5 Vladimir Arsen'ev, the Russian Far East, and Origins of Soviet Whaling in the North Pacific Ocean

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Abstract The Far Eastern author Vladimir Arsen′ev is well known in Russia for his eloquent works of autobiographical fiction, such as the classic *Dersu Uzala*. This chapter details a far less known part of Arsen′ev's autobiography, one with arguably much greater consequence for the environmental history of the North Pacific: his stint working as a fisheries official in Soviet Vladivostok in the 1920s. In that capacity, Arsen′ev oversaw the beginning of the Soviet Union's whaling industry, which in subsequent decades would become environmentally ruinous. Arsen′ev helped inaugurate Soviet whaling, but he also offered important cautions based on his own experience and his deep knowledge of the North Pacific's history of overexploitation of marine mammals. This story helps understand better the origins of Soviet whaling and Arsen′ev's own environmental ethos, which also featured in his literary work.

Keywords environment, revolution, whales, Japan, Indigenous

Vladimir Klavdievich Arsen′ev is well known in Russia for his eloquent works of autobiographical fiction, such as the popular *Dersu Uzala*. Despite that novel's ecological themes, however, Arsen′ev's importance for Russia and the North Pacific's environmental history is far less recognised.[1] His impact came not only through his literature but also from a stint working as an employee of Soviet Vladivostok's Dal′rybokhota (The Department of Far Eastern Fishing and Hunting) in the early 1920s. In that position, Arsen′ev oversaw the beginnings of the Soviet whaling industry. As whistleblowers and historians later showed, over the next fifty years Soviet whaling would leave a legacy of

1 An important exception is Beu, "A Journey towards Environmental Wisdom."

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unparalleled mendacity and environmental destruction.[2] But, while Arsen′ev certainly facilitated the beginning of the destruction of the North Pacific's whales, his work at Dal′rybokhota shows other paths Soviet whaling might have taken and, as it happens, did take for several decades. In fact, in those years, Arsen′ev warned specifically against the ruthless and reckless paths Soviet whaling would take while also expressing a host of ecological ideas drawn from his distinctive experiences in the Russian Far East. This chapter examines Arsen′ev's work with Dal′rybokhota both to re-examine his contributions to the North Pacific's environmental history and to better understand the origins of Soviet whaling.

Arsen′ev's contributions to Soviet whaling buttress recent claims for continuity in environmental policy across Russia's revolutionary divide.[3] While proclaiming a new approach to every aspect of life, the Soviet government in fact often relied on pre-revolutionary expertise to manage its economy and environmental policy. This was especially true in distant corners of the empire such as the Russian Far East. Arsen′ev's long tenure in that region also points to the importance of local difference in the Soviet Union. Arsen′ev's environmental ideas were deeply informed by the Far East's distinctive history of overexploitation of marine mammals and interaction with Indigenous peoples. He was able to insert some of the local knowledge of conservation into the Bolsheviks' economic plans. It was only when Soviet whaling left its Far Eastern roots that the industry became truly rapacious. Finally, Arsen′ev's work with whaling demonstrates the very underappreciated fact of Russia's deep impact on the world's marine ecosystems.[4] Though commonly thought of as an exclusively terrestrial empire, in fact Russia has for centuries been a significant actor at sea as well. The way that its inhabitants have shaped the oceans, and the ideas and practices that have guided them, remain mostly a mystery to historians.

2 See Ivashchenko, "Soviet Whaling" and Jones, *Red Leviathan*.
3 See for example Bruno, *The Nature of Soviet Power*; Brain, *Song of the Forest*.
4 I have explored some of these impacts more deeply in Jones, *Empire of Extinction* and Jones, *Red Leviathan*, but much more remains to be done.

Far Eastern Fisheries in Revolution

In 1918, Arsen′ev received a post as junior inspector in Vladivostok's newly created Dal′rybokhota. Later, he would be named the department's specialist for marine mammal hunting.[5] Arsen′ev—then a well-known army officer and explorer but not yet a famous author—had recently 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 of Khabarovsk attractive, Arsen′ev likely also sympathised with the counterrevolutionary cause, as Amir Khisamutdinov claims.[6] 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.[7] Historian John Stephan surmises that Arsen′ev "stayed out of trouble by keeping a low profile working in a fisheries trust."[8] However, while he may have chosen the Vladivostok bureau for its quiet, Arsen′ev ended up making decisions with important consequences for its surrounding oceans.

