



‘Without fish, there would be nothing here’: Attitudes to salmon and identification with place in a Russian coastal village

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A B S T R A C T

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Postsocialist transformations have changed resource values in many rural parts of Russia. On the Terskii Coast in the northwest of Russia, salmon has become a key resource for people’s everyday survival. Management of this resource used to be heavily controlled by the state during the Soviet period. The situation changed radically after the collapse of Soviet rule, as fishing salmon individually became more easily available. Depending on whether they are local or come from elsewhere, people ascribe different values to local resources. Incomers tend to focus on a commercial meaning of salmon and have a more exploitative attitude to it compared to local people. While also ascribing high commercial value to salmon as a resource, local people attribute nonprofit meanings to salmon at the same time. The difference between the two groups reveals itself in people’s attitudes to commercial fishing, and in their ways of sharing salmon with others. In this article I look at how place-related identity interplays with values attributed to salmon as people on the Terskii Coast manage this key local resource.

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1. Introduction

Postsocialist transformations have changed resource values in many rural parts of Russia. On the Terskii Coast in the northwest of Russia, salmon has become a key resource for people’s everyday survival. During the Soviet period, management of this resource was heavily regulated and controlled by the state. Fishing salmon individually was forbidden. The situation changed radically after the collapse of Soviet rule, as salmon fishing became more easily available. Depending on whether they are local or come from elsewhere, people tend to ascribe different values to local resources. In this article I look at how place-related identity interplays with values attributed to salmon as people on the Terskii Coast manage this key local resource.

The specificity of postsocialist rural development lies in social and economic transformations in Russia that started in the late 1980s and continued to develop on an ever growing scale into the 1990s. These transformations brought multiple opportunities for the commodification of resources, which encouraged the

development of commercial attitudes to them. Although such attitudes existed in villages before, the scale of opportunities for commodification rocketed from the 1990s onwards. As many people on the Terskii Coast say, ‘in Soviet times, people didn’t catch salmon for sale. They just got a little bit for themselves’. Today, salmon fishing is an important source of income for many people on the Coast.

The key aim of this article is to investigate how postsocialist transformations have affected people’s attitudes to local resources. The following research questions are pursued. First, I look at how values that people on the Terskii Coast ascribe to salmon have changed in the wake of postsocialist transformations. In particular, I deal with the emergence of commercial attitudes to salmon. Second, I compare local people and incomers in their attitudes to salmon, in order to study the relationship between identification with place and attitudes to local resources.

In the next section, I introduce the place where I conducted fieldwork and comment on my methodology. After that I place my work within wider research on postsocialist transformations, changing rural values and the commodification of natural resources in Eastern Europe and Russia. This is followed by a section on place-related identities where I describe vernacular terms used in the area to define one’s position in relation to place. In the next section, I provide ethnographic insights into salmon fishing on the Terskii Coast. In particular, I reveal contexts in which a connection between

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people's identification with place as either a local or an incomer and their attitudes to fish as a key local resource becomes explicit. I summarize my research findings and suggest a provisional interpretation of the difference between local people and incomers in their attitudes to salmon in the final section of the article.

2. Research context and methodology

This article is based on data that I collected in several villages on the Terskii Coast of the White Sea in the Kola Peninsula over the period 2005–2009. I do not provide names of villages for the sake of confidentiality, as I touch upon sensitive subjects such as fishing outside official regulations. I will refer to 'the Terskii Coast' in general or use a collective designation 'the village' throughout the article. All names of informants in this article are pseudonyms.

2.1. The Terskii Coast and Pomor people

The Kola Peninsula is situated in the northwest of Russia and is surrounded by the White Sea from the southwest to northeast and the Barents Sea in the north. It borders upon Norway in the northwest, Finland in the west and the Republic of Karelia, which is part of the Russian Federation, in the south (Fig. 1).

The Terskii Coast encompasses the south-western and southern part of the Kola Peninsula, and the north-western and northern part of the White Sea coast, along which several villages are located. The Terskii Coast is a historical rather than geographical name in the sense that it does not appear on contemporary topographic

maps of the region. As several waves of settlers arrived on the White Sea coast at various times, the coastline was consequently divided into seven parts, or Coasts, each of which received its own name. All the villages along the Terskii Coast were initially established as fishing places. Lajus, (2011: 166) makes the point that fishing was not a means of subsistence for people on the White Sea coast but rather a source of living as they traded fish for other goods such as grain. Some villages were also involved in seal hunting. Administratively, all villages on the Terskii Coast belong to Terskii raion and Umba is the raion center. Terskii raion is one of five raions that comprise Murmansk oblast.

People living in the village have traditionally been called *Pomors* (singular for 'a person' is *Pomor*). The name comes from the Russian *po moriu* which means *by sea*. *Pomors* is a group name that has been historically applied to Russian people living along the White Sea coast. *Pomors* are considered to share certain economic and cultural features which distinguish them from other Russians. Russian people first came to the White Sea coast in the middle of the 11th century, attracted by fishing and hunting opportunities. They possibly reached what was later called the Terskii Coast around the middle of the 12th century. In the beginning people came only for fishing and hunting seasons. Permanent settlements appeared on the Terskii Coast around the 15th century (Ushakov, 1972).

The process of Russian people settling and resettling in the area of the White Sea coast continued over a long period of time, and encompassed vast territories. Therefore no single *Pomor* identity formed and the name was used differently from one area to another



Fig. 1. Kola Peninsula. The map is based on a digital topographic map developed by the Main Scientific Research, Information and Computer Center of Russian Ministry of Natural Resources (Glavnivts MPR), 1998. The current map was designed by joint-stock company "Kola geological information laboratory center" (JSC "KGILC"), Apatity, 2011.

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