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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Nivkh People's Sustainable Bear Hunting Enterprise, Seventeenth to Twentieth Centuries

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Abstract

Business-led conservation of wildlife based on private property rights and formal governance has often yielded inconsistent results. In pursuit of alternative approaches that prioritize long-term sustainability in wildlife exploitation, this paper studies the novel case of the Nivkh people's bear hunting enterprise, which functioned in the Lower Amur Basin and Sakhalin from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century. I demonstrate that the Nivkh ran their bear enterprise sustainably via a conglomeration of traditional ecological knowledge, religious beliefs, and informal social institutions, satisfying their personal demand for the animal while successfully selling bear furs and gallbladders to foreign merchants. Such developments were also supported by the regional political economy in which the Nivkh retained a large degree of autonomy. The paper highlights the productive impact that ideas of sacrality, human–animal kinship, and reciprocity exert on sustainability in wildlife enterprises while also stressing the importance of careful government policy in relation to Indigenous conservation systems. The study validates its claims through field notes, expeditionary journals, state reports, and historical and ethnographic research.

Keywords: Nivkh; bear business; sustainability; Indigenous enterprise; Russian Far East

Unsustainable wildlife exploitation has been a persistent problem throughout the development of human civilization. Without adequate management, tensions between humans and wildlife arise almost immediately, leading to overhunting, habitat loss, and ecosystem disruption.[1] Historically, businesses occasionally managed wildlife populations through private property rights. For instance, the increasing scarcity of the bison population in nineteenth-century America led to privatization

[1] Phillip Nyhus, "Human–Wildlife Conflict and Coexistence," *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 41, no. 1 (2016): 143–162.

efforts from Texas and Kansas ranchers, and prevented a complete decimation of the animal, while in the contemporary times, businesses create commercially successful private wildlife conservancies for tigers, white rhinos, and elephants.[2]

However, such an approach does not always work, as businesses often focus on short-term profits instead of long-term sustainability, and private property rights by themselves may decimate animal populations when their use disregards the ecological conditions, or serves the interests of rent-seeking parties.[3] Private property rights may also be too costly to implement, as they require considerable resources to define and enforce, often with substantial government involvement.[4] In turn, the government's presence may additionally exacerbate wildlife mismanagement by neglecting resource constraints or ignoring locally defined priorities.[5]

As such, a question arises whether some alternative/complementary approaches may help businesses prioritize long-term sustainability in wildlife exploitation, especially when private property rights along with formal governance fail to achieve results. Answers to these questions can be gleaned from further explorations of business history, particularly from studying wildlife enterprises in Indigenous societies, whose effectiveness is demonstrated by historical endurance and continued sustainability.[6]

At the heart of nearly all sustainable Indigenous wildlife enterprises lies a self-governance structure based on a combination of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), religious beliefs, and informal social institutions.[7] TEK provides spiritual explanations of environmental phenomena, accumulating as Indigenous peoples adapt to their land through countless generations, and is maintained via religious beliefs, colorful myths, oral history, and special linguistic constructs.[8] Through TEK, Indigenous peoples perceive the world as a place where all elements of matter are related socially and spiritually, and believe that such relations are further infused with sacred significance. The land itself is believed to be alive, and animals are imagined as having agency, forming symbiotic and kindred relationships with people.[9] As a result, TEK transforms the nature of wildlife exploitation from a lifeless

[2] Dean Lueck, "The Extermination and Conservation of the American Bison," *Journal of Legal Studies* 31, no. S2 (2002): S609–S652; Michael De Alessi, "An Ivory-Tower Take on the Ivory Trade," *Econ Journal Watch* 1, no. 1 (2004): 49.

[3] Peter Leeson, and Colin Harris, "Wealth-Destroying Private Property Rights," *World Development* 107, (2018): 7.

[4] Barry Field, "The Evolution of Property Rights," *Kyklos* 42, no. 3 (1989): 319–345; Lueck, "The Extermination and Conservation of the American Bison," 642–643.

[5] Henry Colleen, Stephanie Meakin, and Tero Mustonen, "Indigenous Perceptions of Resilience," in *Arctic Resilience Interim Report 2013*, ed. Annika Nilsson (Stockholm, 2013), 30.

[6] Barbara Bodenhorn, "Sharing Costs: an Exploration of Personal and Individual Property, Equalities and Differentiation," in *Property and Equality, Volume 1: Ritualisation, Sharing, Egalitarianism*, eds. Thomas Widlok and Wolde Gossa Tadesse (New York, 2005), 77–104; John Ziker, Joellie Rasmussen, and David Nolin, "Indigenous Siberians Solve Collective Action Problems through Sharing and Traditional Knowledge," *Sustainability Science* 11 (2006): 45–55; Lars Rønning, "Entrepreneurship among Sámi Reindeer Herders," in *International Handbook of Research on Indigenous Entrepreneurship*, eds. Léo-Paul Dana and Robert Anderson (Cheltenham, 2007), 232–246.

[7] Svein D. Mathiesen et al., "Strategies to Enhance the Resilience of Sámi Reindeer Husbandry to Rapid Changes in the Arctic," in *Arctic Resilience Interim Report 2013*, ed. Annika Nilsson (Stockholm, 2013), 109.

[8] Colleen, Meakin, and Mustonen, "Indigenous Perceptions of Resilience," 27.

[9] Colleen, Meakin, and Mustonen, "Indigenous Perceptions of Resilience," 27, 30.

interaction with a "thing" to a complex system of relationships between living beings, where humans are not acting as proprietors of their environment but rather as stewards.[10] Such perceptions avoid "fixed constellations" of predefined, clear-cut ownership types, enabling the creation of unique and sustainable wildlife management practices, especially since TEK is obtained by "living within contexts of flux, paradox, and tension, respecting the pull of dualism and reconciling opposing forces."[11]

Under TEK and religion the sustainable behavior of Indigenous wildlife enterprises becomes almost self-enforcing, as acts of wildlife overconsumption are believed to imbalance nature and disrupt its cycle, endangering the entire Indigenous society economically and spiritually.[12] When such considerations are insufficient, sustainability can be further supported by informal social institutions, for instance, through norms, reputational sanctions, kinship pressures, cultivation of honor and reciprocity, formation of different perceptions of wealth, and introduction of non-pecuniary considerations into economic activities.[13]

Following these insights, my paper exposes the business world to the Nivkh (also called "Gilyak" in the older literature) people's bear hunting enterprise, which functioned in the Lower Amur Basin and Sakhalin from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century.[14] I demonstrate that the Nivkh ran their bear enterprise sustainably via a self-governing conglomeration of TEK, religious beliefs and informal social institutions, satisfying their personal demand for the bear and successfully selling bear furs and gallbladders to foreign merchants without depleting the animal's population.

Bears occupied a special place in Nivkh's religious cosmology; they were revered as powerful mountain people who acted as messengers of the mountain and taiga god Pal-yz'. The Nivkh also held that, through time, they formed kindred ties with bears. Such belief made the killing of bears from one's own clan impossible, as it amounted to killing a relative, which Nivkh considered a grave crime. As a result, the ownership between a Nivkh clan and their bears was separated. However, in exchange for a payment of luxury and utility items, Nivkh could arrange hunts for clans that had no

[10] David Anderson, "Property as a Way of Knowing on Evenki Lands in Arctic Siberia," in *Property Relations: Renewing the Anthropological Tradition*, ed. Chris M. Hann (Cambridge, 1998), 70, 82; Tatiana Dmitrieva, "Bogatstvo i Ego Simvoly v Kul'ture Nivkhov," in *Real'nyye i Znakovyye Formy Sotsial'noy Differentsiatsii v Arkhaike*, eds. Margarita Al'bedil' and Dmitriy Savinov (Saint-Petersburg, 2015), 77.

[11] Thomas Widlok, "Introduction," in *Property and Equality, Volume 1: Ritualisation, Sharing, Egalitarianism*, eds. Thomas Widlok and Wolde Gossa Tadesse (New York, 2005), 10; Léo-Paul Dana, "Toward a Multidisciplinary Definition of Indigenous Entrepreneurship," in *International Handbook of Research on Indigenous Entrepreneurship*, eds. Léo-Paul Dana, and Robert Anderson (Cheltenham, 2007), 5; Carlos Fausto, "Too Many Owners: Mastery and Ownership in Amazonia," in *Animism in Rainforest and Tundra: Personhood, Animals, Plants and Things in Contemporary Amazonia and Siberia*, eds. Marc Brightman, Vanessa Elisa Grotti, and Olga Ulturgasheva (New York, 2012), 29–47.

