



Memoriam

In memoriam of Mukhtar M. Naurzbaev (1959–2015)



M. Naurzbaev, who singlehandedly developed a multi-millennium tree-ring record of Taymyr in Northern Eurasia, has passed away at age 55. His sudden death took place in Yekaterinburg, Russia in October. M.M. Naurzbaev, a dendrochronologist and forest ecologist, worked for almost two decades in the V.N. Sukachev Institute of Forest (former Siberian Branch of Russian Academy of Sciences), Krasnoyarsk, after leaving a forestry job at the Taymyrsky Biosphere Reserve, which he started in 1984. The only two jobs he ever had were tied to the Taymyr forest, the most northern forest in the world. Born in the Russian Altai and raised in northern Kazakhstan, he had great enthusiasm and passion for the Arctic wilderness or “Sever” (North in Russian), as he would say. This, combined with his dedication to dendrochronology, brought him into close contact with such renowned dendroclimatologists as K. Briffa, F. Schweingruber, M. Hughes, S. Shiyatov and E. Vaganov, who were his Ph.D. adviser back in 1998.

His relatively short academic career (1996–2014) nevertheless resulted in the development of an 8000-year tree-ring record of larch (with two gaps) and a 2000-year summer temperature reconstruction from Taymyr tree rings. His personality and Arctic experience were instrumental in developing and updating a dendroclimatic network for northern Siberia. Most of his research was done in the harsh and rugged limits of tree growth such as the Taymyr Peninsula, Plateau Putorano, Yakutia, Indigirka, and Altai Mountains. Here are few personal stories about him.

Prof. S. G. Shiyatov of Institute of Animal and Plant Ecology (Russian Academy of Sciences) in Yekaterinburg: “Back in 1996, Eugene Vaganov and myself were looking for a student to study subfossil wood from alluvial deposits of the Taymyr Peninsula. Once I saw sad-faced Mukhtar passing by my open office door, I called him in for a chat. Ten minutes later M. Naurzbaev had flown out of my door enthusiastically accepting my offer to develop millennia-length tree-ring record in North Siberia and work in our team. Mukhtar used to say it was one of the happiest moments of his life.”

Associate Res. Prof. I. Panyushkina of the University of Arizona in Tucson: “Naurzbaev fascinated me with his eccentric personality and open mindset. I knew Mukhtar from his first arrival at the Sukachev Institute of Forest. Soon this shy-looking guy seized the leadership among a dozen graduate students and got away with breaking all manners of administrative rules. He liked working at night when nobody could disturb him. After working through the entire night he would wait for me to show up at the office to have morning tea together and discuss what he had read or calculated overnight. I truly learned more from these conversations than from anybody else at that time. Then he would go to bed and sleep till four o'clock in the afternoon. Frankly, Mukhtar showed little interest in material comfort. He believed that keeping up with comfort is waste of time that could be spent for work. Mukhtar's life was full of adventures. I remember a story when on one of his many field trips in Arctic he made his way across the Hatanga Bay rowing a small boat through the rough waters of the open sea because of a delayed helicopter pick-up.”

Dr. O. Churakova (Sidorova) of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich: “When enrolled in the post-graduate research program at the Institute in 1999, I asked my advisor, Mukhtar Naurzbaev, if he could show me the lab and tell me what I needed to do. His brisk answer was: Olga, you know, if a student would ask Prof. Rutherford what to do, this will be the last day of this student in the lab. Since that very moment I knew what to do and what not to ask him. Regardless of his rough manner, Mukhtar generously shared his deep love and knowledge of the Arctic environment, and heartily engaged me in the field of dendroclimatic studies. We have been working in tandem till 2013. I still use wood specimens collected by Mukhtar in my research.”

Academician E. Vaganov, Rector of the Siberian Federal University in Krasnoyarsk: “I would like to highlight the significant side of Mukhtar's nature, which is so exceptional nowadays—his kind-heartedness and understanding. Whenever he was able to help, he was heart and hand (whatever it involved—money, time or advice), expecting nothing in return. We call such people unmercenaries.”

Prof. M. Hughes of the University of Arizona in Tucson: “One of the best aspects of a life in science is the opportunity it provides to meet, work with, and get to know some very special people. I feel very fortunate to have known Mukhtar Naurzbaev since the late 1990s. In our increasingly homogenous world of career-builders, Mukhtar was an entirely authentic individual with an intense commitment to the North and to dendrochronology and ecology”.

His friends and colleagues will sadly miss Mukhtar.

I. Panyushkina
Tree-Ring Laboratory, University of Arizona, Tucson,
AZ, USA
E-mail address: ipanyush@email.arizona.edu

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