

Photo by Eric Freedman



Litter lines a ditch along the Chuy River in northeastern Kyrgyzstan.

# An Arduous Beat

Barriers hinder environmental coverage in Central Asia

BY ERIC FREEDMAN

MSU professor Eric Freedman studied obstacles to environmental journalism in central Asia last summer

Sitting in a Bishkek café called the Captain Nemo — the one with the Beatlesque yellow submarine on the sign above the front door — Gulnura Toralieva sips a milkshake with colored sprinkles around the rim and describes reporting on nuclear waste dumpsites in southern Kyrgyzstan. She's a freelance journalist and, until recently, project director for the nonprofit think tank Institute for Public Policy and its media training program, the Bishkek Press Club.

Toralieva had gone to Mailuu-Suu, site of her Central Asian nation's largest concentration of uranium waste dumps, and told readers of a London-based magazine how local residents use contaminated materials unearthed there for housing and other purposes. She visited 23 dumpsites, noting that wire fences and warning signs were widely ignored.

"People were grazing their cattle on the dumps," she says. As for gathering information through interviews with news sources for her article, "Toxic Time Bomb," she

found that "villagers were more open than the government."

Uranium waste is one deadly legacy of the Soviet era, which ended when the U.S.S.R. imploded in 1991. Now there's fear of environmental disaster: If a landslide or mudslide — common in this mountainous country — sweeps through one of the dumps, the exposed radioactive waste could contaminate rivers, pastures, fields, whole villages. In addition, desperately poor people dig up radioactive steel drums and other metals to sell for scrap that's then incorporated into other products.

Sitting in his 15th-floor office overlooking the skyline and predominantly gray buildings of the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek, Almaz Turdumamatov recalls his station's stories about hazardous waste sites in Mailuu-Suu and elsewhere in his country. He's editor-in-chief of the news service at Channel 5, which began broadcasting in 2007.

"We had no trouble with access to the sites because there were no fences and no danger signs. Sheep ►

and cows were grazing, and people were working there,” Turdumamatov explains. “But when we asked for information from the environmental protection agency, they said there is a general problem but had no specialists who could explain why there were black or brown components in the river. When you ask for information, they have to check with the boss to give an official statement, but the boss is away or in a meeting. This is the trouble with most of the country when the guilty side always rejects giving a statement and just gives a press release, saying ‘take it.’”

Sitting on a bench in a small park in Almaty, the capital of neighboring Kazakhstan, Sergey Ponomaryoz describes how rare kulan horses were introduced into Altym Emel National Park when climate change and the shrinking Aral Sea jeopardized their dwindling wild habitat. “In ancient times, Genghis Kahn hunted on these horses,” the veteran television journalist explains.

Also transplanted into the park were eight Przewalski’s horses from Europe, a native species that had gone extinct in the wilds of Central Asia. “We videoed the horses as they arrived with special security and were removed to the national park.” But a few days before our interview, he got a tip from a national park official that poachers had killed kulan horses and gazelles. “These people were arrested and will sit in prison,” he says.

As serious as the threats from uranium dumpsites and the precarious survival of rare species are, they are by no means the

## “Frankly speaking, people know about the environmental problems but they’re sick and tired of hearing about it every day.”

Talai Kasymaliev,  
editor-in-chief of Karakol TV station

only environmental challenges confronting Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, journalists and ecological activists agree. Others include habitat destruction, water pollution and water quality, air pollution, illegal logging, desertification, trash disposal, overgrazing and contamination from pesticides, deteriorating rocket fuel, mining and energy exploration. Yet the ability of news organizations to report accurately and comprehensively about these problems — and their willingness to do so — are impeded by governmental, political and economic constraints on the press, as well as inadequate training of journalism students and professionals.

In fact, the consensus is that while a few journalists and news outlets cover some environmental issues, those stories the local media do print or broadcast tend to be event-driven and episodic, with little or no analysis or insights from independent experts.

“Journalists are attracted only by the event and seldom do enterprise. There

is no tendency to write like that, only in reaction to a hot event,” according to Irina Chistukova, the coordinator of CARNet Web site for Environmental Protection for Sustainable Development, an affiliate of the United Nations Environment Programme in Bishkek. She also teaches broadcast journalism at nearby Kyrgyz Russian-Slavic University.

