They Saw,

They Came,

They Studied.
Russian Students Enjoy Educational Tour of Maryland

By Ann Leger

A wastewater treatment plant doesn’t appear on most university students’ must-see list. But for a group of Russian students studying water resources management in the United States and learning about pollution control efforts in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, it was an important tour stop. “I’ve never been in such places,” says Daria Kozlovskaya, one of nine students visiting from Moscow State University of Environmental Engineering (MSUEE) in Russia. “It was a perfect experience for me. It was very interesting to know that cleaning water is not easy.”

Chosen from a class of twenty, the young scholars arrived in Maryland for a close-up view of state-of-the-art treatment facilities and agricultural technologies. Here they met Drs. Richard A. Weismiller, Trish Steinhilber, and Robert Hill of the Department of Environmental Science and Technology (ENST), who have been teaching students through a weekly videoconference for the last four years. The students and their instructors learned first hand of American home life while staying in the homes of Drs. Hill, Steinhilber, and Weismiller.

“We’ve all traveled to MSUEE at various times to teach classes on soil and water science,” says Weismiller, who also serves as associate director for the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources’ (AGNR) International Programs in Agriculture and Natural Resources. “We thought it was time for them to see how some of the practices and technologies we’ve talked about work in the ‘real world.’”

Following an opening videoconference between University of Maryland President Daniel Mote and AGNR Dean Cheng-I Wei in College Park and MSUEE in Moscow, the students got down to serious experiential learning.

In addition to their visit to water and wastewater treatment plants, which Steinhilber says will give them “a better frame of reference when they cover related concepts in classes,” the students toured a drinking water treatment plant, the college’s high-tech greenhouses, the U.S. Capitol, Smithsonian museums, and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation’s (CBF) Philip Merrill Environmental Center in Annapolis. A high point for students, the center uses green building features such as composting toilets, recycled building materials, and a green roof—sustainable practices the students had never seen in Russia.

“Two weeks ago I didn’t know that...”
A Trip of Many “Firsts”

According to Hill, the cultural aspects of the study tour were as important to the whole experience as the technical subjects. “The MSUEE student population is about 3,000, so visiting a campus the size of the University of Maryland was like going to a small city to these students,” he says.

“It’s like you visit another planet,” says Slava Karpov, who like his fellow students was also intrigued by the number of people who live in houses rather than in apartments, which is the norm in Russian cities.

When it came to the natural world, squirrels and the ocean topped the list of most memorable sights.

The students took dozens of photos of squirrels—eating peanuts, perched in trees, and just running around—trying to get as close as possible and seeing who could get the best shot. They were a novelty, student Artem Borodin explains, because squirrels in Russia stay in forests and don’t venture into urban areas.

Most of the students had never seen an ocean, and the sight of the Atlantic made a very strong impression. “Somebody said, ‘to see Paris and to die.’ I say, ‘to see the ocean and to die,’” says Olga Bezrukova, who along with many in the group, enjoyed running barefoot through the frigid February surf at Rehoboth.

Two famous sights the visitors did not see: New York City and its Statue of Liberty. Maybe on their next trip.
Excellence in English

English language skills are in high demand because of the many U.S. companies doing business in Russia, as well as the growing number of Russian corporations interacting with them. The MSUEE students were therefore pleased to have an opportunity to practice their already proficient English skills.

Accompanied by their English language teacher, Anastasiya Kabanova, and MSUEE International Program Director Andrey Sorokin, they sat in on a fourth-year Russian language class taught by Dr. Cynthia Martin and met several University of Maryland students who had been born in Russia and emigrated with their families to the United States.

"I was surprised when I met students who are learning Russian language," recalls Alesya Belyaeva. However, she and the others did not expect to—and did not—find an American student who could speak Russian as well as they speak English.