The state of the 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."[9] 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 the situation 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) advised that Japanese fishermen be granted unlimited access to the natural resources of the Russian Far East.[10] In light of the straitened circumstances of the postrevolutionary years, Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin recommended the continuation of fishery concessions to the Japanese and even favoured extending them to the United States. In 1920, he and the Soviet government were embarrassed by a deal they struck with the

5 Vinogradova, "V. K. Arsen′ev," 110–126, 165; Khisamutdinov, *Vladivostok,* 27, 48, 90, 280.
6 Khisamutdinov, "Vladimir Arsen′ev," 1–14.
7 Khisamutdinov, *Vladivostok*, 280.
8 Stephan, *The Russian Far East*, 170.
9 Mandrik, *Istoriia rybnoi promyshlennosti*, 69.
10 Stephan, *The Russian Far East*, 147, 149.

American fraudster Washington Vanderlip, who made spurious promises to develop Kamchatka's coal, oil, and fish resources.[11]

Instead, most American activity in the Russian Far East remained illicit. Just offshore (and sometimes even onshore in Chukotka), American whalers were catching right whales and bowhead whales.[12] As for Russia's own history of whaling in its Far Eastern waters, it was "impoverished," as a later Soviet writer euphemistically put it.[13] 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 Dadymov, 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 ventures had relied, fatally, on an amateurish overenthusiasm and too little systematic knowledge.[14]

As a well-travelled military officer and amateur naturalist, Arsen′ev was deeply familiar with the natural world of the Russian Far East, including its oceans.[15] Even before joining Dal′rybokhota, Arsen′ev had been interested in whaling. He also knew the desultory history of Russian whaling and the current state of the region. In fact, he was personally acquainted with the old whaler, Lindholm. Once he joined Dal′rybokhota, Arsen′ev also tapped into regional expertise. He distributed questionnaires to knowledgeable Far Eastern residents, inquiring about the state of animal populations in the ocean. Although answers came back slowly, and even then were sometimes too vague for satisfactory use, Arsen′ev was able to compile a fairly complete view of the nearby North Pacific Ocean and Sea of Okhotsk. Especially innovative and useful was his large 1921 map depicting the migratory paths of whales and other marine mammals. This kind of information fulfilled specialists' longstanding desires—from as far back as 1895—for just this kind of precise information, which they saw as necessary for economic development.[16] 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 work made Arsen′ev an ideal choice to assist the new Soviet state's efforts to make their Far Eastern oceans profitable.

11 Parry, "Washington B. Vanderlip, the 'Khan of Kamchatka'," 312.
12 Mandrik, *Istoriia rybnoi promyshlennosti*, 91.
13 Liulke, "Na kurse – Vladivostok," 369.
14 Sliunin, *Promyslovye bogatstva Kamchatki, Sakhalina, i Komandorskikh Ostrovov,* 93–95.
15 Slaght, "Arsen′ev's Lament."
16 Sliunin, *Promyslovye bogatstva*, 2.

To stimulate local initiative, in the early 1920s, Dal′rybokhota also invited Russian subjects to submit sealed envelopes containing plans to start whaling ventures. Remarkably, in this time of chaos, malnutrition, and widespread violence, a large number did just that. Some of the applicants were ambitious charlatans, and some were fronts for foreign capitalists, but the dozen or so who asked for government permission to whale Far Eastern seas show some of the restless energy unleashed by the collapsing imperial structures and the openings of new possibilities. Arsen′ev, as the most knowledgeable member of Dal′rybokhota, scrutinised and rendered judgement on these proposals. In this crucial period, he exerted 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. Working out rules to govern successful applicants' operations, Arsen′ev largely turned to longstanding Far Eastern concerns about conservation informed by a relentless historical series of marine mammal population crashes and foreign predation. Reflecting the sense of environmental fatalism that animates parts of *Dersu Uzala*, Arsen′ev stressed the dangers of heedless exploitation. As he noted, "every whaling industry has been predatory, in the sense that whalers have destroyed all the animals in the first few years."[17] Accordingly, Arsen′ev cautioned Russian whalers not to kill young whales or mothers still with their offspring.[18] However, the Far East's geography, along with whale behaviour, made him pessimistic about the prospects for effective conservation. The whales swimming off Russian shores were migrating either northward to their feeding grounds or southward towards Japan. Thus, Japanese whalers would kill them if Russians did not do the job themselves—the classic problem of managing migratory marine mammals everywhere, here intensified by longstanding diplomatic difficulties with Japan.[19]

