The Scythian connection

When reindeer find the fly agaric mushrooms hiding under the snow, they eat them eagerly, become intoxicated and leap about. A shaman copies them, tries the mushrooms gets back on his sleigh pulled by the now crazed deer and imagines he too is flying. He carries a large sack of the dried mushrooms back to the village to share out, then climbs up a pine pole through the smoke hole (chimney) in the top of the bark tent to fly on his drug induced dreams to gather gift messages from the spirits of the upper world at the deer star = pole star = north pole before climbing back down the chimney to share his new gifts of knowledge. And the dried mushrooms in the sack happen to be bright red trimmed with white spots and he had hung them on the branches of fir trees for a while to dry them. And if the shaman is a woman as she often is then she sometimes wears a false beard of horse hair. And the star at the top of the tree? All sound a bit familiar? Enter the strange dream world of the Siberian shamans and their derivation from the Scythians who first domesticated reindeer in the Altai Mountains of China, Russia and Mongolia long long ago.

This is a world of the spirits of nature, deer totem poles, symbolic tattoos and ornaments, flying mythical beasts and strange animal sacrifice. Where are the Scythians today? – scattered and interbred for they were always more of a confederation than a single discrete ethnic tribe but their culture lives on in the reindeer herders of Siberia, in the tall pointed hats of Scottish witches, in Scandanavian gnomes, in Polish cavalry, Russian eagles and griffons, Amazon warrior queens, in the smoking of marihuana, in the geometric symbols of Celtic art, the Oriental tree of life and in the animal figures of early Chinese (Zhou dynasty) and Persian metalwork and ceramics. And what is the link with a GEF wetlands conservation project in China? Well that indeed is the story I tell and it starts as all good stories do with a young lady.

She was still in her 20s when she died but they buried her with greatest respect in a great Kurgan mound of the Pazyryk style on the hills of Altai Mountains some 4,500 years ago. They buried her with her cloak and tall hat, with 5 attendant horses, fine silk, ornaments and a bag of cannabis hemp to drug her flight. Her body is decorated with beautiful animal tattoos. Perhaps she was a warrior queen but more likely she was a shaman priestess and those horses were meant to guide her to the upper world and were fitted with wings and a leather reindeer mask to help them to fly there. The
Scythians were the first to domesticate the reindeer, the first to witness them ‘fly’ and also the first to use mounted archers and warrior horsemen. In the hills around this ‘Ice-maiden of Altai’ are other burial mounds and stone totem poles with carved figures of flying reindeers and other fantastic beasts.

Scythian tattoos show reindeer, horses dressed in reindeer masks, tigers, boars and griffons and other marvelous beasts. The earliest designs are lifelike but later designs become exaggerated and stylized. Reindeer horns sprout bird heads, horses sprout wings. Their bodies are often twisted in strange form to show these are not meant to represent real living creatures but dream spirits twisting in rebirth.

We saw the mounds and recognized the sacred nature of these mountains when we were surveying the alpine wetlands under our GEF ‘Main streams of Life’ programme earlier in the year, but I did not then realize where this story was headed. I was still reeling with the wonderful wildness of the place, its soaring golden eagles and alpine lakes that so reminded me of Scotland.

My next trip was to the north-east corner of China in the bend of the great Amur or Black Dragon (Heilong) river. Again I relished the wildness of the mountains and forests. Again we saw golden eagles, deer, tracks of the great moose, huge Ural owls, signs of wolverine and elusive lynx. Across the great river we could see Russian guardposts with gun emplacements keeping an eye on a strangely evolving tourism industry on the Chinese side. And there among the tourist attractions an old lady with a reindeer created the first link to the Ice-maiden of Altai.

We visited several nature reserves in the
Daxingan Mountains and I loved the rush of butterflies in the short northern summer, the forest birds, cheeky chipmunks. Travelling with colleagues from the national wetland office we had our adventures digging for the permafrost, tracking the moose and getting our can completely stuck in a swamp. But I was more intrigued by the reindeer. Where did they come from and who were these quiet bronzed ladies who tended them so carefully. I went to other forests where we met more of the Evenki minority, saw more of their reindeer and heard more of their stories.

