

Final Report: Senior Researcher Stay at St. Petersburg State University

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“Natural Resources in the Pamirs. Sustainable Water Management in the Past
and Present”

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The background of my UAS Senior Researcher Stay in St. Petersburg (November 6-27, 2016) was the goal to initiate a scientific network for future, empirically-based research on the nexus of water, food production, and natural hazards in the so far scientifically neglected, arid high mountain regions of the Western Pamirs in Central Asia. Due to the complexity of the topic, the research requires an organized, transdisciplinary approach that integrates socio-scientific methods, ethnographic empirical fieldwork, and the study of historical sources to identify past and present starting and leverage points for sustainable resource usage and governance processes in future. In the long-term, former and current sustainable local practices of water use and management in the Western Pamirs will be identified, and the findings will be made available to local communities and development organizations. It is envisioned that this will positively contribute to their capability to address issues of sustainable development in the region moving forward. With such an approach, the venture shall also contribute to the transboundary collaboration and transdisciplinary cooperation of scholars from the social sciences and humanities of the Freie Universität Berlin (FUB) and the St. Petersburg State University (SPbU) on the topic of sustainability.

An important task of the research stay in St. Petersburg was, therefore, to establish new connections and to deepen already existing contacts with potential partners. Several meetings took place with lecturers, scholars, and representatives of the Department of Central Asia and Caucasus Studies of the SPbU, as well as the Russian Geographical Society, the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, and the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Additionally, I gave two lectures on the overarching issue of natural resource management by exploring the topics of pastoralism and pasture management in Kyrgyzstan and small-scale irrigation agriculture in Tajikistan. Staff and students of the Department of Central Asia and Caucasus Studies of the SPbU attended both lectures. Dr. Zarine Dzhandosova, Assistant Professor at the department, and my primary contact person at the SPbU, facilitated the discussions on general issues related to the question of sustainability, on the one hand, and specific features of the two topics I presented, on the other hand.

The meetings, lectures, and discussions were used to exchange ideas for topic-related research projects in the future, to discuss possible forms of future collaboration and its funding, and to identify common research interests going beyond the issue of natural resource management. In this regard, it became clear that the funding for empirical research campaigns within intended common projects appears to be one of the biggest challenges for possible Russian counterparts.

The second goal of my stay was to identify and review systematically topic-related historical sources stored in the archives and collections of the Russian Geographical Society, the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, and the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The visits to these institutions turned out to be very successful. A number of data-rich documents were identified, studied, and filed. They will be used as links for further research, and as sources for intended publications.

Altogether, I benefitted in at least two ways from having the opportunity to conduct a research stay at the SPbU. First, I established and deepened relations to several institutions and people interested in pursuing common endeavors in future. This network will be highly valuable for the development of common proposals for teaching exchanges and research projects. Secondly, the historical information found in the mentioned institutions enables me to reconstruct important historical preconditions for phenomena I observed during my first empirical field research campaigns in the study area. Starting from these insights, I will be able to detect specific path dependencies and gain a deeper understanding of sustainable water management in the arid Western Pamirs in the past and present.