

Soviet village has chance for survival

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KHABAROVSK, USSR — It was a life-and-death struggle between villagers and bureaucrats. And the former have won. Now the dying village of Dada has a chance for survival.

Dada, a small village inhabited by Nanai hunters and fishermen, stands on the bank of the Amur River in the midst of the Siberian taiga forest. The nearest town is about 90 miles away.

For decades the villagers engaged in traditional occupations of game hunting and fishing. The Amur and its tributaries were rich in fish including some unique species, such as kalugas (from the family of sturgeons) that sometimes weigh up to 2,000 pounds.

But then things began to turn sour. The decline of the village was predetermined by unmitigated greed of procurement organizations.

Teams of fishermen equipped with motor boats and nylon nets conducted operations in a manner so predatory that the stock of fish was undermined. Famed kalugas became so rare that the authorities officially banned fishing for them.

Then came the turn of the taiga rich in Siberian cedar, pine and larch. Giant logging and lumbering enterprises did their work on a great scale. High wages paid by such enterprises attracted young men from nearby villages.

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Besides, Dada could not offer many jobs any longer: the fishing cooperative went out of business and the number of licenses for game hunting dropped sharply.

With time Dada was relegated to the category of "prospectless" villages. In the 1970s that term was used to describe settlements which in the opinion of economic planners, had no economic importance.

The construction of schools, houses and clubs was terminated there, and the population was politely advised to change the place of residence.

Something of this kind was in store for Dada's inhabitants. They could go to other settlements where fish canneries and wood-processing enterprises were under construction, because they offered housing and more or less decent services.

However, far from all villagers wanted to do that.

"We were born here. This is where we want to live and die," older people used to say. And some of the younger people supported them.

Only a few years ago the viewpoint of the villagers would have been disregarded. But times change. The villagers addressed scores of letters to the local government body — the district Soviet of People's Deputies. The issue was examined at a special session of the executive committee of the Soviet held in Dada.

Summing up the results of the debates the chairman of the executive committee, Valery Beldy, himself a Nanai, said that the demands of the villagers would be met. At the same time he asked for their permission to

locate a production facility of the Far East Department of Aerogeodesy on the territory of the village, provided the latter agreed to concern itself with social and cultural renovation of the village.

A majority of the population accepted the proposal.

When I visited Dada one year after the memorable session, the first thing I noticed were houses under construction. In reply to my question about prospects, Maria Kimonko, chairwoman of the village Soviet, said:

"The future of the village is now guaranteed. A livestock farm, a wood-processing facility and a souvenir manufactory were built here. Wages increased.

"Men no longer have to work for logging and lumbering enterprises. We now have plenty of jobs. Some people from other settlements are even willing to move to Dada. We could accept them, but there are still problems with housing and there are no vacancies at the kindergarten."

Valery Beldy told me that passions

around the proposed resettlement of the Dada villagers and the final decision made with due account of their interests reflected the current trends: the victory of democratic principles over command-and-administer methods of work characteristic of the not too distant past.

The district has other "prospectless" settlements but no one would decide the matter without consulting the local population. In this respect Dada created a useful precedent.