



Late Quaternary vegetation and environments in the Verkhoyansk Mountains region (NE Asia) reconstructed from a 50-kyr fossil pollen record from Lake Billyakh

Stefanie Müller^{a,*,1}, Pavel E. Tarasov^{a,1}, Andrei A. Andreev^b, Thomas Tütken^c, Steffi Gartz^a, Bernhard Diekmann^d

^a Institute of Geological Sciences, Palaeontology Department, Freie Universität Berlin, Malteserstrasse 74–100, Building D, 12249 Berlin, Germany

^b University of Cologne, Institute of Geology and Mineralogy, Zulpicher Str. 49a, 50674 Cologne, Germany

^c Steinmann Institute for Geology, Mineralogy and Palaeontology, University of Bonn, Poppeldorfer Schloss, 53115 Bonn, Germany

^d Alfred Wegener Institute for Polar and Marine Research, Research Unit Potsdam, Telegrafenberg A43, 14473 Potsdam, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Here we present a detailed radiocarbon-dated 936 cm long pollen record from Lake Billyakh (65°17'N, 126°47'E; 340 m a.s.l.) situated in the western part of the Verkhoyansk Mountains, about 140 km south of the Arctic Circle. A set of 53 surface pollen samples representing tundra, cold deciduous forest and taiga was collected in northern and central Yakutia communities to verify the accuracy of the quantitative biome reconstruction method and to obtain a more precise attribution of the identified pollen taxa to the main regional biomes. The adjusted method is then applied to the pollen record from Lake Billyakh to gain a reconstruction of vegetation and environments since about 50.7 kyr BP. The results of the pollen analysis and pollen-based biome reconstruction suggest that herbaceous tundra and steppe communities dominated the area from 50.7 to 13.5 kyr BP. Relatively low pollen concentrations and high percentages of herbaceous pollen taxa (mainly Cyperaceae, Poaceae and *Artemisia*) likely indicate a reduced vegetation cover and/or lower pollen production. On the other hand, extremely low percentages of drought-tolerant taxa, such as Chenopodiaceae and *Ephedra*, and the constant presence of various mesophyllous herbaceous (*Thalictrum*, Rosaceae, Asteraceae) and shrubby taxa (*Betula* sect. *Nanae/Fruticosae*, *Duschekia fruticosa*, *Salix*) in the pollen assemblages prevent an interpretation of the last glacial environments around Lake Billyakh as extremely arid. The lowest pollen percentages of woody taxa and the highest values of *Artemisia* pollen attest that the 31–15 kyr BP period as the driest and coldest interval of the entire record. A relative high content of taxa representing shrub tundra communities and the presence of larch pollen recorded prior to 31 kyr and after 13.5 kyr BP likely indicate interstadial climate amelioration associated with the middle and latest parts of the last glacial. An increase in pollen percentages of herbaceous taxa around 12 kyr BP suggests broader distribution of drier communities in response to the colder and drier than present climate of the Younger Dryas (YD). The onset of the Holocene is marked in the pollen record by the highest values of shrub taxa, mainly *B.* sect. *Nanae/Fruticosae*. Pollen percentages of arboreal taxa increase gradually and reach maximum values after 7 kyr BP. The latter maximum mainly reflects the spread of *Pinus sylvestris* in central Yakutia as a response to the mid-Holocene climatic optimum. The quasi-continuous presence of larch, shrubby birch and alder pollen throughout the whole record is the most striking feature of the pollen record. Noticeable variations in larch pollen percentages point to multiple short-term warming episodes, which might be synchronous with the Dansgaard-Oeschger cycles in the North Atlantic records. The Lake Billyakh pollen record suggests that larch possibly survived during the last 50 kyr BP in locally favourable environments in the study region.

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1. Introduction

Studies on recent plant and animal communities in the Russian Arctic present vivid examples of ecosystem dynamics under globally and regionally increasing temperatures (Chernov and

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +49 30 83870275; fax: +49 30 83870745.

E-mail address: stefm@zedat.fu-berlin.de (S. Müller).

¹ These authors contributed equally to this paper.