Taiga

Man and taiga

Richness of the taiga

Man settled where the climate was milder and caused great agricultural changes (especially in central-northern Europe), sometimes dramatically decreasing conifer forests. Humus-rich soil is excellent for farming. Corn, barley, oat, sugar beets, sunflowers and potatoes are grown there, while breeding concerns cattle, sheep and horses. Forests are also commercially exploited to make timber and cellulose pulp. Birches provide light and easily workable timber (excellent to make Russian dolls and balalaikas) and produces a very strong and light cellulose, used to make airmail paper. In the Siberian taiga, Russians are building roads and railways to connect the dwellings of the personnel in charge of digging precious ores or extracting oil and natural gas.

The last reindeer-men

In the north-west of Mongolia, west of lake Kovsgol, where the tundra leaves room to the cold taiga, lives a small and extremely old nomadic people which support themselves only on reindeer rearing, its population now just 180. These people live off a symbiotic relation with their animals, so much so that the Mongolians named them Tsaaatans, i.e. reindeer-men, from tang, people, and Tsaa Buga, snow deer; while they call themselves Taiganà, or taiga men. These people’s lives actually depend entirely on reindeers, whose meat and milk are the staples of their diet. Reindeer milk is very nourishing: its fat content is almost four times that of cow’s milk and supplies 2,000 calories per litre. In addition, it preserves part of the vitamins ingested by the animals as they graze. Reindeer meat, cut into strips and sun-dried, is stored to be eaten at any time, cooked into a soup with water and rancid butter. Nevertheless, before eating reindeer meat, men have to officiate a rite of reconciliation with the soul of the animal, offered up to meet man’s needs.

As well as the meat, the hide of these animals is also used to make footwear and headwear, while the horns are used as a precious medium of exchange to buy the few other things the Tsaatans need: tea, flour, tools and ammunition. Since the mid-Nineties, the life and culture of these few people have been seriously threatened with extinction. The reindeers have been affected by a sort of parasite disease that kills them rapidly. The number of these animals has dwindled from over 500 in 1995 to less than 300 today, and the infection is showing no signs of stopping. The Tsaatans can no longer eat the infected meat of the animals, not to aggravate the type of brucellosis that is now affecting 40% of the population, and the milk, which is now in short supply, must be left to the younger animals. Many associations have got busy trying to prevent these people disappearing, by developing a plan for shooting down those animals that are by now hopelessly sick, treating those that can be treated, reclaiming lands and buying at least 1,000 reindeers to replenish the Tsaatans’ precious livestock.

The products of the taiga

The taiga contains a lot of oil and natural gas fields. Today, Norway is the greatest oil exporter in Europe and one of the main suppliers of natural gas to Europe. Siberia contains large reserves of coal, oil, methane, iron, silver, gold, diamonds, uranium and many ores. In Canada, mining accounts for over 30% of the entire economy. Another economic activity is the fur trade, which in Canada involves 3% of the population. Squirrel, fox, mink and ermine furs are economically very attractive. The fishing industry produces salmon and other fish, basically for local consumption.