

The Guardian

Sami reindeer herders battle conservationists and miners to cling on to Arctic culture

Long winters in -30C temperatures they can handle, but now Norway's indigenous people are fighting to protect ancient reindeer grazing land from development.

«Picture»

Johan Anders Oskal with some of his reindeer near Tromsø, Norway. Photographs by John Vidal for the Observer

[John Vidal](#)

Sunday 21 February 2016 Last modified on Monday 22 February 2016 13.23 GMT

When Europe's indigenous [Arctic](#) people want to find their reindeer in a snowstorm and temperatures of -30C, they turn to their £10,000 snowmobiles and an app that is also used by British sheep farmers. In seconds, the satellite tracking device linked to their phone tells them if the animals are on a frozen lake, up a mountain or, in the worst case, have fallen prey to wolves or lynx.

So far, so simple, thanks to new technology. But when the Sami people of northern [Norway](#) want to complain about traditional grazing land being taken by the government, or the mining industry dumping waste in their pristine fjords, communication, they say, is not so easy.

“Our way of life and culture is threatened by the rush for Arctic development, and by conservationists wanting to protect reindeer predators, like eagles and lynx,” says Daniel Oskal, a young reindeer herder who works in the mountains close to Tromsø.

His colleague, Aslak Eira, adds: “The problem is land grabbing. Government expropriates land for roads and tunnels, windfarms and mines. Our land is being eroded by development. Almost half of our winter lands have gone. I fear that in future there will be nowhere left for the reindeer.”

The two Sami herders have lit a small fire in a shelter above a frozen lake. Together with a relation, Johan Oskal, they own 2,000 semi-domesticated reindeer, which are grazing among the bare trees in the snowy mountains near Tromsø. Last month temperatures were below -30C for three weeks – cold enough to freeze reindeer urine as soon as it hits the ground – but the sun has started to come over the mountains again after months of darkness and last week it was a balmy -10C.

The three families have traditional grazing rights on 2,800 sq km of what most people would call wilderness, but which they see as prime winter pasture for reindeer. In summer they trek

200 miles to the coast, where the reindeer can gorge themselves on sweet grasses, putting back on the weight they lost over winter.

The Oskal family have spent years resisting plans by the Norwegian army to expand the Mauken-Blafjell military area for anti-terrorism training. They lost one case, with the result that there are now roads and huts dotted across their pastures. Daniel Oskal's reindeer are now the only ones in the world accustomed to machine-gun fire.

Advertisement

Well-meaning conservationists are as unpopular with the Sami as the army, says Eira. "They give us problems. The eagles, lynx and wolverines eat our animals, but the conservationists think only about protecting the predators. One lynx can kill 100 reindeer in a year. We lose one in 10 of our animals sometimes, but you don't hear anything about the pain of the reindeer. Many times I have found a reindeer killed in an ugly way. Once I found a lynx eating a reindeer as it was giving birth."

Given their immediate problems, climate change is not at the forefront of Sami concerns, according to Nicholas Tyler, a British ecologist at UiT, the Arctic University of Norway, who studies reindeer populations in mainland Norway and the Svalbard archipelago.

"Encroachment and bureaucracy are more serious," he says. "The Sami are like pastoralists all over the world. Their future is definitely under threat. Many marginal encroachments together make up a disaster. The reduced freedom of action resulting from loss of habitat, predation and legal constraints potentially dwarfs the effects of projected climate change on reindeer pastoralism."

Tyler says Norwegian law works against the Sami herders. "There is an urban, European way of thinking about their activity. Pastoralism is aimed at using barren land, but the law is not set up for the movement of animals in the natural environment and Norwegian laws can criminalise herder activity. The authorities want to manage reindeer as if they were sheep."

The Sami's rights to traditional lands, natural resources and cultural heritage are, theoretically, protected under Norwegian law, but the people actually have little control over their own future, says Aili Keskitalo, president of the Sami parliament, based in the eastern town of Karasjok.

The very cold winter weather is good for reindeer, say the Sami herders

She fears that Norway's dominant business and political elites are subverting Sami culture and that the 60,000 to 100,000 remaining Sami are being steadily "Norwegianised". These days, only 10% of Sami people – who stretch across Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia – are herders. In general they are as likely to be bank managers as farmers.

The latest assault on the Sami way of life comes, says Keskitalo, from companies which have been allowed to dig massive open-cast mines on Sami land, and then dump toxic mineral waste in fjords with the best salmon fishing.

“Waste dumping is horrific,” she says. “Norway is one of very few countries doing this. It affects reindeer and fishing. I don’t understand why they do it. These are some of the most important places in the Arctic for salmon, and they want to destroy them.

“We, the Sami, face similar challenges to all indigenous peoples – climate change, industrial development and mining. The government is inviting the world’s industries to our territory. They are even moving towns in Sami lands to make way for more industry.

“Colonisation and pillaging of resources, followed by suppression of indigenous peoples, has been taking place all over the world. Here too. No one can take advantage of all the economic possibilities in the Arctic. This would destroy all that we cherish – nature, climate, communities.”

Ironically, Keskitalo adds, it is Norway’s response to climate change that may threaten the Sami more than the phenomenon itself. “The government is planning a huge wind park in the heart of our reindeer territory. It is too much. We endure holiday communities, power lines, road construction and mines, and now we face wind energy as well.

“We are the most blessed indigenous people in the world. We are lucky to have been born into a world with democracy and prosperity. We have good living standards, but we are struggling to keep our culture. We are told we must adjust to changing times, but we say the government and business should change what they do.”

Out in the mountains, Daniel Oskal takes consolation from an unusually cold winter. “This winter is very good for the reindeer,” he says. “There’s lots of food for them under the snow. But its also good for the predators, so I have to herd my reindeer almost 24 hours a day. As an animal owner, that is my duty. That’s just how it is. I hear a lot of people saying this is a strange winter. I actually think this is the first normal winter since 2000. This is how winter time should be, how we know it from the 1960s, 70s, 80s and 90s. But people seem to forget that.”

It’s likely to be family, rather than predators or climate change, that brings Daniel in from the cold. “I love being up in the hills herding my reindeer. But now that I have my girlfriend and my daughter, it’s harder to stay away.”