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The New York Times

As the Chinese Cut Down Siberia's Forests, Tensions With Russians Rise

By Andrew E. Kramer

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Guest workers from Central Asia at a Chinese run mill in the Siberian logging town of Kansk, Russia. Credit: Emile Ducke for The New York Times

○ KANSK, Russia — During the long summer days in Siberia, logging trucks rumble out of the forest heaped with Siberian larch, Scots pine and birch bound for sawmills run by Chinese who can barely believe their good fortune. “Everything here is Chinese,” said one lumberyard foreman, Wang Yiren, pointing to some of the hundreds of sawmills that in the past few years have popped up along the Trans-Siberian Railway.

Feeding China's colossal appetite for wood has brought jobs and cash to the region, but has also helped to make Russia the global leader in forest depletion, fueling fears that Siberian logging towns will eventually be left without a livelihood.



Stumps and felled trees at a logging site in Siberia. Feeding China's colossal appetite for wood has brought jobs and cash to the region, but has also fueled concern about deforestation. Credit: Emile Ducke for The New York Times

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Not only that, all the manufacturing of consumer wood products is done in China, which has [sharply restricted logging](#) to preserve its remaining forests. The arrangement would seem to smell of exploitation, but it has been embraced by a Russian government that, facing Western economic sanctions over its military incursion in Ukraine and interference in elections, has sought closer economic ties with Beijing.

Russian timber exports to China grew to \$3.5 billion last year, from \$2.2 billion in 2013, the year before the Ukraine crisis, according to Russian trade statistics. The Chinese, in turn, re-export some Russian wood as furniture, doors, flooring, cladding and other finished goods for sale around the world.

So, while the Chinese timber rush has stimulated local economies in Siberia, it has also stirred resentment, underscoring the promise and pitfalls of an economic experiment with implications far beyond one remote region. The governments of Russia and China, each with its own dispute with Washington, are vowing to get along in a common front against the United States.



“I’m a resident of this city,” Irina Avdoshkevich, a member of the City Council, said. “Why should I tolerate these waste piles, these fires?” Credit: Emile Duce for The New York Times

On the sidelines of the recent [meeting of the Group of 20 major economies in Japan](#), Russian and Chinese officials promised to use their currencies in bilateral trade, rather than dollars. But there may be limits to the depth of the relationship between countries that had a border clash in 1969 and retain deep mutual suspicion.

There have been complaints about environmental damage done by logging in Siberia, but the climate impact is harder to measure. Russia regularly leads the world in forest depletion — 16.3 million acres last year, compared to 9.1 million acres lost in the Amazon.

But Russia’s boreal forest is allowed to grow back after logging and fires, making the process less damaging than clearing tropical rain forest for farming or ranching. So far, according to Peter Potapov, a professor at the University of Maryland who leads global forest monitoring projects, scientists have not been able to reach consensus on whether fires and logging release more carbon dioxide than is reabsorbed by areas growing back.

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In Kansk, a logging industry hub of about 100,000 people, about 100 Chinese-operated mills have opened in the past five years, according to Ms. Avdoshkevich. Credit: Emile Ducke for The New York Times

That is little solace to Siberians who are watching their forests disappear down the Trans-Siberian Railway. About 100 Chinese-operated mills have opened in the past five years just in Kansk, a logging industry hub of about 100,000 people, according to Irina Avdoshkevich, a member of the City Council who has opposed the Chinese investment.

Seemingly every road from town leads to lumberyards and giant piles of sawdust and timber.

The Chinese invested in mills to saw raw logs into lumber, but not in a side of the business that used to be a pillar of the local economy: processing wood scraps and sawdust into particleboard, insulation and other products.



A Russian-run mill in Kansk. Credit: Emile Ducke for The New York Times

Residents of Kansk were particularly upset that the new investors decided not to revive the Kansk Biochemical Works, a Soviet-era factory that made ethanol from wood scraps. Officially, it was put to industrial purposes, but it was also consumed as a favorite local tippie known as sawdust vodka.

“There was no coniferous taste,” said Sergey Solovyov, a Russian lumberjack. “It was pure alcohol. You threw in a little lemon and you were a happy man.” “The whole town drank it” before the factory closed, he said. “It’s a shame that it’s gone.” Instead, under Chinese management, the former Soviet sawmill that had provided feedstock to the still allowed the sawdust piles to stack up. They caught fire in 2017, with the blaze spreading through a residential area, burning more than 50 homes and souring the town on Chinese investment.

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A dump for wood scraps burning on the outskirts of Kansk. Credit: Emile Duce for The New York Times

Ms. Avdoshkevich, the City Council member, asked local police and fire officials, who answer to Russia's central government, to intervene, but they did nothing to regulate the Chinese mills, she said. "We understand we need investment," she said. "But if we decided to be friends, it should be even. You get something, I get something."

Instead, she said, the Chinese timber barons simply ship as much wood as they can, as quickly as possible, to China, without investment in manufacturing in Russia and without regard to the environmental damage.



Eduard Maltsev and his partner, Lilia Rakhmanova, on the street where their house stood before it burned down in a fire that started in a Chinese-run mill. Credit: Emile Duce for The New York Times

"I'm a resident of this city," she said. "Why should I tolerate these waste piles, these fires?" But without clear support from the Russian government — some mills have pictures of Vladimir V. Putin and China's leader, Xi Jinping, shaking hands — Ms. Avdoshkevich's campaign against the sawdust piles went nowhere.

The experiences of a local Russian man, Eduard Maltsev, illustrate the tensions. He did land a job feeding logs into a saw in one of the mills, earning about \$230 a month, a respectable wage in these parts. On the flip side, Mr. Maltsev's home burned in the 2017 fire. The Chinese manager quickly left town and Mr. Maltsev said he had received no compensation. He now works as a bus driver.

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Wang Yiren, a Chinese lumberyard foreman, in front of wood stacks in Kansk that were awaiting shipment to China. Credit: Emile Duce for The New York Times

“Yes, it is positive they are creating jobs,” he said of the Chinese, but, like many in the logging towns of Siberia, he now sees China’s swift rise to dominance in the industry as more curse than blessing. “It’s damaging and dangerous,” he said.

In interviews, several Chinese mill operators said Russians should not blame them for the drawbacks of the Siberian timber boom. The Russian government, after all, [sets environmental rules](#) for logging in the vast sea of green known as the taiga.

One Chinese sawmill boss, who offered only his assumed Russian first name, Igor, because he was not authorized to speak to the news media, oversees a sprawling lumberyard of several acres. Most Chinese foremen take Russian names to make it easier for the Russian workers, who often struggle with Chinese names.

Wearing flip-flops and shorts, Igor yelled orders in Russian and Chinese at his mixed staff. All things considered, he said, he would rather be working in China. But it was too late for that, he added. “We cut it all down,” he said. Mr. Wang, who speaks fluent Russian and oversees a neighboring mill, said he employed about 50 Russians. On a recent day, a dozen or so Russian men worked shirtless in the summer heat, pushing logs into a whirring band saw, their tanned, sweaty torsos covered in sawdust.

“This will last another five years, maybe,” he said of the Chinese logging boom. “Then the Russians will start thinking, and they will also forbid logging.”



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