

Vladimir Arsen'ev and Whales in Russia's Revolutionary Far East

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Abstract: This article examines the contributions the famous Far Eastern writer Vladimir Arsen'ev made to the development of the Russian/Soviet whaling industry in the 1920s. During that time Arsen'ev worked as a "specialist for marine mammal hunting" for Dal'rybokhota. He studied the whales of the Russian Far East and helped craft the Far Eastern Republic's policy toward its subjects who wanted to start whaling. As someone with a deep knowledge of imperial-era environmental destruction and conservation, Arsen'ev helped develop measures designed to protect the region's Indigenous people and fur-bearing animals while strengthening Russian sovereignty. He also advocated the wholesale slaughter of killer whales and ultimately failed to restrain destructive commercial whaling. However, in addition to adding a new chapter to Arsen'ev's biography, his ideas about whales and whaling help us better understand the Far East's environment history and especially the way imperial-era ideas around conservation survived into the Soviet period.

Keywords: conservation, Russian Far East, Soviet era, Vladimir Klavdievich Arsen'ev, whales, whaling,

In the years immediately after the Bolshevik Revolution, the Russian Far East's natural world took on heightened economic and political importance.¹ The weakness of the provisional governments and Soviet power had opened the region's oceans to brigandage and foreign pillage. At the same time, many European Russians considered ascending Soviet power to promise the long-sought opportunity to fully develop the Far East's economic potential. Far Easterners inhabited a more complex world, troubled by their experiences with environmental degradation in the past and better informed about the threats and potential offered by Japanese, Americans, and the North Pacific's Indigenous people. Cast into the crucible of political, economic, and geopolitical



cataclysm, those on the ground blended older regional concerns with new ideological demands to craft a new future for the Far Eastern oceans. Among those was an unlikely voice, the famous Far Eastern writer, Vladimir Klavdievich Arsen'ev.

As an employee of Soviet Vladivostok's Dal'rybokhota (The Department of Far Eastern Fishing and Hunting) in the early 1920s, for a time, Arsen'ev exercised real influence on the region's environmental history. A wide traveler and keen observer of the Russian Far East, Arsen'ev gained a deep knowledge of its natural world and the late empire's environmental practices, both good and bad. During his time at Dal'rybokhota, he rendered judgment on numerous private petitions to whale in Far Eastern waters, provided expertise on historical and contemporary world whaling, and surveyed the region's marine mammal distributions and migrations. Most important, he and others attempted to find reasonable and sustainable compromises between the interests of Indigenous Pacific whalers, Far Eastern economic development, and the Soviet state's interests. The principles Arsen'ev and other fisheries officials at the time articulated reveal important strands connecting late imperial and early Soviet environmental thinking at a time when the future was very much in question. Some of them would be incorporated into new Soviet interactions with the ocean, such as the industrial whaling industry they launched out of Vladivostok in 1932. Others would be lost, as the longer, deeply destructive and irresponsible history of the Soviet Union's postwar whaling reveals.² Retrospectively, Arsen'ev's work in the 1920s represents a failed alternative for long-term Soviet environmental policy, one that might have relied on local expertise, built on imperial-era experiences, and that took Indigenous subsistence needs into serious consideration.

Far Eastern Fisheries in Revolution

In 1918, Arsen'ev received a post in Vladivostok's newly created Dal'rybokhota as a junior inspector. Later, he would be named the department's specialist for marine mammal hunting.³ That year, Arsen'ev—at that point a well-known army officer and explorer but not yet a famous author—had moved south from Khabarovsk. The city on the Amur was then in the grips of violent unrest, in conjunction with the Bolshevik Revolution, and Vladivostok offered a measure of calm. Helping make a move out Khabarovsk attractive, Arsen'ev likely also sympathized with the counterrevolutionary cause, as Amir

Khisamutdinov shows in this volume.⁴ Arsen'ev would remain in Vladivostok for the better part of the next decade, despite having numerous opportunities to emigrate. Perhaps he was compelled to stay by the exciting work he found in Dal'rybokhota, which allowed him to travel widely through the Far East.⁵ Historian John Stephan surmises that Arsen'ev "stayed out of trouble by keeping a low profile working in a fisheries trust."⁶ But, while he may have chosen the Vladivostok bureau for its quietude, Arsen'ev ended up making decisions with important consequences for its surrounding oceans.

The state of Far Eastern fisheries that confronted Arsen'ev in Vladivostok was highly unsatisfactory from the Russian point of view, having fallen into veritable "anarchy and chaos."⁷ Russia's share of North Pacific salmon was declining as more and more Japanese fishermen were catching the fish just offshore from Kamchatka and the mouth of the Amur—all legally thanks to the Russo-Japanese Fisheries Treaty negotiated in the wake of the Russian empire's defeat in 1905. The revolution had only made things worse. Due to heightened Japanese influence and a need to raise immediate capital, in 1920 the Far Eastern Republic (a temporarily independent state subject to Bolshevik influence) recommended that the Japanese be granted unlimited access to the natural resources of the Russian Far East.⁸ Given the straightened circumstances of the postrevolutionary years, Lenin recommended the continuation of fishery concessions to the Japanese and favored extending them to the United States. In 1920, he and the Soviet government were embarrassed by a deal they struck with the American fraudster Washington Vanderlip, who made spurious promises to develop Kamchatka's coal, oil, and fish resources.⁹

