# KenArt – European Culture Bridge International Project

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What is it about Russia that catches the world's interest? Its positive image is shaped not by the number of oil wells and gas fields, but primarily by its cultural and natural heritage. At present Russia has only a few territories that have had their heritage preserved as completely and comprehensibly as possible. One of these places is the Kenozero National Park.

In their everyday life people of Kenozero preserve their traditions, way of life, faith and morals. In other words, all that we call culture. The genuine scenic environment and its spiritual relationship with people allow it to withstand the stranglehold of mass culture that is breaking apart traditions, depreciating values and creating a loss of identity today. Unfortunately, the shift in moral guidelines today is giving way to the formation of a consumer-based society with a distorted self-conscience. We should be alarmed by the number of young people that say they could not care less about what country they live in. This is why our most important goal is creating society that will see culture preservation as being vital.

The park pays great attention to preserving culture as the foundation for the rebirth of a traditional habitat and for creating new economic conditions that provide business and jobs for the people. The park houses over one-hundred wood and stone works of art and the museum fund has more than seven thousand movable monuments that echo the uniqueness of the traditional culture of the indigenous peoples living in Kenozero National Park. The museum's main collection is based on objects of anthropology from the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century. A collection of art work from the 17th-18th centuries holds the unique ''Northern Letters.'' The renowned Kenozero ''Heavens'' (chapel and church prayer-hall ceilings depicting scenes from the Bible) have a special place in the museum's collection. These extraordinary examples of monumental works of art in wooden churches, similar to nothing else around the world, have been preserved in Kenozero in considerably large quantities. The 16 “Heavens” is the largest collection in Russia.

Besides cultural artifacts, there is a spiritual culture as well. The Russian North has always been famous for its oral folk creativity: folk tales, songs and stories. Unfortunately, this layer of culture has been lost. Folklore, a traditional applied craft that characterizes Kenozero's spiritual culture, let one conceptualize the territory's uniqueness in its entire cultural importance. It is worth, however, paying special attention to the monuments of wooden architecture as the most fragile and vulnerable part of Russian cultural heritage that is on the verge of extinction.

More than eighty per cent of the churches registered before the October Revolution have been destroyed. By the end of the 20th century, monuments of wood architecture were dropping like flies. If this trend is not stopped, then, according to many well-known Russian scholars, preserving cultural heritage in ten to fifteen years will become an issue of national security, of national preservation. Inaction will undeniably lead to these folk works of architecture, bright spots in Russian and global culture, vanishing from the face of the earth. We are the last generation that can fulfill our truly state goal of saving our heritage.

Meanwhile, in Norway, where monuments of wood architecture have been preserved, they realize that their wood architecture is an object of national pride that attracts tourists from the world over, because these kinds of monuments stand out for their high-grade of artistic merit and the only other place they exist is Russia (M.I. Milchik).

Only around twenty outdoor museums in Russia today house wooden architecture monuments. In the 1980s, the scientific community pin its hopes on national parks as a new and progressive tool for preserving territories in Russia and as an advanced way for preserving cultural and natural heritage. Who could have known then that at the dawn of the 1990s national parks would be founded in mass and a different era would come along.

Kenozero National Park, nonetheless, has clearly proved that preserving cultural heritage in a national park's structure is the most progressive and forward thinking way for maintaining Russian culture by comparison with artificial outdoor museums created to do the same thing. This lets cultural heritage preserve not just separate monuments of material culture in their own historical environment, but other valuable landscape treasures as well.

Besides, cultural heritage preserves one's memory of history that no nation can live without. Remembering the past helps foster patriotism and tolerance, especially among youth. Plus, it is an extremely important social factor and resource for developing isolated territories that usually have national parks serving as the only source of knowledge for new generations on traditional folk culture and architecture. Not forgetting the past is also a very important, informative aspect in having sustainable tourism. Having extremely valuable assets of cultural history in Kenozero National Park makes it one of the most attractive places to visit for tourists.

Since the park was opened in 1991, some unique structures have been brought back to life, plus new approaches and principles are being used to restore monuments by combining traditional joiner craft and modern restoration methods. In the middle of the 1990s, an arduous period in the country's history, the Norwegian government rendered priceless financial, technical and human aid, becoming the Park's main sponsor of restoration work on its most unique memorials.

