

The Itelmen of Kamchatka. Too far to RIO

Dmitry Berezhkov,
Raipon Vice-President.
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About the Itelmens.

The Itelmens are one of the smallest indigenous peoples in the world. There are 3,193 Itelmen living in Russia today and Kovran is the only one community where they form a majority of the population. Three hundred and thirty people live in the village of Kovran and it is known as the “Capital of the Itelmen World.”

The Itelmens are the most ancient people of Kamchatka, the large peninsula in the Russian Far East. The oldest Itelmen settlements discovered by archaeologists show that there were already Itelmens living in Kamchatka some 15,000 years ago. The Itelmen word Itenmen means “living here.” The Itelmens’ language is rapidly disappearing. There are only a few people still alive who can speak it. The main language of communication is now Russian.

The main occupation of the Itelmens since ancient times has been fishing, mostly salmon and smelt fishing. Fish used to represent year-round nutrition for the Itelmens, and the Kamchatka peninsula is one of the richest fisheries on the planet. Huge salmon and smelt populations come to the rivers of Kamchatka in the summer. The sea shelf is rich in crab, halibut, cod, pollock, etc.

During the summer, the Itelmens used to catch and dry the fish, and sour it in special pits for the long winter ahead. For smelt fishing, they would use the dodgy devices that trap the fish without human intervention. Sometimes the Itelmens would go hungry in the springtime, when the summer fish stores had been consumed over the long winter. The soured fish was used mainly for the dogs because they were the only form for transport. The Itelmens also hunted seals along the seashore and bears in the forests. Another of the main features of Itelmen culture was the gathering of local plants. They were great experts in the use of local plants for food and traditional medicine. They developed pottery and built large earth houses in which several families would live at a time. The summer would be spent in fishing camps where they built their high balagans – summer lodgings. Their main holidays were the spring celebration of the first fish when the salmon first appear in the rivers and then the great fall holiday, Alhalalalay, dedicated to giving thanks to the Earth for its gifts to the people.

Their history.

Historically, the Itelmens lived across the whole territory of Kamchatka. Russians began to arrive in the peninsula at around the end of the 17th century. Because of conflicts, new diseases

and assimilation, the Itelmens population declined dramatically throughout the 20th century, as did their indigenous territories. Today, they live mostly in the small territory of North West Kamchatka. In the 1960s, a new disaster befell the Itelmens population. The Soviet authorities forcibly closed hundreds of indigenous settlements in the Russian North and Siberia, including many Itelmens' communities. Thousands of people left their Motherland.

Kovran village is located in North West Kamchaka, four kilometres from the Okhotsk Sea. Itelmens from many villages around were forcibly resettled here. Six hundred and fifty people lived here at the end of the Soviet era, mainly Itelmens. The local Kovran River is not so rich in salmon but has the greatest population of smelt in West Kamchatka.

The state fishing farm "Krasny Oktyabr" was situated here in Soviet times and supported the social services, culture and agriculture of the village. During the hot summer fishing season, all of Kovran's population would work on the state farm as fishermen and workers. In the 1970s, however, the main state farm facilities were relocated to the neighboring city of Ust-Khayrusovo, some 20 kilometers to the south, on the coast, where there is a sea port for the big fishing boats. More than 3,000 people lived in Ust-Khayrusovo and the population would increase substantially during the summer. This was a typical industrial fishing city with a large Russian population. Fish production subsequently closed down in Kovran but, every summer until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, fishing teams from "Krasny Oktyabr," consisting of the local Itelmen people, would go to work on the Kovran River.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the state farm was privatized by its management but continued fishing and supporting the social life of Kovran village. This was a condition set by the local authorities in return for which the company received its fishing quotas. After a few years, however, the company collapsed and the moneymakers of the new business generation began to appear. The first thing they did was to terminate Kovran village's social program. The Kovran agricultural farm immediately went bankrupt and, after a while, the local hospital and boarding school for indigenous children closed as well. The Itelmens began to learn how to survive without any state support.

Sustainable development.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the local people decided to organize their own local fish enterprise known as "Kavral." This involved fishermen who had worked on the state farm during Soviet times. They started to fish for themselves on their native river and delivered 50 percent of their catch to the factories in Ust-Khayrusovo in order to freeze it. They would receive 50 percent of the frozen fish back, which they then sold to the ships that buy fish all along the Kamchatka coast.

