

WORLD HERITAGE NOMINATION - IUCN SUMMARY

THE VIRGIN KOMI FORESTS (RUSSIAN FEDERATION)

Summary prepared by IUCN/WCMC (April 1994) based on the original nomination supplied by the Government of the Russian Federation. This original and all documents in support of this nomination will be available for consultation at the meetings of the Bureau and the Committee.

1. LOCATION

Located in the north-western region of the Komi Republic, on the western slopes of the Northern Urals.

2. JURIDICAL DATA

The Virgin Komi Forests include Pechoro-Ilychsky which was designated a Zapovednik in 1930 and approved under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme in 1984. Yugyd Va National Park was established in 1994. 33 nature monuments, 17 reservations and three forestry farms also exist in the area. Pechoro-Ilychsky Zapovednik is under authority of the Ministry of Environment and Nature Resources of the Russian Federation. 720,000 ha of the originally nominated Komi Forest area is in the ownership of the Komi Republic's Ministry of Nature Use and Nature Resources and the Federal Forestry Service of Russian Federation and is open for commercial forestry.

3. IDENTIFICATION

The total area of the Komi Forest nomination (totalling 3.28 million hectares) is dominated by lowlands in the west which rise to form the Northern Urals in the east, the two being linked by the Uniya and upper reaches of the Ilych river basins. Weathering in the Ilych, Podcherema, Shchugora and Bolshaya Syn basins has resulted in the formation of columns and residual mountain structures, which are protected as nature monuments. Many of these features are remnant reef structures, the oldest of which date back to the Ordovician Period. The vegetation of the lowlands comprises marshes and flood plain islands. Boreal forest extends from the marshes to the foothills of the Urals and is superseded by subalpine scrub woodlands, meadows, tundra, and bedrock.

The fauna includes both European and Asiatic species with some 43 mammal, 204 bird and 16 fish species having been recorded. Threatened mammal species include wolf, otter, beaver, sable, wolverine and lynx.

4. STATE OF PRESERVATION/CONSERVATION

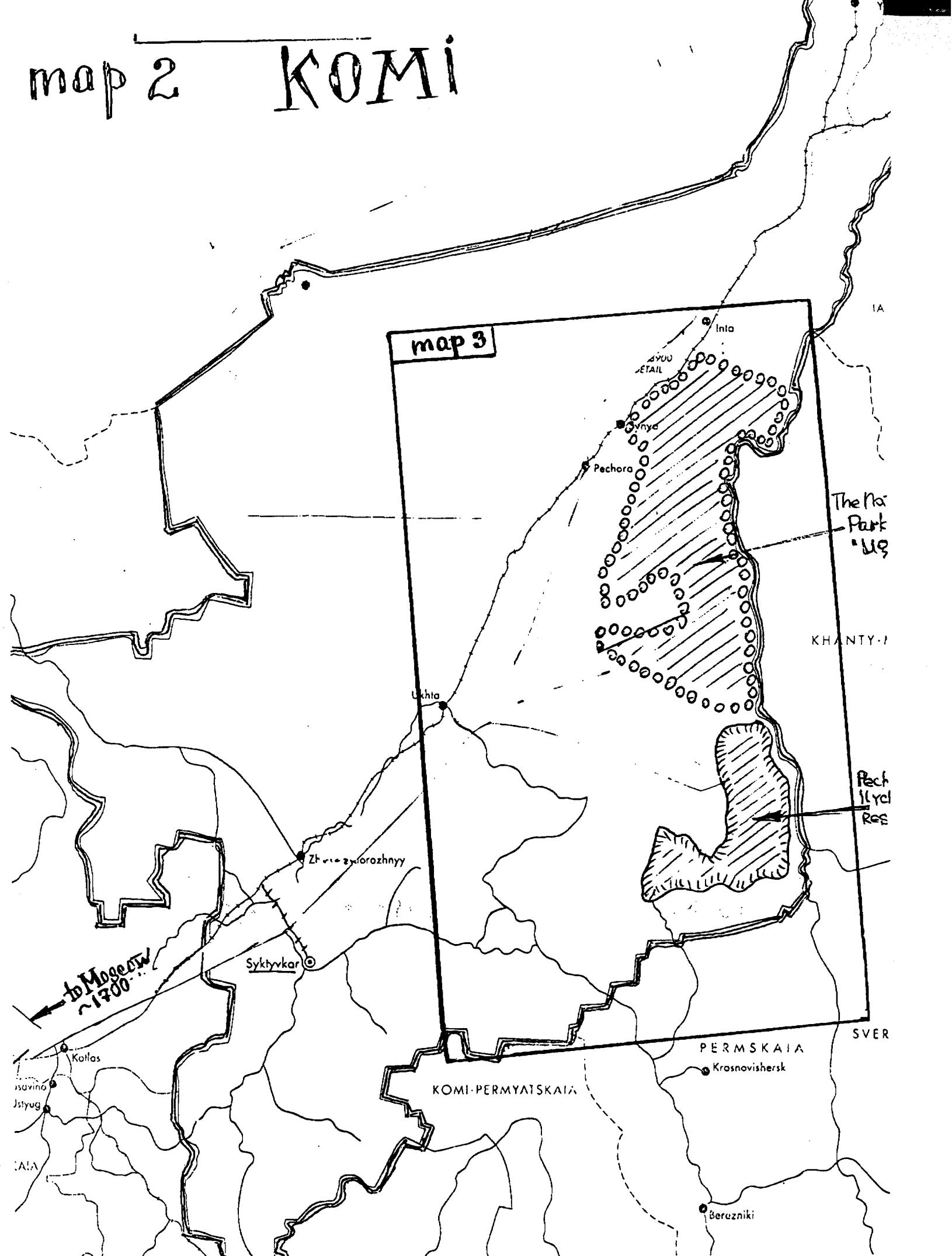
Logging is a major threat to the Uniya basin in the southern part of the territory, as a number of local logging concessions have been sought by a French company. Consequently, it is possible that about 2 million hectares of the virgin forest will be logged. Furthermore, the Ministry of Nature Resources and Environment of the Komi Republic is drafting a decree amending the Yugyd Va National Park's boundaries. If approved, this will result in the loss of the Kozhim basin which comprises about one third of the park area. Other disturbances include the decrease in large mammal populations due to poaching.

