

The High Price of Putin's Sochi Olympiad Keeps on Growing **Health/Science**

Posted by:

Posted on : 2017/8/23 22:31:40

Because of official greed and incompetence and the push to build infrastructure for Putin's Olympiad at any cost, these trees [Colchid boxwood (*Buxus colchica*)] are being killed off throughout the region by a moth that came to Western Europe from China in 2006, one that EU countries have successfully countered, but that jumped to the North Caucasus beginning in 2012.

By Paul Goble for "Window on Eurasia": August 22 – Vladimir Putin's Sochi Olympiad was by all accounts the most expensive such competition in history, costing by some estimates more than 50 billion US dollars. But while the world has looked away, the real costs of that public relations spectacular have continued to grow and in ways far more serious than can be measured by money alone. According to a report by three Krasnodar journalists which appeared in yesterday's *Kommersant*, the failure of officials to check for infestations of a particular kind of moth in wood imported for Sochi Olympic construction now means that the entire region is at risk of losing possibly forever its unique stands of a rare tree (kommersant.ru/doc/3389734). The Colchid boxwood (*Buxus colchica*) had been growing in what is now southern Russia, Abkhazia, Georgia and portions of Turkey for more than 1.8 million years. Ecologists say it played a key role in regulating the chemistry of the water supply there and thus helped keep alive a variety of plants and animals.

But because of official greed and incompetence and the push to build infrastructure for Putin's Olympiad at any cost, these trees are being killed off throughout the region by a moth that came to Western Europe from China in 2006, one that EU countries have successfully countered, but that jumped to the North Caucasus beginning in 2012. In only five years, stands of this ancient tree have been left "at the edge of complete disappearance," according to *Kommersant*. Greed and a desire to show progress on a Kremlin-backed project is largely to blame for the death of many and the dying off of the rest, Boris Tuniyev, a Sochi ecologist says. Especially unfortunate is the fact that the subtropical climate of the region where Putin chose to organize a winter Olympics gives the moths that eat the boxwoods greater chance opportunities to do their destructive work. Elsewhere, these moths may have only one generation per year; but in the North Caucasus, they have as many as four. Moreover, experts say – and they warned about this five years ago – the moths in question have no natural enemies in the Caucasus. Consequently, as they have multiplied, they have been able to eat the leaves of the boxwood and kill it with few chances that they can be stopped without human intervention. But that hasn't happened in an effective way, environmental activists say, because "in this case, legislation designed to protect the environment has interfered with nature." Russian laws block the use of chemical pesticides in protected areas, and so no one in the North Caucasus has been able to legally use them against the boxwood-destroying moths. People in the region have complained and asked for an exemption, but officials have simply folded their hands and said there is nothing they can do. This situation is further worsened by the fact that there are several countries and regions involved and little coordination among them. Killing the moths one place won't stop them if they flourish elsewhere. Despairing of being able to save the boxwoods in the wild, activists and government scientists are now trying to raise new trees in greenhouses where they can prevent the

moths from doing their worst. But that is a long-term strategy and one that will do little to stem the rising costs of the Putin Games. “Even if they are able to save the boxwood” in this way, one expert points out, that “won’t correct the harm to nature already inflicted.” Moreover, the boxwood “grows very, very slowly. In 70 years, it increases in height only by two or three meters.” One will have to wait 500 years to see the trees at the same height many of them were before the Olympiad. “Neither we nor our children will see boxwood forests again,” he says.

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The commentary above is from Paul Goble’s “Window on Eurasia” series and appears here with the author’s permission. Contact Goble at: paul.goble@gmail.com