

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE EARTH



INDIGENOUS VOICES
ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Altai's Sacred Climate

Restoring the sacred web of life in
Siberia's Golden Moutains

For countless generations, Altai people herded their livestock across what is now known as the Golden Mountains of Altai UNESCO's World Heritage Site, in Russia's southern Siberia. They endured many obstacles—from Mongol hordes to Soviet oppression. Today, they face the new challenge—climate change. Local shamans are convinced that only through restoring their reverential relationship with the sacred and spiritual realms can Altai people and the rest of the world restore the balance of the Earth and its climate.



Summer Pastures | Altai | Russia

At the crossing of the Russian, Mongolian, Kazakh and Chinese borders, a mountain range rises at the western edge of Sayan Mountains. For centuries, Altai people herded their livestock across these plateaus and through mountain passes. Russian *Staroveriy*, or Old Believers, sought refuge in these valleys long ago from persecution by the Tsar's Russian Orthodox Church. With its outstanding landscape and biological and cultural diversity, the region gained international recognition when the Golden Mountains of Altai was designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1998.



Kokboru | Elo village | Altai

Galloping across a field near the village of Elo, descendants of the ancient Altai horsemen compete in a "goat-pulling" tournament—a modern version of Turkic tradition of *Kokboru*. Teams compete by trying to throw a dead goat into their opponents' *kazan*—a large sod vat. This tradition faded from Altai culture during the decades of Soviet cultural domination beginning in 1919. *Kokboru* is slowly being restored in Altai through cultural exchanges with other Turkic people from around Asia. This is part of emerging South-to-South connections between Altai people and their Indigenous brothers and sisters from all corners of the Earth, helping tackle many social, cultural and ecological challenges, including climate change.



Alexander Dibesov | Aktru glacier | Altai

Alexander Dibesov, a warden of a mountaineering camp at the foot of Aktru glacier, scans the scree slopes of the canyon through his binoculars for signs of mountain sheep. "In the summer, when I was a kid, my family would come to Aktru from our home in the valley," says Alexander. "We loved going sledding on the glacier." Just 60 years ago, the glacier came down all the way to where Alexander is kneeling. Today, the glaciers are receding, barely visible up the slope in the distance.



Ancient Petroglyphs | Altai | Russia

An ancient horseman pursues mountain sheep over the rugged foothills of Altai Mountains. The petroglyph carved into stone two and a half millennia ago is a testament to the resilience of this cultural landscape. Since the first humans arrived here close to a million years ago, it has served as a home or migration route to nomadic cultures that, despite many upheavals, remain strong in modern day Altai. Today, the etched horseman and its quarry face a different set of obstacles, from the petroglyphs themselves being cut out for sale on the black market to accelerated erosion due to climate change. Torrential downpours, freezing and thawing—now more frequent and unpredictable—can splinter the rock and destroy the petroglyphs forever.



Maria Amanchina | Ukok plateau | Altai

Maria Amanchina, a traditional Altai shaman and healer, lights a pipe as she sends her prayers with the smoke to the Sky, the Land, and the Spirit of Altai. Maria knows that healthy, respectful relationships with sacred sites—such as Ukok Plateau, a part of the Golden Mountains World Heritage Site on the border with China, Mongolia and Kazakhstan—are key to ensuring that her people and the Land can endure the changes facing the Altai, such as climate change.



Berkuts | Uch Enmek Nature Park | Altai

Tracing the contours of forested foothills with their wingtips, two *berkuts*, or Golden Eagles, draw a veil of snow flurries over the sacred Uch-Enmek Mountain. Local people chose an ancient depiction of the *berkut* as the symbol for the Uch-Enmek Nature Park, created in the Karakol Valley in 2001 to protect this most sacred mountain and valley. According to the Altai tradition, Uch-Enmek is the umbilical cord of the Earth, maintaining the spiritual and energy balance of our planet, and regulating the weather and climate.



