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KEYS:/PROVOCATIONS NO. 209/

Memo to: The Climate Club -- C759 2 October 1988

From: Walt Roberts

Provocation No. 229

Ecological Movements in the USSR

Lake Sevan in Soviet Armenia is, by ancient Armenian Church traditions, a sacred lake. Some fifteen years or more ago I visited this beautiful, mountainous place, which is a several hours automobile ride from the capital city of Yerevan, deep in the south of the Soviet Union. The lake is over 1,300 square kms in area, and lies in a mountain encircled depression at about 1,900 meters elevation above sea level.

The lake drains southwards into the Razdan River, and ultimately to the Caspian Sea. It courses down a rugged scenic valley with rushing rapids, waterfalls and dense vegetation on the steep slopes and in the valley floor. The region is truly exquisite in late summer, when I visited. Some have thought rugged Armenia the site of the biblical Garden of Eden. It should qualify! I sat one glorious late summer afternoon, a few days after my visit to Lake Sevan, in a garden with with the Armenian astronomer Viktor Ambartsumian. We munched apricots from his tree, and he told of the fine brandy they made. His home is on the grounds of the Byurakan Observatory, in another valley close to the Razdan.

Glorious Lake Sevan and its environs have been ravished by the results of environmental debacles arising from industrialization. Six hydroelectric power plants built on the Razdan led to drastic reductions of the lake level in spite of new diversion aqueducts designed to bring additional water to the lake.

When I visited, the lake was down perhaps 5 meters or more, and some of the swimming beaches and docks of the relatively new resort hotels were a quarter kilometer from the lake shore. The hydro plants, I was told by Soviet friends, were built to fuel a machine tool industry located there to use the power and to provide employment. When environmentalist outcries reduced the hydro power output, coal-fired power plants arose. Now the Razdan valley is suffering severe atmospheric pollution from the coal. It was painfully evident during my visit.

A recent article in Science (26 Aug 88, p.1033) chronicles a stronger and stronger environmental awakening in the USSR. According to the author, governmental officials are now openly acknowledging that across the entire country there is serious environmental pollution. Moreover, under the new Glasnost, people are openly demonstrating against it. A lead Soviet official stated: "One might say that for a whole era our party and professional propaganda and science have been intolerably passive as far as ecology is concerned. For many decades, the environment has been undergoing catastrophic pollution."

This new frankness signals great hope for preservation of the superb natural beauties of so much of the Soviet land. I have criss-crossed the country on many trips, and I appreciate these beauties. Perhaps, now, adequate measures will be taken to assure their protection as a scenic benefit to the Soviet people and their visitors, but also for the enhancement of agriculture and industry, as Gorbachev seeks to increase industrial efficiency and redress the ailing economy.

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When I visited, the lake was down perhaps 2 meters or more, and some of the swimming beaches and docks of the relatively new resort hotels were a quarter kilometer from the lake shore. The hydro plants, I was told by Soviet friends, were built to fuel a machine tool industry located there to use the power and to provide employment. When environmentalist outcries reduced the hydro power output, coal-fired power plants arose. Now the Razdan valley is suffering severe atmospheric pollution from the coal. It was painfully evident during my visit.

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