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Summary

For the Altai indigenous people the Karakol valley represents the spiritual heart of the Republic. The sacred mountain which stands at the head of the valley is so revered that the replacement name ‘Uch Enmek’ meaning ‘three fontanel’ is used to avoid speaking the mountain’s true name. The valley supports a wide range of characteristic wildlife including rare and endemic species and is filled with enigmatic ancient monuments, rock art sanctuaries and the world renowned Bashadar kurgan complex. These monuments are placed in a specific relationship to the natural landscape. They reflect centuries of sacred knowledge which has transformed the valley into a shrine. A naturally formed ring of magnetite located at the centre of the valley is believed by the indigenous population to represent the ‘navel’ of the valley which together with the kurgans surrounding it brings a life force and knowledge through the sun’s rays to the middle world of man. The indigenous culture encodes the sacred knowledge of the ancients while the local people continue to guard the valley’s secrets. The rock art sanctuaries are the people’s ‘sudur bichik’, their sacred text for the future. The epic spiritual giants of the past are said to rest in the kurgans offering their strength to future generations. Threatened by a rapidly growing tourist industry, archaeological excavation motivated by the perceived threat of global warming to permafrost burials and the uncertainty of new land and tenure laws the people of the valley have responded by creating their own nature park in an attempt to preserve their land, heritage and culture. Combining traditional sacred knowledge with contemporary scientific methods of research, the indigenous community attempt to formalize their knowledge and to deepen understanding of the ritual function of kurgans. After generations of keeping the valley ‘closed’ to outsiders local spiritual leaders now offer initiation and pilgrimage in the hope of raising a broader awareness of their spiritual worldview. Concerned for the status of sacred lands the world over, the Karakol indigenous leaders dream of creating a
model territory in their sacred valley for the study and harmonious development of such sacred places and for the well-being of humanity.

**Introduction**

The Altai Republic borders Siberia, Mongolia, China and Kazakhstan and is home to the ‘Golden Mountains’ UNESCO serial natural world heritage site. It has great historical and spiritual meaning as ‘the homeland of all humanity’, ‘the cradle of the world’ and ‘the source of wisdom’ (Roerich, 2001). ‘Uch Enmek’ Indigenous Nature Park was set up to protect the Sacred Karakol Valley and is situated in the Ongudai region at the heart of the Altai Republic, (see Figure 23.1).

The Park encompasses 60,551 hectares and is bordered by the Ursul and Karakol rivers and the Ongudai and Ust-Koks regions. The landscape is characteristic of different altitude belts in the Central Altai and consists of high-mountain, mid-mountain and mountain valley landscapes. The main ridges of the Terektsinskii mountain range are influenced by glacial activity with major geomorphologic features such as moraine hillocks, ridges and traces of creep and avalanche with an elevation between 900 and 3000m. Vegetation ranges from tundra, moss, lichen, (sub)-alpine meadow to mountain steppe, marsh and meadow landscapes. The territory is rich in rare, endemic, relic and endangered species of flora and fauna such as the Maral Root (*Rhaponticum carthamoides*), Black Stork (*Ciconia nigra* L.), Demoiselle Crane (*Anthropoides virgo*) and Altai Snowcock (*Tetraogallus altaicus*), the snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*), Altai argali (*Ovis ammon ammon*) and at least 14 other species, butterflies, reptiles and birds, are red book listed.

Approximately 2500 indigenous people live in six villages administered by three municipalities. The majority depend on raising livestock (cattle, sheep, goat, cows and horses), hunting and deer farming. The Park is under jurisdiction of the municipalities and the Forestry Commission. Tourism in the park is jointly managed by the park body and local tourist company ‘Ongudai Tour’ which offer excursions, horse-riding treks, ‘pilgrimages’ and cultural tourism.