Arsen′ev repeatedly cautioned against hunting near the several *zapovedniks* (nature preserves) in Kamchatka. The numbers of *zapovedniks* had

17 "Instruktsiia o poriadke proizvodstva kit…" 1924, State Archive of the Primorsky Krai (GAPK), R-66, op. 4, no. 85, 163.

18 "Instruktsiia o poriadke proizvodstva kit…" 167. On relations with Japanese fishermen, see Eisuke Kaminaga, "Maritime History and Imperiology."

19 "Instruktsiia o poriadke proizvodstva kit …" 163.

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 *zapovedniks* reflected his—and most Far Easterners'—historical experience with the overharvesting of smaller marine mammals, such as sea otters, sea lions, and walruses. This, in fact, was the reason prospective whalers needed to avoid the nature reserves, since 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 granted permission to hunt. Applicants were ordered not to anchor near sea otter or fur seal *zapusks*. These were special places where no hunting was allowed for a certain number of years and which had a long history in the Russian North Pacific, dating back at least to the early nineteenth century.[22] Furthermore, the Soviet government reserved the right to extend these *zapusks* at any time.[23] One official (perhaps Arsen′ev himself; the Dal′rybokhota documents are sometimes unsigned) stressed that licenses should only be given out to whalers for long terms (ten to fifteen years) and that the first three years should be left as a *zapusk*, measures that would hopefully encourage investment in the longer-term health of the whale stocks. Whaling, in other words, was to be encouraged, but with significant cautions attached.[24]

At times, the concepts attached to the *zapovedniks* and *zapusks* extended past the rational-use arguments relatively common to the time—and even beyond the *zapovedniks*' unique function as biological laboratories—to preservationist goals.[25] Russian observers of the 1920s believed (wrongly, as it turned out) that the waters around Kamchatka and the Kuril Islands preserved the last examples of the sea otter species, elsewhere hunted to extinction by fur traders.[26] They credited the survival of remnant populations to farsighted imperial Russian conservation measures, but felt more was needed to save the species from extinction. In 1923, Kuril Islands fisheries

20 Weiner, "Community Ecology in Stalin's Russia," 685.
21 "Instruktsiia o poriadke proizvodstva kit …" 6.
22 See Jones, "A. F. Kashevarov, the Russian–American Company, and Alaska Conservation," and Kashevarov, "Shto takoe zapusk."
23 "Instruktsiia o poriadke proizvodstva kit …" 25.
24 "Obshchie soobrazheniia otnositel′no form ekspluatatsii …," GAPK, F. 633, op. 2, no. 31, 14.
25 On the creation and role of *zapovedniki* in imperial and Soviet Russia, see Weiner, *Models of Nature*.
26 See Jones, *Empire of Extinction*.

inspectors recommended the animal be granted complete protection at the Cape Lopatka *zapovednik*, its last remaining Kamchatkan stronghold.[27] Such concerns long outlived Arsen′ev's tenure, and prohibitions on whaling around *zapovedniks* 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 mammals also informed other, more problematic, recommendations. For example, he advised shooting and killing as many orcas as possible, regardless of their 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 at whatever time of year."[28] This was another recommendation for practices that endured into later Soviet plans. Killer whales are, indeed, efficient predators of smaller marine mammals, and in the past may have been significant hunters of whales as well. In the 1920s, humans around the world regarded them as pests and rarely thought twice about killing them. However, rarely have there been plans to systematically eradicate the whales, though in the 1950s and 1960s Canadians attempted to extirpate killer whales at a scale similar to that which Arsen′ev recommended.[29] Later, Soviet whalers would kill them opportunistically, before briefly turning in desperation to commercially hunting these comparatively lean whales as other species declined. So, in the 1920s, Arsen′ev's plan for eradicating orcas was in a sense ahead of its time, though very much out of step with later ecological views on the importance of predators in maintaining prey populations.