[12] Alexandra Lavriller, "'Spirit-Charged' Animals in Siberia," in *Animism in Rainforest and Tundra: Personhood, Animals, Plants and Things in Contemporary Amazonia and Siberia*, eds. Marc Brightman, Vanessa Elisa Grotti, and Olga Ulturgasheva (New York, 2012), 113–129.

[13] Dana, "Toward a Multidisciplinary Definition," 3–5.

[14] The Lower Amur Basin and Sakhalin are geographical locations in the present-day Russian Federation. The Lower Amur Basin is located in southeastern Siberia, and Sakhalin is a large island, positioned off the southeastern Siberian coast.

kinship ties with their bears, usually for individuals from a clan of wife-takers who killed the bear and took all of its products, with the exception of bones. Beyond requiring payment for hunting and limiting invites on the basis of clan ties, the Nivkh further controlled overconsumption by imposing additional costs on the host clan. Religious prescriptions prolonged the butchering process, during which the hosts incurred the costs of accommodating their guests and had to sacrifice resources to honor their bear and ensure its reincarnation. Compliance with the bear hunting process was secured by threats of spiritual punishments, fines, ostracism, and blood vengeance.

The Nivkh's bear enterprise was also supported by the regional political economy, in which Nivkh had a large degree of autonomy. Due to their remoteness and resistance to authority, the Nivkh never fully submitted to the rule of Chinese, Japanese, and Russian governments. At the same time, regional trade in bears was free from formal regulations, as states instead focused on managing the commerce in the fur of small- and middle-sized animals. Under such conditions, the Nivkh's sustainable bear enterprise was free from external influence and persisted for centuries until its operations were eroded by the worsening political climate in the region, and eventually stamped out by the Soviet regime.

To my knowledge, researchers have not examined the Nivkh's sustainable bear enterprise in detail, especially within the larger context of the Northeast Asian political economy of the seventeenth to the early twentieth century, which makes my contribution novel. From a practical perspective, the study of Nivkh's conservation principles emphasizes the impact of spirituality, sacrality, human–animal kinship, reciprocity, and coexistence in sustainable wildlife enterprises.[15] Integration of these ideas into contemporary business practices may particularly matter for preserving bear populations threatened by high commercial demand, and constitute a competitive advantage in a world where animals are increasingly viewed as stakeholders, non-human life is ascribed value, and significant goodwill is attached to sustainability.[16] Policymakers can also benefit from studying the Nivkh's bear hunting case, as it highlights the importance of autonomy for an effective functioning of Indigenous wildlife enterprises, and shows that careless nation-state policies can outright destroy Indigenous conservation systems, resulting in negative consequences for both humans and animals.

My analysis relies on diaries, field studies, and state reports, documented by scholars, government officials, and travelers who witnessed the Nivkh's economic activities, such as Venyukov, Busse, Vysheslavtsev, Shrenk, Kreynovich, and Shternberg.[17] Another important source of evidence comes from scholars of Nivkh

[15] Kekuhi Kealiikanakaoleohaililani and Christian Giardina, "Embracing the Sacred: an Indigenous Framework for Tomorrow's Sustainability Science," *Sustainability Science* 11 (2016): 57–67.

[16] Lalita Gomez, Pavel Toropov, and Christ Shepherd, "Bears in the Russian Far East Illegally Exploited for Meat, Medicine and Trophies," *Tropical Conservation Science* 16 (2023): 19400829231191060; Linda Tallberg, José-Carlos García-Rosell, and Minni Haanpää, "Human–animal Relations in Business and Society: Advancing the Feminist Interpretation of Stakeholder Theory," *Journal of Business Ethics* 180, no. 1 (2022): 1–16.

[17] Mikhail Venyukov, *Obozreniye Yaponskogo Arkhipelaga v Sovremennom Ego Sostoyanii. Chast' Vtoraya: Yapontsy Doma i v Obshchestve* (Saint-Petersburg, 1871); Nikolay Busse, *Ostrov Sakhalin i Ekspeditsiya 1853–1854 gg.* (Saint-Petersburg, 1872); Aleksey Vysheslavtsev, "Ot Bukhty Sv. Vladimira do Amura,"

descent such as Chuner Taksami and Marina Temina, who were able to clarify much of the Nivkh terminology and further provide the validity of the earlier scholars' findings by utilizing their own heritage, familial relations, and informants within the older Nivkh generations.[18]

The Nivkh's Territory, Social Structure, and Religion

According to Black, the earliest mentions of the Nivkh are found in Chinese historical records that date back to the twelfth century.[19] More detailed knowledge about the Nivkh appeared in the seventeenth century when Russian Cossack expeditions provided descriptions of the Nivkh, their settlements and the ubiquitous presence of bears on their territories.[20] The Nivkh inhabited areas in the Lower Amur Basin and in the central and northern parts of Sakhalin, as shown in Figure 1. Such a distribution remains relatively stable today.[21] Despite the geographical divide, Amur and Sakhalin Nivkh spoke the same unique language with slight dialectical differences, and had the same religious views, traditions, and norms.[22] The Nivkh were not the only Indigenous peoples in the region; they had neighbors such as the Evenki, Orochi, Ulcha, and Ainu.

Polevoy and Taksami estimate that, during the seventeenth century, the Nivkh population could have exceeded ten thousand.[23] Semenov's mid-nineteenth-century estimate for all the Indigenous population in the Lower Amur Basin constituted eight thousand, while Shrenk's assessment of the Nivkh's population at the end of the nineteenth century is around five thousand.[24] Kreynovich in his expeditions to Amur and Sakhalin in 1926–1928, considered the Nivkh population to be around four

Russkiy Vestnik 29 (1860): 179–211; Leopol'd Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh Amurskogo Kraya. Tom 2* (Saint-Petersburg, 1899); Leopol'd Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh Amurskogo Kraya. Tom 3* (Saint-Petersburg, 1903); Erukhim Kreynovich, *Nivkhgu: Zagadochnyye Obitateli Sakhalina i Amura* (Moscow, 1973); Erukhim Kreynovich, "Perezhitki Rodovoy Sobstvennosti i Gruppovogo Braka u Gilyakov," in *Voprosy Istorii Doklassovogo Obshchestva*, ed. Abram Deborin (Moscow, 1936), 711–754; Erukhim Kreynovich, "O Kul'te Medvedya u Nivkhov," in *Strany i Narody Vostoka. Vypusk XXIV, Kniga 5*, ed. Dmitriy Ol'derogge (Moscow, 1982), 245–283; Lev Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy, Negidal'tsy, Ayny* (Khabarovsk, 1933).

[18] Boris Polevoy and Chuner Taksami, "Pervyye Russkiye Svedeniya o Nivkhakh-gilyakakh," in *Strany i Narody Vostoka. Vypusk XVII, Kniga 3*, ed. Dmitriy Ol'derogge (Moscow, 1975), 138–157; Chuner Taksami, "Obshchiye Elementy v Traditsionnoy Kul'ture Narodov Tikhookeanskogo Severa," *Izvestiya Rossiyskogo gosudarstvennogo pedagogicheskogo universiteta im. AI Gertsena* 106 (2009): 15–20; Marina Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik kak Istoricheskiy Pamyatnik Nematerial'nogo Kul'turnogo Naslediya Nivkhov* (Belgorod, 2020).

[19] Lydia Black, "The Nivkh (Gilyak) of Sakhalin and the Lower Amur," *Arctic Anthropology* 10, no. 1 (1973): 5.

[20] Polevoy and Taksami, "Pervyye Russkiye Svedeniya," 138.

[21] Ekaterina Gruzdeva, "Explaining Language Loss: the Sakhalin Nivkh Case," in *Cultural and Linguistic Minorities in the Russian Federation and the European Union*, eds. Heiko F. Marten, Michael Rießler, Janne Saarikivi, and Reetta Toivanen (Cham, 2015), 234.

