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On quest to save Siberian taiga

THE university holidays are here. Students the world over are planning to holiday on some hot island, baking on the beach all day, drinking and dancing all night.

All except six Cambridge students, that is. They're off to Siberia, to live in a forest, with wolves and the bears.

"We're more concerned about the mosquitoes," says a nonchalant Aidan Brown.

"They're not malarial, but apparently have a ferocious bite."

Aidan, a 20-year-old physics student, is one of six undergraduates about to set off for Siberia - in the name of science.

The team (which also includes a pathologist, a geographer and three ecology students) is on a mission to protect part of the taiga, the world's biggest forest.

They'll be living in the heart of the forest, in a remote area of the Tomsk region. The nearest town will be miles away. Sleeping in tents, sometimes lucky enough to find a log cabin, they'll be living and working in the woodland.

All are passionate about conservation, which is why they've volunteered to help a group of Russian students and academics collect data from the forest.

The plan, explains Katie Barber (the pathologist), is to establish which species of plants and animals live in the taiga. Some of them are rare; others unique to the forest. The group



The Siberia six.. Clockwise from the left, Stephen Whitfield, Blaise Martay, Aidan Brown, Katie Barber, Lucy Malpas and not pictured Alison Beresford

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will spend five weeks scouring a defined plot, recording all the species they come across. They will photograph trees, birds, mammals and animal tracks.

They will work from about 8am until dusk in temperatures between 27 and 34C. The information they collate will be given to the Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC); the group hopes their evidence will prove the taiga in Tomsk region (oblast) is worthy of conservation. If given FSC certification, 10 per cent will be conserved, and the remaining 90 is farmed on a sustainable basis.

The people of the taiga live off the forest, adds Stephen Whitfield, the group's leader. A geography student, he will carry out a social science project in Russia, talking to the locals. The taiga is sparsely populated, but dotted with village settlements, dependent on the forest for survival.

Locals fell the trees for logs, fashion boxes from birch bark and harvest edible pine nuts - selling these commodities to make a living. FSC certification would, explains Stephen, make their products more saleable worldwide; people could buy them safe in the knowledge the taiga is not being damaged. The stock of birch and pine trees, prevalent in the Tomsk region, would be regularly replenished.

"It's a pretty new thing in the area we're going to," continues Stephen. "Russian forestry has been quite neglected since the end of communism; now legislation's changing quite rapidly, from one year to the next. I'll be asking villagers how the changes have affected them - and what difference FSC certification might make."

The team from Cambridge will be working alongside academics from the Institute of International Environmental Safety, based in Tomsk, with students from Tomsk State University as interpreters.

The final six were chosen from a shortlist of 15, drawn up by Cambridge scientists. All had to apply for a place on the expedition.

The successful candidates were announced at the end of last year, which is when the mammoth task of planning the trip began.

The group not only had to organise the expedition - they had to raise some £10,000 to fund it.

Each member pledged £500 of their own money, applied for university and charitable grants, asked businesses and individuals for donations and helped organise fundraising events, such as a ceilidh, held in April, which raised more than £500. With just days until they leave for the taiga, on July 3, they're nearly there financially.

The group's research is actually part of a three-year project: a team from Cambridge visited the Taiga last year too, and, hopefully, one will return in 2007 to complete the scheme.

Another aim is to help establish "forest schools". As Katie explains, evidence suggests that children in the taiga take the forest for granted; as far as they're concerned, it's always been there - and always will be.

The schools are designed to teach youngsters about their surroundings, the trees and the threats they face. "They do things like 'plant your own tree', to encourage the children to get involved, to go back and see their tree grow," adds Katie.

Plant scientist Blaise Martay, clearly an intrepid sort (she's already spent months in Cambodia, working on another conservation project), can't wait to go; Siberia, she says simply, sounds exciting.

"It's a place where not many people get to go," adds Lucy Malpas, an ecologist. "It sounds adventurous; this is a great opportunity."

■ If you'd like to help the students reach their £10,000 target, email Aidan Brown at ab493@cam.ac.uk ..

What is the taiga?

The taiga, also known as the Boreal Forest, covers large regions of North America, Europe and Russia - including much of Siberia. A belt of dense, largely coniferous, woodland, it makes up about a third of the world's total forest area.

Spruce, fir, pine and larch are the most common types of tree found in the taiga. There are few deciduous varieties; they can't withstand the extreme climate (long, cold winters followed by short, hot summers).

An enormous carbon sink, the taiga is almost as important an oxygen provider as the Amazon rainforest. It is also home to numerous rare plant and animal species. Communities of indigenous people rely on the forest for their livelihoods and their homes.

But the taiga is under threat - from fossil fuel exploitation and logging.

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