The Kavral enterprise began to support the local culture. Itelmen cultural supporters revived the ceremony of the ancient Alhalalalay holiday of giving thanks to Mother Earth. Gradually, the celebration became famous in Kamchatka. Many outsiders now wanted to visit the

community and participate in the celebrations. Groups of tourists from other regions of Russia and from abroad would visit Kovran to experience the native traditional food, see the nature and study the ancient Itelmen culture.

In 1998, the new Regional Governor signed an Act establishing the first special Territory of Traditional Nature Use in Russia, “Thsanom,” which included the traditional Itelmen land around Kovran. This Act was highly innovative for Russian legislation, with the territory being governed by the Itelmens themselves.

The main aim of creating the “Thsanom” territory was to protect the environment, as well as to develop the traditional Itelmen economy – fishing, hunting, sea hunting, forest harvesting, etc. The Russian branch of WWF and regional environmental organizations supported this initiative. Several members of the Itelmen community gained the status of public environmental inspectors from the regional government (Department of Ecology). The community began to develop a network of environmental posts, including field radios and transportation, where public inspectors could stay for longer or shorter periods of time in order to monitor the territory but where they could also engage in traditional livelihood activities. An ethno-information center was established and this commenced educational activities on the environmental program for the local population.

At the same time, and maybe as a consequence of increased beer consumption in Russia, dry salted smelt became one of the most popular snacks in the country. The prices paid for the community’s fish started to rise. At the end of the 1990s, the community decided to build its own fish factory to process the fish in Kovran village. The governor supported the idea and the community received state support to buy the equipment. This was a time of discussions about sustainable development for the Itelmen people. They began to build the fish factory but did not have time to finish it.

Challenges for sustainable development.

The Kovran River has no rich salmon resources, so for a long time the river was of no interest to the bigger commercial fishing companies. Following the rise in the price of smelt fish, however, big business began to turn its attention to the river. In 2003, the authorities suddenly decided to open up the most lucrative part of the river, near Kovran, to commercial fishing. This is also the traditional fishing place of the Itelmens, as it is the only place in the river where fishing is profitable. And it was opened up not to Kavral, as the traditional user of the river, but to the big fishing company “Ivning Star” from the biggest regional city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. The local people were forced to find work with the new owners of the river. In 2008, the Kamchatka authorities organized commercial tenders to rent out rivers for up to 25 years and the tender for the Kovran River was won by another large company. The local Kavral enterprise also participated in the tender but lost, as it had no fish factory. Once the commercial exploitation of the Kovran River had begun, the stocks of smelt fish decreased dramatically.

Ill comes often on the back of worse. The new governor, appointed in 2001, who was a geologist and the head of the largest regional gold mining company, Koryakgeoldobycha, exploited a loophole in the Federal Law on Territories of Traditional Nature Use from 2001 to rescind the Regional Act on the “Thsanom” Territory of Traditional Nature Use, thereby undermining the self-governance of Itelmen on their native territory. In addition, since 2008, oil companies have begun drilling on the sea shelf near the village and have begun to search for oil and gas along the shores all around the small Itelmen community.

The village has begun to die. The population has once again dwindled. Some have passed away, while other highly-skilled individuals – doctors, teachers, who are mainly not indigenous, - have escaped Kovran in search of a better life elsewhere. Most of the male population has no job. Alcoholism has increased dramatically. The suicide rate is 12 times higher than the Russian average, which is already one of the worst in the world.

The hopes for sustainable development.

The leaders of the Itelmen people are continuing their struggle for their native river, their lands and the right to a traditional way of life. They have lost all their court cases aimed at overturning the governor’s decision to rescind the Act on the “Thsanom” Territory, along with all the court cases against commercial fishing companies over the one single fishing place on the Kovran River. Big business intimidates the indigenous activists; the authorities sometimes put them in prison.

Nevertheless, throughout all these years, the indigenous leaders of the Itelmen have continued to write letters, organize village gatherings, pursue their work in court, make complaints etc., and, in all these years, the indigenous folklore group Elvel has continued to celebrate the fall holiday of Alhalalalay, giving thanks to Mother Earth for her gifts.

In 2012, official experts from the Fish Science Institute banned commercial smelt fishing on the river because of the catastrophic decline in the smelt population on the Kovran River. This is a small victory for the indigenous community, as they have been writing letters to the authorities for many years about the depletion of the river. Nevertheless, this prohibition is temporary, for one year only. The next step has to be taken by the new governor who was appointed in 2011. He has no background in geology or in commercial fishing and he could ban large-scale fishing on the river. The Itelmen people’s hopes now lie with him.