‘Uch Enmek’ was created by decree of the Altai Republic in 2001 based on legislation termed: ‘Specially Protected Nature Territories and Sites in the Altai Republic’ and ‘The historical and cultural heritage of the peoples’ of the Altai Republic’. It was an initiative of the indigenous organization ‘Tengri – Soul Ecology’ and represents a specially protected nature territory that includes both natural and historical features, cultural complexes of high recreational, aesthetic and economic value. It was established for the purposes of nature and cultural conservation and for recreational activities. The park territory has been divided into three zones based on indigenous notions of land use and function:

- **Zone A:** Reserve area – ‘the nucleus’; includes the sacred peaks of ‘Uch Enmek’, 810 hectares, including summer and winter pasture with no hunting or farming
- **Zone B:** Buffer zone – includes ‘kurgans’ and other historical and cultural monuments; strictly regulated visitation for shamanic ritual, scientific research and recreational purposes as well as limited agricultural use (4776 hectares)
- **Zone C:** Development zone – provides for the protection and preservation of natural complexes, monuments of historical and cultural heritage. It includes villages and farming lands, hunting and recreation areas (54,964 hectares).
Cultural and historical heritage of the sacred Karakol valley

The philosophy of the Altai worldview considers natural objects (plants, stones, stars and planets) to be living beings endowed with the same functional organs as a human being and accordingly Mount Uch Enmek is traditionally considered the ‘navel’. The earth is believed to receive vital energy and knowledge through this navel in the same way that a foetus receives nourishment in the mother’s womb.

The natural peculiarity of the Karakol valley lies in its geological formation. The valley is unique for its widespread outcrops of gabbro and dolerite which are high in magnetite mineral content. In the centre of the valley these outcrops form what is essentially a ring of magnetite that is considered to attract the energies of the ether to the earth (see Figures 23.2 and 23.4).

Perhaps as a response to the unique geology the valley is home to a whole system of sacred archaeological complexes including a Stone Age dwelling, petroglyphs, runic inscriptions, standing stones and kurgans (burial chambers) characteristic of the Karakol (see Figure 23.5), Afanasiev, Scythian and Turkic cultures. The Bashadar and Tuckta kurgan complexes researched in the 1950s by S.I. Rudenko, dated to the Scythian period and attributed to the Pzyryk culture (5th–7th century BC) are renowned the world over. The permafrost burials of the Scythian period situated in the south of Mountain Altai are unique for their highly ornamental burial inventory made of gold, felt, leather and wood, mumified human remains of the tribal elite and sacrificial horses (Soenov, 1998). It is strongly believed by the current indigenous custodians that the true uniqueness of these archaeological monuments lies in their layout and magnetic qualities which repeat the form and structure of the ‘magnetic ring’ described above (see Figure 23.4). As a result the Karakol valley represents a shrine created consecutively over a period of several millennia. Of particular significance are the kurgans, a burial type construction with characteristic stone, or earth cover. Locally kurgans are treated with immense reverence. They are believed to be the burial grounds of the epic heroes, the spiritual giants of old.

Faith

The ethical principles of the traditional culture of the indigenous peoples of Altai have been developed over centuries. These principles presuppose the particularly careful use of natural resources. They also acknowledge the existence of specific areas which play an important role in supporting ecological balance between man and the environment. Whilst such areas may be inhabited by population groups they are also recognized as places where one may receive knowledge, strength and the stimulus for spiritual development. Just as the special relationship of the local population has secured the high levels of biological diversity one witnesses in Altai in the post-Soviet period, so the preservation of sacred lands guarantees the preservation of the traditional culture and its sustainable development.
Altai indigenous values and beliefs have been concentrated in the Karakol valley. The ideas and understanding accumulated on this sacred land have found expression in the oral culture, rituals, customs and everyday life, in ‘local, sacred knowledge’ which has been transmitted from one generation to another. The local population believes that their well-being depends on their direct connection to the land (the condition of their totemic animals, plants, mountains and special places) and in turn the well-being of sacred land depends on the reciprocal ‘service’ it is afforded by the indigenous population through preservation, protection, ritual and harmonious interaction.