Big Animals and "Little People"

Imperial—and Soviet—conservationists worried about the possible impacts of whaling on human communities as well. In particular, they expressed real concern about the effects it might have on the Far East's indigenous peoples, the so-called "little people" of the North who belonged formally to the

27 "Doklad ob okhrane bobrov u mysa Lopatka, 1923," GAPK, F. 633, op. 2, no. 31, 34–34ob.

28 "Instruktsiia o poriadke proizvodstva kit …" 163.

29 See Colby, *Orca*.

Russian and Soviet empires.[30] It was assumed, quite rightly, that commercial whaling might harm them, especially by reducing their food supplies. 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 [through trade], etc."[31] This unnamed government official experienced the vulnerability of marine mammal hunters first-hand while stationed in Chukotka in 1925–1926. That winter, the wind shifted from south to north, blowing the sea ice onto shore and cutting the people off from the ocean and its creatures. Not only did the local Chukchi begin to starve but they got very cold, since they were deprived of the seal oil they normally depended on for warmth.[32] 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."[33] 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.[34]

But the whaling status quo was not acceptable to the Soviet government either. The Chukchi were then selling most of the whale products they did not use for subsistence to American traders in the North Pacific. This contraband trade, conducted mostly at Diomede 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.[35] Soviet commentators were sure the trade did not benefit the Chukchi. They noted that, despite the motorised boats and harpoon guns they had bought, the Chukchi were neither catching more marine mammals, including whales, nor was their own population increasing.[36] The reasons were several. First, the intensity of the Indigenous hunt itself was reducing the numbers of marine mammals. Second, the rapacious Americans were also killing too many of the creatures. As a result, the Chukchi were now "sitting on their half-ruined floors, cursing

30 For a full treatment of Soviet relations with the indigenous peoples of the Arctic, see Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors*.
31 "Otchety i informatsionnye materialy o promysle morskikh zverei, 1952–1926," GAPK, F. 633, op. 4, no. 85, 46.
32 "Otchety i informatsionnye materialy o promysle morskikh zverei, 1952 – 1926," 35.
33 "Otchety i informatsionnye materialy o promysle morskikh zverei, 1952 – 1926," 6.
34 GAPK F. 633, op. 4, no. 100, 54.
35 "Otchety i informatsionnye materialy o promysle morskikh zverei, 1952–1926," 44.
36 Sliunin, *Promyslovye bogatstva*, 10.

all whites, and especially the Russians"—an outcome especially galling to the very Russians who thought of themselves as protectors of Chukchi interests.[37] 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."[38] 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 flats, 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.[39]

State-sponsored whaling would edge out both American whalers and less-responsible Russians (the *promyshlenniki* mentioned), who were presumed to be taking advantage of the Chukchi and other Indigenous people.

This calculus rested on one necessary assumption: that Russian ventures would be more environmentally 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 about Americans' ecological shortcomings. From the 1840s, they had eliminated huge numbers of right, bowhead, and grey whales in Far Eastern waters.[41] Russian whalers'

37 "Otchety i informatsionnye materialy o promysle morskikh zverei, 1952–1926," 45.
38 GAPK, F. 633, op. 4, no. 100, 50.
39 GAPK, F. 633, op. 4, no. 100, 64.
40 GAPK, F. 633, op. 4, no. 100, 66.
41 Parry, "Yankee Whalers in Siberia."

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 condition 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 exists in the archives of Eremeev ever starting his whaling venture.

Other officials were readier to prescribe government support for whaling, in the hopes that it could offer immediate relief to some of the pressing problems posed by Indigenous peoples' declining welfare. In a 1926 report to Dal'rybokhota, Commissar K. Kulagin addressed the problems facing the Commander Islands, the exceptionally remote, treeless islands that 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 taken in the nineteenth century had cultivated a rebound. During the chaos of the late empire and the Civil War, these measures had been discontinued, 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 the time knew little of whales' potential uses, Kulagin assured them there would be many. Whale blubber could provide raw materials for Vladivostok's underutilised soap factories to produce exportable products earning hard currency, then a pressing concern for the new Soviet state. In addition, though Kulagin anticipated scepticism about this, whales could be turned into margarine—a replacement for butter, he explained. Whale margarine could substitute the expensive importing of pig fats that was then harming the Soviet balance of trade. Exports of whale margarine 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 acclimated to whale meat;

42 GAPK, F. 633, op. 4, no. 100, 82.

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 favourably 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 little more like the Chukchi and Japanese, they could create a new whaling tradition and find profitable paths through the chaos of the time.