Uruchai Nanov | Uch-Enmek Nature Park | Altai

En route to Aru-Kem Lake in the Uch-Enmek Nature Park, Uchural Nonov, a Park warden, ties horse hair—a substitute for traditional strands of cotton, or *kyira*—to a sacred tree. "We ask the spirit of Altai to bless our companions' journey and to look after our families," says Uruchai. The supplicant never asks for anything for oneself. Reverence, respect, and reciprocity are at the heart of the sacred relationship between local people and the Altai. These qualities are fundamental elements of the local peoples' worldview, guiding their daily actions toward each other, land, water, and air.



Emil & Radmila Terkishev | Uch-Enmek Nature Park | Altai

Hauntingly beautiful and stirring, *Kai* is an ancient style of throat singing, a way of connecting and communicating with the Altai's physical and spiritual landscapes. Emil Terkishev is a traditional *Kai-chi*—a hereditary shamanic throat singer and story teller. While he writes and performs his own music with support and accompaniment of his wife Radmilla, he relies on the guidance of his two-string *topshur* as he journeys through the past, present and future of this sacred land in his chants and songs, seeking answers to Altai's current challenges.



Samankul Azyrankulov (standing) & Kadyrbek Dzhakypov | Dzhumalinskyy springs | Altai

Over the last few years, Maria and other Altai shamans have been gradually building relationships with custodians of sacred sites and their allies in different parts of the world in order to work collectively on restoring and sustaining the sacred Web of Life. Custodians of sacred sites in Kyrgyzstan, Samankul Azyrankulov (standing) and Kadyrbek Dzhakypov (laying down), came to Altai to reconnect with the sacred landscape that nourished their ancestors, including Manas—the hero of the longest Kyrgyz epic poem who was born in Altai over a thousand years ago. At the Dzhumalinskyy springs, where sacred healing water gurgles up from the foothills of Ukok Plateau, the two pilgrims from Kyrgyzstan make offerings seeking the healing energy of the sacred springs and rocks. They hope to bring this positive energy back to their homeland, to help address their own challenges, from inter-ethnic conflict to climate change.



Maria Amanchina & her guests | Kosh-Agach | Altai

As they prepare to travel to the sacred Ukok Plateau, Maria guides her guests—clockwise, Liz Hosken, Director of the UK-based Gaia Foundation, Botswana healer Niall Campbell and Chagat Almashev, Director of the Foundation for Sustainable Development of Altai—through a purification ceremony over wafts of smoke from a sacred juniper fire. "Our relationship with the world," says Maria, "must be based on our ability to keep the sacred balance with all living beings and the Land." This is particularly important in places of high spiritual significance and potency, such as sacred sites. Linking the people who understand and support the fundamental importance of this truth is critical to re-balancing humankind's relationship with the Earth and its climate.



Maria Amanchina | Ukok plateau | Altai

Called the "Pastures of Heaven" by the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, Ukok Plateau is dotted with hundreds of burial grounds, or *kurgans*. Maria is standing over one such *kurgan*, where a 2,400-year-old mummy of a Pazyryk noblewoman, the "Ice Princess", was excavated by archaeologists in 1993 to great international fanfare. Maria feels that the dominant Western mindset pierces the heart of the Earth as it digs for gold, drills for oil, and unearths and removes archeological "artifacts". This very worldview is responsible for upsetting the intricate balance of the Altai and the rest of living Mother Earth. A powerful earthquake that shook the region soon after the "Ice Princess" was removed and shipped to the Museum of Russian Academy of Sciences in Novosibirsk, confirmed Maria's convictions. Just as undeniable is the climate change Maria observes altering the Altai landscape, including the melting permafrost that for centuries preserved the remains of the Altai peoples' ancestors on the Ukok Plateau. Maria is convinced that only through reclaiming our reverential relationship with the sacred and spiritual worlds can we restore the balance of the Earth and its climate.