Becoming Aboriginal: Experiences of a European Woman in Kamchatka's Wilderness

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I graduated from Moscow State University in 1980 with a degree in structural linguistics. I wanted to stay in Moscow and never expected to go live in Kamchatka, but my husband was sent there to work after completing university. During the Soviet era, being sent to remote regions was mandatory as payback for our higher education, which we received free of charge. We had to go to the capital of the region, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, in order to work at the Pedagogical Institute for a term of three years. We did not even take our one-year old son with us, since they had promised to send us for further postgraduate study in just one year.

The first year living on this remote frontier of the Soviet Empire was very difficult for me. I worked at a research centre called the Institute of Volcanology (the study of volcanoes) and completed my Ph.D. at that time.

By the end of the year, we did not move back and our little son was brought to us. He went to kindergarten and immediately began to be ill, his condition getting worse and worse (bronchitis and asthma). At last, the doctors told us that we would have to move to a place where we could live with him in the natural wilderness or else to leave Kamchatka altogether. By this time we were captivated by this wonderful land and decided to leave our

comfortable life in the city. We went to work as wardens/rangers at the Kronotskiy Biosphere Reserve.

The second phase I would like to identify is my experience living in the wilderness while working at the remote meteorological station in the territory of the biosphere reserve. By that time I had given birth to a daughter. We moved to Zhupanovo, an abandoned settlement. There were only a few people working at the reserve, the meteorological station, and as frontier guards. We lived there in a house heated by a wood stove and without running water. The status of this region as a reserve did not permit us to use local resources as entailed in a subsistence way of life. In other words, there was no hunting or fishing permitted. We began to study local plants, animals and folk medicine in order to treat our child. Neither of our children ever fell ill there. During this time, I not only learned how to chop wood and carry water, but also to gather herbs, mushrooms, cook food made with berries and fresh fish, to sew fur clothes and to do many other things.

Soon we decided to return to"civilized" living conditions in order to educate our children and to return to our own fields of work and study. It was then that we managed to meet an outstanding scientist and educator, Nina Efremova, who led the first ecological school in Kamchatka despite the fact that the word "ecology" was not yet widely used at that time. She accepted our eldest son to study at her school and taught him many things, starting with skills that allowed him to write in his diary of nature and subjects (e.g., botany). She had a vast knowledge of Kamchatka's herbs and wrote a book entitled *Medicinal Herbs of Kamchatka and the Commander Islands*.

The third phase we experienced involved the education of our three children and self-education, using lessons of nature for this purpose. We underwent a change of mentality and psychology by going through these processes. Soon our third child was born and we went away to the wilderness

again, this time to the very centre of the Kronotskiy State Biosphere Reserve where we experienced even more severe living conditions. We were situated at the meteorological and hydrological station on the banks of Kronotskiy Lake, the biggest freshwater lake in Kamchatka.

We had to home-school our children according to the school programmes and later they took their exams at school. Just the same, the chief teacher for them was nature itself. Our house was very small and we planned our children's activities to be outdoors: they played, ate, worked at the meteorological station, and even slept away from home in the daytime and came home only to overnight. They helped us a lot with the meteorological observations, especially our eldest son, and they studied the surrounding environment. Soon, with the help of the specialists of the Kronotskiy Biosphere Reserve and visiting expeditions, they knew the names of all the local plants and animals and soon began to fulfill some simple work for the scientific staff of the Biosphere Reserve. We lived there during the winter and summer and other seasons, so especially precious were the everyday observations of not only meteorological character, but also the phenological. The children made special notes that were later used by the scientific department and, later on, they even fulfilled special programmes for the Institute of Volcanology involving water samples and for the Institute of Nature Protection on the programme studying *Pinus pumilla* (crawling pine) that grows there.

I and my husband, in the meantime, had to do everyday work: conduct the usual work at the meteorological station, carry water, stock wood for fuel, cook, wash and do the many other things that must be done, only we performed them without any modern devices or even electricity.

At that time we began to learn much about the life of Chukchi, Koryak and other local aboriginal peoples of Kamchatka and Siberia. Then we could understand that, in similar conditions, the matter of only such a way of life was

possible. So our psychology changed, the process that I call “becoming aboriginal.” It applies to me since I feel now more like an aboriginal woman than a European one.

The fourth phase was characterized by our move to more “civilized” living conditions and the subsequent need to employ the same skills. Due to the energy crises in Kamchatka, when energy was completely cut off, we had to remember our skills and lessons of life in the wilderness.

But times changed. We had to return in 1992 because the meteorological station was closed. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, it was no longer possible to supply helicopters and provide for all the support staff and activities in the remote stations. Since then, there have been no observations in the territory, which is more than 1 million hectares of the Biosphere Reserve.

Our children began to study at school. Our eldest son, who lived in the Biosphere Reserve the longest of all our children, eventually became a biologist, graduating from university and specializing in birds. As a student, his knowledge and skills became very useful for him in his field practice. More recently, we again had to return to the skills we formerly had used. At the end of 1998 and in 1999, Kamchatka was totally cut off from its energy supply. That meant that we had to live without electricity, and without water too, because all the power machines work on electricity. In comparison, it is much better to live without all the modern amenities in a house in the forest than in an apartment in a large building.

Some of these lessons are useful for people everywhere and especially for children. Under conditions of over-consumption of energy, natural resources and food, we have to teach children other ideas: how to save such resources and how to use them economically.

We had to install a stove in our regular apartment, and we went into the

forest to cook our food on a fire and take water from the spring. Thank goodness that the population is small in our region, that the water is very clean, and that the situation did not last long. During this crisis, the skills of gathering wood, making fires and saving electricity and water at home became not only useful, but vital.

The modern world is over-consumptive. I won't give you figures of electricity and other expenses, but we are all faced with the problem of teaching ourselves and our children to save and conserve our natural resources. Some of these lessons are useful for people everywhere and especially for children.

The old concept "back to nature" seems to be a new concept. In this framework, studying the experience of aboriginal peoples over many centuries is especially important. New ecological schools and schools of survival have appeared in Kamchatka and we work on them together with aboriginal communities. Thus, when we say "back to nature," we do not want you to live in igloos, chop wood, or melt snow to get water. Instead, we want you to study. Now we have a whole net of ecological schools in Kamchatka, the students of which not only study in class, but have field experiences in the winter and summer.

This final phase, for me, is a time for reflection with respect to my life. Moving into the third millennium, we should all think about how to live in the new century without war and terror and about what to teach our children. Isn't it time to return to the experience of minor peoples?

Our ecological school works together with aboriginal communities. We invite representatives of the communities to talk about their lives in reindeer herds, to dance, or to explain all the rituals in dances and other actions. The renewed aboriginal feasts are very attractive and we invite children there to see the pieces of aboriginal lives.

This kind of work is only beginning, but we want to step into the new

millennium with a new concept of life without wars between small or great peoples, without terror and death, and with life at peace with nature and people.

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