



Rock carving, Alta, Norway

Photo: © Johnny Leo L. Jernsletten

BASIC CONCEPTS IN THE REINDEER INDUSTRY

Introduction

This chapter presents a short overview of the circumpolar reindeer herding “landscape” and some of the universal principles behind reindeer husbandry. We will introduce the reader to some of the concepts connected to the reindeer industry as a “way-of-life”. It is meant to be a short introduction as a help to those readers who are not familiar with the reindeer industry.

The chapter will also focus on the exceptional diversity found within the reindeer industry in the circumpolar area. The reindeer herding communities are by no means a homogeneous mass that will react in one particular way to external pressures, or changed market conditions, but must be considered equally heterogeneous as groups found in any other society. This is an important point that also will be confirmed throughout the report. This is a point that Flanders emphasises in connection with the opening of the Northern Sea Route:

“Perhaps the most important suggestion made in the Alaskan material is that indigenous groups will not be affected uniformly. [...] Indigenous groups should not be treated as a single mass, all affected the same way.”

The point made from Flanders is valid in our context when it comes to the reindeer herding communities.

Pastures

In many national management systems the reindeer industry is placed under the Ministry of Agriculture, although it differs in many aspects from what we normally consider as “agriculture”. Reindeer have the ability to utilize pastures in the outlying field that no other animal could use, especially when it comes to lichen. But reindeer can not live only on lichen. The reindeer herd requires different pastures according to seasons. And in order to meet the need for different

pastures the reindeer migrate yearly fourth and back between summer- and winter pastures.

Summer pastures are also called “green pastures” with green plants, herbs, grass etc. This type of pasture secures the growth of the animals and is important for the calves. Good quality summer pastures give the reindeer a head-start for the winter through increased weight. Summer pastures are mainly along the coast where wet, cooling winds help the animals against the mosquito, or in the high mountains where the herd can find peace from insects on patches of snow.

Winter pasture is mainly dominated with lichen. It is often described as the “bottle-neck” for the industry, because the grazing capacity on the winter pastures is normally much lower than on the summer pastures. A general rule is that it is the winter pasture which decides how many reindeer the owner could have inside one grazing area. The winter pasture could also get ice-covered after a period of mild weather. The wet snow will freeze and make a hard cover of ice over the lichen. The reindeer will not get access to the pastures, and the herd has to move to another pasture.

The Saami reindeer owners divide the year into eight seasons. This division reflects what is important

for the reindeer in each season. In the following we want to give the reader an impression of the importance of the access to a diversity of grazing areas throughout the year.

Spring (April-May): This is the calving season and an important time for the herds to grow. The reindeer will be on the calving land with small hills and protection against the cold wind. A calving area has patches with snowless ground, often in a southern slope where the sun is warming. It is important to protect the reindeer from predators and from external disturbances so that the calves and their mothers are not separated.

Spring-summer/early summer (June): This is a time of intensive grazing activity. The animals need to gain weight and it is important that they can graze undisturbed in one area. The period before the mosquitos are hatched and the hot summer days begin is especially important for the calves - good pastures give them the opportunity to grow and become stronger.

Summer (June-July): The animals are moving towards higher grazing areas, or further out on the coast. In the mountain the patches of snow allow the reindeer to get cooled down and to escape from the bugs, and provide fresh grass as the snow melts. On



Winter pasture, Liehittäjä consession area, Sweden

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Reindeer herder, Russia

Photo: © Konstantin Klokov

the coast the fresh winds from the sea drives the bugs away. This is also the time for the reindeer owner to mark the calves.

Autumn-summer (August): The animals are still grazing on the green pastures, but mushroom are also an important part of the diet. They are now building up the fat reserves for the winter.

Autumn (September-October): Cold nights make the green pastures wither and the animals gradually change their diet to lichen. This is also the rutting season and some of the bulls are slaughtered before they go into heat, which will give the meat a nonpleasant taste.

Autumn-winter (November - December): Lichen pastures get more and more important for the animals. This is also the slaughtering season, which is an important part of the work for the owner. This is the time to decide the herd structure. Which animals should be slaughtered and which should be used for breeding. After the slaughtering the animals are collected into different herds and the move down to the winter pastures begins.

Winter (December - March): The animals are separated into small herds, and are mainly grazing on lichens. The herds are guarded from a distance, and protected from predators.

Spring-winter (March-April): This is the season for return to the summer pastures. There is still a lot of snow and it is difficult for the animals to get down to the lichens. The southern slopes are important for the herd during the migration, because here it is less snow and easier access to the pastures.

In different regions the distribution of seasonal pastures can vary: for example the Nenets in Western Siberia do not use mountain pastures. They migrate with their herds from summer pastures situated on the tundra on the Arctic Ocean coast and spend the winter in the forest-tundra or taiga. In Alaska there are herds that graze year round on relatively small tundra islands. In the Siberian taiga herds are kept year round in forests landscapes. But in all cases the diversity of seasonal pastures with sufficient carrying capacity remains the essential condition for reindeer husbandry.



Reindeer herd on St. Paul Island, Alaska.

Photo: © Johnny Leo L. Jernsletten

Ownership to Reindeer

The relationship between the reindeer and the owner or herder is essential for the day-to-day work with the herds. To know your animals by behaviour and colour is valued in most of the reindeer herding cultures. The ability to create a well composed herd with all the important characterizations is also highly valued and signals that you are a successful reindeer owner. Aspects that are important for a well composed herd are for instance the proportion of male and female reindeer, variation in the colours of the animals, and individual behavior. A well composed herd is easy to manage and enables the animals to utilize the pasture more efficiently.