Instead, most American activity in the Far East remained illicit. Just offshore, and sometimes right onshore in Chukotka, American whalers were catching right whales and bowheads, though not in the massive numbers they had been in the nineteenth century.¹⁰ As for Russia's history of whaling in its nearshore waters, it was "impoverished," as a later Soviet writer euphemistically put it.¹¹ Despite great hopes, the late imperial years had seen several failed whaling ventures, notably those of the Finnish mariner and imperial subject Otto Lindholm and the ill-fated Russian Akim Dydymov, who perished somewhere at sea in the North Pacific in 1888. As the century turned, those interested in the Far East and whaling stressed that such heroic ventures had relied, fatally, on an amateurish overenthusiasm and too little systematic knowledge.¹²

As a well-traveled military officer and amateur naturalist, Arsen'ev was uniquely familiar with the natural world of the Russian Far East (as

economic development.¹⁴ Arsen'ev's work and map represented the most comprehensive, dependable knowledge of the Far East's marine resources, one upon which a real, profitable, and relatively safe whaling industry could be built. Such expertise made Arsen'ev an ideal choice to assist the new Soviet state's efforts to make their Far Eastern oceans profitable.

To stimulate local initiative, in the early 1920s, Dal'rybokhota invited Russian subjects to submit sealed envelopes to the government office with plans to start whaling ventures. Remarkably, in this time of chaos, malnutrition, and widespread violence, a large number did just that. Some were ambitious charlatans, some were fronts for foreign capital, but the dozen or so applicants for government permission to whale the Far East show some of the restless energy unleashed by the collapsing imperial structures and the possibility of new futures. Arsen'ev, as the most knowledgeable member of Dal'rybokhota, scrutinized and rendered judgment on these proposals. In a crucial period, he levied tremendous influence on the shape of Soviet policy toward the oceans.

Arsen'ev did not enjoy unlimited control over these proposals' fates—he approved at least one that was later rejected by Moscow as being too entangled with American whaling interests. However, his written responses to the proposals demonstrate the range of concerns that informed late imperial and early Soviet attitudes toward whales and whalers, attitudes that demonstrate important continuities across the revolutionary divide.¹⁵ Arsen'ev worked out rules to govern the successful applicants' operations. These rules are often derived from longstanding Far Eastern concerns about conservation informed by a relentless historical series of marine mammal crashes and foreign predation. Reflecting the sense of environmental fatalism that also animates parts of his famous novel *Dersu Uzala*, and which Alexander Turbin details in this volume, Arsen'ev stressed the dangers of heedless exploitation.¹⁶ Primarily, he noted, “every whaling industry has been predatory, in the sense that whalers have destroyed all the animals in the first few years.”¹⁷ Russian whalers thus should not kill young animals or mother whales still with their offspring.¹⁸ However, Far Eastern geography and whale behavior made Arsen'ev pessimistic about the prospects for effective conservation. The whales swimming off Russian shores were migrating either northward to their feeding grounds or southward to Japan. Thus, the Japanese would kill them if Russians did not do the job themselves—the classical problem of managing migratory marine mammals around the world, here intensified by longstanding diplomatic difficulties with Japan.¹⁹

Arsen'ev did repeatedly caution against hunting near the several *zapovedniki* (nature preserves) in Kamchatka. The numbers of *zapovedniki* had expanded in the last years of the Russian empire and enjoyed Soviet support in the 1920s as important areas for the scientific study of "pristine" ecosystems that existed outside of human influence.²⁰ Arsen'ev's caution around nature preserves reflected his—and most Far Easterners'—primary historical experience, which involved the overharvest of smaller marine mammals, such as sea otters, sea lions, and walrus. This, in fact, was the reason that prospective whalers needed to avoid *zapovedniki*, as Arsen'ev feared the noise of harpoons would frighten the skittish and still-rare sea otters.²¹

Arsen'ev's concerns found their way into the instructions given to those citizens granted permission to hunt. Applicants were ordered not to anchor near sea otter or fur seal *zapuski* (areas where hunting had been temporarily banned), for fear they would scare the animals away. Furthermore, the Soviet government reserved the right to extend the *zapuski* at any time.²² One official (perhaps Arsen'ev) stressed that licenses should only be given out for long terms (ten to fifteen years) and that the first three years should be left as a *zapusk*, measures that would hopefully encourage interest in the longer-term health of the whale stocks. Whaling, in other words, was to be encouraged, but with significant cautions attached.²³

At times, the *zapovednik* concept extended past the rational use arguments relatively common to the time—and even beyond their unique Russian function as biological laboratories—to serve preservationist impulses.²⁴ Russian observers of the 1920s believed (wrongly it turned out) that the waters around Kamchatka and the Kurile Islands preserved the last examples of the sea otter species.²⁵ That remnant populations had survived here was a credit to farsighted imperial Russian conservation measures, but more was needed to save the species from extinction. In 1923 Kurile Islands fisheries inspectors recommended the animal be granted complete protection at the Cape Lopatka *zapovednik*, its last remaining Kamchatkan stronghold.²⁶ Such concerns long outlived Arsen'ev's tenure, and prohibitions on hunting whales around *zapovedniki* later applied to the new Soviet whaling fleet in the 1930s as well. Thus, despite a later history of gross excess, Russian whaling was imbued at its outset with some of the most progressive aspects of imperial conservation, though ones that privileged pinnipeds and other smaller marine mammals.