5. JUSTIFICATION FOR INCLUSION ON THE WORLD HERITAGE LIST

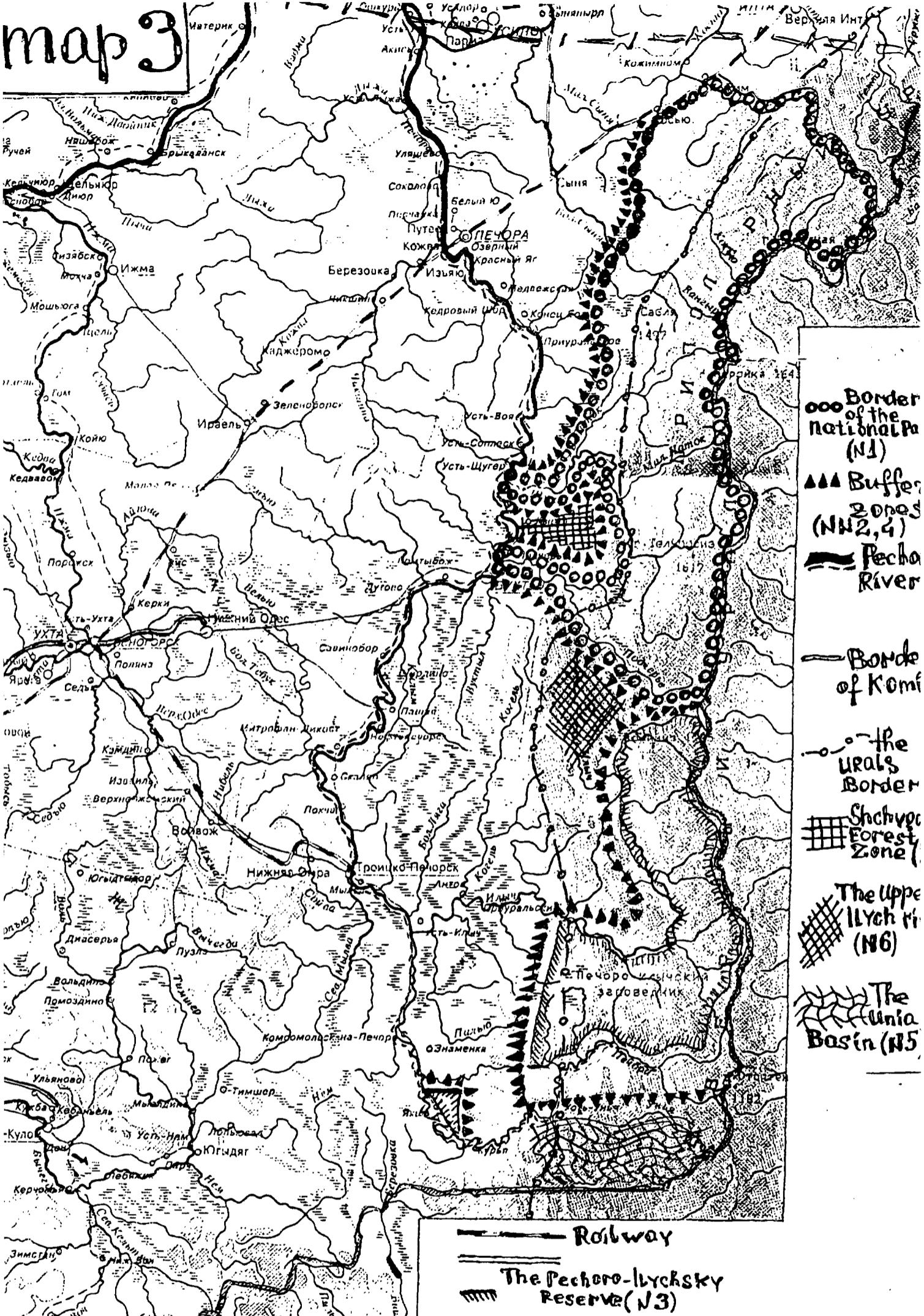
The Virgin Komi Forests nomination, as prepared by the Government of the Russian Federation, provides the following justification for designation as a World Heritage natural property:

