

# Russian national park to bridge US-Russia divide

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A polar bear plays with her cubs at Moscow Zoo, on March 22, 2012. Russia has decreed a national park in its remote Far Eastern Chukotka region, paving the way for a joint US-Russian nature reserve spanning the Bering Strait, an idea first proposed by the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

Russia on Thursday decreed a national park in its remote Far Eastern Chukotka region, paving the way for a joint US-Russian nature reserve spanning the Bering Strait, an idea first proposed by the last Soviet

leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

Prime Minister [Dmitry Medvedev](#) signed the decree to create the new national park called Beringia, Russia's [World Wildlife Fund](#) said. The park will eventually be part of the first US-Russian nature reserve spanning the Bering Strait area, it said.

The 86-kilometre-wide strait separates Russia and Alaska but an earlier land bridge is believed to have once served as one of the earliest [migration routes](#) between the two continents.

The plan to create a US-Russian national park originally came from Gorbachev, WWF Arctic expert Mikhail Stishov told AFP.

Gorbachev was the Soviet Union's last leader, presiding over the breakup of an empire, abandoned Cold War rhetoric and sought to promote cooperation with the United States.



Map locating the Bering Strait. Russia has decreed a national park in its remote Far Eastern Chukotka region, paving the way for a joint US-Russian nature reserve spanning the Bering Strait, an idea first proposed by the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

On the US side, the Bering Land Bridge national reserve in Alaska, one of America's most remote protected areas, has existed since the 1970s.

The bilateral park project has taken this long because Chukotka needed to upgrade an existing nature reserve to national park status.

By the time Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and US Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton](#) shook hands last September and agreed to "bridge" the parklands on either side of the Bering Strait, relations were at one of their lowest points since the Gorbachev years.

But for the migrating [polar bears](#), huge bird colonies and [walruses](#) of the [Bering strait](#), political issues are not a priority, Stishov said.

"We just wanted the national park," he said.

Linking the two parks will facilitate conservation, preserve ties between indigenous peoples and allow tighter cooperation on environmental monitoring, according to the US-Russia agreement signed in September.

Russia's Beringia national park will directly touch the US border, although it does not include some of Russia's marine waters in the strait nor the small Ratmanov island, which is a base for a Russian border control station.

Chukotka, where billionaire Chelsea football club owner Roman Abramovich served as governor from 2000-2008, is a vast, sparsely inhabited region bordered by the Arctic and the Pacific. The new national park will only be accessible via air or sea.

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