Arsen'ev's concerns for fur-bearing marine mammal protection informed other, more problematic, recommendations. For example, he



Figure 2. Bowhead whales swimming in Lindholm Bay. Photo by Vladislav Raevskii.

advised shooting and killing as many orcas (or killer whales) as possible, regardless of age. *Kasatki* (as they are known in Russian, a name taken from the Kamchadal term for the animal) were in Arsen'ev's view "tigers among the marine mammals, and should be extirpated everywhere, with whatever means, and whatever time of year."²⁷ This was another recommendation that found its way into later Soviet plans. In truth, killer whales are efficient predators of smaller marine mammals, and in the past may have been significant hunters of whales as well. Humans have rarely attempted to systematically eradicate orcas, though in the 1950s and 1960s Canadians attempted an extirpation of killer whales similar to the one Arsen'ev recommended.²⁸ Later, Soviet whalers would kill them opportunistically, before briefly turning in desperation to hunting the comparatively lean killer whales for their oil as other species declined. So, in the 1920s, Arsen'ev plan for eradicating orcas was in a sense ahead of its time, though he would be out of step with later ecological views about the importance of predators in maintaining prey populations.

Big Animals and "Little People"

Imperial—and Soviet—conservationists worried about something else too: The potential effects commercial whaling could have on the Far East's indigenous peoples, the so-called little people of the North who belonged formally to the Russian and Soviet empires.²⁹ It was assumed, quite rightly, that commercial whaling might harm them, especially by reducing their food sources. As an ethnographer reporting to Arsen'ev put it: "For the coastal natives, the marine mammal is everything. It gives them meat, habitation, food for their dogs, tea, sugar, etc."³⁰ This unnamed government official experienced the vulnerability of marine mammal hunters firsthand while stationed in Chukotka in 1925–1926. That winter, the wind shifted from southerly to northerly, blowing the sea ice onto shore and cutting the people off from the ocean and its creatures. Not only did the Chukchi begin to starve, but they got very cold since they were deprived of the seal oil they normally depended on for warmth.³¹ In light of the vagaries of the ice, this official urged that the catching of marine mammals be "left in native hands . . . in order that capitalist hunting does not destroy the natural resources before they have been studied."³² These concerns entered into practice as well. For example, one whaling petitioner, a Mr. Barykin, found his request turned down when he could not give reliable information on how his proposed venture would affect Far Eastern Indigenous people.³³

But the status quo was not acceptable either. The Chukchi presented problems to the Russians, as they sold most of the whale products they did not use for subsistence (mostly baleen) to American traders in the North Pacific. This contraband trade, conducted mostly at Diomed Island in the Bering Strait, proved impossible for the Soviets to stop because of the wide oceanic spaces involved and the excellent prices offered by the Americans.³⁴ This trade, according to Soviet commentators, did not benefit the Chukchi. They noted that, despite the increase in motorized boats and harpoon guns, the Chukchi were neither catching more marine mammals, including whales, nor was their own population increasing.³⁵ The reasons for the decline were several. First, the intensity of the indigenous hunt itself was reducing the numbers of marine mammals. Second, the rapacious Americans were killing far too many of the creatures. As a result, the Chukchi were now "sitting on their half-ruined floors, cursing all whites, and especially the Russians"—an outcome especially galling to the very Russians who thought of themselves as protectors of Chukchi interests.³⁶ Thus, the

Soviets needed a policy that would simultaneously conserve marine mammals, preserve Chukchi access to their food supplies, and chase out the foreigners who competed for them.

Despite the risks, then, it seemed imperative for political reasons that Russians become directly involved in Far Eastern whaling. As Dal'rybokhota officials wrote in 1921, the "hunting of marine mammals will without a doubt have great significance for the local natives . . . therefore it is essential that (commercial ventures) . . . have a pure Russian character."³⁷ The next year Dal'rybokhota laid out a more comprehensive vision when granting another applicant a six-year license to hunt marine mammals in Chukotka:

At the current time, when the waters of the furthest reaches of Far Eastern Asia are almost exclusively visited by ships sailing under foreign flags, when almost all commerce is held in the hands of foreign merchants and *promyshlenniki* [private entrepreneurs] and in some regions the local native population has not been able to see a Russian ship for several years—in order to avoid the strengthening of foreign influence, the appearance of pure Russian undertakings is absolutely necessary.³⁸

