

# ORGANIC WHUPS POACHERS IN THE WILD EAST

## *A story of Siberian certification*

*By Andrew Black*



The Soviet-era jeep lurched down the muddy forest track deeper into the Russian wilderness, sloshing my guts against my ribs with each jolt.

It was my first day in the woods on a weeklong wild harvest inspection. It was nearly midnight, raining, and we were barreling down the worst road I had ever traveled. Unlike most of my organic farm inspections, this wasn't going to be a walk down a row of garden vegetables.

Cramped stoically in the back of the bucking jeep, were Anton Semyonov, my translator and contact with the Wildlife Conservation Society Russia Program and Alexi Perflyev, assistant manager of the Kavalerovo Hunting Lease; one of the wild harvest operations I had come to inspect. Anton was my main guide and translator. I looked at our driver Igor Tetuiev, head of the Hunting Lease. His eyes were riveted on the "road" while his arms flew wildly at the wheel. Although my life was in capable hands, my

fortitude began to unravel. I was exhausted, starved and thousands of miles out of my comfort zone.

Most people wouldn't expect to find an Oregon Tilth Certified Organic inspector deep in the forest of the Russian Far East. But the demand in the U.S. for certified organic products is powerful enough to send an OTCO inspector almost anywhere.

I had arrived in Russia a few days earlier with only my laptop, and a couple of organic system plans for two wild harvest inspections. Somewhere between Portland, Seoul and Vladivostok, my luggage was lost. Anton Semyonov with the Wildlife Conservation Society, took me to Vladivostok's Chinatown to buy a change of clothes.

I was sent to the Russian wilderness because of the Siberian tiger that used to range through China, Russia, and Korea. Now the last remaining 400 to 500 tigers live a phantom existence in the Primorsky Kray region of the Russian Far East. Habitat loss and poachers threaten their continued survival. Anton and the Wildlife Conservation Society are hoping that certified organic wild harvested medicinal herbs will help save them.

The Society sponsors a program allowing the Kavalerovo and Chin Sun Hunting Leases to offer locals an economic alternative to poaching tigers and their prey. Villagers register with the hunting clubs to harvest medicinal herbs on certified organic ground. The hunting club managers, like Igor, and Valeriy Novikov of the Chin Sun Hunting Lease, are responsible for monitoring the pickers, managing post-harvest drying and keeping records verifying the operations are following National Organic Program rules. For a wild crop to be sold as organic in the U.S., the NOP demands the land must be free of prohibited materials and that the wild harvest is sustainable and not destructive to the environment. In addition to being certified organic by Oregon Tilth, the land managed by the hunting clubs is also part of the Wildlife Conservation Society's Tiger Friendly certification program. There are eight to ten tigers prowling the forests managed by Valeriy and Igor. According to Anton, the hunting clubs can be certified Tiger Friendly if they can effectively control poaching.

A nasty pothole rocked the jeep, and although I felt miserable, my fortune was about to change. With one last push, Igor revved our jeep up a steep bank and we burst into a clearing with a small cabin.





Outside the jeep, it felt good to stretch and breathe in the clean forest air. We unloaded the jeep and Alexi laid out a feast of a half smoked salmon, rye bread, mustard, and fresh vegetables from Igor's garden. Several days later I visited both Igor's and Valeriy's gardens and found them typical of what I had seen in nearly every village home throughout the region—beautiful rows of cabbage, potatoes, beets, carrots, tomatoes, corn, and sunflowers just three steps away from the back door. They grew enough to eat and preserve surplus for winter. All of it was organically grown out of necessity and tradition.

When we sat down to eat, Igor handed me a shot of Russian cognac and offered a toast to the beauty of nature. Life was good again. Another toast later, Anton led me to a banya, a wood fired sauna, at the edge of the forest, where I sweated out my exhaustion and culture shock, while thrashing myself with a moist bundle of oak leaves. I stumbled back to the cabin in a daze and fell asleep smiling.

The wild crops hunted by the hunting clubs are the main ingredients in some of the finest health elixirs around. Siberian ginseng root, wild rosehips, and the small red berry from a vine called *Schisandra chinensis* are the focus of the wild harvest. The plants grow in the forested river valleys dominated by diverse stands of birch, aspen, oak, fir and Korean pine. Siberian Ginseng *Eleutherococcus senticosus* and rosehips grow in abundance there while Schisandra is harder to find. Schisandra is also known as Wu Wei Zi, and is one of the 50 fundamental herbs of traditional

Chinese medicine. The Russians I met praised the plant for its energy-giving powers. I ate some for a boost while hiking up steep slopes to ridges and hilltops during the inspections. From these high vantage points I could see only untouched forest in all directions — no logging scars, no roads, no homes.

On one hike up to a ridgeline with Valeriy, I tried to express my amazement at how intact his forests were in contrast to the Oregon forests that I call home. In response he said, "Russia is a paradox," and explained that in the last decade Russia had taken a grand step forward towards democracy, but its rural economy had taken two steps backwards.

Later that same day we were driving through fields of weeds and forbs as high as the hood of Valeriy's truck. He pointed out hundreds of acres of river bottom soil. Wild rosehips were easy picking in these fields and Valeriy wanted to include the area for the wild harvest certification. He said that the field had once been part of a large Soviet farming cooperative. They had grown oats, potatoes, and corn but when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1989, so did the co-op. Looking out across the abandoned farm fields, I was astonished at how fast wilderness was reclaiming them. It seemed strange that in fields once alive with agriculture, I was now more likely to see tiger tracks than tractor tracks.

The story of certified organic wild harvested crops beside the footprints of the vanishing Siberian tiger represents a unique merger between two important environmental crusades—endangered species protection and the organic food industry. If successful, the project will reduce tiger poaching and give Igor and Valeriy an opportunity to revive their communities. Perhaps this small project in the wilderness of the Russian Far East can one day serve as a model for market-based conservation in other wild places around the globe.

If you are interested in contributing to this project, contact Russia Tiger Friendly • WCS Asia Program • c/o Lisa Yook, 2300 Southern Boulevard, Bronx, NY 10460



**Source:** <http://www.tilth.org/education-research/in-good-tilth-magazine/articles/2008/19ii/organic-whips-poachers-in-the-wild-east>