

MINES, RIVERS AND MONGOLIA

PIELC brings international lawyers BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN



ROLES THÉARD

Mongol hordes, nomadic herders, sweeping steppes, the vast Gobi Desert. Contemplate Mongolia and images of wild and untouched lands spring to mind. But these days Mongolia has earned the nickname “Minegolia” as companies rush in to exploit the area for its mineral resources. Corporations with names like “Khan Resources,” along with local and multinational corporations are looking to plunder Mongolia by mining coal, copper, gold, silver and phosphate, among others.

Erdenechimeg “Chimgee” Dashdorj and Bazardad Nanjindorj of the Center for Human Rights and Development in Mongolia want to see the land, air and water protected. They have come to the U.S. through the Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide (ELAW) to attend this week’s Public Interest Environmental Law Conference (PIELC), present on panels and meet with attorneys from all over the world who work on similar issues.

Through ELAW the Mongolian attorneys met Elena Chernobrovkina, an attorney working to protect Russia’s Lake Baikal watershed from threats posed by dams, pipelines and mining operations. The Mongolian attorneys seek to protect the

lake as well. Lake Baikal, the oldest and deepest lake in the world, holds 20 percent of the world’s total unfrozen freshwater reserve.

Baikal, in Siberia, and the neighboring country of Mongolia are intertwined — pollution that flows from Russian and Mongolian mining operations affects the lake. And Chernobrovkina says research shows that the vast amount of water in Lake Baikal has a global effect — or more precisely, a global warming effect. Damming the rivers that flow into the lake has changed the local climate. And Baikal’s only outlet, the Angara River, is also dammed, and faces more damming, which will affect the water that flows from the lake into the Arctic Ocean.

Chernobrovkina and her colleague from Buryat Regional Organization for Lake Baikal, Sergey Shapkhayev, say that Lake Baikal “plays a crucial role in regulating the Siberian rivers’ flow into the Arctic Ocean.” These flows are “one of the key vulnerabilities in the climate system of the Arctic.”

As a result of the damages to Lake Baikal and its rivers, Chernobrovkina says that “now we are seeing the global climate is also changing.”

Climate change is a global issue. Mining and pollution are cross-border issues, Chernobrovkina says as she sits around a table with Dashdorj, Nanjindorj and another ELAW fellow, Roles Théard of the Haitian Environmental Foundation. Théard says that Haiti might have mining on its horizons, and he wants to make sure that the country isn’t hit by the problems mining has caused elsewhere. If companies are given permission to mine, they must commit to protecting the site, he says. “If they don’t protect the site, they don’t have the project.”

Théard says he works to educate the Haitian people about the need for protecting the land against soil erosion. In a country where only 20 percent of the land is on the plains, and everything else is mountainous, and whose major activity is agriculture, the rural poor “put pressure on the land” as they cut trees for fuel and to make space for farming, he says.

ELAW and PIELC have brought these geographically and culturally separated environmental attorneys together so they can learn from each other and gain understanding through each country’s successes and errors. Furthermore, they will trade knowledge with the more than 3,000 conference attendees flooding the UO Law School throughout the weekend.

In Mongolia, 40 percent of the population is nomadic, Nanjindorj explains as Dashdorj translates. “The nature is beautiful, and the people depend on nature, environment and climate.”

“The main problem our beautiful environment is facing is mining,” Nanjindorj continues. “Our largest commitment is to work for the public interest and the environment.”

Mongolia has a history of rivers and streams destroyed by mines, and according to Dashdorj, “thousands of hectares of land without proper rehabilitation after mining.” Now there is the prospect of more mega-mines on the horizon, and the vast land of Ghengis Kahn and the immense waters of Lake Baikal face a battle against further destruction.

Erdenechimeg Dashdorj and Elena Chernobrovkina speak on a PIELC panel about Lake Baikal at 9 am Friday, March 2, and about mining with Roles Théard and Bazardad Nanjindorj at 10:30 am. Glenn Miller, an ELAW mining expert, joins them. Later that same day at the conference there will be a panel on coal exports. Peabody Coal, an American company looking to export coal through the Northwest to China, is one of the many foreign corporations currently mining in Mongolia.



HEINBERG AND END OF GROWTH

According to the internationally known author and speaker Richard Heinberg, the balloon of growth is on the verge of explosion. Heinberg, known for his work on “peak oil,” is a keynote speaker March 1 at PIELC, and he will also be kicking off the Eugene Neighborhood Leaders Council’s Green Neighbors Faire March 3 with a discussion of the impending transformations that he says our civilization faces.

Heinberg has written ten books, including *The Party’s Over* and *Peak Everything*. Peak oil is the idea that the rate of oil extraction has hit a peak and because there is a finite amount of the resource it is now in decline.

Reviewers say Heinberg’s work conveys civilization’s crucial need to transition toward sustainability with lucidity and passion. He is known for his perspectives on such issues as the economic crisis, food and agriculture, community resilience and global climate change. “I don’t think that it’s the end of the world, but some major things will definitely have to change during our lifetimes and our children’s lifetimes,” Heinberg said in an interview with *EW*.

Heinberg’s Saturday, March 3, presentation is called “Transitioning After Growth: Connecting Community, Economy, Energy and Environment.” “I’ll be talking about the reasons that I believe that economic growth as we know it is coming to an end,” he says. “I’ll explain how we’ve set up a financial system that only works when it’s growing and how it’s coming apart at the seams.” Heinberg will describe how, in the face of energy descent, society must build and rebuild local connections and resources.

Heinberg will be speaking at PIELC at 6 pm Thursday, March 1, along with Barbara and Ken Brower, the children of David Brower, a founder of the Sierra Club Foundation, the John Muir Institute for Environmental Studies, Friends of the Earth and the League of Conservation Voters.

The Green Neighbors Faire presentation begins at 11 am at the United Methodist Church. A daylong workshop exploring the ways in which Eugene is striving to build a more sustainable economy will follow. The faire includes workshops and panels on topics ranging from energy and water conservation to bees and backyard ducks.

Admission to the Green Neighbors Faire is free, and the suggested donation for Heinberg’s talk at the faire is \$5-\$10. — *Caitlin McKimmy*



ELENA CHERNOBROVKINA