So what is special about reindeer? We are familiar enough with them at Christmas. Well they are very special. Unlike other deer these animals can live in the frozen tundra. They migrate huge distances between their summer and winter feeding areas. They are strangely tame and not afraid of humans and unlike other deer he females have enormous antlers to rival any male, The antlers too are strangely formed with twisted branches leading to dozens of points a veritable tree of life. Reindeer are a complete life support system in these harsh mountains – they give milk, meat, bones, antlers and hides and they can be ridden or pull a sleigh. But they cannot stay still, they need to keep moving in search of new food. They eat moss and lichens that grow very slowly. They live in large herds so can eat out a small area quickly and need to move on. In winter they can descend to the valleys but in summer they cannot stand the biting midges and flies so travel far and high in search of cold peace. Man never could domesticate such a beast but the deer could domesticate man. Man and deer found a mutual relationship. The deer gives food and shelter to the human and the human protects the herd from the bears and wolves and helps provide shelter and food in turn when needed by the deer. And thus the Scythians learned to live with the deer, follow their nomadic patterns and live in birch bark tents in the larch forests, tending no crops but living a fully sustained life among the deer, their mushrooms and their spirit of nature.
As the climate changed the reindeer drifted further north allowing humans too to penetrate the vast forests of Siberia and spread to east and west. The Scythians ruled the great mountains and plains of Central Asia for several centuries. They left many remains. DNA of mummies shows a blending of Iranian origins in the west mixing with Mongolian stock from the east. Scots, Poles and Siberian Evenki all trace their origins to these lost peoples. But these were far from savage barbarian Huns. They were expert artists, metal workers, with highly developed and rich clothes, gold ornaments and efficient weaponry. One Scythian chieftain was buried with no less than 400 horses. Some of the eastern Siberians followed the deer (Karibou) across the frozen Bering Straits to build their conical tepees and erect their totem poles of carved animal motifs in the New World.

There were reindeer in NE China in ancient times but they may too have died out but we know that a large herd swam across from Siberia in the 17th century and Evenki herdsmen followed them. Today their descendents are still here but the numbers of both Evenki and reindeer are only a few hundreds and the future looks bleak for both parties. But this does not have to be. Our project can maybe intervene on behalf of both and all in the name of wetlands conservation.

Since the 1950s China has been using the forests of NE China in an unsustainable way. At first there seemed an endless resource and so began 50 years cutting of forests, draining of wetlands, mining, opening up new land for agriculture. Half the forest area and half of the fragile alpine wetlands have been lost in the process. The biomass of forests shows an even worse result with as much as 90% reduction since the
1950s. The big trees have been replaced by new little trees but the greatest problem is forest fires. Opening up forests for logging also opens them up to drying winds and sunshine. NE China is an area of frequent spring lightning and the growing human population is also careless in terms of starting fires. Forest fires have been recorded a total 1674 times since 1949. The average lost timber is $58 \times 10^4 \text{ m}^3$ every year. The largest forest fire occurred in May 1987 and blazed for 27 days, burning 1.33 million ha of forest land.

As a result of all this degradation the Evenki have been squeezed off their traditional herding areas and rather uncomfortably resettled into permanent villages where they remain as curiosities posing for the cameras of gawking tourists. A few reindeer huddle around smokey fires, not for the warmth for they are well warm enough; but rather to escape the ravages of the biting insects when they would far rather be high up in the hills.

The best way to protect the critical alpine wetlands, lakes and permafrost of the Daxingan mountains is to take better care of the forest environment. As of April 2015 logging of natural forests in NE China is banned so the ex-logging farms have to find some alternative occupations. Meanwhile the best possible custodians of these released forests would be the original reindeer herding Evenki. There is a good reason for this. Reindeer feed on the slow growing lichens that grow on low branches. Low branches and their lichens are destroyed when there is a forest fire. The Evenki would have to prevent any fires if they want to re-establish their old herding patterns. But I know some of them would like to try.

The project also has funds that could be used in developing a museum documenting the Evenki way of life, their world of spirits, their deep knowledge of the plants and animals of the region. Why spend money on a Chinese scholar to design and museum and display a second-hand version of their knowledge and beliefs when we still have the Evenki there to tell their own story. We can commission the old folk to pool their stories and tell us their history, beliefs and habits in their own ways and their own imagery. This is what I think alternative livelihood should be and this is what I think our project objectives of experimenting in new forms of co-management of wetland Protected Areas should be. Can China go backwards to heal an environmental wrong turn? Watch this space; we will see what we can do.