[22] Black, "The Nivkh (Gilyak)," 3; Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 348. Where applicable, dialectical differences between Amur and Sakhalin Nivkh are noted in this paper by "Am. d." meaning Amur dialect and "Sakh. d." meaning Sakhalin dialect.

[23] Polevoy and Taksami, "Pervyye Russkiye Svedeniya," 145.

[24] Petr Semenov, *Geograficheskо-Statisticheskiy Slovar' Rossiyskoy Imperii, Tom 1* (Saint-Petersburg, 1863); Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 2*, 56.

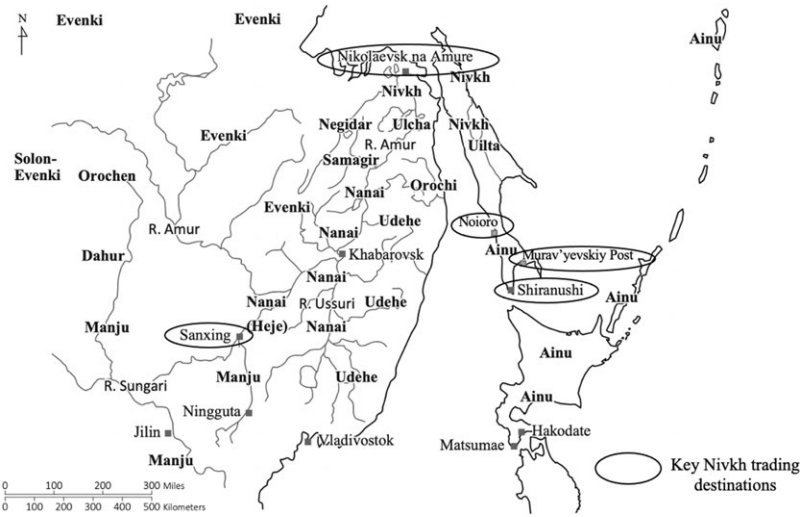

Figure 1. Northeast Asia in the nineteenth century with the location of local ethnic groups and key trading destinations of the Nivkh. (Source: The map is based on Shiro Sasaki, "A History of the Far East Indigenous People's Transborder Activities between the Russian and Chinese Empires," in *Northeast Asian Borders: History, Politics, and Local Societies [Senri Ethnological Studies 92],* ed. Yuki Konagaya and Olga Shaglanova [Osaka, 2016], 161. My added locations of Noioro and Murav'yevskiy Post are based on Busse, *Ostrov Sakhalin i Ekspeditsiya 1853–1854 gg. [Saint-Petersburg, 1872]*, 72, 152–153, 161–162.)

thousand individuals.[25] In 2021 the Russian state census counted the Nivkh population at 3,842.[26]

Before the Soviet Union, clans organized the Nivkh's social relations. A clan could exist by itself in a separate village, or co-exist in a settlement with another clan.[27] Nivkh clans were exogamic, and incestuous relations were forbidden.[28] When marrying, the wife became a part of another clan, thus creating separations between clans as wife-givers and wife-takers.[29] Consequently, every clan formed organic relationships with clans from which it received its wives and clans to which it gave its daughters in marriage.[30] Marriages were performed on a contractual basis, with the bride-price *kalym* paid to the bride's father or brothers, while the bride's father exchanged a dowry with his son-in-law.[31] The wife could also practice fraternal polyandry in the absence of her husband with a group of men called *pu,* usually her

[25] Kreynovich, *Nivkhgu: Zagadochnyye Obitateli*, 56.

[26] Rosstat, "Natsional'nyy Sostav Naseleniya Rossiyskoy Federatsii Soglasno Perepisi Naseleniya 2021 Goda," *Natsional'nyy Sostav Naseleniya*, accessed 18 Aug. 2024, https://rosstat.gov.ru/storage/mediabank/Tom5_tab1_VPN-2020.xlsx.

[27] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 110.

[28] Gruzdeva, "Explaining Language Loss," 236.

[29] Kreynovich, "O Kul'te Medvedya," 253, footnote 7; Kreynovich, *Nivkhgu: Zagadochnyye Obitateli*, 271–272.

[30] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston, 1969), 298.

[31] Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures*, 301–302.

husband's brothers.[32] There are indications that wife-taker clans took on a more subordinate status to the wife-giver clans. The wife-giver clan lived by a patronizing formula of "a son-in-law must be fed," while the wife-taker clan was expected to assist the wife-givers in their economic activities.[33]

Despite residing in a region where China, Japan, and Russia historically vied for control, the Nivkh's remoteness and resistance ensured that they existed under "nothing more than anarchy" until the twentieth century.[34] Based on the accounts of Vasiliy Poyarkov's expedition in 1644–1645, the Nivkh paid no fur tribute to China.[35] Sasaki also classifies the Nivkh as "liberated and ambitious traders" who "never completely submitted to the authority of the [Qing] dynasty."[36] Despite the Chinese administration's numerous attempts to control the Nivkh by appointing chiefs, the legitimacy of such agents was not recognized.[37] Later, the Nivkh resisted similar domination methods of the Russian Empire, which greatly expanded its presence in Lower Amur Basin and Sakhalin from 1855.[38] However, in both Amur and Sakhalin, Nivkh territories were gradually being encroached upon by Russian settlers. On Sakhalin, which became a Russian penal colony, many Nivkh were also murdered by Russian desperadoes, became addicted to vodka, and died from new epidemic diseases.[39] The Nivkh's independence was finally curbed by the Soviet Union's forced collectivization and resettlement programs from 1920s to 1950s, which resulted in an almost complete loss of Nivkh culture, language, and traditional occupations.[40]

Existing under anarchy for most of their history, the Nivkh secured social cooperation via self-governance through religious beliefs, TEK, and informal institutions. The Nivkh's worldview was that of animism and anthropomorphism. Everything in nature was alive and had a soul, and the Nivkh were surrounded by god-humans who hid themselves under the guises of animate and inanimate objects.[41] The two most important gods, or "masters" for Nivkh were Pal-yz' and Tol-yz', directly associated with the key economic activities of hunting and fishing. Pal-yz' lived on the tallest mountain and commanded all wildlife, with bears (*k'otr* in the Amur dialect [Am. d.] or *chkhyv* in the Sakhalin dialect [Sakh. d]) being his children and messengers, while Tol-yz' lived at the bottom of the Okhotsk Sea and ruled salmon, orcas, and other marine life.[42]

Pal-yz' and Tol-yz' supplied the Nivkh with wildlife and blessed them with luck and health. However, the gods could take these benefits away if Nivkh displeased them by punishing the offender and their entire clan with illnesses or untimely deaths and

[32] Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures*, 301.
[33] Black, "The Nivkh (Gilyak)," 79, 81.
[34] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 109.
[35] Poleveoy and Taksami, "Pervyye Russkiye Svedeniya," 140, 153.
[36] Sasaki, "A History of the Far East," 175.
[37] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 112.
[38] Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik*, 90–91.
[39] James Forsyth, *A History of the Peoples of Siberia: Russia's North Asian Colony 1581–1990* (Cambridge, 1992), 218.
[40] Gruzdeva, "Explaining Language Loss," 249.
[41] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 49.
[42] Aleksandr Ostrovskiy, *Mifologiya i Verovaniya Nivkhov* (Saint-Petersburg, 1997), 24–25.

reducing the availability of animals.[43] To prevent such a disastrous outcome, the Nivkh had to abide by religious prescriptions that also fostered social cooperation. The Nivkh had to live peacefully, engage in mutual aid, respect all life, and provide Pal-yz' and Tol-yz' with offerings of items foreign to their respective domains.[44] For instance, Pal-yz' did not want any bear meat as offerings.[45] Offerings could be small and sporadic, or be performed lavishly during large religious festivals.[46] Each offering had to include some wood shavings called *inau*, which served as a spiritual conduit.[47] Constant offerings, religious rituals, and frequent retelling of myths reinforced the Nivkh's belief to such an extent that a person would "fall ill out of fear" at the thought of angering the gods and incurring their punishment.[48]

