

# Mongolian-Russian groups find common ground with Navajo

*Second in a two-part series*

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CHURCHROCK — Russian and Mongolian professionals sat around the family room Saturday morning at the home of Bertha Nez, watching curiously as Navajo Peacemaker Philmer Bluehouse stuck out his hand in greeting.

“Ya’at’éeéh,” he said. “We shake hands, ‘Ya’at’éeéh.’ People say that it means hello. But it doesn’t mean hello. It means, ‘The Universe, it is.’ ... I am the Universe, all the energy from the Universe – protons, neutrons, electrons,” Bluehouse explained. “So for us, it is sacred to shake hands. ‘I come to you with the Universe.’”

The visitors nodded appreciatively at the

introduction to Navajo culture and responded, “Ya’at’éeéh.”

Although the Russian delegation was focused on health impacts to the Red Water Pond Road residents living sandwiched between former uranium mines, Narangerel Rinchin, Ph.D., who directs the Center for Civic Education in Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia, was more interested in Navajo culture and the perspective of the local citizens.

Rinchin’s organization, along with that of Sergei “Sergey” Shapkhaev, Ph.D., director of the Buryat Regional Organization for Lake Baikal, in Ulan-Ude, Russia, are partners with Southwest Research and Information Center of Albuquerque in a Mongolia/Buryatia Mining Exchange program, which has brought representatives from both countries to the Southwest for nearly a decade.



Cable Hoover/Independent

Sergei Shapkhaev, left, listens as Paul Robinson of the Southwest Research and Information Center talks about the 1979 uranium spill during a tour in Churchrock Saturday.

## Comparative study

“We have always been interested in the Navajo Nation because we look similar, herd sheep,” Rinchin said as she checked on a pot of mutton stew and recommended they add onion. “Their culture is quite different but many similarities, especially this kind of nomadic life. Mongols are nomads. There are lots of similarities, in culture, in living everyday life.”

Rinchin works for a non-governmental organization which does mostly educational work for local communities. The education center has worked with Southwest Research for the last seven or eight years, she said.

“Every year we have come, the members of our Mongolian communities who try to influence government policy on mining issues, on

**See Common ground, Page 5**

# Common ground

Continued from Page 1

environmental issues, and organize local people to be more aware about laws and to be skilled to participate in the decision-making," she said.

"We work in many, many communities around the country so we have lots of community organizations which are part of our environmental coalition, and the environmental coalition has a direct link with the Ministry of Environment and Green Development," Rinchin said.

Much like Churchrock following the 1979 uranium tailings spill, Rinchin said there are places in Mongolia where local herdsmen found something unusual with the newborn animals.

"They first react on that fact and make some noise to be heard to the government so they do some investigations," she said. "There were several cases where the local people raised the question and the government was investigating these cases and found that really this was because of contaminated water.

"There is one small town which was surrounded by mines, heavily, and became very bad place. So now lots of the efforts to change the situation are going there," Rinchin said.

## Common ground

Sergei Shapkhaev, although Russian, is a seventh-generation traditional Buryat, the largest indigenous group in Siberia and a northern subgroup of the Mongols. For him, the field trip to the Navajo Nation was an eye-opening experience.

"We have the exact same sites, same industry and it results in the same types of problems," he said. "In our indigenous groups of people, native Buryats, they are very similar in lifestyle and history as Native people here, and they are affected the most by these types of problems as well in Russia.

"The most interesting part

for me, this field trip experience, is when we are here in the community and we can see for ourselves and meet the people," Shapkhaev said. "We would like to know how they attempt to solve problems, exact same problems that we have, its preservation of culture and its values, preservation of traditional lifestyle and adaptation to the modern world and its realities."

Shapkhaev said his impression was that the Navajo still attempt to raise cattle or corn, and that those products have to be clean and usable.

"If you don't preserve that part, you know, it's really hard, if not impossible, for the culture to survive and the people to exist," he said.

Shapkhaev teaches geography at the local university, where they try to provide equal educational opportunities for people from small towns.

"The young people, when they come from these communities, the parents usually drive them and drop them off and bring all kinds of goods for them - sheep and what not - but their goal is that they will get an education," he said, which will be useful when they return to their communities.

As director of the non-governmental Buryat Regional Organization for Lake Baikal, Shapkhaev is working with the idea of creating new jobs for the returning young people. For example, he said, they started a farm of yaks and some of the people got involved in operating the farm. They even brought in camels because some of the areas traditionally raised camels.

"When we brought camels to the village, life stopped. They canceled school and all the kids went outside and they were just watching camels all day long," Shapkhaev said. Because the camels were so rare and exotic, they became a big tourist attraction. But now the population of camels has doubled and the newness has worn off, he said, so they want to build a herd of camels like

they used to have.

## Climate change

Shapkhaev's organization also works on land-use policy. "We want to separate the land use for industry versus land use for agriculture," he said. "We don't want to see any expansion of mining industry into agricultural land."

As a trained hydrometeorologist, the hydrologic cycles and the possibilities of drought and flooding are very important components in the land-use planning, Shapkhaev said.

"I'm taking into consideration the climate factors, especially any issues that deal with rivers. Rivers are very important for traditional lifestyle and work," he said. "We are connected with a group that studies hydrologic cycles and we use the knowledge about the hydrologic cycles and information about drought versus too much water."

The landscape of Buryatia is very similar to what Shapkhaev observed at Churchrock, he said, and they also are impacted by drought. For now, however, they are seeing more precipitation with the 30-year change in the hydrologic cycle, and this is creating an entirely different problem for the people living around Lake Baikal.

"The water is rising and if they can't control it, they'll flood the area," Shapkhaev said. "This year they already had flooding problems in several areas outside of Buryatia, but they are working hard to prevent them from happening in Buryatia."

The Mongols are in the same watershed as Buryatia, with the Selenge River in northern Mongolia - called the Selenga River in Russia - being the largest tributary to Lake Baikal.

"So 300 rivers go into the lake and one river goes out of the lake. The one river that flows out of the lake, they already have four hydropower stations, similar to Lake Ontario and the Saint Lawrence

River," Shapkhaev said.

There are plans to build a hydropower station on the Selenge River in Mongolia, but Shapkhaev is opposed. "The existing dams can do the job," he said, "they just have to renovate the plans to include this natural fluctuation of water into the planning."

The World Bank is supporting the project and public hearings are in the works in both Mongolia and Buryatia to assess the potential risks.

"There are many, many communities that live along River Selenga on both sides, Mongolian side and Russian territory," Shapkhaev said. "If in Mongolia there is flooding and any hydropower station messes with the natural flow, it will affect people along the river all the way down. It's a new problem, a new challenge. We didn't have that challenge before."