State-sponsored whaling ventures would edge out both American whalers and less-responsible Russians (*promyshlenniki*), who were presumed to be taking advantage of the Chukchi and other indigenous people. Such attitudes were entirely consistent with the broader pattern Sergey Glebov discerns in which imperial administrators saw Indigenous people as helpless victims of non-Russian ecological exploitation.³⁹

This calculus rested on one necessary assumption—that Russian ventures would be more ecologically responsible than American, "capitalist," whaling. One whaling applicant, a Mr. Korolev, appealed to just this line of thinking. He proposed bringing Russian whalers to "regions where American ships go unchecked and, without paying any duties, exterminate a mass of marine animals in our waters."⁴⁰ Indeed, there was no arguing with Americans' ecological failings. From the 1840s, they had eliminated huge numbers of right, bowhead, and gray whales in Far Eastern waters.⁴¹ Russian whalers' environmental records were still unproven. Perhaps, with the expertise and caution that Arsen'ev offered, they might do better, with better results for the Far East's Indigenous people.

In such a situation, support and even subsidies for Russian whalers seemed quite sensible. Yet the desperate Far Eastern government could

not afford much. One particularly expansive plan, brought forward by Graf Eremeev, to build a whaling station near Vladivostok, required the use of some government land then being used for growing hay. The Navy agreed to lend the land, but only on the promise that Eremeev deliver 300 *puds* of the finest hay to a nearby lighthouse every year.⁴² Given those costs, it is hardly surprising that no trace of Eremeev ever starting his whaling venture exists in the archives.

Other officials were readier to offer government support to whaling, in the hopes that it could offer immediate relief to some of the pressing problems Indigenous peoples' welfare posed to the new Soviet state. In a 1926 report to Da'rybokhota, Commissar K. Kulagin addressed the problems facing the Commander Islands, exceptionally remote, treeless islands that the Russians had settled with Aleutian Islanders in 1826 in order to hunt fur seals and sea otters. After the predictable crash in these animals' populations, effective conservation measures in the nineteenth century had cultivated a rebound. During the chaos of the late empire and the Civil War, these measures were abandoned, and the animals were again in serious decline. Japanese bandits were often blamed. Because of the environmental ruin, the Aleuts now faced unemployment and starvation.

Kulagin mooted the possibility of removing the Aleuts entirely from the Commanders, but if that were not an option, the multitude of whales swimming unmolested in the surrounding waters offered another solution. Though Russians at this time knew little of whales' potential uses, Kulagin assured them there would be many. Whale blubber would provide raw materials for Vladivostok's underutilized soap factories to produce exportable products earning hard currency—then a dominant concern for the new state. In addition, though Kulagin expected skepticism, whales could be turned into margarine—replacement for animal butters, he explained. This latter product could substitute for the expensive importation of pig fats then troubling the Soviet balance of trade. Export would be so lucrative, he thought, that any necessary machinery would pay for itself within a year. In the longer term, Soviet citizens could be weaned on to whale meat; Japanese palates, which enjoyed it fresh, salted, canned, pickled, and dried, could not be completely wrong. Having tried it himself, Kulagin thought whale meat compared favorably with veal. And, with enough whales, the Commander Island Aleuts would finally be free of expensive imported foods.⁴³ If Russians could just become a bit more like Chukchi and Japanese, they could create a new whaling tradition and find profitable ways through the chaos of the moment.

In a certain light, then, industrial Russian whaling could actually appear to some Soviets a solution at the same time to problems of foreign encroachment, economic crisis, conservation, and Indigenous welfare. Indeed, these problems and their solutions seemed intertwined. Government inspector, I.I. Gapanovich, saw cooperation with Kamchadals—and especially Chukchi—as the only readily available means for Russians to build their own whaling expertise and crowd out the American whalers. “A cooperative organization would be worth attention,” he wrote, “as it would promise both commercial profit and would allow the fulfillment of the government’s goals.”⁴⁴ Others also saw potential in the cooperation, not conflict, between modern and Indigenous whaling. While discussing the numerous plans being submitted in Vladivostok during the tumult of the revolution, one fisheries official, N. Rudin, noted in 1924 that companies that were allowed to hunt whales should be “required to leave the meat that remains on the processed whale carcass near places of local habitation for their use.”⁴⁵ Far from breaking with traditional Indigenous whaling in the Far East, a new Soviet venture could enhance this history and the well-being of those who depended on it.

Arsen’ev supported such initiatives as well, noting that there were many Indigenous peoples in the Far East who could benefit from increased consumption of whale meat; if done right, whaling could feed people while removing the predators of other useful species such as salmon and pinnipeds, and thus increasing their populations as well. Removing American whalers would help with all those goals as well.