- (i) **Contains examples of the major stages of earth's evolutionary history and outstanding geological features** The numerous nature monuments and mountain-glacier formations provide models of on-going geological processes.
- (iv) **Contains the most important areas of high biodiversity and significant natural habitats for threatened species** The territory represents a vast expanse of virgin boreal forest ecosystem which provides a significant habitat for threatened flora and fauna.

map 2 KOMI



map 3



WORLD HERITAGE NOMINATION - IUCN TECHNICAL EVALUATION

THE VIRGIN KOMI FORESTS (RUSSIAN FEDERATION)

1. DOCUMENTATION

- i) IUCN/WCMC Date Sheet (5 references)
- ii) Additional Literature Consulted: GEF/World Bank. 1995. Action Plan for Protected Area System of Russia. 142p.; Dinerstein, E. 1994. An Emergency Strategy to Rescue Russia's Biological Diversity. *Cons. Biology*. December; Acharya, A. 1995. Plundering the Boreal Forests. *World Watch* May/June; Anon. 1994. Climate Change and the Fate of the Northern Boreal Forests. Greenpeace. 33p.; Knystantos, A. 1987. **Natural History of the USSR**. Century; Stewart, J.M. 1992. **The Nature of Russia**. Boxtree; CAFF. 1994. **The State of Protected Areas in the Circumpolar Arctic**. 163p.; Syrjanen, K. et.al. 1994. Landscape Structure and Forest Dynamics in subcontinental European Taiga. *Ann. Zool. Fennici*. 31.19-34.
- iii) Consultations: 14 external reviewers, Greenpeace and WWF Project Staff, Russian Academy of Science staff, Ministry of Environment and Forestry Department officials.
- iv) Field Visit: June, 1995. Jim Thorsell and Zbig Karpowicz

2. COMPARISON WITH OTHER AREAS

The Virgin Komi Forests (VKF) are located in the Western Eurasian Biogeographic Province and are part of the northern boreal forest biome (also called taiga). This forest is a vast ecosystem that encircles the northern hemisphere. Within the total area there are 637 protected areas on the 1993 UN List of Protected Areas, 204 of which are in this Biogeographic Province. There are currently two World Heritage sites in the boreal forest belt - Nahanni National Park (476,560 ha) and Wood Buffalo National Park (4,480,000 ha) in Canada. The VKF share some similarities with these sites in terms of its vast expanse of conifer, aspen and birch forests and wild rivers. The VKF, however, contain an extensive area of alpine tundra in the Ural mountains. It does not have the exceptional canyon scenery of the Nahanni nor the high wildlife and waterfowl values as does Wood Buffalo. Closest in comparison to VKF are the Central Siberian Taiga Reserve (5 mil.ha) but this is less varied as it does not have the relief that the Ural mountains provide in VKF. This relief, plus the fact that the site is large and is at the arctic tundra/boreal forest interface, also make it more significant than other forest areas to the west into Scandinavia and the Vishersky Zapovednik to the south.

The VKF are unique in that they are said to contain the largest block of undisturbed boreal forest in Europe. Boreal forests to the west of the site are heavily exploited and fragmented and the VKF, as the most remote and least altered, thus become valued for their rarity as a naturally dynamic forest system. This is a situation similar to the World Heritage sites of Shirakami in Japan which was inscribed as one of the last and most extensive stands of Siebold's beach forest, Garajonay National Park in Spain as the last major remnant of laurel forest and the Belovezhskaya site in Belarus/Poland that contains Europe's last major mixed lowland forest. The portion of the VKF that is the Pechoro-Ilych Biosphere Reserve also stands apart as it is one of the few sites in the region with a long record of monitoring and scientific research - over 50 years of studies have been conducted here.