Though religious beliefs and TEK largely self-enforced cooperation, the Nivkh also utilized informal institutions to keep individuals in check. Disputes were mediated through the opinions of elders and the involvement of respected arbitrators called *khlai nivukh*.[49] Within a clan, compensation for smaller offenses such as damages to one's house usually involved the payment of a fine called *tkhusind*, while grave crimes such as murders of relatives were punished with social exclusion.[50] Social exclusion was a costly punishment that deterred rule breaking, as it deprived the offender of their clan membership and denied them a chance at another life. The Nivkh believed that, upon dying, their soul usually traveled to the settlement of the dead *mlyvo*, where it would be reborn and live again.[51] In some cases, a soul would instead reincarnate in a manner associated with one's death. For example, if a Nivkh got killed by a bear, they would join the retinue of Pal-Yz' as a bear and watch over their clan, becoming their animal kin.[52] However, only the deceased individual's clan could ensure their rebirth by giving them an immolation burial, sacrificing dogs for spiritual guidance, and offering food and items for the soul.[53] Without funerary rites, one's soul could be captured by the evil spirits called *milk* and would never find peace.[54] Interclan disputes were largely resolved through *khlai nivukh* and *tkhusind,* but with murder, the victim's clan could threaten a blood vengeance, proclaiming that their relative's bones "must be lifted!"[55]

The Nivkh's TEK, religion, and informal social institutions also supported respectful relations with wildlife. By viewing animals as beings with agency, Nivkh could not torture or kill animals for fun, and while hunting and fishing, Nivkh had to engage wildlife in "dialogue" and ask for its permission to be hunted.[56] The necessity to perform funerary rites also extended to animals, especially lavish ones if such

[43] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 365–367.
[44] Black, "The Nivkh (Gilyak)," 47–48.
[45] Ostrovskiy, *Mifologiya i Verovaniya*, 44.
[46] Taksami, "Obshchiye Elementy," 18.
[47] Kreynovich, *Nivkhgu: Zagadochnyye Obitateli*, 62–63.
[48] Kreynovich, *Nivkhgu: Zagadochnyye Obitateli*, 222.
[49] Dmitrieva, "Bogatstvo i Ego Simvoly," 84; Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik*, 91.
[50] Black, "The Nivkh (Gilyak)," 84–85.
[51] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 79.
[52] Kreynovich, *Nivkhgu: Zagadochnyye Obitateli*, 395.
[53] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 326–330.
[54] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 72–73, 79, 94.
[55] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 95.
[56] Ostrovskiy, *Mifologiya i Verovaniya*, 24.

animals were considered kindred.[57] If respect was not shown, then the animal's soul would report poor treatment to deities and even personally take vengeance upon the offender and their clan.[58] Due to human–animal kinship beliefs, the Nivkh's informal institutions also applied to kindred animals via *tkhusind* and even blood vengeance.

The Nivkh's Economic and Commercial Activities

Before the Soviet Union's disruption of their society, the Nivkh's main economic activities were dog breeding, exploitation of marine life, and hunting of forest animals. Nivkh were not agriculturalists, as they treated the very land as a living being and could not cause it suffering.[59] The Nivkh only domesticated dogs, and did not breed reindeer as the neighboring Evenki did. The Nivkh used dogs as transport animals, a source of food and clothing, a means of payment, and sacrifices in religious rituals.[60]

Exploitation of marine life further provided Nivkh with their main source of food and allowed them to obtain clothing from fish and seal skins. Nivkh hunted seals on boats during early spring, and fished for salmon and sturgeon during summer, drying the fish and storing it for winter. While Nivkh clans had their own fishing grounds, in practice, the Nivkh moved to the best fishing spots without anyone's permission. However, placement of nets by other fishermen was respected.[61] Dried fish was owned collectively by a clan, and the Nivkh could take from the common pool in times of need.[62] Due to the abundance of fish and sea mammals in Nivkh territories and no competitive pressures, simple communal ownership was sufficient to not deplete marine life.[63]

Forest animal hunting was an important activity for personal consumption and trade, with each Nivkh clan having its own hunting grounds, or *tunf*.[64] For personal consumption, the Nivkh were primarily interested in hunting bears, and seldomly pursued other animals.[65] Nivkh demanded bears for material and spiritual reasons. Bear meat and fat were considered delicacies, which diversified the Nivkh's primarily fish-based diet. Spiritual demand stemmed from the Nivkh's veneration of bears as powerful mountain people of superior intellect and strength, who also established "the exchange between the human communities and the world of the supernatural." As such, consumption of certain bear organs was believed to infuse the Nivkh with power—for instance, eating the bear's heart, *nongaund*, would endow one with

[57] Black, "The Nivkh (Gilyak)," 49.
[58] Kreynovich, *Nivkhgu: Zagadochnyye Obitateli*, 116.
[59] Busse, *Ostrov Sakhalin*, 19.
[60] Black, "The Nivkh (Gilyak)," 91; Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 2*, 76.
[61] Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 3*, 37.
[62] Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 3*, 37.
[63] Dmitrieva, "Bogatstvo i Ego Simvoly," 76–77. However, private property arrangements emerged in the Nivkh's fishing in the early 20th century with the increased commercial interest from Russian and Japanese merchants. Kreynovich reported the expansion of territorial delineations along the key Nivkh fishing areas, and hypothesized that such developments were an extension of the Nivkh's experiences with hunting small- and middle-size animals, as shown below. See Kreynovich, "Perezhitki Rodovoy Sobstvennosti," 728–729, 736.
[64] Kreynovich, "Perezhitki Rodovoy Sobstvennosti," 712.
[65] Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 2*, 122–123.

courage.[66] However, some bear parts were taboo, and prohibited from consumption by women, children, and teenagers. For instance, a woman was prohibited from eating a bear's heart, as Nivkh believed that courage was not required for a woman, and an act of such kind would anger the bear's soul.[67] Additionally, a hunted bear's soul could be supplied with gifts that it would take to Pal-yz' himself in return for divine benevolence.[68]

The spectrum of hunted animals increased for trading purposes, and the Nivkh supplied various animal products for the regional economy, such as sable furs, fox furs, eagle feathers, bear skins, and bear gallbladders. Bear skins, while not as valuable as the fur of small- and middle-sized animals, were universally demanded in Amur and Sakhalin and served as precious gifts for government officials in China and Russia.[69] In early-twentieth-century Russia, bear products commanded an especially high price due to a sharp decrease in the animal's population in the country, especially in its central part.[70] Gallbladders were in high demand by Chinese and Japanese merchants due to being a key ingredient in traditional medicine, considered as "prized" and "very expensive."[71] In late-nineteenth-century Japan, gallbladders circulated as gifts among the political elites and were exchanged during "official audiences between ... domanial lords and the shogun."[72]

Trade in animal products was extremely important, as it allowed the Nivkh to obtain wealth, and with it, social prestige and positions of informal leadership. The Nivkh believed that wealth emerged primarily from the benevolence of the deities, and not their own talents and skills.[73] As such, wealthy Nivkh were considered to be chosen of the gods. Wealthy people were admired by their clan, became the center of social life in the settlement, took the helm of trading expeditions, led hunting parties, and became *khlai nivukh*.[74] Wealth was also important for paying *tkhusind*, was included in *kalym* and dowry, and was utilized during funerary rites. For the Nivkh, wealth consisted of non-perishable luxury goods such as Japanese swords, ornate metal spears, rifles, chainmail, cast iron cauldrons, Chinese silk, porcelain, and

[66] Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 2*, 123; Shternberg, *Giljaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 70.

[67] Kreynovich, "O Kul'te Medvedya," 215; Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 70.

[68] Boris Chichlo, "The Cult of the Bear and Soviet Ideology in Siberia," *Religion in Communist Lands* 13, no. 2 (1985): 167; Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 68. Such treatment of the bear was not unique to the Nivkh. Many societies in the northeastern Eurasia, Russia, Finland, Sweden, and Norway formed bear cults and held bears in high regard. However, reverence for bears appeared to be the most extensive for Indigenous peoples in Lower Amur Basin and Sakhalin, especially the Nivkh. See, for instance, Tatiana Dmitrieva, "O Vozmozhnosti Vyyavleniya Obshchikh Chert Pochitaniya Medvedya u Obskikh Ugrov I Narodov Dal''nego Vostoka", in *Tsiklichnost': Dinamika Kul'tury i Sokhraneniye Traditsii*, eds. Margarita Al'bedil' and Dmitriy Savinov (Saint-Petersburg, 2013), 154–164; Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik*, 84.

