The logistic challenges of organizing programs for participants shuttling between three countries were daunting. This itinerary included a one-week trip to the Buryat Republic of Russia, a two-week tour through central and northern Mongolia, and a ten-day excursion to New Mexico, Nevada, and California. The program successfully expanded and deepened links between Mongolian and Buryat organizations as well as between organizations in those countries and their U.S. colleagues. Country representatives were able to visit mines and to establish dialogues with mining company representatives and regulatory agency staff. Presentations included an overview of resource conservation strategies, options for development of mineral revenue-based permanent funds in Buryatia, and the environmental impact of mines in Mongolia.

The 2008 Exchange began in August in Buryatia with activities organized by Sendema Shirapova and Lena Chernbrovkina, who had coordinated previous exchanges, staff at the Buryat Center for Public Environmental Expertiza program of BRO-Baikal. Mongolian participants in the Buryat portions of the exchange included Narangerel Rinchin, PhD, director of the Center for Citizenship Education in Mongolia and B. Nyamchuu, research coordinator for the Ardyn Elch Movement, a civil society organization in the Yeroo River region of north-central Mongolia affected by placer gold mining since the early 1900s. The U.S. participant in the group was Paul Robinson, research director at SRIC and exchange coordinator. In addition to Sendema and Lena, Russian participants in the Buryat delegation included Alexei Papaev, PhD, a geography teacher in Orlik in western Buryatia, Sergei Shapkaev, director of BRO-Baikal, and Vladimir Belogolovko, coordinator of the BRO-Baikal ROLL (Repeat of Lessons Learned) project.

Packed into a minivan, the exchange group traveled from Orlik in western Buryatia, the source of 60% of the water entering Lake Baikal. We then followed the south shore of Lake Baikal through the meadows and mountains of Tunka National Park and beyond the pavement into sparsely settled Okinsky Rayon (County) where we met Alexei. Okinsky Rayon is named for the Oka River, which drains the Eastern Sayan Mountain Range. While in Okinsky, the group visited the Khushir gold mine overlooking the Oka River.

In addition to his teaching, Alexei is vice-president of the Soyot Association representing the Soyot ethnic group, indigenous descendants of reindeer-herding people who have lived in the mountains of western Buryatia for generations. Little-known outside Okinsky Rayon, the Soyot people are seeking to increase their recognition in Russia as a distinct indigenous community. Alexei led the exchange group to several Soyot cultural areas including prayer and ritual sites and a plateau used for annual gatherings of Soyot and Buryat people and their relatives from nearby regions. These sites overlook a waterfall that drops into the Oka River from the base of the mountain containing the Kushir Gold deposit. From the prayer shelter at the waterfall, participants could see the mine and access roads, mountains and hills into the mountain. The exchange delegation’s visit to the mine was the first time local or regional civil society representatives had seen the current operation up close. The mine camp, including housing, water treatment, machine shops, and laboratory facilities, is located in a transition zone between trees and grasses. The mine access road zig-zags up through a larch and birch forest to the mine site located above treeline.

Mine development is currently focused on blasting an adit — a horizontal tunnel — into the mountain to assess the extent of gold ore and to allow bulk sampling for metallurgical tests needed to design the gold recovery facility. While blasting the adit and sampling the ore, the mine company is conducting surface exploration by trenching and borehole drilling across its lease area to identify additional gold deposits.

Community concerns regarding the gold mining project include uncertainty about its effects on local livestock-based communities, impacts and benefits the region can expect from the operation, siting of gold process and waste disposal facilities, and whether gold mining will deter ecotourism centered on the spectacular environment and prominent cultural resources in Okinsky. Transportation is also an issue, since the only route to Kushir for trucks carrying cyanide and other hazardous materials is through Okinsky Rayon along a rugged and unpaved road that passes through Orlik and other local communities.

Our return tour from Orlik to Ulan-Ude included a stop at Lake Baikal for a picnic. We got our feet wet, made ritual offerings, and basked in the vastness and beauty of what is considered a “sacred sea” by Buryats, Mongolians, and many Russians.

At Ulan-Ude, Paul Robinson made a presentation at a seminar hosted by BRO-Baikal at the Buryat Geological Institute to discuss opportunities for nature protection through conservation of mineral deposits and mechanisms for permanent funds to be created from mineral incomes. These issues are of major importance to Buryatia and the focus of debate in the...
The Mongolian component of our international exchange ended in Yeroo, where the group was received by the Ardyn Elch Movement, host for a portion of the 2007 exchange (see Voices from the Earth, Winter 2007, Volume 8, No. 4). The stay in Yeroo included a final seminar and visits to important shrines and springs near a newly opened iron ore mine that emerged as a significant local concern. The Ardyn Elch Movement raised issues about the lack of effective enforcement of legal requirements regarding reclamation, water resources protection, and income from mines operated for the export of raw materials. The reputation of Mongolians as warm and generous hosts was reinforced by the hospitality shown the exchange group and GGFO participants in the communities visited. The tour culminated in Yeroo with a fabulous spread of locally grown food and entertainment by local youth groups and local residents. The international guests agreed was at least as good as the mutton stew and frybread meal that the international group ate at the eating back home.

The international tour ended in San Francisco with an evaluation and a discussion of follow-up activities. Participants acknowledged the educational value of the exchange, which illustrated U.S. mining and renewable energy technologies that are still very rare in their home countries. Everyone expressed strong interest in the continuation of multinational exchanges between their countries and the United States. This was suggested that future years emphasize youth involvement. The trinational exchanges have enhanced communication across the Mongolian-Russian border in the Lake Baikal watershed and have heightened awareness of environmental issues around the world. The cross-cultural program successfully fostered communication among civil society, industry, and regulators about environmental management issues and it increased awareness about complex technical issues affecting communities and the environment, but its strongest legacy is the relationships established among the participants. The shared experiences and theSteppes will be of importance in the future, as mining continues in the Lake Baikal region.