

Lakes Tahoe and Baikal Inspire Unique Russian-American Partnership

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The Tahoe-Baikal Institute (TBI) was established in 1990 to help preserve Lake Tahoe and Lake Baikal, in Siberia, as well as other significant and threatened natural areas around the world. This preservation is realized through environmental education programs, research, and international exchanges of students and scholars.

The creation of the TBI was unique among Russian-American partnerships when initiated. The idea originally came from U.S. and Soviet students at a 1988 international youth conference in Helsinki, where they managed to present the idea to Presidents Gorbachev and Reagan and California Governor Deukmejian in person.

As a result, a California Resources Agency delegation visited Lake Baikal in 1990 and negotiated an agreement with Siberian authorities calling for the creation of the TBI. The institute is an international non-profit venture, with branches at Lake Tahoe (in South Lake Tahoe and Incline Village) and in Irkutsk, near Lake

Baikal in Russia.

TBI's core program has been a university-level environmental exchange program, which is conducted each summer for two months at Lake Tahoe and Lake Baikal. Since 1990, over 220 participants have graduated from the program, which blends lectures, research, and restoration activities.

How are the two lakes comparable?

Lake Tahoe is one of the world's largest, clearest and deepest subalpine lakes. More than 260 species of wildlife and 1,000 plant species inhabit the Lake Tahoe Basin. Tahoe's immense popularity as

a recreational and ski area has brought millions of visitors and tens of thousands of new homes and businesses during the last 40 years. This urban development has taken a toll on Tahoe's water quality. The transparency of its water has decreased by approximately 30 percent since measurements

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Lake Baikal



Lake Tahoe Environmental Education Coalition

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The Lake Tahoe Report

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began in the late 1960s.

Lake Baikal is the world's largest, deepest, and oldest freshwater lake. It contains 20 percent of the earth's unfrozen fresh water, and has one of the most biologically diverse ecosystems in the world, due largely to its age of 20 million years.

In terms of size and age, the two lakes contrast sharply. Tahoe is about 22 miles long, 11 miles wide and 1,600 feet deep at its deepest point. It is about 2 million years old, much older than most freshwater lakes. Lake Baikal is about 497 miles long at its longest point, 50 miles wide at its widest point, and a mile deep at its deepest point. Baikal is also over 10 times older than Tahoe.

In terms of urban development, most of Lake Baikal is undeveloped, about like Tahoe was 100 years ago. It has experienced more extensive recent harvesting of timber than the Tahoe Basin, and mining and pulp mill industrial sites have caused considerable pollution in the southern end of the lake. As Russian investors contemplate ski areas, other recreational uses and urban development, proper waste management and prevention of both point and nonpoint source water pollution will become vital to Lake Baikal's water quality, as they are to Lake Tahoe's water quality.

The political and cultural geography of the two lakes is also somewhat similar. Whereas the Lake Tahoe Basin is partly in California and partly in Nevada, Lake Baikal's watershed is divided between three Russian Territories – Irkutsk, the Republic of Buryatia and the Chita region – and part of the Nation of Mongolia. The Washoe tribe of Native Americans considers Lake Tahoe to be a sacred place, and the Buryat and Evenk people



Tahoe Baikal Institute participants

regard Lake Baikal in the same way.

Realizing that both lakes are important in scopes other than the scientific and political, TBI's exchange program incorporates academic, recreational, and cultural activities so that the social, aesthetic, and inherent values of both lakes may be appreciated. The concept of having youth from two former 45-year-long Cold War enemies gathering together each year to learn about their unique lakes and cultures and debating how to make a better future reverberates with possibilities like ripples in a peaceful lake.

For more information about the Tahoe-Baikal Institute, call (530) 542-5599, or check their Web site at www.tahoebaikal.org.