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Abstract

This paper explores the history of fishing on Lake Baikal in an effort to understand the fish-human nexus, to expand our understandings of the Russian relationship to the environment before the 20th century, and to think about the colonial encounter in Siberia from an environmental angle. Fishing has long been a crucial, life-sustaining, and culturally important component of life at Baikal; and fish and people have long existed in mutually influential and intertwined webs of relations. Fish stocks declined markedly in Baikal from the late 18th century on—a drop that Soviet fishers and policymakers struggled with throughout the 20th century. Notably, this massive population decrease came about before any industrial change affected the area. The changing fate of the fish was more the result of an increase in the Slavic population and of the tax-farming economic structures that the new settlers brought to the practice of fishing. Humans, this story shows, do not need to have industrial machines with their extractive capabilities and pollution by-products in order to bring about systemic ecological changes.