
My First Practical Experience with the World Heritage

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In late March 1995, Berlin hosted the first Conference of the Parties to the Framework Convention on Climate Change, and then German Minister for the Environment, a young lady from the former GDR by the name of Angela Merkel, had set aside a budget for NGO Side Events to accompany this event.

At that time I was with Naturschutzbund Deutschland (NABU), one of Germany's big environmental NGOs, coordinating our programme in the countries of the former Eastern bloc. Just two years ago, I had met Prof. Dr. Michael Succow, a landscape ecologist also from the GDR (and actually the same region as Dr. Merkel) who had become Germany's shooting star of nature conservation. Together with three colleagues –Hans-Dieter (“Hannes”) Knapp, Matthias Freude and Leberecht Jeschke– he had accomplished the astonishing feat of gazettement five national

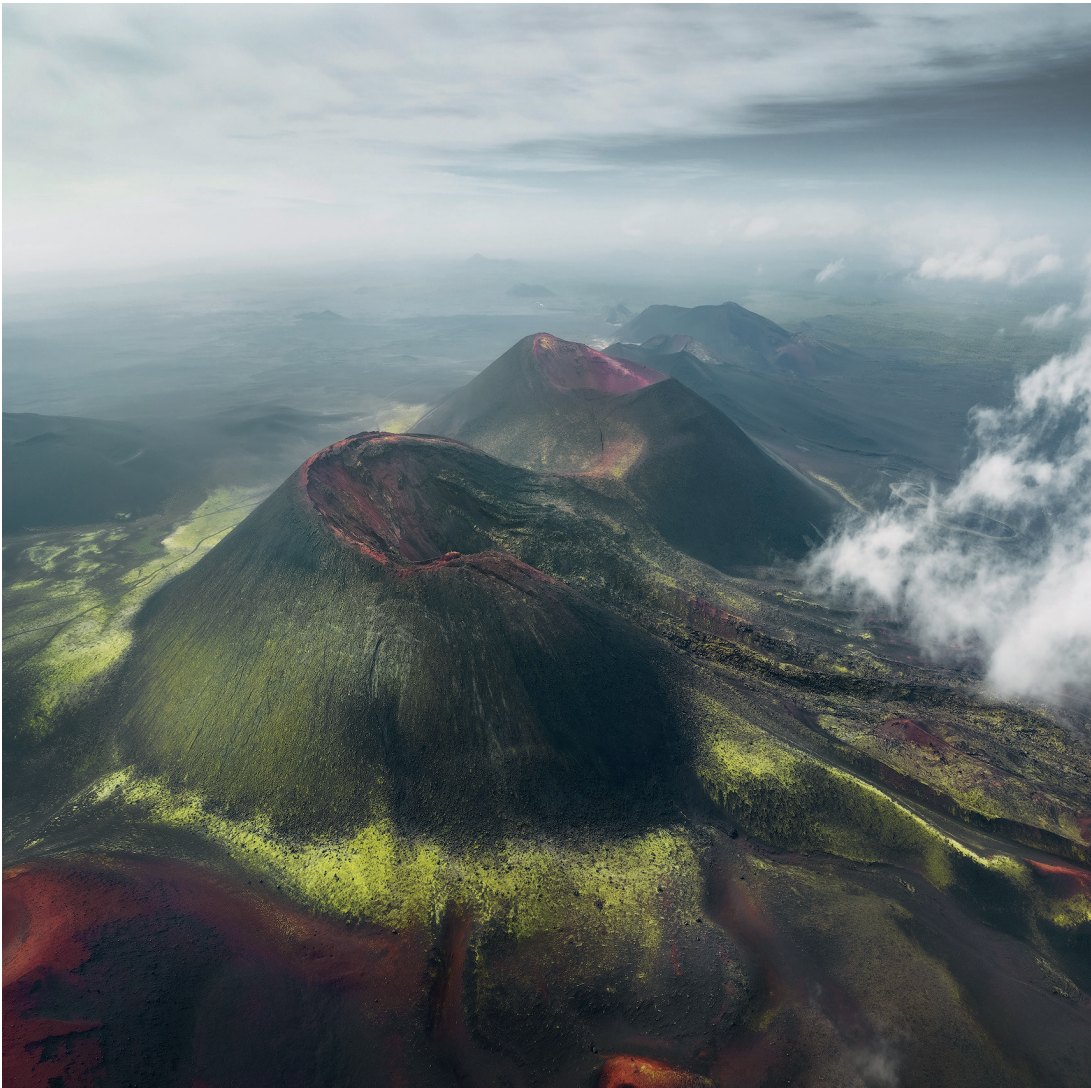
Parks and six biosphere reserves in the few months between the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and German re-unification in October 1990. In the following years he designed protected area programmes for Georgia (1991), Mongolia (1992) and –since 1993 with me– Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Now he was waiting for a chance to go to Russia.

