

# Mammoth tusks spark bitter debate

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Norvost Press Agency

YAKUTST, USSR — The government of the Yakut Autonomous Republic has responded to public protests being raised, especially by indigenous Northerners by forbidding all organizations and individuals to prospect for and collect mammoth tusks — unique treasures preserved in the permafrost which are, unfortunately, becoming scarce.

Thanks to the severe climate of this part of the country, the bodies of mammoths, woolly rhinoceroses and bison, have remained intact in the permafrost for hundreds of thousands of years.

Found there periodically, they become a world sensation. Yet, such finds are becoming rare. Even disjointed bones are now hard to come by.

Fossil mammoth tusks — an excellent carving material used by local craftsmen from time immemorial, are still sometimes found in the remote areas of the Yakut tundra and on the Arctic islands.

Original figurines made of mammoth bones are the pride of the world's largest museums. But any large acquisitions are unlikely in the future. The prices are skyrocketing: about 2.2 pounds of quality mammoth tusks costs \$7,000 to \$8,000 U.S.

dollars in the world market.

Lately the Severokvartssamotsvety central association of the Soviet Ministry of Geology has monopolized mammoth bone production in the Yakut Region.

Over the past 10 years they have taken some 50 tons of the valuable raw material from northern Yakutia, exporting 95 percent of it. The republic got no profit, although under the contract it was to keep 50 percent of the excavated tusks.

The local population was outraged by the barbarous treatment of the fragile northern environment. Heavy-duty excavators and water cannons spoiled deer pastures, destroyed unique landscapes and did serious damage to the white fox population — the ruin fur trade in the Far North.

As a result, the average annual production of pelts in the region dropped from up to 25,000 to about 14,000 and is still falling. According to scientists, it will take from 20 to 200 years to restore the damaged vegetation in the tundra.

In late February the State Court of Arbitration of the Russian Federation defended the claim of the Ust-Yansky state farm for the damage of 137 hectares of deer pastures, fining the Severokvartssamotsvety association 621,800 rubles.

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Another claim for about the same sum is being prepared to pay for damages to the hunting grounds.

Yakutia has nullified its contract with the association, making the Sever agro-industrial complex the only official excavator of mammoth tusks.

Under an agreement with the district Soviet of People's Deputies, it will collect the valuable raw material

without using the machinery that damages northern nature.

The tusks will be received, registered and worked by the Sardana craft and souvenir factory in Yakutia and by Yakut workshops. Under the government resolution, beginning with this year the prices on items made of mammoth tusks will be determined by the enterprises which make them.