Some reviewers of Alan Roe’s *Into Russian Nature*, and I am no exception, use the term ‘fascinating’ to characterise his monograph. It is a truly breathtaking story about Soviet nature and protected areas, and Soviet environmentalists and their quixotic struggle with bureaucratic and ideological windmills. It is a story about Soviet scientists, their plans and dreams related to national parks and nature conservation. It is also about the birth of the green movement in the USSR and its connections with the West, and about the phenomenon of Soviet tourism, as well as about disappointments and crushed hopes. The book is based on a vast range of primary sources: Roe uses data from the Russian state, local and private archives, newspaper publications, interviews with participants and photos and maps.

The book consists of three parts, the first covering the history of the struggle for national parks, the second presenting stories of four Russian national parks, and the third part being dedicated to the situation in the country in the early 1990s and including the author’s reflections on the crisis of the entire system of protected areas. Roe begins the narrative with the idea of protected areas that originated in the Russian Empire. In the first four chapters, Roe does not lay out the history of Soviet protected areas from year to year, but rather briefly outlines key events and milestones. His statement that the ‘Russian national park story … does not fit neatly into traditional political chronologies’ (p. 7) is applicable for the last 30 years; however, the Soviet period in the history of protected areas shows otherwise.

The history of Soviet nature reserves (*zapovedniki*) is closely connected with the political history of the country. The industrialisation of the 1930s led to a shift from nature conservation to its active use. The Stalin purges of the 1930s affected the staff of protected areas and the repres-sions of the early 1950s, along with the ‘doctors’ plot’ and the ‘Mingrelian affair’, resulted in a massive reduction in the number of nature reserves. Some of these areas were restored during the Khrushchev thaw, when the USSR joined the International Union for Conservation of Nature in 1956, but by 1961 there were already new reductions in the system of protected areas and a general ‘tightening of the screws’ followed.

The connection between the development of tourism and Soviet and later Russian nature reserves and national parks is the cornerstone of Roe’s monograph. He traces throughout the book two opposing ideas among Soviet environmentalists. Some advocated the protection of nature from hordes of tourists with their ‘destructive rituals’ (p. 55), loud songs, drums, guitars,
campfires and litter. Others believed that national parks could be profit-making establishments and ‘self-sustaining enterprises that generated significant earnings for the state’ (p. 60) through the development of tourism. Such an interpretation and borrowing of Western models and concepts could lead to an ideological trap; therefore, Soviet geographers were forced to prove why Soviet national parks would be better than American ones.

The second part of Roe’s monograph are the separate stories of four national parks in the USSR located on Lake Baikal, the Volga, the Ural Mountains and in the Karelian forests – and include the stories of enthusiastic people supporting the parks. Roe not only analyses the struggle for parks, the efforts of scientists and the interests of the timber and fishing industry, but he also reveals how local residents were involved and affected by this process. Thus, the transition from disputes over the status and functions of national parks to their foundation in the 1980s revealed a new issue – the rights of local people, who did not understand what could and could not be done in these parks.

Examining examples of other national parks and nature reserves, Roe only casually mentions another type of protected area – temporary reserves (zakazniki), which were a quite controversial form of nature protection. Temporary reserves were established for a certain period of time and focused on the conservation, reproduction and recovery of particular species or habitats. In the mid-1980s, there were more than 3,000 temporary reserves in the USSR, with a total area larger than the area of nature reserves. In fact, temporary reserves were the backbone of the entire nature protection system in the USSR and, like other protected areas, they also experienced the invasion of tourists and poaching, and became the cause of environmental conflicts in the 1980s–90s.

In the final part of the book, titled ‘The Crisis of Russia’s National Parks in the 1990s’, Roe analyses the failures of Soviet and Russian national parks. Roe identifies a wide spectrum of general reasons why national parks fell into crisis in the 1990s and failed to become popular recreational destinations. He writes about the lack of funding and trained personnel in Russian national parks, local environmental disputes and conflicts between federal and regional administrations, and about the Russian government, which tried to ‘portray itself as a concerned and dedicated environmental steward’ (p. 251).

Finally, Roe draws attention to the term ‘national park’, which remains vague and unclear to many Russians. He states that ‘while ‘national’ in the international parlance meant ‘state’ park, the term ‘national park’ in the Russian language risked suggesting some connection with the many ‘nationalities’ that lived in the USSR (p. 70). This is why the Soviet developers of national parks used terms such as ‘nature’, ‘people’s’, ‘regional’ and ‘state parks’, explains the author. In addition to the reasons for the unpopularity and failure of national parks, which Roe writes about, it is worth noting another important point. National parks in Russia have never become national symbols that attract tourists and promote their self-identification, or even regional brands that

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locals are proud of. The reality of the 1990s revealed that Russians were much more interested in travelling abroad than in visiting national parks within the own country.

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