People have lived here for centuries and their communication with nature has lead to the understanding of the laws of nature or as it is called today – ecological consciousness; to love and to worship not only nature but also ourselves and those close to us. We are an integral part of nature and so a person’s entire inner energy and aura has to be congruent with that of nature for there to be balance in the ether. The Karakol valley itself is sacred because it creates this atmosphere of harmony. People who visit the valley immediately feel the difference, that the people here live by laws connected with nature which we call ‘baily d’ang’, ‘taboo’ or ‘law’. (N. Shumarov, Tolos clan, personal communication 2008).

Rather than being quaint vestiges of a time past, the sacred local knowledge expressed in the cultural forms ‘alkyshtar’ (blessings), ‘jangar kojhong’ (sacred and ritual songs sung by women), ‘kài’ (the throat singing of epics) and ‘bai’ (sacred laws) continues to collectively support the living atmosphere in the Karakol valley. Indigenous peoples have preserved the foundation of a holistic world view which enables one to sense and consequently harmonize changes taking place in the subtle interactions within the environment. Therefore, the true value of the Altai culture lies not in its separate parts but rather in its entirety expressed within the vibrational world of this particular landscape (see Figure 23.3).

Uch Enmek – Indigenous initiative

The Uch Enmek Indigenous Park, named after Mount Uch Enmek (see Figure 23.3) is the indigenous response to threats facing the Sacred Valley and the indigenous culture that are described in detail below. The conservation of the natural, historical and cultural conditions of the Karakol valley requires that it be separated from common usage and attributed a special status. This special status has traditionally been afforded to the valley by the indigenous population. The nature park is considered an appropriate adaptation of the indigenous community’s traditional role of preserving the valley in the contemporary economic, social and political climate. Hence, rather than representing a purely ecological directive, the Park offers the indigenous population a conceptual framework for their future development.

The park acknowledges the need to apply legal measures concerning the use of natural resources and protection of intellectual property, to carry out essential zoning and planning work to protect the valley from threats and develop an economic development plan, ‘…nature parks represent one type of special economic zone of which the ecological component is a priority principle’ (Mamyev, 2008). In order to involve the local population in park-based sacred territory protection activities it is, therefore, essential to create a local economic infrastructure.

Aims of the Ech Umeck indigenous initiative

The Ech Umeck Indigenous initiative has the following aims.

Research

1. develop a scientific model for sustainable development within the valley;
2. zoning to establish landscape and recreational areas;
3. registering monuments of cultural and historical heritage where possible avoiding further invasive archaeological excavations;
4. creating thematic maps;
5 comprehensive study of the natural, social and cultural landscape;
6 social monitoring.

Nature protection
1 protecting the valley as a territory of special spiritual, ecological and scientific value;
2 ecological monitoring;
3 establishing a mechanism for the rational use of natural resources and monuments of historical and cultural heritage.

Ecological awareness campaign
1 Develop a system for raising broad awareness of the indigenous knowledge of the spiritual and ecological principles of the Karakol valley through pilgrimage type of tourism.

Develop spiritual and ethical guidance in park management
1 Value, love and respect nature and the indigenous culture for their own sake
2 Worship the territory of the park as sacred space
3 Revere the traditional culture advocating natural and cultural diversity
4 As far as possible observe the natural rights of wildlife, flora and fauna and the codes of the indigenous culture
5 Fulfil one’s responsibilities in such a way that the spirit of the sacred land is inspired by the beauty of human emotion (Mamyev, 2008, p238).