When the NGO Programme for the COP1 of the UNFCCC was announced we suggested to organize a conference “Endless Taiga?” investigating the situation of the world's boreal forests as the second green lung of the planet, with a strong focus on Russia but also experts from Canada and Scandinavia. Since NABU didn't have any cooperation with Russia, I mobilized the NGOs contacts I had from my previous anti-nuclear campaign work, first and foremost Greenpeace Russia, who in

turn enjoyed excellent relations with the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

The conference became a great success. We had speakers from all across Russia from the Finnish border in the West to Kamtchatka on the Pacific coast. I remember one lady from Vladivostok saying: “I never thought that after WWII I would ever travel to Germany. But for this conference, I was happy to do it.”

After the end of the conference, I had a meeting with Greenpeace Russia in order to discuss potential follow-up activities. During that meeting, Sergey Tsyplyonkov, then (and now) Greenpeace’s Executive Director, turned to me saying, “Stephan, I have a paper here that maybe you can help us with. Recently we have concluded an agreement with President Boris Yeltsin where he assigned us to prepare eight natural world heritage nominations for Russia.”



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For the reader, these lines may have been just as jaw-dropping as they were for me then. Even though these were the years when almost everything was possible in Russia, the idea that in a country where the state was everything and civil society and NGOs were suppressed and mistreated as much as possible, the head of state could assign tasks of national importance to an organization which was considered suspicious and foreign-controlled was strictly unthinkable.

Knowing only too well what Michael Succow's preferences were, I asked Sergey, "Can I see the paper?" He handed the one-page document to me, and reading "Volcanoes of Kamtchatka, Commander Islands, Uvs Nuur Hollows, the Delta of the Lena River" and others I understood that this was an opportunity that would not re-occur, and I only said, "Sergey, I think we can help you." Sergey was only too happy but also cautioned: "We have to be very fast because we don't know how long Yeltsin will remain in power, and once he's gone, we may not be able to continue. If possible we should start with one nomination even this year." In 1995, the deadline for submitting nominations was 1 October, and this was the 31 March, but this was EXACTLY Succow's moment.

I called him immediately after having said good-bye to Sergey and told him what had been discussed. Succow didn't hesitate. He called Martin Uppenbrink, the President of the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation, with whom he was on excellent terms, and called me back to tell me that we'd have a meeting with him in May. I told Succow that with a meeting in May we would never be able to finalize a nomination by 1 October. He called him again and came back to me with an appointment on 18 April. That at least left us with a chance.

On Friday 18 April in early afternoon, Michael Succow (who was NABU's Vice-President at the time), Christian Unsel (NABU's other Vice-President) and myself walked up the narrow stairs to Uppenbrink's office in an old villa in Bonn to meet him and his expert on the former Soviet Union, Heinrich Schmauder, a German who had immigrated from Northern Kazakhstan in 1961 and knew only too well what was at stake. I had brought the roll of big maps of Kamtchatka which a young Russian lady who had participated in the conference had given to me.

Uppenbrink, a man of extraordinary stature, passion and experience, did not need to be convinced. He rolled the Kamtchatka maps out on the floor, studied them on his knees, and before even getting back up, pointed at Schmauder: "On Monday morning 9'o clock you are in the Ministry [for the Environment] and request 40.000 Deutschmark for four World Heritage nominations."

Leaving Uppenbrink's office, we just looked at each other, almost unable to believe what happened, but also realizing the huge challenge we had taken upon us. Before any of us knew what to do next, Succow took out his mobile phone and called the other three of his famous "gang of four" who had done the impossible in East Germany. "Hannes, do you have any plans yet for the summer?" "No, nothing fixed yet." "You will go to Russia to prepare a World Heritage nomination." Within minutes, four teams were formed to work on the four nominations. Succow himself chose Kamtchatka. Knapp, the forest expert, was sent to the Fennoscandian Forests along the Finnish border, Freude should go to the Uvs Nuur Basin in the Tuva Republic, and Jeschke to the Bashkirian Urals. Poor me, the young non-expert: I was to stay home and organize everything.

