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Transformations of indigeneity and nature in a mining region: the case of Vepses in Karelia

Indigenous peoples' relations with nature and the mining industry are often discussed by opposing traditional lifestyles and resource extraction. However, there are examples when an indigenous community develops strong bonds with mining. This paper focuses on such an example and discusses the case of Vepses in Karelia (northwestern Russia) and their historical engagement with the extraction of rare decorative stones. The paper analyzes the narratives related to nature and indigenous identity in a community influenced by regime change and socioeconomic transition.

Over the course of the 20th century, Karelian Vepses experienced the switch from small-scale artisanal mining to extensive industrial development in the Soviet time and the closure of the state enterprises in post-Soviet period. These changes influenced their local identity and the ethnic composition of the region. The rapid development of stoneworking industry in Karelia went alongside significant changes of nature such as deforestation or swamp drainage. These changes were described in Soviet-time publications positively, as an example of Soviet people overcoming northern wilderness. However, the interview narratives related to mining and nature show that the residents of Vepsian villages have strong connections with both as essential elements of their indigenous identity. The discourse of "conquering nature" is rarely present in the interviews.

The paper demonstrates that mining, nature and indigenous communities may be perceived as being in interdependence, and their transformations in post-Soviet Russia are mutually related. Stoneworking is viewed as the outcome of natural richness, while its development or decline defines the locals' future.