This last goal, though, proved tricky to honor given the Soviet Union’s perilous financial state in the 1920s. Arsen’ev noted with dismay and not a little irritation upon receiving yet another proposal to hunt for marine mammals along the rivers of the Russian Far East that “according to rumors, [the proposers] are agents of the American Company Svenson, and are unlikely to contribute to the development of the economic well-being of the Russian Republic . . . but will work in America’s interest and to the detriment of the Russian riverside population.” In some cases, foreign connections were necessary to procure sufficient capital to embark upon significant, long-term ventures—Arsen’ev supported these as long as there were promises to employ a significant number of Russians—but he joined in the general condemnation of foreigners practicing “predatory” hunting.⁴⁶

In one respect Arsen’ev was an outlier. Although he expressed no real love for his East Asian neighbors—in fact, as Sergei Glebov details, he actively disliked the Chinese and Koreans⁴⁷—he downplayed fears of

increasing Japanese incursion into Far Eastern waters. There was growing anxiety that the Japanese would steal a march on the Russians and begin catching the whales along the Russian coast and even sometimes venture in Peter the Great Bay in Vladivostok. The Japanese already whaled near their own shores and had sent fur-sealers to Russian possessions at least up until the trade was banned by international convention in 1911. However, Arsen'ev thought fears of Japanese incursion significantly overblown for one simple reason—conveniently for the Japanese, North Pacific whales migrated from their feeding grounds in the Bering Sea past Russian shores and to Japan, arriving, as it were, at the doorstep of eager Japanese fishermen. What reason would they have for whaling in Russian waters, something that would only cost them more effort and fuel for the same result?⁴⁸

Plans in Action

Later, Soviets would perceive Arsen'ev's relationship with the Japanese as all too cozy. He was the personal friend of the Japanese ambassador and did hold a high view of Japan (in Hakodate he had written in his diary that the "order, cleanliness and quiet, politeness, and aspiration toward the good and elegant—all this provided such a stark contrast with our Russian dirtiness, chaos, and disorder").⁴⁹ The Bolsheviks posthumously convicted Arsen'ev of leading a Japanese spy ring.⁵⁰ The accusations were preposterous, but they signify a qualifying point to the argument that fundamental Soviet attitudes toward the ocean were laid down in this period. Soviet plans for the whaling industry sometimes took Arsen'ev's ideas in perverse and caricatured directions. Long after the Far East was secured from foreign influence, planners—and even some novelists who picked up the plume of Arsen'ev—would replay the days of the American and Japanese environmental scoundrels, even as the Soviets' own actions rivaled and then outdid anything from that admittedly terrible era.⁵¹ Almost none would heed Arsen'ev's prescient warning that no whale fishery had ever operated sustainably.

Even in those feverish days of the 1920s, the whaling ventures that erupted after the revolution seldom went off without problems. Making plans to whale was one thing; putting together the capital and expertise needed to successfully capture the leviathans was entirely different. A doomed first postrevolutionary attempt illustrated some of the dangers. In 1920, a group of entrepreneurs and government bureaucrats set sail on a motorized sloop named the *Diana* in order

to assess the possibility of catching whales in Far Eastern waters. The sloop's new engine quit while still in Peter the Great Bay, and the crew rerouted to Hakodate, Japan, where it docked for repairs. These included the strengthening of the mast, an evil portent. Temporarily fortified and having transferred most of its passengers to another ship, the twenty-one remaining men on board the *Diana* headed north for Kamchatka and into the Bering Strait. In October, the autumn storms, famous in the region, began to hit. Without a working engine, escape options were limited. The crew decided to head south for the Kuriles and Japan, but on November 8, a giant wave tore through the ship, washing the cargo and a Korean sailor, Ipondyu, off the deck and into the ocean, never to be seen again.⁵²

In the middle of November, the replacement rudder was lost, and the ship was now drifting more or less helplessly south into waters about which the crew knew almost nothing. Another monstrous wave smashed through the gunwales and threw the captain, I. Khudoleya, into the ocean and to his death. Now, food supplies began to dwindle, and the men faced reduced rations as they floated through increasingly tropical seas and past several islands, bereft of humans as far as they could tell. Finally, on January 16, 1921—more than seven months after setting sail—the *Diana* drifted near Guam, where American naval officials towed it to shore and provided food and medical care to the remaining crew.⁵³ Despite all the applications to Arsen'ev's office, no more Soviet attempts were made for another decade.

Instead, Dal'rybokhota, under the order of Far Eastern Republic head Jan Gamarnik (1923–1926), decided to grant a foreign concession to get whaling started. It had determined in 1923 that this strategy was necessary as “under the conditions of the moment this could give the Treasury greater benefits, both material and economic,” as long as the concessions were granted to solid foreign companies.⁵⁴ That year the Soviet Union signed a fifteen-year concessionary treaty with the Norwegian firm of Christian Christensen, Jr., based in the Norwegian whaling capital of Sandefjord. The agreement allowed the Norwegians to kill and process any species of whales within the twelve miles of territorial waters between Cape Serdtse-Kamen and Cape Lopatka the Soviets claimed as their own. Shore stations were envisioned as a possibility, though this would cost the Norwegians extra.⁵⁵ In the meantime, in exchange for the concession, the Soviet government was to receive 5 percent of any sales realized from whale products taken in Soviet waters. At first, the crew would consist entirely of Norwegian citizens, but the venture was conceived partly as a training ground for future

Soviet whalers, and within five years they were supposed to make up a quarter of the workforce.⁵⁶

Far Eastern officials were immediately nervous about the arrangement, complaining about the long period of the concession, the low payment demanded, and the need to keep a large security staff in case of violations. Some, including Arsen'ev, thought the concession should be delayed.⁵⁷ In 1925 though, the Norwegians took up the concession and began moving the floating factory "Commanderen" and four chaser boats (together termed the *Vega* fleet) to the Far East. Later that year the fleet arrived in Kamchatka, which surprised Soviet officials, who had thought it would first dock in Vladivostok or Khabarovsk, where higher Soviet officials could have handled the formalities.

