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Siberian rafting trip brings different cultures together

Soviet and American youths learn lessons, share experiences during summer

By Hy Rosario
Emerald Contributor

Siberia became the site of many treasured moments this summer as American and Soviet youths joined together in a river rafting expedition.

For 12 days, members of the Soviet-American Rafting Youth Exchange rafted the Katun River, which runs through the Altai Mountains in Siberia.

The exchange, which was a joint venture between the California-based Project RAFT (Russians and Americans for Teamwork) and Sputnik, the Soviet International Youth Travel Bureau, attracted 20 participants, 10 of whom were Americans.

Throughout the trip, program participants swapped jokes, visited small Russian villages and debated with one another.

"It changed my views," said Tasha Ciancutti, a freshman at the University who took part in the

"By the end of the trip there were no differences. People were wearing each other's clothes and life vests... It was totally communal."

-Tasha Ciancutti

exchange and is thinking of working in the diplomatic field.

"I learned how to let go of my viewpoints and understand someone else's. Not necessarily take it on as my own but the ability to acknowledge it," she said.

Although the youths first appeared to have nothing in common except an interest in rafting, at the end of their 300-kilometer trip a strong bond of friendship had formed among group members.

"It turned out to be an opportunity to learn about each other's culture," Ciancutti said.

Between rapids the youths would talk, share Beatles lyrics, take pictures and learn each other's life histories. They discovered many striking similarities that they had with one another.

"By the end of the trip there were no differences. People were wearing each other's clothes and life vests," Ciancutti said. "It was

totally communal."

Interpreters and many non-verbal signals made it possible for group members to get their messages across to one another as they worked together to unload their equipment and set up camp for the night, she said.

In this way, the American youths also were able to communicate to villagers that they happened to meet on the way down.

"The Soviets made huge efforts to get to know us," Ciancutti said. "In some Siberian villages, we were the first Americans they had seen."

This was true in the small, isolated village of Inya where group members played soccer with the villagers, drank fermented mare's milk, received friendship belts and listened to the village elders dub their visit as the "greatest day in Inya's history," Ciancutti said.

The day was highlighted when "an old woman with no teeth,

wearing a scarf over her head, came up to me and said 'All we want is peace. All we want is friendship. All we want is to get along with the U.S.," Ciancutti said.

But a summer in the Altai Mountains was not without its difficulties.

According to Jib Ellison, Project RAFT executive director and rafting guide, the inclement weather sometimes resulted in frayed tempers, especially when team members became "wet, cold, and tired."

In addition, team members began to form cliques as the trip progressed. Ellison claimed that this banding together helped group members let off steam and air their complaints to someone who would understand.

"We all have very human qualities of wanting to contribute, of wanting to make friends, to love and be loved, and to be afraid,"

Ellison said.

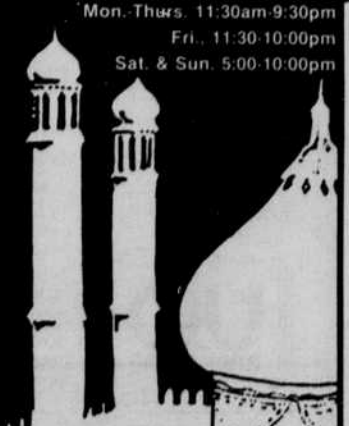
The differences in ideology were seen in the interactions of group participants as they navigated the rapids together.

Most of the Soviet youths stressed collectivity and working for the group while the American team members were mainly concerned with individuality, Ellison said.