For many years now, Kenozero National Park has been carrying out projects to preserve and revive crafts and trade, folklore traditions, customary ceremonies and festivities that a full spiritual life is meaningless without. Culture is a truly valuable social factor, a strategic source of development. As it so happens, culture projects based on traditions are usually a way for overcoming an economic crisis. Therefore, culture programmes bring together both culture and economy.

The KenArt European Culture Bridge, made possible together with the Valash Outdoor Museum (Czech Republic), Archipelago NGO (Estonia) and Machaon International (Slovakia), is one of such projects. Its conceptual idea is tied to the bridge, a symbol of cultural links and partnership. The project's events brandish Kenozero's cultural wealth and diversity, unite Russian and foreign artists, architects, sculptors, musicians, experts and curators.

It is not fortuitous that Kenozero was selected to implement this project. The Park has been able to preserve the Russian countryside, something that unfortunately has been lost in other territories. All of us know that the Russian northern countryside is at the heart of our culture. At present many features of cultural identity among people living in villages have disappeared, particularly the architectural features that are now inherent to all but a few buildings scattered in various villages. Thus, one of the main events in the project is the founding of the ''Kenozero Biryulki Park of Architecture'' (Vladimir Dal’s dictionary of Russian language defines Biryulki as not just toys, but decorations as well).

We decided to amass the most characteristic examples of monuments within a five-hectare site while focusing on lost structures. Miniature copies of all buildings, both civilian and ceremonial will be on display; they will be built in full compliance with all canons of joinery craft. Having miniature copies lets one take a peek inside the structures and see the principle items of everyday folk life. This future exhibition is unique as nowhere else in Russia there is a museum of miniature copies, let alone copies made to be as close to their original as possible. We are in no way supplanting the original structures, rather giving people a perception of these monuments. We are embarking on a new and very promising area in the studying, interpretation and rejuvenation of our heritage. We would like to point out that all but the first items of the exhibit will be built as part of the KenArt European Culture Bridge Project.

Another important event implemented within the project’s framework will be the ''Northern Equator Landscape Theatre Land-Art Exposition,'' built on integrating tradition and innovation. Land-art is based on using real landscapes as the main artistic material and object. The main character in this upcoming theatre is the landscape, while the artists' goal is to form communicative art objects and delicately reveal nature's assets. In 2008 the Park held International Land-Art Symposium called ''The Reflection''. The event ended in having striking sculptures made from natural materials placed next to the first refurbished water mill in North-West Russia, thus recreating the traditional landscape and filling it with a new harmony.

As industrial production was developing in the 20th century, most farm industries and trades died out, but Kenozero has preserved this unique piece of culture. As part of the KenArt European Culture Bridge, Kenozero residents were treated to a series of seminars and workshops with specialists well-known in the North. These specialists set out to teach local residents wanting to obtain an extra source of income how to make souvenirs and host tourists at their homes. The traditional Uspensky fair in the village of Vershinino hosted a record number of participants, specialists and folklore groups this year. Moreover, a film on Kenozero and recording piece by the Kenozerochka folklore group from Uct-Poch were completed. What's more, collections of customary theatrical costumes for three of the Park's folklore groups were assembled.

Park employees, local residents and project partners in May took a trip to the Czech Republic where they met the Valash Museum management. The participants also saw firsthand the revival of folk society customs, preservation of traditional industries and trades, got a glimpse of the museum's exhibit and scholarly work, its restoration and use of wood architecture monuments, the acquisition of the museum funds and much more. During their trip they had meetings and discussions with employees working in the Czech Republic's culture sector organizations and with the region's municipal authorities. The participants also visited the ancient Bouzov castle and took part in folklore programmes and festivals. The importance of this trip for both countries was stressed by Yan Krist, the Director of the National Institute of Czech Folk Culture, who said that ever since the Soviet Union fell twenty years ago, his institute has never had a delegation visit from Russia, as mainly cooperation was carried out with western countries. But, as he also said, they have not lost any interest in Russian culture and the people who work to preserve and revive it.

In August the Park held the Kenozero Art Exhibition for partners, journalists, and Russian national park and museum administrators, as well as the winners of the Northern Equator Landscape Theatre sketch contest from Russia and Europe. The guests were shown Kenozero's natural and cultural heritage, the Park's traditional-culture revival and architectural-and-natural-monument preservation activities and the National Park's interaction with local population.