Integrating sacred knowledge and scientific research
The ‘kurgans’ provide the physical loci for the central ideas and sacred knowledge encoded in the
epic throat singing tradition. The kurgans and the epic heroes associated with them symbolize a time when the culture of the ancients was at its peak. The local population considers kurgans capable of having both a positive and a negative effect on a person. Highly controlled visitation is believed to minimize the effect of human emotional, mental and psychic energies on the place allowing the information fields and sacred function to exist within their own ‘space’. Codes concerning how kurgans should be treated that have been passed from one generation to another are still strictly observed. Appropriate rituals were traditionally carried out often with the guidance of a shaman. Visiting a kurgan is permitted in small groups only and each individual is responsible for assuring their thoughts and intentions are pure.

In collaboration with the park, research has been carried out by Professor A.N. Dmitriev (Head of the Geophysics and Mineralogy Research Department at the Institute of Geology of the Siberian branch of the Russian Academy of Science) and Dr A.V. Shitov (Doctor of Geological and Mineralogical Science, Gorno-Altaisk State University) into the magnetic and radioactivity fields at kurgan sites (Dmitriev and Shitov, 2005). Results have shown that the magnetic and weight characteristics of a group of people in a meditative condition significantly influence the different fields at kurgan sites. It has also been established that standing in one of the series of Scythian ritual complexes affects the autonomic nervous system. In addition, a small and highly intense ‘magnetic dipole’ has been discovered in the immediate vicinity of a double kurgan from the Bashadar group. The magnetic field of the ‘dipole’ displayed variation in amplitude up to 10,000 nT (nanotesla) and reacted to the presence of a human being. By means of comparison changes in the field during magnetic storms on the earth’s surface do not exceed 1000 nT (see Figure 23.4 for a magnetic map of the Kurgan and Figure 23.5 for a photo of an excavated Kurgan) (Dmitriev et al, 2004).

The complex magnetic and radioactive fields, location and layout of kurgans in relation to the geological characteristics of the landscape partly

Figure 23.4 Magnetic field of the Archaeological site ‘Neijnhee Soru’ at the Karakol Valley

Source: Dmitriev and Shitov (2005), adapted by D. Mamjev and B. Verschuuren
reveal their hidden meaning (see Figure 23.2). It is possible that kurgans intentionally influence local natural magnetic and radioactivity fields and play a role in the psychological and ecological dynamics of the region. The kurgans are constructed in such a way that they represent a micro-model of the natural macrocosm. It has not yet been established exactly what information these constructions carry and how they can affect the uninitiated physically and psychologically. It is clear however, that excavation of kurgans destroys their magnetic qualities reducing the possibility of resurrecting comprehensive knowledge of this special ritual structure. Even the most preliminary scientific research carried out by the park indicates the high significance of the given territory for the modern world from an indigenous point of view.

Taking responsibility

In the Altai indigenous worldview the omnipresent energy that can be felt in the valley is also a living being and therefore responds to the human emotional, mental and psychic condition both of the individual and the ethnic group. It can be imprinted with different types of information including psychic energy, human thought, emotion and sound. Therefore, notions such as ‘bai’, ‘bailu’ and ‘kemi’ lie at the foundation of the indigenous relationship to the natural world. ‘Bai’ means ‘sacred’, ‘prohibition’, ‘modest’, ‘frugal’, ‘creating abundance’ and represents the moral codes and limitations in behaviour in relationship to sacred objects in the natural world (Yaimova, 1990, p13). ‘Bailu jer’ is usually translated as ‘sacred land’. However, ‘bailu’ also emphasizes the principle of human responsibility and action indicating that ‘the sacred’ demands a particular form of human behaviour.

A combination of faith, traditional knowledge and modern science is employed in park research into the true meaning of sacred sites. The enigmatic kurgan complexes are being studied to determine the principles of their layout, magnetic fields and function within the natural landscape. Altai elder N. Shodoev writes on the theme of Altai folk wisdom referred to as ‘bilik’ which, he writes, is carried in the heart and memory of the Altai people. ‘The content of the Bilik is constantly being re-assimilated philosophically and serves as a prism, through which solutions to contemporary problems may be found. It is the Altai people’s most ancient and sacred treasure. It reveals a profound relationship to life, a deep understanding of natural energies and rhythms and a keen feeling for the dramatic contradictions of our time.’ (Shodoev and Kurchakov, 2005) Hence, personal responsibility is a predominant element of the indigenous relationship to the natural world that is regarded to be of significance to the modern world.