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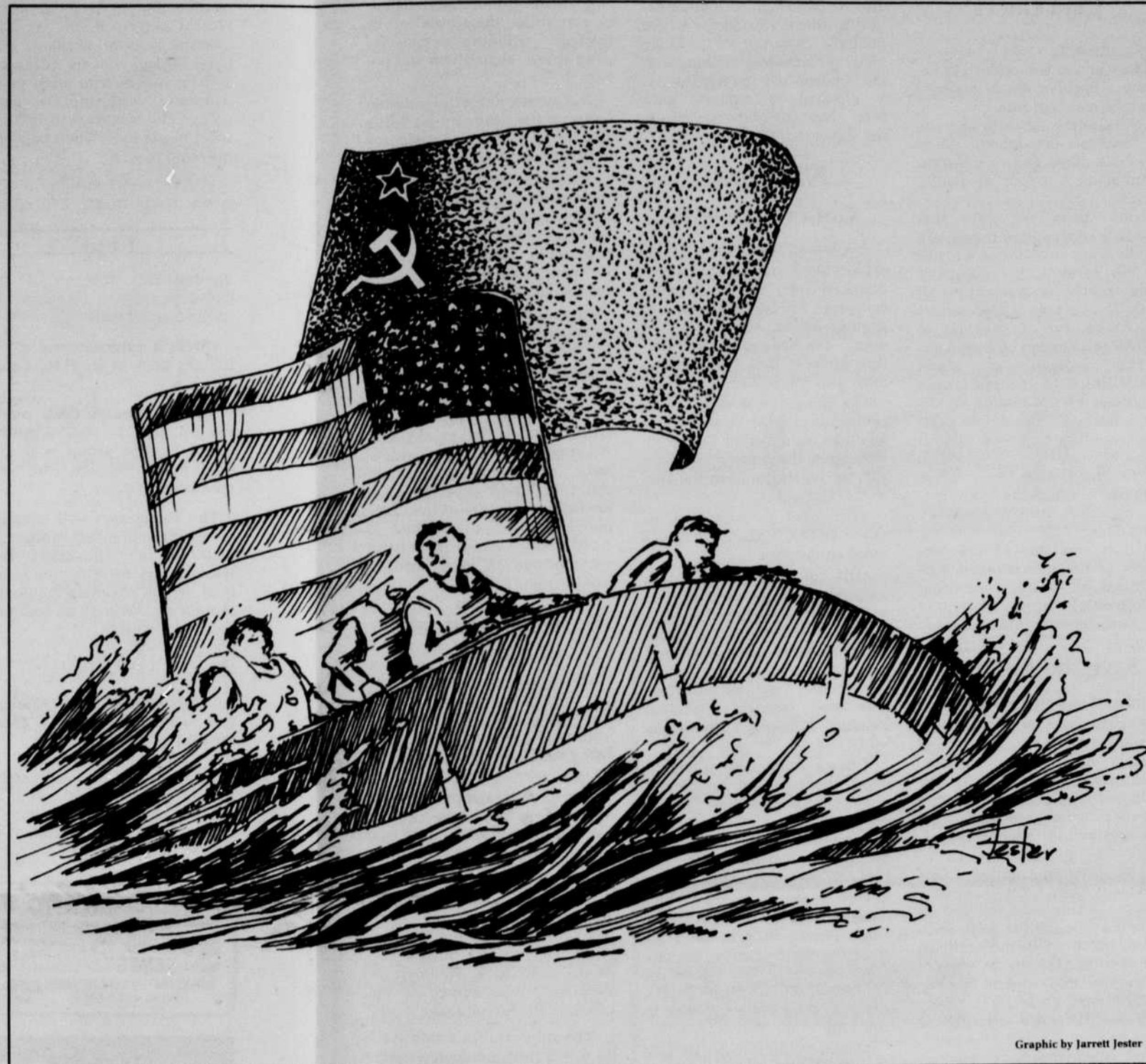


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But to successfully complete the trip, the both nations' youths had to learn how to overcome and accept their individual differences and work as a team, he said.

"We need to be more collective in our thoughts and they need to assert more of their individuality," Ellison said.

Teamwork saw team members

through the perils of Siberia but the trip is far from over.

The American team, who were selected for their enthusiasm, curiosity and ability to quickly adapt to different situations, will host a reunion with their Soviet counterparts in the summer of 1989. Team members will meet on the banks of the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon for another rafting expedition, said Jayne Williams,

Project RAFT coordinator.

"It's the participants' hope to bring the metaphor home about all of us being in the same boat in the nuclear age," Ellison said.

Williams echoes his thoughts.

Rafting provides a bridge between the two cultures, she said. "They are not cardboard cut-outs. They are people too."

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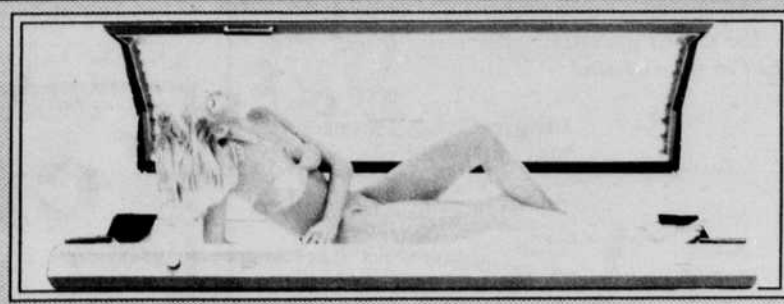
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