[69] Venyukov, *Obozreniye Yaponskogo Arkhipelaga*, chap. 15, 8; Victor Zatsepine, "Beyond the Black Dragon River: Encounters and Decline of the Qing and Russian Empires: 1860–1917," Ph.D. diss., (The University of British Columbia, 2006), 82.

[70] Stanislav Belikov et al., *Medvedi: Buryy medved', Belyy medved', Gimalayskiy medved'* (Moscow, 1993), 51.

[71] Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik*, 50.

[72] Brett Walker, *The Conquest of Ainu Lands: Ecology and Culture in Japanese Expansion, 1590–1800* (Berkeley, 2001), 196.

[73] Dmitrieva, "Bogatstvo i Ego Simvoly," 85.

[74] Dmitrieva, "Bogatstvo i Ego Simvoly," 84; Shternberg, *Giljaki, orochi, gol'dy*, 120; Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 3*, 34; Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 104.

jewelry. Wealth also included "pleasure" items that were not traditionally available to Nivkh, such as vodka, tea, and rice. Utility items, such as dogs, arrows, and boats also constituted wealth.[75] Money did not enter into the Nivkh's wealth considerations and, as such, their trade was based on barter.[76]

The exact beginnings of Nivkh trade are difficult to pinpoint; however, Shternberg writes that it was a relatively novel phenomenon.[77] Historical sources point toward the seventeenth century as the expansion point for Amur Nivkh's trading activities. Shrenk as well as Taksami and Polevoy note that, throughout the seventeenth century, Amur Nivkh readily made trade connections with Chinese merchants and launched regular trading expeditions to the southern tip of Sakhalin to purchase iron, copper, and silver.[78] With time, the key trading destinations of Amur Nivkh on the continent became Sanxing and Nikolaevsk na Amure, while dealings in Sakhalin proceeded in the Japanese trading post of Shiranushi, Ainu settlement of Noioro, and Murav'yevskiy Post until its abolishment in 1854.[79]

Kreynovich claims that Sakhalin Nivkh began trading later than Amur Nivkh, although does not provide the estimate of such a gap.[80] Through Vasiliy Poyarkov's Cossack expedition, it is known, however, that Sakhalin Nivkh did "not trade with anyone" at least until 1645, as evidenced by the large amounts of unexploited wildlife in their lands.[81] Shrenk documents that Sakhalin Nivkh rarely launched expeditions to the continent and traded mostly on the island.[82] As a result, Sakhalin Nivkh had an overall lower level of wealth and less spacious dwellings than the continental Nivkh.[83] However, Shrenk still highlights Sakhalin Nivkh's trade spirit and their appreciation of wealth.[84] Figure 1 shows the key trading destinations of the Nivkh.

Sasaki notes that the Nivkh especially prospered from trade "during the mid-18th to mid-19th centuries," with the expansion of Qing dynasty and Tokugawa Shogunate's commercial interests in the region.[85] At the same time, the Nivkh's remoteness and resistance to control allowed them to avoid direct management of their economic activities by states, unlike, for instance, the Ainu, who hunted compulsorily under the orders of the Japanese Matsumae clan.[86] The Nivkh suffered subsequent impoverishment as trade endured a downturn in the latter half of the

[75] Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 3*, 2, 36, 133–134.

[76] Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 2*, 278.

[77] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 269–270.

[78] Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 2*, 276; Poleveoy and Taksami, "Pervyye Russkiye Svedeniya," 144, 153.

[79] Vysheslavtsev, "Ot Bukhty Sv. Vladimira," 198; Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 2*, 277, 291, 295–296; Busse, *Ostrov Sakhalin,* 63, 72; Deriha, "How Can We Approach," 104; Sasaki, "Economics of the Santan Trade," 544.

[80] Kreynovich, *Nivkhgu: Zagadochnyye Obitateli*, 166.

[81] Cited from Polevoy and Taksami, "Pervyye Russkiye Svedeniya," 141.

[82] Such a situation can be explained by Sakhalin Nivkh's avoidance of continental governments, and their existence on the periphery of popular trade routes. See Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 2*, 277; Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 349.

[83] Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 2*, 277, 288; Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 3*, 98–99.

[84] Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 2*, 288–289.

[85] Sasaki, "Economics of the Santan Trade," 532.

[86] Koji Deriha, "How Can We Approach the Issue of Ainu Traps? Ainu Hunting of Small Animals in the Nineteenth-Century Fur Trade System," in *Human-Nature Relations and the Historical Backgrounds of Hunter-Gatherer Cultures in Northeast Asian Forests (Senri Ethnological Studies 72),* ed. Shiro Sasaki (Osaka, 2009), 112.

nineteenth century, when Tokugawa Shogunate collapsed in 1867, and the new border policies of Russia, China, and Japan disrupted traditional commercial routes.[87] In 1918–1922, with the outbreak of the Russian Civil War, the Nivkh's trade experienced further breakdowns, and was eventually stamped out by the Soviet Union.[88] By the end of 1920s, the concept of a wealthy Nivkh was relegated to storytelling.[89]

When regional trade flourished, the Nivkh were the most enthusiastic Indigenous merchants, obtaining "remarkable" earnings from selling their animal products.[90] However, the Nivkh's hunting approaches varied between animals. Before the intensification of trade in the seventeenth century, the Nivkh had almost no demand for small- and middle-sized animals, and clans did not properly supervise the exploitation of such animals on their hunting grounds, even for complete strangers.[91] Shternberg notes that sables and foxes freely roamed near Nivkh settlements.[92] While the Nivkh's TEK and religion promoted a respectful treatment of all life, small- and middle-size animals were ascribed little spiritual importance, and there was a lack of detailed religious instructions to control their conservation.[93] As such, when trade accelerated, the Nivkh began to utilize private property rights for conservation of small- and middle-sized animals, influenced by the foreign merchants and the formal trade rules of the Qing dynasty and the Tokugawa Shogunate.[94] Sable rivers and fox holes became owned by individuals/families, special areas for catching eagles were marked out, and property rights to animal territories became hereditary.[95]

However, the Nivkh's bear hunting was managed differently.

The Nivkh's Sustainable Bear Hunting Enterprise

While the Nivkh actively hunted bears for personal consumption and trade, they did not endanger the animal's population. Shrenk mentions a large number of bears living in the Nivkh's territories, while Shternberg writes that, during his journeys through Nivkh lands, he "had to sleep in areas teeming with bears ... often hearing the heavy footsteps of bears that curiously inspected our tents."[96]

To achieve this result, the Nivkh relied on a combination of TEK and religious and social institutions. Such an arrangement persisted even under the intensification of

[87] Sasaki, "Economics of the Santan Trade," 545–546.

[88] Forsyth, "*A History of the Peoples*," 242.

[89] Dmitrieva, "Bogatstvo i Ego Simvoly," 75.

[90] Shiro Sasaki, "Economics of the Santan Trade: Profit of the Nivkh and Ul'chi traders in Northeast Asia in the 18th and 19th centuries," in *The Siberian World*, eds. John P. Ziker, Jenanne Ferguson, Vladimir Davydov (London, 2023), 533, 542–543; Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 3*, 34.

[91] Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 3*, 37; Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 110–111.

[92] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 269–270.

[93] Ostrovskiy, *Mifologiya i Verovaniya*, 25; Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 2*, 250–251.

[94] Dmitrieva, "Bogatstvo i Ego Simvoly," 79; Kreynovich, "Perezhitki Rodovoy Sobstvennosti," 734; Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 3*, 34–35; Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 269. Such developments echo the case of the Indigenous peoples of Quebec in the eighteenth century, who shifted to an active marking of the hunting grounds for animal conservation as they began to participate in the fur trade with the European colonists. See Harold Demsetz, "Toward a Theory of Property Rights," *American Economic Review* 57, no. 2 (1967): 347–359.

[95] Kreynovich, *Nivkhgu: Zagadochnyye Obitateli*, 141; Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 2*, 251–252.