Threats and challenges

The main issues that threaten the integrity of the Karakol valley can be summarized as:

• changes in land law, land tenure and natural resource policies;
• increasing unregulated local and international tourism and infrastructure development; and
• destruction of sacred sites by development, theft and archaeology.

Critical imminent changes in land tenure law

The move towards an open land market and changes in policy on the use of natural resources is starkly at odds with the Altai traditional system of land tenure and spiritual values. Russian law does not recognize the notion of sacred land. As a consequence no guidelines exist to manage natural resources of sacred lands in particular. At the same time, the social and economic condition of the indigenous population is characterized by high unemployment levels, minimal annual family income and poor social security. Moreover, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the break-up of ‘kolkhoz’ farms has left agricultural communities in an ideological vacuum. In the Altai worldview the homeland is not just a geographical area but an emotional and spiritual relationship to a clan’s land in which a mountain represents the sacred centre. Lands were held in common by the whole clan and the territory borders clearly marked.

In Russia in the early 20th century, land, however, was declared the property of the state.
During the Soviet period traditional totemic, ancestral land rights were denied and clan rituals prohibited. In 1993 during the period of ‘perestroika’ by decree of the president of the Russian Federation former state and collective farm lands were subdivided among former farm workers into what are called private ‘portion rights’ to land plots. To assist citizens claiming their rights to private ownership regional bodies were required to issue the necessary documentation before the end of 2005. Within the Altai Republic this process was not carried out and farm workers were allocated agricultural use rights only. It is only recently, in the light of the impending open land market in Russia, that individuals eligible for land ownership have become aware of their rights. Of the 2500 people inhabiting the territory of the park approximately 1000 have the automatic right to the ownership of ‘portions’ (of approximately 15 hectares). However, due to the expense and convoluted nature of the privatization process these individuals have still not been able to register their legal rights. It is possible that lands not privatized by 2010 will be retrieved by the state and made available to farmers on a rental basis only. Of the 60,000 hectares of park territory (24,000 are forestry lands, 5000 represent villages and populated areas) only 15,000 hectares of land are registered by the local population as having rights to agricultural land use. Approximately 70 per cent of park land remains unregistered.

The reclaiming by the state of these lands and their potential future sale and development is currently perceived as representing the greatest threat to the survival of the traditional way of life of the native people inhabiting the park territory. Potential land sales within the park risks the loss of indigenous people’s rights to visit and preserve sacred natural objects and ritual sites. There is a strong desire among the population of the Karakol valley to return to a ‘totemic’ system of land tenure in which certain areas of the valley are predisposed to accepted forms of behaviour and land use.

Although the ‘Uch Enmek’ Nature Park is a legal body and government organization, it does not have the resources to carry out surveying, zoning or land tenure activities which would enable the park territory to be registered as such within the cadastral system. The timescale involved in this situation makes indigenous land rights an emergency management issue. The situation is all the more complicated by elements of uncertainty given that no model exists for dealing with private land ownership on sacred land in a specially protected nature territory within the Republic. Park management is currently seeking resources and expertise to assist in resolving these issues.

However, presently the park stands alone in its aims and one senses neither a common commitment to the vision of the park nor a true perception of the sacredness of the land amongst the other stakeholders. Uch Enmek’s current activities are limited predominantly to scientific research, tourism management and awareness raising activities both with local schools and visitors. It is hoped that support may be received from the international natural and cultural heritage community in stimulating commitment to the park’s vision.

