of care” for individuals or communities (Tuan, 1990; Relph, 1976). Thus, being human can mean, as Cresswell (2004) notes, being ‘in place’, and to be in place can also mean to be ‘attached’ or ‘rooted’.

Becoming sensitive to the multiple emotions expressed in and about ecological settings, particularly regarding critical resources, places emotions at the center of understanding people’s motivations to think about and use nature and resources in particular ways. Sensitivity heightens our ability as scholars to understand the spatiality of emotions about places and environments, perhaps also leading to greater understanding of identity formation alongside the production of place as territory (see Storey, 2012). As ecological places themselves change (e.g., due to resource development) and as people move between old and new landscapes, perceptions and knowledges of place transform, potentially creating new perceptions and emotions attached to places, ecological systems and natural resources.

Emotional ecological geographies work within and among individuals and communities to create topographies linking people with the biophysical world. Emotional ecological topographies are thus structures of feeling through which we respond to other species and inanimate objects. Emotional contact with animate and inanimate objects “creates the very surfaces and boundaries that allow all kinds of objects to be delineated” (Ahmed, 2004: 10). Additionally, because emotions circulate through objects, such as environmental sites or specific resources (e.g., salmon fishing grounds), ecological spaces become “sticky” or “saturated” sites of personal and social tension (11). Movement of emotions through the environment – and reaction to those emotions – teaches us about how people are attached to and use places or resources. That is important to understand because “what moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place” (11). Attention to how emotions are formed and expressed through words and actions illuminates how people become invested in particular places, creating emotional ecological topographies.

Bringing emotional geographies together with nature-society studies becomes critical to better understand how emotions inform (re)actions in actual ecological places. In doing so, we may gain more insight into how resource users engage with and transform their environments socially and ecologically, understanding that “emotive realities have direct bearing on how resources are accessed, used and fought over” (Sultana, 2011: 163). Additionally, when ecological and resource regions become contested terrains (e.g., due to competition in specific places among different people over access to different resources), place is important in the production of ideas about homelands by creating nationalistic emotions about ecology and resources. As indigenous and more recent communities engage to protect ecology or resources associated with specific sites, the imagining of nations and homelands may convert spaces into places (Storey, 2012; Taylor, 1999). By asserting attachment and rootedness to specific ecologies and resources, identities and ecological homelands may become territorialized. This may be perceived as a way to alleviate the threat of the globalization by creating the opportunity to resist the “hypermobility of flexible capitalism” (Cresswell, 2004: 27) as, for example, resources are sought and developed by transnational actors.

This paper aims to show how emotions about ecology and resources are conceptualized and represented by people living in one hydrocarbon extraction region, Sakhalin Island, Russia, and how these emotions create specific actions in this ecological homeland. First, I describe Sakhalin’s socioeconomic, cultural and

ecological setting. Second, I explain my methodology, cognitive mapping. Third, I describe emotions related to resource use, discussing the theoretical and practical significance of engaging with emotions about ecology and resources for the field of emotional geography and for understanding the places of nature-society studies. In the discussion, I move beyond descriptions of emotions expressed by participants by establishing greater context for understanding why the emotions most often expressed by individual participants are “important and interesting” (see Pile, 2010: 11). I engage with concepts of emotions about place by considering place as a field of care (Tuan, 1990), as sites of cultural rootedness and practical attachment (Relph, 1976; Cresswell, 2004) and as living and embodied sites for the production of identity(ies) and nationalistic territories (Storey, 2012) related to ecology and resources. I conclude that researching emotions about ecologies and resources matters because they shape perceptions about resource access, quality and longevity, which may shape future availability of, access to and embodied use of resources. Additionally, I address the limitations of this study and pose questions aimed to provoke further inquiry about emotional ecologies and consideration of the term ecological homeland.

## 2. Placing Sakhalin Island

Sakhalin Island is located in the Sea of Okhotsk in Russia’s Far North and East (Fig. 1). Local inhabitants and visitors consider it a *krai mira* (edge of the world) and Sakhalin came under Russian rule only in 1875 (Stephan, 1971), after acquisition from Japan (who mainly operated seasonal coastal fishing camps). At that time, Sakhalin developed as a penal colony for political prisoners, who extracted coal and built its first European-style settlements (Vysokov, 1996). The conditions of the population in political exile from across the Russian Empire is captured in Anton Chekhov’s 1895 book *A Journey to Sakhalin*, where descriptions of the island’s landscapes and people make Sakhalin infamous in Russian literature for its harsh living conditions and “uncivilized” native and penal colony peoples and places.

After the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, the Soviets claimed northern Sakhalin above 50°N; the southern half remained Japanese. The Soviet Union controlled the entire island after 1945. Sovietization of Sakhalin razed entire Japanese villages, and the few Japanese settlers were returned to Japan. Some people native to Sakhalin, mostly Ainu, were also “resettled” on Hokkaido, Japan by Soviet troops (Stephan, 1971). Other native communities across Sakhalin oblast (an administrative territorial unit comprised of Sakhalin Island and the Kurile Islands) of Nivkh, Orok and Evenk were relocated into compact urban-like areas (*mesta kompaktnogo prozhivaniya*) during collectivization (1930s–40s). As elsewhere in Soviet Russia, indigenous children attended boarding schools (*internaat*; Bartels and Bartels, 1995) in the Soviet state’s attempt to weaken cultural and linguistic connections with home communities and strengthen allegiance to the Russian language and Soviet culture (Vakhtin, 1992).

The regional capital, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, was established in 1946 on the southern half of the island. In the Soviet period, Sakhalin oblast became a well-established resource extraction region for fish, coal, and onshore oil. Industries based on forest and fish resources dominated island wide production, and onshore oil extraction prevailed in northern Sakhalin (Stephan, 1994; Vysokov, 1996; Wood and French, 1989). Sakhalin remains a raw resource extraction region in the post-Soviet period, largely known for export of raw forest and fish (namely salmon, salmon roe and scallops; Newell, 2004) and offshore oil and gas materials (Bradshaw, 2003; Murashko and Sulyandziga, 2000; Thornton and Ziegler, 2002).

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