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## Logging Called Threat to Krasnodar Reserve

23 December 2008 By [Maria Antonova](#) / [Staff Writer](#) Krasnodar regional authorities are turning a blind eye to a massive, illegal logging project in a nature reserve on the Black Sea, local environmentalists say, in what could be an attempt to open the protected area to commercial tourism.

A local forestry official confirmed that logging was being done in the park, but denied that the project violated federal or local environmental protections.

Officially, the project is a four-kilometer fire safety road bisecting the Bolshoi Utrish reserve, connecting an existing road on its border with the Black Sea. But officials admitted that the road would be used for recreational development of the coast, and environmentalists said the construction would irrevocably damage the park, which is on track to receive the federal government's most protected status.

Converting pristine areas along the Black Sea into resorts has been a lucrative business for the Russian construction industry, particularly since investors started flocking to the region after Sochi was chosen to host the 2014 Winter Olympics.

The Bolshoi Utrish reserve is located about 250 kilometers up the coast from Sochi and just 15 kilometers south of the resort city Anapa.

Loggers have already cut into the park from both sides by more than a kilometer, chopping down thousands of trees that are in the Red Book of endangered species, said Andrei Rudomakha, coordinator of the North Caucasus Environmental Watch, an organization based in Maikop, the capital of the neighboring Adygeya republic.

The dry, subtropical forest in the reserve is unique in Russia and is the northernmost such forest in the world, environmentalists said.

"Judging by the impudence and the scale of work, some big interests are involved in this project," Rudomakha said. "Everything about this construction is illegal from start to finish, and nobody is doing anything to stop it."

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Workers clearing trees in the Bolshoi Utrish reserve. Protesters say the work is an attempt to open a new section of the Black Sea coast for mass tourism.

## **Activists' Efforts**

Bolshoi Utrish is a zakaznik, a protected park where some recreational use, such as camping, is permitted. Under a 2001 government decree, the park is supposed to become a zapovednik by 2010, making it federally protected with strict regulations on any human activity.

And although the park remains protected on paper, the zakaznik administration was dispersed in the late 1990s because of a lack of funding. It is now managed by the regional branch of the Federal Forestry Agency, which ordered the road's construction.

According to federal law, any logging activity in a protected area has to undergo a state environmental assessment, which includes public hearings and a calculation of environmental damage, said Mikhail Kreindlin, an expert for Greenpeace in Russia. Another federal law prohibits the destruction of endangered species, and regional authorities themselves prohibited any road construction in this park in 1994, he said.

## **Official Response**

Alexander Byuller, a deputy head of the Krasnodar region forestry agency, confirmed by phone that the 8-meter-wide road was being built for the agency's "internal use."

"The purpose of the clearings is building a fire safety road," Byuller said. He said the felling of endangered species of trees was not prohibited for such purpose, and he denied that the work was illegal because it was cleared by the regional department of emergency situations and state environmental control.



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The State Duma blocked an inquiry.

But when asked whether the road would be used solely for fire safety, Byuller said it would "also give access to the coast, where the forestry is already offering plots of land for recreational use."

Earlier this year, someone already won the right to rent 100 hectares on the coast in an auction, he said. "I don't know what will be there, nobody showed me the project," he said.

Although the park's status permits recreational use, clear cutting is prohibited and only temporary structures can be put up. Difficult access to the park's interior has so far ruled out mass tourism, although it attracts campers, some of whom live in the park year-round.

Byuller said the road would help spread tourism more evenly across the coast and make the region "more like Europe," where protected areas have good road networks and facilities.

"These Rudomakhas should be forced to work for the state and pay taxes," instead of "being financed from abroad to chain themselves to things," he said. "He should take a chainsaw and go chop some wood for socially unprotected babushkas."

He also expressed little concern for the tourists already enjoying the park, calling them "nudists on the wild beach."

Environmentalists say they are stunned that the regional department of the Federal Inspection Service for Natural Resources Use -- the environmental watchdog of the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry -- is allowing the works to continue.

North Caucasus Environmental Watch has sent the watchdog, which is responsible for protecting endangered species, repeated requests to look into the issue, Rudomakha said.

Natalya Maltseva, the deputy head of Krasnodar region's branch of the watchdog, declined to comment for this story and advised calling the press department of the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry. The ministry's press service said they had no information on the situation.

Rudomakha's group has also sent letters to Yevgeny Golovachyov, the nature protection prosecutor for the Azov and Black Sea district, asking him to look into the logging.

Golovachyov also declined to comment before receiving official permission from the Krasnodar regional prosecutor. A faxed request sent Wednesday to the regional prosecutor went unanswered.

## Tourist Petition

Russians who regularly spend summers in Bolshoi Utrish have written a petition to President Dmitry Medvedev that was signed by more than 4,600 people from Moscow and other cities, said Maria Alyokhina, a Muscovite who is one of the petition organizers. The signatures were taken to the presidential administration on Monday, and a sanctioned rally is to take place Tuesday at 2 p.m. near the Krasnopresnenskaya metro station.

"We are appalled that they are cutting trees in what we consider our second home," said Alyokhina, adding that rumors were circulating that the site would be completely closed to the public to create a new government dacha. Alyokhina estimated that about 1,000 people camp in Utrish every summer.

Campers at the park confirmed that construction work deep in the heart of the reserve was in full swing. "Clear cutting is still being done by three logging teams close to the coast, and there is also a team of land surveyors who are using drilling equipment," Nikolai Linnik, who is one of 15 people currently living in the reserve, said by phone last week.

Linnik said a "campaign is under way since this summer to discredit Utrish and its dwellers," which has included "provocations" by unknown men and local police, who subsequently jailed some campers for up to five days for assault of an officer. He also said drug control officials from Anapa had planted marijuana in one of the camper's trailers.

Some people live in the reserve for years at a time, Linnik said. "We are the only ones who survey it and take out the trash," he said.

## **Outcome in Doubt**

The fate of Bolshoi Utrish and other protected parks remains an open question as major commercial interests -- particularly logging and tourism -- make the country's environment laws difficult to enforce and profitable to flout.

The Natural Resources and Environment Ministry said in May that the reserve was still on track to receive the strictly protected zapovednik status.

On Dec. 10, State Duma Deputy Sergei Obukhov, a Communist from the Krasnodar region, called for an inquiry into the government over the allegedly illegal logging, but the pro-Kremlin party United Russia, which has an overwhelming majority in the Duma, blocked the inquiry.

Obukhov has since written five personal inquiries regarding the reserve to various officials, including Krasnodar Governor Alexander Tkachyov, Natural Resources and Environment Minister Yury Trutnev, and Vladimir Kirillov, head of the ministry's environmental watchdog. Given Obukhov's status as a deputy, such inquiries must be acted on and responded to within 30 days.

"An official request from the Duma to the government would be processed much faster and would not be waved off," Obukhov said in a phone interview. "But the deputies decided against it."

"This is a regular occurrence," Obukhov said. "When big money comes into the picture, nature falls silent and nobody cares about the environment."