The Park's work in developing sustainable tourism received high marks from tourism-industry specialists during a public-relations tour given to journalists and tour operators. At the moment, a new website for the park is being developed, while later on there will be a training workshop held in Estonia and a press tour. The project will finish with a large festival in July 2010 that will bring together artists, architects, sculptors, musicians, experts and curators from Europe and Russia.

Why do we do this? We would like to see the comments of Boris Shergin, an outstanding writer, about the power of traditions in the Russian North that he made in the 1920s remain relevant to this very day. He said: ''a married Russian peasant woman agreed to have her dress knitted like those in French magazines, but she never said to remove the brocaded wreath from her head, for it is a woman's wreath! This is not our decision!'' This historically makes perfect sense for the Russian North. The Arkhangelsk region never knew serfdom, which allowed peasant culture to dominate, and up until the 18th century remained the only window to Europe, embracing western progress in engineering while still staying true to the laws and legacy of their ancestors. This is what we as the heirs of Russian culture need to preserve by combining Russian traditions and western innovation. Now that we are in the 21st century, we must change our thinking about Russian culture and adapt it to the current social-economic conditions. Implementing the cultural programmes is one of the ways in fulfilling a sustainable-development policy.

The KenArt European Culture Bridge Project's advantage is in its partnership. Our friends and colleagues from Maсhaon International (Slovakia) NGO are carrying out international projects to preserve and promote cultural and natural diversity across the world. Machaon is not only a brave warrior from Greek mythology, but a beautiful butterfly as well. This helpless little animal, on the one hand, symbolizes the fragility of the world's wildlife. On the other hand, as the ancient Chinese proverb says, this butterfly can change the course of events on the other side of the world with one flap of its wings. Thanks to Machaon International, we met our new partners from the Valash Outdoor Museum and Archipelаgo.

The Valash Museum is a truly alive museum, one of the largest and oldest outdoor museums in Europe. At eighty-five years running, the museum preserves customary use of its natural resources, architecture and the Moravia life-style. We admire their employees' respect for what they do and for the museum visitors. The highest professional level of the museum can be defined by one word – love. Love for their culture, work, land and country.

Our Estonian partners have vast experience in international projects for environmental protection, cultural-landscape restoration, sustainable-tourism development, preserving traditional industries and trades and reviving village populations. They also work a great deal with local people wherever they are.

The concept of preserving the unity of culture and nature – maintaining the traditional cultural landscape – is also a founding part of Kenozero National Parks operations. There is an obvious connection between the necessity to preserve natural and cultural heritage and the ability to use them as a resource for social-economic development in the area. However, a balance needs to be found between preserving and using this heritage. Each of the Park's activities involves cooperation with the local population. The best approach for us is when a national park becomes the initiator and center for carrying out a sustainable-living strategy for the local population. Involving local people in the Park's operations is neither a fad nor homage to a certain trend, but the realization that a territory's sustainability is possible only when one preserves the key factor in the formation of Kenozero's heritage – its people. The local community must return to the position of being one in charge, in other words being responsible for their own land and fate, being involved in the problem-solving processes, overcoming passiveness and the endless expectation of help ''from above.''

Getting the local population involved in a system of joint management of the territory is a long and arduous process and so far not everything has been going as well as it could. Kenozero National Park's founding coincided with the fall of the Soviet Union and the fundamental shift to a market economy that ushered along a social-economic crisis in the agriculture and forestry, two traditional industries for the local population during the Soviet era. Massive job layoffs across the territory followed as a result of a drop in wood, paper and agricultural production. The living situation got much worse across the board, people felt hopeless about the future and most people felt they had lost their purpose in life. Years of arduous work was needed to overcome the incredulous and negative attitude toward the Park. Today, locals are taking part in the territory's management, because they realize that it makes economic and moral sense to preserve the environment and their heritage. The Park was the first in Russia to implement the conception of sustainable living for the local population. People credit Kenozero National Park with the district's economic revival.

Cultural heritage is Russia's ''gold'' reserve that is not subject to depreciation in value and guarantees succession and continuity in the civilized processes of the country and society. The words of Vladimir Tolstoy, the Director of Yasnaya Polyana national reserve, fit perfectly here: ''business + culture = a better quality business; government + culture = a better quality of government; life + culture = a better quality of life.''