In a certain light, then, industrial Russian whaling could actually appear to some Soviets to be a solution to the problems of foreign encroachment, economic crisis, conservation, and Indigenous welfare all at the same time. 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 cooperation, not conflict, between modern and Indigenous whaling. While discussing the numerous plans being submitted in Vladivostok, one fisheries official, N. Rudin, noted in 1924 that companies 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, the new Soviet ventures could build on this history and enhance the well-being of those who depended upon the animals.

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 also removing animals (such as orcas) who consumed others species such as salmon and pinnipeds, thereby increasing their numbers and making still more food available for humans. Chasing away American whalers would help meet all these goals as well.

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. Gapanovicha," GAPK, F. 633, op. 5, no. 6, 24.

45 "Instruktsiia o poriadke proizovdstva kit…" 25.

Plans in Action

This last goal, though, proved tricky to meet in light of the Soviet Union's perilous financial state. Arsen′ev was dismayed and irritated to receive several proposals to hunt for marine mammals along the rivers of the Russian Far East that seemed to conceal their true national character. "According to rumours," he wrote about one, the applicants were "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 in order 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 practising "predatory" hunting.[46]

In one respect, Arsen′ev was an outlier. Although he shared a widespread Far Eastern dislike for Chinese and Korean people, he downplayed general fears of increasing Japanese incursion into nearby waters.[47] There was growing anxiety that the Japanese would steal a march on the Russians and begin catching whales along the Russian coast and perhaps even venture into the Peter the Great Bay in Vladivostok. Arsen′ev thought these fears overblown for one simple reason: conveniently for the Japanese, many species of North Pacific whales migrated from their feeding grounds in the Bering Sea past Russian shores to Japan, arriving, as it were, at the doorstep of eager Japanese whalers. 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]

Later Soviet officials would perceive Arsen′ev's relationship with the Japanese as too cosy. He was the personal friend of the Japanese ambassador in the Far East and held the country in high regard (once, 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 qualification to the argument that

46 "Doklad nachal′nika…" 42.
47 Stephan, *The Russian Far East*, 212; Glebov, "The Political Ecology of V. K. Arsen′ev."
48 "Tezisy i plan rabot. Uboi morskogo zveriia (Kitobraznikh), 1923." GAPK, F. 633, op. 4, no. 100, 163.
49 V. K. Arsen′ev, *Dnevnik*, 7–9 May, 1918, 1.
50 Khisamutdinov, *The Russian Far East*; Khisamutdinov, "Vladimir Arsen′ev."

Arsen′ev helped establish long-term Soviet approaches to the ocean. 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 rivalled and then outdid anything from that era.[51] Almost none would heed Arsen′ev's prescient warning that no whale fishery had ever operated sustainably.

Even in the feverish days of the 1920s, the whaling ventures that launched after the revolution seldom went off without problems. Making plans to whale was one thing; putting together the capital and expertise necessary 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 motorised sloop named the *Diana* in order to assess the possibility of catching whales in Far Eastern waters. The sloop's new motor quit while still in Peter the Great Bay, and the crew rerouted to Hakodate, Japan, where they docked for repairs. Temporarily fortified and having transferred most of the 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. With the motor still not working, escape was difficult. The crew decided to head south for the Kurils 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 rudder was lost in another storm, and the ship now drifted 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 to all appearances bereft of humans. Finally, on January 16, 1921—more than seven months after setting sail—the *Diana* drifted near the island of Guam, where American naval officials towed it to shore and provided food and medical

51 For example, the whaling trilogy of the Vladivostok novelist A. A. Vakhov: Vakhov, *Tragediia Kapitana Ligova*; Vakhov, *Shtorm Ne Utikhaet*; Vakhov, *Fontany na Gorizonte*.

