

THE NATURE OF
RUSSIA



JOHN MASSEY STEWART

With a foreword by Nikolay N. Vorontsov,
Former USSR Minister of the Environment



BOXTREE

This book is dedicated to all living
things in the world's largest country

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FOREWORD

Occupying an area of more than 22 million sq km (18 percent of earth's dry land) plus 10 million sq km of a marine economic zone, the ecosystems of my country represent the most important constituent part of our planet's biosphere.

Its boreal forests play an immensely important role in the maintenance of the oxygen balance of our planet. More than 70 percent of the sensitive tundra ecosystem exists in my country. The most productive soils of all – the chernozems or black earth – lie across the steppe zone which, sadly, is now almost ruined by bad agricultural practices. The world's most northerly deserts are found in Soviet Central Asia. Our famous Lake Baikal contains 20 percent of the world's total freshwater supplies; the remarkable purity of its water is the result of its unique but fragile ecosystem which includes about 2100 species of which 700 are found nowhere else on earth.

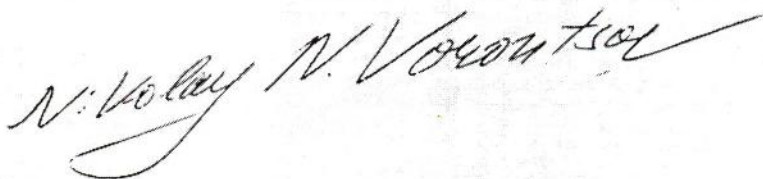
Alas, today the Soviet Union is better known not as a country of unique landscapes and diverse fauna and flora, but as a country suffering from the major ecological catastrophes of Chernobyl and the Aral Sea. For decades we kept silent about our serious ecological problems and spoke only of our undoubted successes in nature conservation (for instance, the return of the sable, saiga antelope, beaver and European bison from the brink of extinction). But in recent years we have changed this rosy-coloured picture for a black one and now we write only about the destruction of nature in the USSR.

The truth, however, is more complex. About 25 percent of the USSR's territory is permanently polluted and about 30 percent suffers periodically from the long-range transport of pollutants. However, about 45 percent of the territory of the country is still practically virgin nature. This represents 8 percent of the world's dry land (larger, indeed, than Amazonia), and its conservation must become the concern not only of the USSR's scientists but of the entire world community.

In this book John Massey Stewart rightly pays attention to the unique system of 170 nature reserves in the USSR which covers 1.2 percent of the entire country.

I have read this book with much interest. It is a brilliant introduction to the nature of an enormous country still little known in the West. John Massey Stewart has produced a good, objective picture of our ecological problems. But he has also succeeded in showing that, in the words of the popular Russian song, 'not all is sold, not all is lost' in my country.

I am certain of the success of this book and hope that it will help towards a better understanding of the ecological problems of our country and the role it plays in the biosphere.



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