The environment may be a hot topic for the press in other parts of the world, but not here. No journalists specialize in fulltime eco-coverage in Kyrgyzstan, and virtually none do so in Kazakhstan. That’s true even at *Vechnii Bishkek*, where Svetlana Lapterva says she’s the only reporter who writes about the environment from the headquarters of Kyrgyzstan’s largest newspaper.

“We don’t have real professional journalists on ecological issues. There was one woman in Kyrgyzstan who was a really good analyst but she’s not writing now and is employed by an international agency.” It’s also tough, she continues, to persuade editors to give her enough time to dig into an environmental issue.

At the same time, Damir Kalikov, Lapterva’s *Vechnii Bishkek* colleague in the high-mountains provincial capital of Naryn, has had success in getting some environmental stories published. One about environmental problems with a Chinese-run gold mining operation sparked “a great response, and the government didn’t give a license for the company’s work,” he says. A story about overfishing in Lake Son Kol led to a two-year governmental ban on fishing there, but he adds, “Presently it is forbidden but people are trying to fish illegally.”

### MORE BARRIERS TO ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM

Interviews with more than 30 print, broadcast and online journalists, environmental activists, and policy and press experts detail a depressingly long list of rationales and explanations for the dearth of strong environmental journalism. The National Council for Eastern European and Eurasian Studies in Seattle and the Muslim Studies Program at Michigan State University funded the project to explore



obstacles to effective environmental journalism.

None of the countries' universities teach environmental journalism courses. And the beat — if one were to exist — wouldn't be a steppingstone to career advancement: Reporters who aim to climb that ladder are most likely to focus on politics, economics and international relations.

Add to that authoritarian regimes, laws that restrict press freedom, an intimidating atmosphere that encourages self-censorship, the unsolved 2007 murder of the prominent independent journalist and human rights activist Alisher Saipov in Kyrgyzstan and the unsolved 2007 disappearance of investigative journalist Oralgaisha Omarshanova in Kazakhstan. Some of the most promising young journalists and journalism students emigrate to Russia, Europe, the United States and other places.

As elsewhere in the world — in closed societies, in partly closed societies like these and in open societies alike — the environment is a political and an economic issue, one that cannot be separated from such other potential quicksand issues as poverty, public health, foreign policy and even open government. Further complicating the situation for environmental coverage is the reality that many stories have inherent political ramifications, like accounts of bureaucratic incompetence and dishonesty. As one example, underpaid border guards in remote Kyrgyz posts have been poaching endangered Marco Polo sheep.

"Nobody can control them," says Vechernii Bishkek's Kalikov. "They are preparing meat for the winter. It's impossible to get them. I was trying hard to stop them."

Another factor is the precarious financial condition of most privately owned media outlets, meaning inadequate advertising and circulation revenue. It's important to understand that private ownership of newspapers, radio or television here doesn't automatically equate with independent media. Far more often, the owners are opposition political parties, wealthy politicians and business owners seeking influence, and friends and relatives of the two presidents and their inner circles.

Reporting on complex environmental stories can be expensive in time and personnel to send journalists to remote destinations. On a global scale, no single environmental issue today draws as much press attention as climate change, and global warming poses a special threat to Kyrgyzstan's glaciers.

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- **TOP:** Vendors sell newspapers in Bishkek.
- **LEFT:** Two men read copies of an independent newspaper in glass display cases along a street in downtown Bishkek. Given the tough economic times in the country, many people no longer buy newspapers.
- **RIGHT:** Three women chat in the shade near Alia-Too Square, the former Lenin Square, Bishkek.
- **BOTTOM:** A cowboy moves his cattle along a main road near Lake Issyk-Kul, Kyrgyzstan.

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But as Channel 5's Turdumamatov explains, "Most media organizations will not allow their journalists to make special reports on the glaciers because there are no roads there and it costs too much to rent helicopters. So journalists are not going to those places."