[96] Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 3*, 64; Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 23.

trade, as it avoided external influence owing to the established prominence of the bear in the Nivkh's religious cosmology and bear product exchange falling out of government regulation in the region. Monitoring all business activities in the vast area of Amur and Sakhalin was very costly, and as a result, formal control of regional trade focused more on products from small- and middle-sized animals, such as sables and black foxes, which commanded the most value and were easy to handle logistically.[97] Other animal products, including bears, "were often traded or exchanged through private channels, avoiding state restrictions."[98] Shrenk notes how the Nivkh often bribed Chinese officials to conduct such trade without oversight.[99] Busse wrote in his diaries that trade in Sakhalin was often done privately, and often in Noioro, as the settlement was removed from the oversight of Japanese officials.[100] As a result, Venyukov lists very detailed numbers of otter, sable, and fox furs sold in Sakhalin trading posts, but is unable to determine the quantity of bear skins.[101]

The Nivkh's conservation system relied on the belief that bears on a clan's hunting grounds were its relatives. Such relations formed in many ways. Recall how the Nivkh thought that a human who was wounded or killed by a bear was marked for reincarnation as a bear. Beyond that, the Nivkh believed that their clan's women could get pregnant from bears and thus give birth to twins. Women could also turn into bears. One Nivkh myth tells of a woman who was ill until two bears arrived, carrying her away through the window of her home. Eventually, the woman's foot imprints on the soil gradually turned into bear ones, and she "left with the bears ... turning into a bear."[102] Another legend that illustrates the Nivkh's views on human–bear kinship is the *Legend of Mykrfin,* which tells of a hunter by the same name, who suddenly disappeared and did not return to his clan for three years. When Mykrfin finally came back, he explained his absence as follows. After losing his way in the forest and nearly starving, he saw a beautiful woman in a dream, who instructed him to follow her tracks so that she could feed him. After following the tracks, Mykrfin arrived at a hut on a distant mountain, where the woman lived. The woman fed him as promised, and the couple lived together for three years, becoming husband and wife. After that, Mykrfin's wife told him that, to remain with her forever, Mykrfin had to return to his clan and eventually get killed by a bear. Mykrfin returned to his clan and, in two years, was ambushed by a large female bear, which his wife had turned into to fulfill her promise. Fighting ensued, and both Mykrfin and the bear died. Mykrfin's clan buried him and the bear together so they could reunite in the next life.[103]

However, cultivation of bear–human kinship separated ownership between a Nivkh clan and their bears, as killing relatives was criminal.[104] As a result, bear

[97] Victor Zatsepine, *Beyond the Amur: Frontier Encounters between China and Russia, 1850–1930* (Vancouver, 2017), 15.
[98] Zatsepine, "Beyond the Black Dragon," 85.
[99] Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom 2*, 292.
[100] Busse, *Ostrov Sakhalin*, 72.
[101] Venyukov, *Obozreniye Yaponskogo Arkhipelaga*, chap. 15, 11.
[102] Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik*, 27.
[103] Ostrovskiy, *Mifologiya i Verovaniya*, 45.
[104] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 71.

hunting proceeded in a more roundabout and sustainable fashion, where in exchange for payment, a Nivkh clan arranged bear hunts for individuals that had no blood ties with their kindred animals.[105] To reconcile the contradictory nature of this process, the Nivkh claimed that kindred bears showed their clan benevolence and allowed themselves to be hunted by others.[106] In exchange, the inviting side was expected to perform funerary rites for their fallen animal. If such rituals were carried out properly, then the bear "lost nothing" from its death, as it would simply regrow its flesh and "merrily" reincarnate.[107]

The hunting payment prevented bear demand from becoming unlimited, and adjusted to the state of the local economy to not become too cheap. For example, Amur Nivkh, due to their greater involvement in trade, included more luxury items in the bear payment, while Sakhalin Nivkh, who traded less, paid more with utility items.[108] The demand was further contained by issuing invitations on the basis of marital relations between clans. Hunters were most commonly invited from wife-taker clans due to the mutualistic relations between wife-giver and wife-taker clans, and by extending a hunting invitation, the wife-giver clan thus patronized the wife-taker clan by providing them with a boon.[109] However, Kreynovich mentions that occasionally wife-giver clan hunters or even acquaintances from a completely unrelated clan could also be invited.[110] Invited hunters who killed the bear were called *narkh* and took away all the bear products from the inviting clan, apart from the animal's bones.[111]

The hosts were further restrained from issuing too many invitations by ritualistic prescriptions that required the bear to be butchered over numerous days in an elaborate "bear festival." During this time, the host clan had to accommodate the invited hunters and perform costly funerary rites for the bear, which included sacrifices of novel and expensive food items such as rice, which Nivkh could not grow themselves. Beyond incurring costs, however, suppliers obtained some additional benefits. Apart from the material payment from *narkh*, bear hunting hosts created social capital by displaying their hospitality through arranging the festival, and supplied the bear's soul with gifts for Pal-yz' in exchange for health, luck, and other benefits.[112]

The Nivkh hunted bears primarily in autumn, when the animals descended to the rivers to eat salmon and fatten up before winter. Most commonly, bear hunting commenced in groups of multiple invitation issuers and *narkh.* Such a configuration mitigated risk, as despite the overall skittishness of Amur and Sakhalin bears, the animal could still pose danger.[113] Moreover, the involvement of numerous individuals allowed the inviting side to better supervise *narkh*, and spread the corresponding

[105] Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik*, 56.
[106] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 52.
[107] Shternberg, *Giljaki, orochi, gol'dy, negidal'cy, ajny*, 52–53; Kreynovich, "O Kul'te Medvedya," 272.
[108] Kreynovich, "O Kul'te Medvedya," 277; Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik*, 31, 56–57.
[109] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 61–62.
[110] Kreynovich, *Nivkhgu: Zagadochnyye Obitateli*, 181.
[111] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 61–62.
[112] Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom* 3, 34–35; Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 70.
[113] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 52.

costs of funerary rites. *Narkh,* in the meantime, could split the hunting payment between themselves.[114]

Bear hunts strictly took place on the grounds of the inviting clan, and never extended beyond that territory.[115] The hunt began with the arrival of *narkh*, and the combined group set out to search for bear tracks or a bear den. If hunters were following the tracks, they laid an ambush for the bear. If hunters looked for a bear den, then *narkh* stood at the entrance of the den, while the hosts disturbed the bear either by poking it with a smooth stick or tickling it with a prickly staff made of pinewood. *Narkh* then shot the animal with bows or rifles and delivered the coup de grace with spears. To make the process swift and prevent unnecessary suffering for the animal, Nivkh hunters also pressed the bear's head into the snow, to hasten its death.[116]

Afterwards, the hunting party lit a fire with a flint called *uigla t'ugr* (Am. d.) provided by *narkh*. The bear was then skinned with special knives *uigla dyako* (Am. d.), and its carcass was put into a resting pose called *ivryud'*, facing the fire, as the bear's spirit had to witness the honors that were given to its physical vessel.[117] Pine twigs were prepared as beds upon which the fat, meat, and organs were placed. The paws were removed first, followed by the fat from the back. Then, the bear's head was removed and placed on a special cushion made from alder tree twigs. After that, the bear's belly was cut open, its organs removed, and the remainder of its limbs cut off. This process usually took an entire day.[118]

On day two, called *naskrud'* (Am. d.), the Nivkh loaded the bear parts onto stretchers and headed toward the inviting clan's village, where *narkh* would reside and be fed by the hosts for the duration of the festival.[119] The hunting party was met with celebratory shouts and rhythms played on the Nivkh's traditional instrument, the musical log. The hunters placed the bear's head on a special altar called *lezn*, along with funerary offerings of tobacco, dried fish roe, and raw fish, for the bear to take these items as gifts to Pal-yz'.[120]

Third day was called *tënr izd'* (Am. d.), or the "bear head feeding day," when the bear's head was lathered with expensive rice porridge and a ritual dish called *mos'*, a jellified concoction made from fish skin, seal fat, cranberries, and crowberries.[121] Through such a ritual, the kindred bear was fed and showed respect and gratitude, and would become a staunch lobbyist with Pal-yz'.[122]

Day four, called *uiglyd' zoskt'* (Am. d.), involved the separation of tabooed bear parts from non-tabooed bear parts.[123]

[114] Some *narkh* were invited to join the bear trade after the bear was killed, in the later days of the festival. See Kreynovich, "O Kul'te Medvedya," 264.

