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ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY TAKES TO THE FIELD



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In August, environmental historian [Nicholas Breyfogle](#) left the library behind and embarked upon the first leg of a challenging far-flung adventure, which he hopes will become a model for the way environmental history is studied.

Breyfogle, Mershon affiliate and associate professor of history, is part of a new network of cross-disciplinary, transnational researchers who are exploring three of the most interesting ecological and human sites in the former Soviet Union: the Solovetskie Islands, Chernobyl and Lake Baikal.

"Each site represents a very distinct and important ecological region and presents different sets of questions about the human-environment relationships over time, challenging us to apply new ways of thinking and research," Breyfogle said.

The four-year project, funded by Great Britain's Leverhulme Trust, "is designed to expand significantly our understandings of Russian environmental history and resource use — topics that are of tremendous importance today," Breyfogle said. "Russia, with its vast landscapes, forests, water reserves, minerals, and oil and gas, will be a determining player in how our planet and the humans on it change in the coming years."

The team's first trip this August was to the Solovetskie islands in the White Sea just south of the Arctic Circle. For centuries, the archipelago has been home to fishing communities and monasteries and is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

"These islands offered us rich materials to investigate the complex relationships between an Arctic climate, geology, and nature on the one hand; and state, society, religion, and resource extraction (especially fishing and lumber) on the other.

"Solovki is a marvelous and unique natural museum of northern ecologies," Breyfogle said. "Within just a few miles of each other, one can come into contact with climates and ecosystems that on the mainland would be many hundreds of kilometers apart: pseudo-tundra, forest-tundra, and taiga, along with swamps and lakes."

The researchers represent diverse fields — history, geography, environmental sciences, and economics — and six cooperating universities in three countries—the United States, Great Britain, and Russia.

"The field-work component is unusual for historical work, which typically relies on the use of archives and libraries, but environmental history, more than any other historical subfield, can't only be studied from a desk," Breyfogle said. "We need to get our boots muddy, see the sites, smell the smells, clamber over rocks, get bitten by mosquitoes, and perhaps wander through a little radiation."

Lessons from Chernobyl

During 2014-15, the researchers travel to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in Ukraine to work on the site of one of the great environmental disasters of the 20th century.

"By shutting off this area to human habitation — now more than 25 years later — this great laboratory exists, which may provide an opportunity to see and understand broader patterns of nature and the long-term impacts of such disasters," Breyfogle said. "As the world contemplates its future sources of energy, understanding the history of the nuclear option is essential."

In 2015-16, Breyfogle will coordinate work on the third and final site: Lake Baikal, the oldest (25 million years) and deepest (more than a mile down) lake in the world and the topic of his forthcoming Mershon-supported book project, *Baikal: the Great Lake and its People*.



Lake Baikal — vast enough to be called a sea; indeed the Russian people refer to it as "the sacred sea" — holds one-fifth of all the surface, liquid freshwater on the planet, more than all the Great Lakes combined.

It was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996; the UNESCO website notes: "Known as the 'Galapagos of Russia,' its age and isolation have produced one of the world's richest and most unusual freshwater faunas, which is of exceptional value to evolutionary science." Among hundreds of endemic species is one of the few populations of freshwater seals on earth.

Baikal has been an important religious center for millennia and since the 17th century has been a site for exploration and scientific research. For much of the 20th century, it has been the focal point in Russia for local environmental activism and conservation efforts.

"This surprises a lot of people because nature protection and Russia are not usually associated with each other in the American mind," Breyfogle said. "But, at the end of the nineteenth century, the Russians were among the first to set aside large areas to study and preserve as examples of their diverse habitat and — unlike many other places — were off limits to the public. This served as a model for others — New Zealand's marine conservation work along its coasts and the UN's Biosphere approach are just two examples.

More information

For more information, visit the project website: <http://www.york.ac.uk/history/research/majorprojects/russiasenvironmentalhistory>

Read Breyfogle's blog posts and view stunning photos that chronicle his trek through Russia's Solovetskie Islands this past August: <https://u.osu.edu/breyfogle.1>

More information about environmental history at Ohio State can be found at <http://history.osu.edu/constellations#environment>. The growing strength of environmental history is evidenced in the history department's new faculty hires and a just completed two-year program at the Center For Historical Research on "Health, Disease, and Environment in World History," <http://chr.osu.edu/program/2011-2013>

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