

## WHICH TRUTH? CULTURAL POLITICS AND VODKA IN RURAL RUSSIA\*

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After what level of alcohol consumption does an informant become unreliable? How do I distinguish between an emphatic opinion, delivered under the candor-producing influence of alcohol, and unrestrained hyperbole, wrought by intoxication? When should I stop taking notes? (And I'm sure some of you are wondering, "At what point is the alcohol-consuming interviewer no longer reliable?" On that, more later. . . .)

Why should I have voiced questions about alcohol and fieldwork? I wasn't plying my interviewees with bottles of vodka—they were alarmingly capable of doing that on their own. My problem was that I was doing fieldwork on conflicts over natural resources in rural Russia. Vodka is so much a part of daily life there that few—almost no—gathering takes place without shared libation (Figure 1). Additionally, I was asking people to discuss with me controversial matters, such as poaching or resistance to the establishment of a park, that could, on occasion, elicit immoderate responses.

We hunt all of the time. They call me the "Killer"! When I go out hunting with my friends I always come home with pheasants and fowl. I shoot everything, even deer. We are all poachers here!

No, my friends and I don't hunt anymore. There isn't that much left to hunt around here, some geese, ducks but not many deer. And it's the simple guys like me who are the ones who get fined if we're caught, so we just don't hunt.

The quotations are from the same young man, and the seemingly irreconcilable statements were produced under very different levels of alcohol consumption. The first expression, full of a hunter's braggadocio, came as he was drinking. Its successor was issued in the cold light of day, and when he was stone sober.

So, does he hunt all the time, or does he no longer hunt? (Maybe the answer is that he hunts some of the time.) Between an intoxicated boast and an unintoxicated wariness about admitting to illegal acts, how does a researcher know which statement more accurately reflects the actual behavior of an informant?

Most researchers who look at hunting around a protected area will probably have had similar experiences. It's only natural that one doesn't admit to poaching. Of course, hunting isn't the only topic that elicits such contradictory statements.

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