The relationship between the reindeer owners are also important for the reindeer husbandry. The family is essential because they represent a potential work force in intensive periods, like marking of the calves, slaughtering or the separation of the herd into several smaller herds. In these periods, the reindeer owners depends on persons that are knowledgeable and willing to lend a hand. In other seasons there is less need for extra workers. This variation in need of labour is the historical background for different adaptations of

communities in the circumpolar area. The communities are able to alternate between working with the herds and other necessary activities like hunting and fishing.

According to the Norwegian management system the “husbandry unit” (driftsenhet) is the basis of the reindeer husbandry organisation. This is a form of “licence” given to an individual from the area board where the unit wants to establish itself. The licence entitles a person to start with reindeer husbandry inside one designated area, and the area board decides which district the new unit will belong to.

In legal terms a unit consist of one herd managed by one person, or the spouses together, if both persons have their own earmarks in the herd. If both persons have a husbandry unit before they are married, they can keep their separate units also after the marriage.

The concept of “husbandry unit” is not in accordance with the way the Saami themselves have traditionally organised the reindeer husbandry. The “Siida” is an ancient Saami community system within a designated area. It could also be defined as a working partnership where the members had individual rights to resources but helped each other with the management of the herds, the hunting and fishing.



Artificial feeding of reindeer.

Photo: © Johnny Leo L. Jernsletten

The community could consist of several families and their reindeer herds. The *siida* is not just a working partnership, but also a central basis for the traditional use of the grazing areas.

In Russia after the socialist reorganisations of economy in the 1930's the main part of the reindeer owners became wage workers for *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes*. Small private herds were united into larger ones (from several hundred animals in the taiga areas to 2.000-3.000 on the tundra). To guard large herds the herders' families had been divided into brigades. Accordingly, the brigade is considered a basic productive unit in reindeer husbandry in Russia today. The brigade is a group of families, usually related to each other, who jointly manage one herd within a designated pasture area. During "perestroika" *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes* were transformed into other types of enterprises, but the brigades have remained the basic element of the industry.

The basis for the Report

The reindeer industry is an important part of the societies in Russia, Alaska, Norway, Sweden and Finland,

but it is rather "invisible" in comparison with other industries. At the same time, it is an area intensive industry dependent on extensive grazing grounds.

Relatively speaking, and according to different national statistics, a small number of people are connected to the industry. In connection with this an often raised question occurs from persons outside the industry: how much consideration should be taken to protect and safeguard this industry against other interests in the society? In accordance with international legislation, the fundamental viewpoint of this report is that reindeer husbandry forms a "way-of-life" more than a "way-of-production". A loss of this industry will not only mean a loss of reindeer meat and other products to a market, it will also mean a loss of many Arctic cultures.

The interviews conducted for this report with the reindeer herders, reindeer owners and other persons connected to the industry, have clearly shown that the self-esteem and self-respect of the people involved in reindeer husbandry is strong, even increasing, despite the fact that the industry in some areas is fighting for survival. This is the case in the eastern part of Russia, and the western part of Alaska; and the development in the southern part of Sweden is not optimistic. Still,

the reindeer owners, herders and their families do not want to give up. This is a strong message from the industry, and we would like to emphasize this in the report.

The point could be illustrated by some of the questions put forward in a questionnaire answered by Swedish reindeer owners in 1998. We will let three of the questions illustrate our point:

The first question:

“How did you become involved in reindeer husbandry?”

The answers were divided into five alternatives, and most responses were

“Reindeer husbandry is my biggest interest” and “My parents were reindeer owners. It was natural to be like them”.

The second question:

“Where do you obtain knowledge and inspiration in your reindeer husbandry?”

This time there were seven alternatives. The top two were:

“From other reindeer owners in the same situation as myself” and “From older and more skilled reindeer owners through traditional knowledge”.

The third question:

“Which are the positive aspects of being a reindeer herder?”

Six alternatives were given, and the top two were:

“To be a reindeer owner is part of my tradition” and “The satisfaction when the reindeer are healthy and well”.

Reindeer husbandry is an important part of life for the owners and their families. Some will even say “it is our life”. But reindeer husbandry is also important to persons outside the industry – it provides raw material for handicraft and is a common symbol of identity for indigenous peoples in the north. Reindeer husbandry makes up one of several important parts of what we in a generic term call “arctic cultures”, and without

reindeer husbandry, all these cultures will experience severe losses of tradition.

The Concepts of Reindeer Herding, Reindeer Management and Reindeer husbandry

The use of the concepts reindeer herding, reindeer management and reindeer husbandry is part of a long debate in the scientific literature. The concept “ranging” has also been introduced to describe the different ways of working with a reindeer herd. During the project field trips we have been introduced to a number of ways that people relate to their herds. The span is enormous - from families migrating with their animals 5-600 km between summer and winter pastures, only using reindeer as transport, to families with the animals in a fence during the winter, and driving the animals 30-40 km with car to the summer pasture. A considerable variation is found within each country, or even within one pasture area.

It is important to notice that the use of different concepts to describe the organisation of work within the industry, could also imply a hidden classification of people. That involves a “ranking” situation between peoples. We have tried to avoid this through a flexible approach to our description of the management systems. Reindeer herding is used either for the concrete action with a herd, or as a description of persons working with the herd, without any ownership to the animals. Reindeer management is used in the description of different herding systems, in other words the overall organisation. Reindeer husbandry is used as a general term for the families living of the animals, or having a close relationship to the animals through different kinds of ownership.