Further misunderstandings plagued the concession until 1927, when it was revoked, thirteen years ahead of schedule. Historian A. T. Mandrik claims this was because the *Vega* did not bring enough profit to the Soviet government.⁵⁸ The Norwegians, meanwhile, stated that, due to constant Soviet harassment, they had wanted to give up the concession anyway. Otto Paust, one of the lead Norwegians, reported that the Soviets "lived in a childish fantasy" that led them to believe they could skim off endless profits from the concession and expect that it would continue; in short that they could "have their cake and eat it too." Paust also opined that Kamchatkan officials were jealous of the large share of the profits Moscow was taking, hinting at some of the regional concerns that drove the Soviet whaling history.⁵⁹

Interestingly, these were not the reasons the Soviets cited for discontinuing the concession. Instead, they referenced a host of ecological violations that largely reflected Arsen'ev's conception of proper resource management. *Izvestiia* reported on August 20, 1926, that the Soviet merchant fleet had discovered 100 carcasses of dead whales in Morzhovoi Bay. The gigantic, rotting whales were so thick in the water that they imperiled navigation in the area. "However," wrote *Izvestiia*, "the main thing here is how the dead whales had been killed completely pointlessly, as they were discovered unused." Secret internal reports outlined a "host of violations committed by the concessioners"—primarily ecological violations that included "the killing of young whales, unsanitary actions, throwing unused parts of the whales overboard," and so on.⁶⁰

Alongside these concerns for the impact whaling would have on the ocean (and other Russian activities), controversy about relations with the North Pacific's Indigenous people also erupted in ways that encapsulated the divergent strands of Western and Soviet understandings of

whaling and underlined whaling's geopolitical importance. Paust, the Norwegian who had criticized Kamchatkan graft, also expressed anger and puzzlement over Soviet relations with the Eskimos (Chukchi). He had the chance to meet several while whaling, and he found that they universally clamored for cartridges for their weapons. The Soviets, he claimed, had withheld them for fear of rebellion. These were deadly and even silly measures to take against "such a peaceful people such as the Eskimos" who, because they could not shoot marine mammals, were now starving. As a result, Paust willingly paid for Chukchi labor with the Norwegians' cartridges.⁶¹ There was another side to this story. Paust was ignorant of the long history of Chukchi resistance to Russian rule, and he was also—according to Soviets in the Far East—the actual cause of their current problems. "The whales of the Bering Strait zone of the Chukchi Peninsula," wrote the Committee for the Protection of the People of the North, "have gotten ever rarer in the last two years. The explanation for this, in large part, is that the concessionary firm *Vega* started whaling [in these waters] in 1925." In an extraordinary statement, the committee recommended the total closure of these waters to any modern whaling, both because of the declining number of whales and for the way the exploding harpoons scared off walruses.⁶² Thus, on the eve of the Soviet Union's first large-scale whaling venture—the *Aleut* fleet—local officials, at least, felt these waters could sustain no more carnage.

When two decades later the Soviet Union joined the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 1948, their delegates were instructed to fight for the rights of indigenous Soviet peoples to hunt grey whales, to ensure that all commercial hunting around Kamchatka and Chukotka be forbidden, and to insist on the full use of whale carcasses by all Commission members.⁶³ As the list shows, even as they were divorced in time and place from the Far East of the 1920s, the ideas most fully articulated by Arsen'ev long held sway among the whaling industry's planners. They also influenced Russian policy throughout the 1920s and even into the *Aleut* fleet, which sailed out of Vladivostok and into the North Pacific from 1933. In this way, Arsen'ev's emphasis on conservation and local knowledge outlasted the decline of such concerns in the late 1920s, when Stalinist central planners marginalized regional knowledge, or *kraevedenie*.⁶⁴ After World War II, Soviet whaling's Far Eastern legacy was sundered, as the industry expanded into the distant Antarctic. From the late 1950s Soviet whalers began illegally killing thousands of endangered whales around the world and lying about its cheating to the IWC.⁶⁵ In 1969 the Soviets shut down Chukotkans'

whaling and instead sent a ship of their own. The fears of 1920s Dal'rybkhota had been fully realized.

One of this story's implications, though, is that we cannot adequately understand Soviet environmental politics as reflective merely of the predilections of a high-modernist behemoth that cared nothing for the environmental damage it wrought.⁶⁶ In the case of whaling, at least, the tail that wagged this dog for several decades was the remote Far East, a region absorbed with its own historical problems and momentum. During the revolutionary era those problems revolved mostly around the perception of an urgent need to develop the region's maritime resources while protecting them from foreign predation and ensuring Indigenous well-being. Vladimir Arsen'ev was a prominent voice in the articulation and enactment of these ideas, even if they were only imperfectly realized and only persisted through the 1940s. Arsen'ev stepped only briefly into this pivot in place and time, but, in his quest for quiet, arguably his greatest impact on Russian—and global history—came not with *Dersu Uzala*, but with a few years of bureaucratic work in a temporary fisheries agency.