Unregulated tourism and infrastructure development

Over the past five years the Altai Republic has become a major tourist destination within Russia and is increasingly attracting tourists from abroad. Due to the absence of appropriate laws sacred lands and cultural heritage is being uncontrollably exploited by the tourist business. The lack of knowledge and respect for indigenous sacred sites can be witnessed at various mountain passes including ‘Chikitiman’ in the Ongudai region and the sacred spring ‘Arjhan Suu’. These sites have been desecrated by tourists through the grotesque imitation of the ‘Kyira’ ritual tying of cloths to trees and mass graffiti on the rocks of the sacred pass. In addition to the likely ecological consequences of the planned Gazprom pipeline project and the proposed road to China the creation of the ‘Altai Valley’ special economic zone of tourist and recreational type threatens to rapidly increase the tourist pressure.

Although the indigenous population are still extremely cautious of visitors to their carefully structured sacred landscape, the park is becoming acknowledged for its role in regulating visitation of sacred sites, and communicating the indigenous experience of the sacred landscape. Income
opportunities are provided by the Karakol guest base through the hiring of guides and horses, and the ‘Kaichi’ (Kai performers) who sing the epics or perform a ritual before a visiting group embarks on a pilgrimage. This type of involvement confirms the authority of highly respected ‘knowledge keepers’ whose role is essential in the process of making sacred land accessible to the non-indigenous community.

An excursion through approximately 20 kilometres of valley landscape constitutes the most common form of tourism on park territory. Components of the excursion include a ‘kai’ throat singing performance, visits to rock art sites, kurgans, places of ritual and a traditional Altai meal. Being managed by the indigenous population the excursion has organically taken on a number of interesting factors. When the indigenous people visit the valley they prepare themselves inwardly by placing negative thoughts and emotions to one side which could ‘pollute’ the special quality of the atmosphere. As a rule, visitors are invited to do the same, taking care that their thoughts be ‘white’ and ‘pure’. The guide determines which specific places to visit depending on areas recognized as being ‘open’ or ‘closed’ in line with the changing energies in the valley.

**Destruction of sacred sites by development, theft and archaeology**

The key problems in preserving sacred areas in the recent past have been posed by the destruction of petroglyph sites due to theft, road building and the work of archaeologists who have excavated ritual burial grounds and removed monuments without carrying out complex studies of their role within the sacred landscape or the spiritual worldview of the indigenous population. This threat increases with the Russian academic community’s awareness of global warming which interprets global warming as a directive to excavate all remaining permafrost burials (see Figure 23.5).

**Conclusions**

The relationship of the indigenous population to the Karakol valley leads us to understand that the evaluation of an area as ‘sacred land’ is not simply dependent on the human perception of it as ‘homeland’. Certain areas on the planet are ‘special’ due to the particular function they fulfil in regulating ecological systems. Over the course of their culture indigenous peoples have learned to live within the powerful energies of place. The result of this relationship is what is understood as ‘traditional culture’. The culture itself can be considered to actually massage the land like an acupuncture point on the human body guaranteeing that the ‘special area’ functions to its fullest capacity. According to this worldview one may consider all the sacred natural sites across the globe as ‘acupuncture points’, their distinctive cultures responsible for maintaining the ecological equilibrium not only of a given area, but also of the whole.

The loss of this connection and the negation of the principles functioning at sacred lands is perceived to be the true cause of the ecological catastrophes we witness in the world today. This knowledge confirms the need to mark special areas as sacred lands at an international level. The uniqueness of the indigenous initiative Uch Enmek lies in its attempt to express its sacred knowledge via contemporary science into a language that can be accessible to contemporary societies who may have lost their special relationship to the land. Although the indigenous world view is very different from science-based environmental protection, the structure of the Uch Enmek Nature Park serves as a meeting place between nature conservation and indigenous survival. The Altai indigenous people are a reminder that
people across the world are forgetting to respect the land and to communicate with it effectively. A reciprocal relationship with the land is necessary to ensure its ecological and spiritual heart.

References


