

The NOMAD Expedition - Studying social change in the Russian far north

Written by [NOMAD](#)

Press release: The NOMAD Expedition - Studying social change in the Russian far north (Kola Peninsula, NW Russia)

[Read more](#) about Dr. Vladislava Vladimirova, Prof. Yulian Konstantinov and Dr. Joachim Otto Habeck, three researchers working with NOMAD.

[Beautiful images from the expedition](#) in high res



The NOMAD Expedition (March 2007-February 2008) followed the annual migration of a reindeer herd in the central part of the Kola Peninsula. Endorsed by the German International Polar Year Committee, it was funded by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (MPI) in Halle, Germany. A constituent part of the expedition was eNOMAD – a cooperative project of the Department of Social Anthropology at UiTø and the Norwegian Telemedical Centre, funded by the Roald Amundsen Institute for Arctic Research. All details about NOMAD, as well as a month-by-month field-diary of the expedition can be found [here](http://polarjahr.de/NOMAD) (<http://polarjahr.de/NOMAD>).

NOMAD's main task was to study how synergy of socio-economic plus climate change affects the interaction between humans and reindeer, represented by the local form of post-Soviet reindeer husbandry. The latter is characterized by lack of control over the herds for the greater part of the

year, a herding method known as “extensive herding”.

A point of observation was sought which departed from usual field-methods of research of this part of the Russian North. Accounting for the constraints extensive herding imposes on fieldwork, the NOMAD sought close contact with a migrating herd, rather than establish itself in settlements, or tundra herding camps. For this purpose a tent/sled mobile camp was organized, with which the team followed the migrating herd during the snow cover months. During the rest of the time we followed the herd on foot, using a small boat when crossing rivers or lakes.

Apart from these functions, the mobile camp created a setting in the tundra, where herders and other tundra-related actors would willingly pass by and take a cup of tea and a short rest. We would discuss research team problems with them, trends in present reindeer herding, as well as consult them for fortnightly reports on the expedition’s web-site.

The current increase of private herds, grazed together with the overall cooperative stock, was a major focus of NOMAD. The process, discussed elsewhere by the authors as a “private-in-the-collective” phenomenon, is a socio-economic trend, contributing to further extensivity of herding methods. It was observed that this trend was working in a synergetic relationship with climate change, propelling forward what is known in the literature on reindeer husbandry as the “extensive spiral”.

The eNOMAD component probed into possibilities for establishing telemedical services for the benefit of tundra herding camps and remote villages. Difficult access to medical care is of great significance for the local community and, among other reasons, contributes to a very pronounced gender split. Herders’ wives, especially those with young children, would not join their husbands at tundra camps for lack of medical service. Consequences are connected with pronounced enforced celibacy among herders (up to 70%), high levels of alcoholic dependence, high incidence of work accidents, and very low life expectancy for men in herding (43 yrs). Introducing telemedical services was seen by the community to offer a way of improving the situation and helping bring families together. High equipment and running costs present, however, a serious obstacle.

Results have shown how a state of maximum extensivity of husbandry methods leads to an increasing reliance on fence-building, heavy track vehicle transportation, and high speed snow-scooters, imported second-hand from the Nordic countries. It can be said that maximum extensivity has set in as a stable tendency. Organizationally, every effort is being made, both from top as from bottom, to retain a state-supported “private-in-the-collective” form, rather than shift to independent private herding. Climate change discourse is turning into a political instrument in this context, being used to sustain the current herding cooperatives as meta-state farms. In the studying of this process the NOMAD field method has proved to be an adequate instrument for understanding social and economic processes in the herding part of the Russian Far North.

The future of NOMAD

NOMAD was conceived as a long-term programme, designed to unite academic and more general interests in an interdisciplinary fashion. Over the years a considerable infrastructure has been accumulated, allowing autonomous movement over the entirety of the Kola reindeer-herding

territory. The team enjoys long-term working and friendly relationships in the local reindeer herding community and especially with reindeer herders with whom we have had a productive cooperation since 1994.

The eNOMAD component of the expedition set up a small computer centre in the Lovozero Municipal Library, through which e-mail touch is continuously ensured with the village. The existing infrastructure, with the help of local contacts and collaborators is a sound basis for the continuation of the work of the NOMAD Programme, being capable of hosting interested researchers. We shall be actively searching support for the continuation of the work of the Expedition in the following years. A second following of a herd migration in central Kola is being planned for 2010-11. We encourage interest for participation in such an effort.

[Read more](#) about Dr. Vladislava Vladimirova, Prof. Yulian Konstantinov and Dr. Joachim Otto Habeck, three researchers working with NOMAD.

[Illustrations of the expedition](#)

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On February 25th 2009, the IPY Joint Committee will release a report on 'The State of Polar Research'. In the lead-up to this event, major IPY research projects are releasing information for the press, and making themselves available for media enquiries. A wide range of projects will be profiled reflecting the diversity of IPY. For more information, please visit

http://www.ipy.org/index.php?ipy/detail/feb09_projects/ or contact Rhian Salmon (ipy.ras@gmail.com)