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Notes

1. The longer history of Russians' imagination of the Far East's natural world can be found in Marc Bassin, *Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Mark Sokolsky, "Taming Tiger Country: Colonization and Environment in the Russian Far East, 1860–1940" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2016).

2. See Yulia Ivashchenko, "Soviet Whaling: Past History and Present Impacts" (PhD diss., Southern Cross University, 2013). See also Ryan Tucker Jones, *Red Leviathan: The Environmental History of Russian Whaling* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, forthcoming).

3. V. G. Vinogradova, "V.K. Arsen'ev: Dokumenty o V.K. Arsen'ev," [Vladimir Arsen'ev: Documents on V.K. Arsen'ev] *Dal'nyi Vostok* 2 (1961), 110–126, 165; A. A. Khisamutdinov, *Vladivostok: Etudi k istorii starogo goroda* [Vladivostok: Studies on the History of the Old City] (Vladivostok: Izdatel'stvo Dal'nevostochnogo universiteta, 1992), 279, 280, 48.

4. A. A. Khisamutdinov, "Vladimir Arsen'ev: His Work, Colleagues, and Family," *Sibirica* 19, no.3, 1–14.
5. Khisamutdinov, *Vladivostok*, 280.
6. John Stephan, *The Russian Far East: A History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 170.
7. A. T. Mandrik, *Istoriia rybnoi promyshlennosti rossiiskogo Dal'nego Vostoka* [History of the Fisheries of the Russian Far East] (Vladivostok, Dal'nauka, 1994), 69.
8. Stephan, *The Russian Far East*, 147, 149.
9. Albert Parry, "Washington B. Vanderlip, the 'Khan of Kamchatka,'" *Pacific Historical Review* 17, no. 3 (August 1948): 311–330, here 312.
10. Mandrik, *Istoriia rybnoi promyshlennosti*, 91.
11. I. Liulke, "Na kurse—Vladivostok," [On course to Vladivostok] in *Antarktika za Kormoi* [Antarktika Astern], ed. V. P. Shcherbatiuk (Vladivostok: Izdatel'stvo Morskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta imeni admiral G.I. Nevel'skogo, 2014): 368–370, here 369.
12. N. V. Sliunin, *Promyslovye bogatstva Kamchatki, Sakhalina, i Komandorskikh Ostrovov: Otchet za 1892–1893 gg* [Fishing riches of Kamchatka, Sakhalin and the Commander Islands: Report from 1892 – 1893] (St. Petersburg: Tip V. Kirshbaum, 1895), 93, 94, 95.
13. Jonathan Slaght, "Arsen'ev's Lament: Primory'e's Wildlife a Hundred Years Ago and Today," *Sibirica* 19, no. 3, 79–89.
14. Sliunin, *Promyslovye bogatstva*, 2.
15. An argument also made in Andy Bruno, *The Nature of Soviet Power: An Arctic Environmental History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
16. Aleksandr Turbin, "'Deception begins with trade . . .': Vladimir Arsen'ev's Economic Expertise and Challenges of Rationalizing Imperial Diversity in the Taiga," *Sibirica* 19, no. 3, 37–59.
17. "Instruktsiia o poriadke proizvodstva kit . . .," 1924, GAPK, R-66, Op. 4, No. 85, 163.
18. "Instruktsiia o poriadke proizvodstva kit . . .," 1924, GAPK, R-66, Op. 4, No. 85, 167. On relations with Japanese fishermen, see Eisuke Kaminaga, "Maritime History and Imperiology: Japan's 'Northern Fisheries' and the Primar Governor-Generalship," in *Imperiology: From Empirical Knowledge to Discussing the Russian Empire*, ed. Matsuzato Kimitaka (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2007): 259–273.
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20. Douglas Wiener, "Community Ecology in Stalin's Russia: 'Socialist' and 'Bourgeois' Science," *Isis* 75, no. 4 (December 1984), 685.
21. "Instruktsiia o poriadke proizvodstva kit . . .," 1924, GAPK, F. 633, Op. 4, No. 85, 6.
22. "Instruktsiia o poriadke proizvodstva kit . . .," 1924, GAPK, R-66, Op. 4, No. 85, 25.