[115] Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik*, 77.

[116] Kreynovich, "O Kul'te Medvedya," 254–256.

[117] Ostrovskiy, *Mifologiya i Verovaniya*, 55; Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik*, 72.

[118] Kreynovich, "O Kul'te Medvedya," 257–258.

[119] Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik*, 73–74.

[120] Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom* 3, 34–35; Ostrovskiy, *Mifologiya i Verovaniya*, 60.

[121] Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik*, 31–32.

[122] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 93.

[123] Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik*, 75.

Day five and six, called *narkh upyd'* and *uiglyd' rozd'* (Am. d.), consisted of *narkh* distributing bear meat and organs between themselves. Some meat was boiled in a large iron pot and eaten straight away by *narkh*. To facilitate the bear's reincarnation and show respect, the meat had to be eaten carefully, without littering the ground. The process was supervised by the hosts.[124]

On the seventh and final day, called *tënr gott'* (Am. d.), business transactions concluded with more feeding of the bear's head, as well as decorating it with prayer beads. The bear's head was then lowered from *lezn*, fried on a skewer, and eaten.[125] Afterwards, *narkh* collected the bear skin and the remainder of its meat/organs and returned the bear's bones to the hosts, with goods strapped to them by leather belts. This process constituted the method of payment for bear hunting called *man'dyu charb* (Am. d.) or *chmalar* (Sakh. d). Hip bones (*pyĭgn*) and scapula (*tyvsk* [Am. d.]; *nagri* [Sakh. d.]) were given to the more esteemed and wealthier *narkh*, and commanded luxury goods such as Chinese silk, ornate spears, Japanese swords, and rifles, or utility goods such as sled dogs. Smaller bones respectively exchanged for goods of lesser value such as rice porridge or utility items such as axes, knives, and arrows. As mentioned earlier, Amur Nivkh utilized more luxurious items in their exchanges, while Sakhalin Nivkh relied more on utility items, due to the latter's lesser involvement in trade.[126] Kreinovich and Temina note that this process was not one of gift exchange but rather a type of an obligation, a payment for the hunting invitation, and failure to return the bear's bones with goods was punished by a fine of a sled dog for each missing bone.[127] After trade concluded, bear suppliers distributed the payments among themselves and stored the bear's bones in a special area called *yopod'* (Am. d.) or *nanyu* (Sakh. d.), while the skull was placed into a barn called *kork nangof* (Am. d.) or *tënr khu në* (Sakh. d).[128] *Narkh* then returned to their clans and could fully utilize the remainder of the bear for personal consumption and/or trade its parts to foreign merchants. Bear meat and fat were usually shared with *narkh*'s clan members. Meanwhile, the host clan had to sacrifice dogs by strangling—an odd number of dogs for a male bear and an even number for a female bear. The souls of sacrificed animals served as guides for the bear's reincarnation.[129]

Compliance with bear hunting regulations was secured by the Nivkh's religious and social institutions. Recall that the Nivkh's TEK and religion fostered a belief that disrespect to animals was punished with ill occurrences. Such punishments were especially magnified for kindred bears. A Nivkh story describes a hunter who behaved disrespectfully toward bears, breaking century-old traditions, not properly taking care of bear meat and bones. As a result, "he became very poor and vanished."[130] In most extreme circumstances, compliance was further ensured by the threat of a

[124] Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik*, 57.
[125] Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik*, 73–75.
[126] Kreynovich, "O Kul'te Medvedya," 276; Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik,* 57.
[127] Kreynovich, *Nivkhgu: Zagadochnyye Obitateli*, 181–182; Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik*, 56–57.
[128] Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik*, 70.
[129] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 66–67.
[130] Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik*, 32. Disrespectful treatment toward bears was acceptable only when a bear killed a Nivkh. Such a bear was hunted down, and its corpse humiliated in revenge, its bones and meat scattered around. See Kreynovich, *Nivkhgu: Zagadochnyye Obitateli*, 392–393.

blood vengeance for a dishonorable treatment of a deceased bear relative.[131] Clans were incentivized not to let things come to a potential all-out war, as apart from its sheer cost, wiping out a clan meant a reduction in bear suppliers, which would raise the cost of doing business with other clans.

Apart from sporadic bear hunts, Nivkh clans also engaged in planned hunts by capturing a bear cub and raising it, in anticipation of future profit opportunities and deific boons.[132] Nivkh also raised a bear cub to cope with grief over a departed child. The Nivkh believed that bears take pity on a Nivkh whose child died, and allow them to take a bear cub to raise as their own child and manage their grief.[133] An enterprising Nivkh usually caught a bear cub during spring when bear mothers were still weak after hibernation. The bear mother was left alive for future reproduction.[134] The bear resided in a cage but was frequently led on walks around the village on a leash, and kept well-fed and bathed by its owner, as kinship dictated taking care of a Nivkh's relative, especially if raised in the image of one's departed child. A male bear was raised for three years, while a female bear was raised for four.[135] Such a lengthy duration of raising the bear, along with the resources it required for adequate sustenance put a significant economic constraint on how many bears could be captured and raised at once.

After three or four years had passed, in winter, the bear's owner invited *narkh* to hunt the captured animal.[136] For that purpose, an arena was prepared for hunting the bear, stomped out from a small patch of soil, and decorated with ritualistic wooden poles. The bear was taken for one last walk around the village, wearing a large colorful belt. After the walk, the bear was tied to a wooden pole in the arena and spoon-fed by the owner with a wide variety of food, including *mos'*. While feeding the bear, the festival's host had to utter the following words: "For the last time I'm feeding you, go well, go well to your master [Pal-yz'], let the master love you dearly."[137] At the same time, *narkh* prepared to shoot the bear. To get the best angle for a shot, the bear was teased to stand on its hind legs, which exposed its heart for a swift kill. The bear was then butchered, its head placed on *lezn* along with funerary offerings, and the day finished with more feasting, dances, and games, such as wrestling, fighting with wooden swords, and dog sled racing.[138] Afterwards, the business process continued in the same way as during a sporadic hunt.[139]

Conclusion

The Nivkh's sustainable bear enterprise lasted until the formation of the Soviet Union, where much economic interest was drawn to the Northern and Far Eastern territories

[131] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 95.
[132] Shrenk, *Ob Inorodtsakh. Tom* 3, 64–65.
[133] Kreynovich, *Nivkhgu: Zagadochnyye Obitateli*, 169, 180.
[134] Kreynovich, *Nivkhgu: Zagadochnyye Obitateli*, 117.
[135] Kreynovich, "O Kul'te Medvedya," 272.
[136] Kreynovich, *Nivkhgu: Zagadochnyye Obitateli*, 181.
[137] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 63.
[138] Shternberg, *Gilyaki, Orochi, Gol'dy*, 66.
[139] Kreynovich, "O Kul'te Medvedya," 275–277; Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik*, 76.

due to the abundance of oil, gas, and mineral resources.[140] As a result, the question of managing the Indigenous populations in that vast area became very acute and led to the creation of the Committee of the North in 1924 to promote "the planned organization of the small peoples of the North."[141] The Committee included famous ethnographers Vladimir Bogoraz and Lev Shternberg, who argued that the Indigenous communities needed to retain their culture and traditional economic activities within established autonomous territories.[142] However, the Committee had no executive power, and in May 1932, ethnography was officially divorced from Marxism. The Committee of the North was dissolved, and numerous ethnographers imprisoned.[143] Without anyone left to defend their interests, native communities in the Far East were considered backward and irrational, and had to be revolutionized to fit within the modern socialistic state.[144]

From the 1920s to the 1950s, traditional economic activities of the Indigenous peoples were monopolized and collectivized by the Soviet Union, and private trade was suppressed. The Nivkh became laborers on collective farms and in the timber, mining, and oil-drilling industries, divorced from their traditional occupations and social networks. According to Forsyth, by 1939, over 96% of Nivkh households were collectivized and resettled in Russian-style villages.[145] The process continued in 1950s, when Nivkh were again resettled into small towns and villages of mixed population for further cultural disorientation and complete dismantling of traditional institutions.[146]