52 GAPK, F. 633, op. 4, no. 100, 46ob.

care to the surviving crew.[53] Despite all the applications to Arsen'ev's office, no more Soviet whaling 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. The organisation had determined in 1923 that this strategy was necessary, as "under the condition of the moment this could give the Treasury greater benefits, both material and economic," provided the concession was granted to a solid foreign company.[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 whale within the twelve miles of territorial waters between Cape Serdtse-Kamen and Cape Lopatka that 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 five percent of any sales of whale products taken in Soviet waters. At first, the crew would consist entirely of Norwegian citizens, but the venture was conceived partly as a school 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. They complained about the long period of the concession, the low payment received in return, and the need to keep a large security staff in case of violations. Some, including Arsen'ev, thought the start of the concession should be delayed.[57] In 1925, though, the Norwegians took it up as planned 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, where higher Soviet officials could have handled 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, for their part, stated that, due to constant

53 GAPK, F. 633, op. 4, no. 100, 47.
54 GAPK, F. 633, op. 2, no. 31, 23.
55 "Kontsesionnyi dogovor," 3.
56 "Kontsesionnyi dogovor," 3.
57 Letter to Dal'ryba, August 1923, GAPK, F. 633, op. 5, no. 3, 5–6, 10.
58 Mandrik, *Istoriia rybnoi promyshlennosti*, 131.

Soviet harassment, they had wanted to give up the concession anyway. Otto Paust, one of the lead Norwegian whalers, reported that the Soviets "lived in a childish fantasy" that led them to believe they could skim endless profits off the concession while expecting it to 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 shaped 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 one hundred carcasses of dead whales in Morzhovoi Bay. The gigantic, rotting animals were so thick in the water that they imperilled navigation. "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, antisanitary 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 Western and Soviet understandings of whaling and underlined whaling's geopolitical importance. Paust, the Norwegian who had criticised Kamchatkan graft, also expressed anger and puzzlement over Soviet relations with the Eskimos (Chukchi). He had the chance to meet several while whaling in the region, and he found that they universally clamoured for cartridges for their weapons. The Soviets, he claimed, had withheld them for fear of rebellion. The lack of weapons was senseless and deadly for "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 labour with Norwegian 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,"

59 GAPK, F. 633, op. 7, no. 19, 39ob, 40.
60 GAPK, F. 633, op. 7, no. 19, 70.
61 GAPK, F. 633, op. 7, no. 19, 40.

wrote the Soviet Committee for the Protection of the People of the North in 1927, "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 for the time, the Committee recommended the total closure of the waters to any industrial whaling, both because of the declining number of whales and 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, launched in 1932—important officials felt these waters could sustain no more catches.

When two decades later, in 1948, the Soviet Union joined the International Whaling Commission (IWC), their delegates were instructed to fight for the rights of indigenous Soviet people 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 demonstrates, 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 influenced the whaling industry's planners. They also informed Russian policy throughout the 1920s and even into the *Aleut* fleet, which sailed out of Vladivostok and into the North Pacific for several decades. In this way, Arsen′ev's emphasis on conservation and local knowledge outlasted the general decline of such concerns in the late 1920s, when Stalinist central planners marginalised regional knowledge, or *kraevedenie*.[64] Arsen'ev's concerns did not persist forever, though. After the Second World War, 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' own whaling and instead sent a ship of their own to kill and process whales on their behalf. The fears of 1920s Dal′rybokhota that Chukchi would be harmed by industrial whaling had been fully realised.

One of this story's implications, however, is that we cannot adequately understand Soviet environmental politics as reflective merely of the predilections

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

63 "Instruktsiia delegatam na Mezhdunarodnuiu Konferentsiiu," Russian State Archive for the Economy (RGAE), F. 9242, op. 1, no. 342, 66.

64 Donavan, "'How Well Do You Know Your *Krai*?'" 472; Loskutova, "'Nauka oblastnogo masshtaba.'"

65 Ivashchenko and Clapham, "Too Much Is Never Enough."

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 Russian 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 exploit the region's maritime resources while protecting them from overharvesting and foreign predation and also 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 realised 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 Russia's—and the North Pacific's—environmental history came not with *Dersu Uzala*, but with a few years of bureaucratic work in a temporary fisheries agency.

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66 As Paul Josephson argues in *Industrialized Nature* and elsewhere.

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