Unethical practices by some journalists are in play as well. When CARnet's Chistukova talks about the dearth of analysis and insight in environmental stories, she adds, "If there is some analysis, these articles or videos were paid for with money. Yes, you can see it — it's one-sided argumentation." And Roza Omurzakova, head of the nongovernmental organization Naryn's Flora, explains that grassroots groups like hers "don't have money for the mass media. The problem we face is that they have to pay to get an article in the paper about a project, about the issue." Meanwhile, her group is working to build a collaborative relationship with local reporters.

Paid stories? Bribery? Indeed, "envelope journalism" — taking payoffs either to prevent publication of a story or to print a press handout masquerading as true reporting is deeply entrenched in the region. Ethics are one thing in principle, but the financial realities of journalists' salaries are a potent force that enables corruption in the media.

Another obstacle is the difficulty of getting access to information from government

agencies, experts and other sources.

For those who believe that the primary duty of environmental journalists is to provide fair, balanced, accurate and ethical reporting perhaps the most troubling ramification is the failure to report in depth — or sometimes at all — on serious ecological risks.

"One problem not being covered is the cutting of forests, not only valuable trees but trees all over Kyrgyzstan," Turdumamatov says. "When we asked for assistance from state agencies and the local population, they said everything is OK."

## PUBLIC CONCERN

Journalists and environmental leaders disagree on the depth of public concern about the environment. And some media experts say the lack of interest among many journalists reflects a lack of interest — even hostility — among a public focused more on daily survival than eco-protection.

To the degree there is concern, it's not surprising in a region of villages, limited technology, nomadic traditions and 70 years of Soviet rule, most environmental concerns are local, not global or even national. Those worries aren't about climate change or the Kyoto protocol or proposed nuclear power plants or threats to endangered species in exotic places.

Instead, journalists and activists who do pay attention to ecological problems are far more apt to talk about industrial waste dumped in rivers that provide drinking and irrigation water, illegal logging of nearby forests, overfishing of the closest lake, trash-strewn streets.

"The mass media is obliged to cover this issue, but again, the people are interested more in economic and political problems," notes Taalai Kasymaliev, editor-in-chief of Kyrgyz-language news at EM TV in Karakol, the capital of the oblast, or province, where the country's premier ecological jewel — Issyk-Kul Lake — is located. "Frankly speaking, people know about the environmental problems but they're sick and tired of hearing about it every day."

And in a gloomy observation, Kasymaliev talks of vendors who sell dried fish from Issyk-kul along the roadsides. "They don't have official jobs. Their main activity is to fish and sell. Even if it's the last fish in the lake, they'll take it and sell it to make money." 🌐

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disconnect until they smelled that people were trying to get FERC to regulate them." Indeed, just four months after the state's initial request to FERC, Golden Lotus wrote the commission, stating its intention to disconnect from the grid. "Everybody we talked to said 'Don't be FERC-regulated,'" Wylie said. "It's a nightmare. The cost to do that would be outrageous."

## A FISHING HOLE

Nearly three months after the incident at Song of the Morning, on the second of two days of steady rain, John Walters went for a look at the Pigeon. Hefty as a defensive tackle, Walters doesn't shake your hand so much as he engulfs it. But standing on the river's bank among the yellowing poplars and browning ferns of early fall, he was a big softy.

"This river has a special place in my heart," he said, gazing at the rain-dappled Pigeon.

"Flowing water around my legs cleanses my soul. I don't know how else to say it."

The river looked like your ideal postcard trout stream: gravel-bottomed, swift and crystalline. But Walters said its immediate appearance was deceiving.

"Usually this time of year, at this time of day, you'd see bugs. You might see rising trout," he said. "Well, you're not going to."

Walters said he holds no ill will toward the staff of the Song of the Morning Ranch, but has "absolute disdain for their management style. That dam needs to be removed," he said. "It's been proven they can't run the dam safely and efficiently."

Though it may be stocked with trout from the nearby Sturgeon River to get fishermen back on the water sooner, Walters said he'd rather see the Pigeon replenish itself naturally with trout well adapted to its particulars. "Whether it takes one year,



A dead trout with silt in its gills, found in the river on June 25.

three years, 10 years — it will come back naturally."

But for now, he'll have to find a new fishing hole.

"Where I want to go," he said, "it's pointless to go." 🌐

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