Moreover, the Nivkh became victims of the anti-religious campaign of the Soviet Union, since the bear cult was a thorn in USSR's ideological side. At first, such a development may seem strange, as the bear historically served as the international symbol of the Russian Empire and later Soviet Union, and as the mascot for the 1980 Olympics. However, the associated imagery of the Soviet Union with a bear was mostly promulgated in the Western press, and the Olympic mascot was selected likely due to its prolonged "association with Russia in other countries."[147] In reality, the Soviet Union wanted to eradicate the bear-related tradition or supplant it with events such as Olympiads, since bear beliefs went against socialist culture, rivaled the image of Lenin, and undermined the "new Soviet myths" based on dialectical materialism.[148] The process of eradicating bear beliefs was uneven, and the Nivkh along with other Indigenous peoples such as the Evenki and Nanai retained some elements of their bear religion. However, according to Chichlo, the Nivkh found it more difficult to preserve their bear traditions due to the protracted ritualistic nature of their hunting and the

[140] Evgeniy Gololobov, *Ekologicheskaya istoriya Sibirskogo Severa. XX vek: Poisk i Analiz Istochnikov* (Surgut, 2018), 13.

[141] Gruzdeva, "Explaining Language Loss," 238.

[142] Chichlo, "The Cult of the Bear," 169.

[143] Yuriy Slezkin, "Sovetskaya etnografiya v nokdaune: 1928–1938," *Etnograficheskoye obozreniye* 2 (1993): 119.

[144] Gololobov, *Ekologicheskaya istoriya*, 15.

[145] Forsyth, "*A History of the Peoples*," 246.

[146] Gruzdeva, "Explaining Language Loss," 240–241.

[147] Anne Platoff, "The 'Forward Russia' Flag: Examining the Changing Use of the Bear as a Symbol of Russia," *Raven: A Journal of Vexillology* 19 (2012): 118.

[148] Chichlo, "The Cult of the Bear," 175, 179.

practice of raising bears in captivity, which could be easily monitored by the local authorities.[149] Some Nivkh villages still managed to raise bears and hunt them, but such events were spaced out in time and were divorced from their intended meanings before eventually fading away. Temina writes that the Amur settlement of Petrvoskaya Kosa held the penultimate bear festival in 1936, while the final festival took place in 1967, where it was mostly geared toward entertainment purposes.[150]

The Soviet policy of dismantling the Nivkh's bear conservation system not only affected the Indigenous peoples but also impacted regional bear populations. Due to the Soviet Union's emphasis on resource extraction, the Far East was turned into a massive industrial base where many animal habitats were destroyed.[151] Furthermore, the economic development of hunting in USSR was sidelined and deprived of specialists. Up to 1955, the entire Soviet Union trained hunting management specialists in only two institutions—Moscow Fur Institute and Irkutsk Agricultural Institute. However, in 1955, the Moscow Fur Institute was closed, and only in 1965, Kirov Agricultural Institute opened a hunting management faculty. According to Gololobov, hunting specialist vacancies were filled by incompetent people, who had limited understanding of wildlife. In addition, there was a serious shortage of personnel, with only 0.5 specialists per hunting enterprise in the Soviet Union.[152]

As a consequence, bear populations in the USSR, and particularly in the Far East, were often mismanaged. For instance, in the late 1950s the population of bears in Sakhalin was estimated at 2,600, dropping to 1,900–2,000 by the early 1970s, and by some calculations, even lower, to 1,000 bears.[153] Such numbers stem from the Soviet government classifying bears as dangerous predators and rewarding their killings in Sakhalin while not properly regulating this process. Some hunters took advantage of the lack of regulations to the extreme, utilizing motorboats and even helicopters to shoot the animals, almost completely eliminating the bear population in Sakhalin's Susunai Range.[154] After such developments, the Soviet government licensed bear hunting and prohibited the shooting of bear mothers and their cubs. Such policy had a limited effect, and before the USSR's collapse in the early 1990s, the bear population in Sakhalin was estimated at 1,300.[155]

Under the Russian Federation, the Nivkh again endured a series of changes to their economic conditions. Collective farms were abolished, and the Nivkh could create private hunting and fishing farms. Yet, as stated by Gruzdeva, some of these farms only exist "on paper" and do not actually function.[156] The Nivkh's fishing enterprises struggle, as they have to compete against large fishing companies, yet do not receive government subsidies and loans, while the local infrastructure is still underdeveloped. Unemployment among Nivkh is high, and younger generations prefer to find

[149] Chichlo, "The Cult of the Bear," 173.
[150] Temina, *Medvezhiy Prazdnik*, 87.
[151] Gololobov, *Ekologicheskaya istoriya*, 14.
[152] Gololobov, *Ekologicheskaya istoriya*, 16–17.
[153] Belikov et al., *Medvedi: Buryy medved'*, 419.
[154] Andrey Klitin, "Sub"yektivnyye Zametki o Burom Medvede Sakhalina i Kuril'skikh ostrovov," *Okhota* 10 (2004): 6–11.
[155] Belikov et al., *Medvedi: Buryy medved'*, 419.
[156] Gruzdeva, "Explaining Language Loss," 241.

jobs in the mining and oil sectors, instead of their traditional occupations.[157] Some Nivkh still hunt bears to sell their fur, paws, and gallbladders to Chinese customers, but do so without the sustainability-promoting rituals of past centuries.[158]

In the introduction to this paper, I claimed that there may be merit in exploring Indigenous wildlife solutions and integrating some of their ideas into modern businesses. However, such a process can work both ways, as Indigenous wildlife management can likewise benefit from utilizing the achievements of modern sustainable business practices.[159] As shown in this paper, while the Nivkh's TEK and religious institutions promoted respectful and ethical treatment of all animals, they specialized in bears, which left blank spots in detailed management of other wildlife. While fostering coexistence between Indigenous knowledge and contemporary sustainable practices is not an easy process, its overall prospects may be positive. After all, as mentioned earlier, TEK can reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable.

Finally, it is important to stress that the performance of Indigenous wildlife management systems is very dependent on the policies of nation-states. Assimilation, border management, intrusive legislation, and trade regulations often exert a negative influence on Indigenous societies, as evidenced by the Nivkh, whose bear enterprise functioned best under autonomy and free trade. Once these conditions no longer held, a number of negative consequences arose for both for the welfare of the Nivkh themselves, and for the bear population. Following the advice of past luminaries such as Shternberg and modern-day insights of organizations such as the Arctic Council, one could argue for the necessity of such measures as reinforcing the autonomy of Indigenous peoples and facilitating traditional knowledge transfers to Indigenous youth.[160]

In reality, of course, the voices of the Indigenous peoples may still be unheard, or the states may have different priorities that are misaligned with those of Indigenous peoples. This stresses all the greater the need to continue documenting and preserving the history of various Indigenous wildlife enterprises. Even if some of such enterprises, such as the Nivkh's, are no longer operational, it does not mean that their lessons are forever lost to time, and may be utilized in the future, where conditions for their use are more accommodating.

Future research could also focus on an ambitious comparative task of studying other bear-related Indigenous enterprises in Lower Amur and Sakhalin (and beyond), highlighting their differences and similarities with the Nivkh's unique solutions to provide a more full-fledged outlook on the harmonization of bear trade and sustainability.[161]

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[157] Natalya Novikova, "Nivkhi. Sotsial'naya Situatsiya i Problemy," *Interaktivnyy Atlas Korennykh Malochislennykh Narodov Severa, Sibiri i Dal'nego Vostoka* (accessed 23 Aug. 2024), https://www.atlaskmns.ru/page/ru/people_nivhi_socsit.html; Sakhalin Energy.

[158] Natalia Dronova and Alexander Shestakov, *Trapping a Living: Conservation and Socio-Economic Aspects of the Fur Trade* (Cambridge, 2005), 35.

[159] Kealiikanakaoleohaililani and Christian Giardina, "Embracing the Sacred," 66.

[160] Mathiesen et al., "Strategies to Enhance," 111.

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