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24. On the creation and role of *zapovedniki* in imperial and Soviet Russia, see Douglas Weiner, *Models of Nature: Ecology, Conservation, and Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).
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27. "Instruksiia o poriadke proizvodstva kit . . .," 1924, GAPK, F. 633, Op. 4, No. 85, 163.
28. See Jason Colby, *Orca: How We Came to Know and Love the Ocean's Greatest Predator* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
29. For a full treatment of Soviet relations with the indigenous peoples of the Arctic, see Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).
30. "Otchety i informatsionnye materialy o promysle morskikh zveri, 1925–1926," GAPK, F. 633, Op. 4, No. 85, 46.
31. GAPK, F. 633, Op. 4, No. 85, 35.
32. "Otchety i informatsionnye materialy o promysle morskikh zveri, 1925–1926," GAPK, F. 633, Op. 4, No. 85, 6.
33. GAPK F. 633, Op. 4, No. 100, 54.
34. "Otchety i informatsionnye materialy o promysle morskikh zveri, 1925–1926," GAPK, F. 633, Op. 4, No. 85, 44.
35. Sliunin, *Promyslovye bogatstva*, 10.
36. "Otchety i informatsionnye materialy o promysle morskikh zveri, 1925–1926," GAPK, F. 633, Op. 4, No. 85, 45.
37. GAPK, F. 633, Op. 4, No. 100, 50.
38. GAPK, F. 633, Op. 4, No. 100, 64.
39. Sergey Glebov, "The Political Ecology of Vladimir Arseniev," *Sibirica* 19, no. 3, 15–36.
40. GAPK, F. 633, Op. 4, No. 100, 66.
41. Albert Parry, "Yankee Whalers in Siberia," *Russian Review* 5, no. 2 (1946): 36–49.
42. GAPK, F. 633, Op. 4, No. 100, 82. A *pud* is the equivalent of approximately 16.38 kg.
43. "Doklad nachal'nika komandorskikh pushnykh promyslov K. Kulagina, 26. Sentiabria, 1926," GAPK, F. 633, Op. 5, No. 18, 1, 2.
44. "Stat'ia I.I. Gapanovich," GAPK F. 633, Op. 5, No. 6, 24.
45. "Instruksiia o poriadke proizvodstva kit . . .," 1924, GAPK, 633, Op. 4, No. 85, 25.
46. "Doklad," April 7, 1921, GAPK, F. 633, Op. 4, No. 100, 42.

47. Stephan, *The Russian Far East*, 212; Sergei Glebov, "The Political Ecology of V.K. Arsen'ev."

48. "Tezisy i plan rabot. Uboi morskogo zveriiia (Kitobraznikh), 1923," GAPK, F. 633, Op. 4, No. 100, 163.

49. Arsen'ev, *Dnevnik*, 7–9 May 1918, Archive of the Society for the Study of the Amur Region (OIAK), 1.

50. Amir Khisamutdinov, *The Russian Far East: Historical Essays* (Honolulu: Khisamutdinov, 1993); Khisamutdinov, "Vladimir Arsen'ev: His Work, Colleagues, and Family," *Sibirica* 19, no. 3, 1–14.

51. For example, the whaling trilogy of the Vladivostok novelist A. A. Vakhov. A. A. Vakhov, *Tragediia Kapitana Ligova* (Magadan: Oblastnoe Knizhnoe Izdatel'stvo, 1955); A.A. Vakhov, *Shtorm Ne Utikhaet* (Magadan: Magadanskoe Knizhnoe Izdatel'stvo, 1957); A.A. Vakhov, *Fontany na Gorizonte* (Magadan: Magadanskoe Knizhnoe Izdatel'stvo, 1958).

52. GAPK, F. 633, Op. 4, No. 100, 46 ob.

53. GAPK, F. 633, Op. 4, No. 100, 47.

54. GAPK, F. 633, Op. 2, No. 31, 23.

55. "Kontsesionnyi dogovor," GAPK, F. 633, Op. 5, No. 3, 2.

56. "Kontsesionnyi dogovor," GAPK, F. 633, Op. 5, No. 3, 3.

57. Letter to Dalryba, August 1923, GAPK, F. 633, Op. 5, No. 3, 5–6, 10.

58. Mandrik, *Istoriia rybnoi promyshlennosti*, 131.

59. GAPK, F. 633, Op. 7, No. 19, pp 39 ob, 40.

60. GAPK, F. 633, Op. 7, No. 19, 70.

61. GAPK, F. 633, Op. 7, No. 19, 40.

62. GAPK, F. 653, Op. 7, No. 19, 53; the committee specifically recommended forbidding "capitalist" whaling.

63. "Instruktsiia delgatam na Mezhdunarodnuii Konferentsiiu," RGAE, F. 9242, Op. 1, No. 324, 66.

64. Victoria Donovan, "'How Well Do You Know Your *Krai*?' The *Kraevedenie* Revival and Patriotic Politics in late Khrushchev-Era Russia," *Slavic Review* 74, no. 3 (Fall, 2015): 464–483, here 472; Marina Loskutova, "'Nauku oblastnogo masshtaba': Ideia estestvennykh raionov v Rossiiskoi geografii i istoki kraevedcheskogo dvizheniia 1920-x gg," *Ab Imperio* 2 (2011): 83–121.

65. Yulia V. Ivashchenko and Phillip J. Clapham, "Too Much Is Never Enough: The Cautionary Tale of Soviet Illegal Whaling," *Marine Fisheries Review* 76, no. 1–2 (June 2014): 1–21.

66. As Paul Josephson argues in *Industrialized Nature: Brute Force Technology and the Natural World* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2002) and elsewhere.