In conclusion, the VKF is one of the major protected areas in all the boreal forest region in terms of size and its undisturbed state. The VKF are particularly valuable within the context of the western palearctic where they represent the major remaining large naturally functioning boreal forest protected area in this region.

3. INTEGRITY

The VKF site consists of two main contiguous protected areas: the Pechoro-Ilychsky Zapovednik (Nature Reserve) (730,000 ha) and the Yugyd Va National Park (1.9 mil ha). The former has 60 staff, a management plan and a very strict management regime limited to research activities. Yugyd Va National Park has many areas of restricted access but is open to tourism and some extractive uses by surrounding local residents. Each area has a buffer zone with the southern edge of the Pechoro having a large one of 650,000 ha, protected to an even greater degree than the National Park. The remainder of the nominated site (about 15% of the total area) comes under state forestry farm status (except for some small reservations) and would thus be open to commercial logging activities. Although no such activity is currently taking place, the legal status of this part of the nomination is judged inadequate by IUCN.

Less than 50 people live in the nominated area. The region surrounding the site is lightly populated but forestry and oil and gas activities are extensive. A French company was seeking agreement to conduct logging in the southern buffer zone but the application appears to be stalled. A proposal to reduce the size of the National Park by excising the Kozhim basin (for mineral exploitation) was made but was withdrawn after protests from conservation interests. Both these proposed forestry and mining activities would seriously impair the values of the site.

In terms of adequacy of its boundary, the VKF, as nominated, is very satisfactory and includes all the main elements of the area. If, however, the forestry farms are excluded due to their lack of legal protection, there would be two major design flaws. First, the upper Ilych River basin is a major "hole" in the site and should be upgraded to at least buffer zone status. The smaller LP350 excision contains important watershed values and some valuable stands of Siberian pine and should also be incorporated into the national park.

In terms of budget and equipment, the site is not well-supported. Much is required including fire-fighting equipment, radios, boats, computers and more operational funds. Fortunately WWF, with funds from the Swiss Government, is about to implement a Sfr. 4 million project over the next four years which should considerably strengthen the integrity of the VKF.

4. ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

- 4.1 During the field inspection IUCN was concerned to note the very limited evidence of wildlife. While there has been some poaching, this would not be a factor for all the area of the VKF. A census and status report on the main indicator species of the area should be sought.
- 4.2 Although the name of the site suggests it is a forest it is important to note that it also has a great number of other natural features such as the Ural mountains, tundra, lakes, bogs, fisheries and wild rivers.
- 4.3 The nominated site is rare in that it is almost totally natural, largely unaffected by any human occupation or activity. Cultural features are thus rare except for the existence of an historic traders trail across the area which was abandoned many years ago.

5. EVALUATION

The Russian European taiga as found in the VKF offers an excellent opportunity to study those natural processes that affect biodiversity in pristine boreal forests. The VKF are indeed special due to their size and natural condition. If fully protected, it would be one of the top five most important natural sites in the boreal forest region (particularly with the WWF project about to start). The area has proved to be important for science and indeed is an unsurpassed natural benchmark for monitoring climatic change and the impacts of the conversion of the boreal forest zone through industrial logging. IUCN thus concludes that the total area, as nominated, meets natural criteria *ii* and *iii*.

Unfortunately, approximately 720,000 ha of the originally nominated area is not under adequate legal protection and this portion does not thus satisfy condition of integrity *iv*. If not given a higher level of protection, activities in both the upper Ilych basin and the area known as LP350 could significantly compromise the integrity of the remaining portion. Another concern is the prospect of the approval of logging permits in the southern buffer zone.

A revised map of the exact boundaries was provided in September 1995. The size of the three components that comprise the nomination are: Pechoro Ilychsky Nature Reserve (730,000 ha); Bufferzone (650,000 ha), and Yugyd-Va National Park (1.9 mil.ha). Total area is thus 3.28 mil.ha.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Bureau, recognizing that the full site meets criteria *ii* and *iii*, recommended that the 3 mil. ha of the site that is fully protected as National Park, Zapovednik, and buffer zone could be inscribed. A strong recommendation for action that would allow the remaining 720,000 ha to be incorporated in future was part of this recommendation.

The Committee should express concern over the prospects of releasing any of the site to industrial forestry or mineral extraction interests. The Bureau also recognized the 60 years of conservation effort that the authorities have already devoted to these forests and commended WWF for locating funds from the Swiss Government to assist in strengthening management of the area.