We had less than half a year to go. The teams had to travel to some of the most remote places of a country where almost all public services were on the brink of col-

lapse. At the time it was impossible to transfer money to a Russian bank, and anyway, Uppenbrink had promised the funds but it would take months before we would



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have it in our hands. All documents would be drafted originally in German, then translated into Russian, and finally, for UNESCO, translated again into English. Last but not least: We needed (of course) the cooperation of the Russian authorities who in the end had to put their signatures under the documents. For that, however, we had a partner in Russia who had already proved what they were able to do.

First of all, I informed Sergey Tsyplyonkov to tell him the good news. We agreed that a preparatory mission in early June should travel to Moscow in order to set everything on track. Then, four field missions should be undertaken in the first half of July. After that, Hans-Dieter Knapp, who was the President of the Academy for International Nature Conservation on the Isle of Vilm, would make his team available to draft the nomination dossiers, with input from Russian experts. The dossiers were to be finalized by the end of August, translated into Russian, sent to Russia for approval, translated into English, and sent to Paris before 1 October.

One of the seven members of the NABU Presidium was in a position to advance the funds needed so that we had the liquidity at hand that we needed to make payments in Russia. Sizeable amounts of cash were carried to Moscow for that purpose. All this happened without any formal decision of NABU's presidium, or involvement of its headquarters in Bonn. Since I was not a formal staff under NABU's Executive Director but was rather assigned to Succow, we were a kind of independent unit doing things on our own terms and conditions, meaning that there were not any of them. All of us wanted to get this done. We trusted each other to a degree that no formalities were needed.

The missions were conducted as planned but the Bashkirian Urals were found not to meet the standards of a world heritage, so only three nominations were prepared. The Bashkirian Urals later became a Biosphere Reserve. The Uvs Nuur Basin was submitted but IUCN concluded that the nomination should be a transboundary one with Mongolia since most of the basin was actually located on Mongolian territory. It took until 2001 that the two countries submitted a common nomination, and the Uvs Nuur Basin was eventually inscribed in 2003. The nomination of the Fennoskandian Forests was also completed but was blocked by the Russian military because the majority of the nominated areas were directly adjacent to the strategic border with Finland, which was considered to be too much of a security problem.

Finally, the Volcanoes of Kamtchatka. Michael Succow and his team had identified six component parts for this nomination but one of them lacked legal protection. It was in a common visit with the governor of the Kamtchatka Oblast to the sauna that Succow convinced him to establish a Regional Nature Park for this component – something he had the power to do without excessive legal procedure. The Volcanoes of Kamtchatka were immediately inscribed in 1996, and the sixth component was added in 2001.

The funds from the Federal Agency arrived on NABU's bank account only after the nomination dossiers had been sent to Paris. But we got the job done.

The next year, Uppenbrink provided again the funds for four nominations: the Western Caucasus, the Lena River Delta, the Commander Islands, and Vodlozero Na-

tional Park. By then, things had already become more complicated in Russia. Tickets were stolen by travel agents, and permission to conduct research on the Commander Islands was not granted in time. The three other missions were completed successfully, but Vodlozero NP was found not to qualify. The Lena Delta nomination was prepared but its submission has been withheld by the Russian authorities until today for undisclosed reasons. So again, only one out of the four nominations reached its goal: The Western Caucasus was nominated in 1998 and inscribed in 1999.

A year later, Russia had decided that its future priority was on stabilizing protection and management of the existing World Heritage Sites rather than nominating new ones, and our initiative remained a short

bright flash in the history of World Natural Heritage.

To my knowledge, this story which came to an end too early has never been written down or told in public. As for Greenpeace Russia, however, it continued. In 2012, when the World Heritage Committee held its session in St. Petersburg, Greenpeace Russia and the civil society activists who had stopped the Gazprom Tower project organized the first International NGO Forum on World Heritage. We hadn't been in touch with each other for fifteen years but when I heard about the conference I called Sergey Tsyplonkov and was invited. It was on this NGO Forum that I happened to be the first speaker and proposed to create an organization called World Heritage Watch. Then, another story began.



Volcanes de Kamchatka.