

Mapping Russia's Future

By Joanne Neuber and Barbara Ruben

Demographer Murray Feshbach discusses his Environmental and Health Atlas of Russia.

Stacks of monographs, books and scribbled notes cover every available surface and overflow the shelves lining the walls of Murray Feshbach's Georgetown University office in Washington, DC. But he deftly navigates the unwieldy stacks to retrieve statistics on life expectancy in Moscow or data outlining the average concentration of sulfur dioxide in Russian cities. Similarly, the 500-page *Environmental and Health Atlas of Russia* (PAIMS Publishing House, 1995), which he edited, synthesizes thousands of figures on everything from infant mortality to radioactive waste to the incidence of rabies in the Russian Federation.

For Feshbach, a professor of demography, some of this material is familiar territory. Feshbach is also author of *Ecocide in the USSR* (Harper Collins, 1992) and *Ecological Disaster: Cleaning Up the Hidden Legacy of the Soviet Regime* (Twentieth Century Press, 1995), a monograph that cites AIHA as a model health care partnership program currently operating in the NIS.

But before the Atlas, "We've never had such a broad, systematic overview of these issues," he says. "The overall collection of data behind these maps--practically all of the text--is new, never-before published information."

Working with 38 Russian environmental and health professionals, Feshbach combed available information from the Ministry of Health to show the vast differences between regions in Russia. These differences are illustrated in more than 300 color maps documenting an array of issues, from population density to distribution of cancers.

Feshbach's research shows that both the environmental and health difficulties facing Russia are staggering. He cites declining health of newborns; poor reproductive health of women; inadequate vaccination and decreased immunity levels; and environmental health issues, including chemical toxins and water pollution, as issues that need urgent attention.

Feshbach sees the Atlas, published in both English and Russian editions, as the first attempt to collect data that adheres to internationally recognized standards and approaches. Yet, some variations in medical definitions still exist, creating challenges for Feshbach and his colleagues. For example, in many parts of the Russian Federation a "live birth" is still defined as a baby who weighs over 1,000 grams and survives past day seven and the 28th week of gestation rather than the current WHO definition of a baby weighing 500 grams or more at 22 weeks.

The current version of the Atlas is only the beginning, Feshbach says. He has begun preparation for a CD-ROM version of the Atlas and is exploring the possibility of expanding to other areas of the NIS. Feshbach also sees the AIHA partners as leaders in this process and encourages feedback from NIS medical personnel.

"We hope there will be a lot of interesting comparisons over time about water pollution, about beach erosion, about infant mortality, about life expectancy," he notes. "If I were a physician in Perm Oblast, I would see where my oblast fit in comparison with other oblasts. Then I would want to know what the environmental health impacts are in my oblast--for example, how bad is the water there?...This Atlas can be used to let NIS health professionals understand where priorities need to be set in their oblasts."

The hard part comes in applying those statistics. "The question is, how are you going to do something about it? Where are you going to get the money to retrofit all those smokestacks--

all 3.1 million smokestacks--of which one-half had filters--of which only one-fourth actually work. How do you teach current maintenance or repair?"

The ecological and health problems facing Russia have resulted in a dramatic drop in life expectancy from 66 to 57 years for males over the last decade, compared with the average of 75.6 years in Western Europe. This problem raises the issue of declining worker productivity and how it will effect both the economy and society, Feshbach says.

"That is why I think this issue is so important. Yet, they are heading [toward decline] by not forcing improvements in, for example, resource allocation--especially in the health sector. And that is, also, why programs like yours are so important. I have really come to appreciate the AIHA program for addressing these health issues."

The Atlas can be purchased from the Center for Post Soviet Studies, 2 Wisconsin Circle, Suite 410, Chevy Chase, MD, 20815, (301) 652-8181. Orders in the NIS can be requested by contacting Sergei Piteev, Moscow, Russia, at tel. 095-236-9424, Fax: 236-7069.