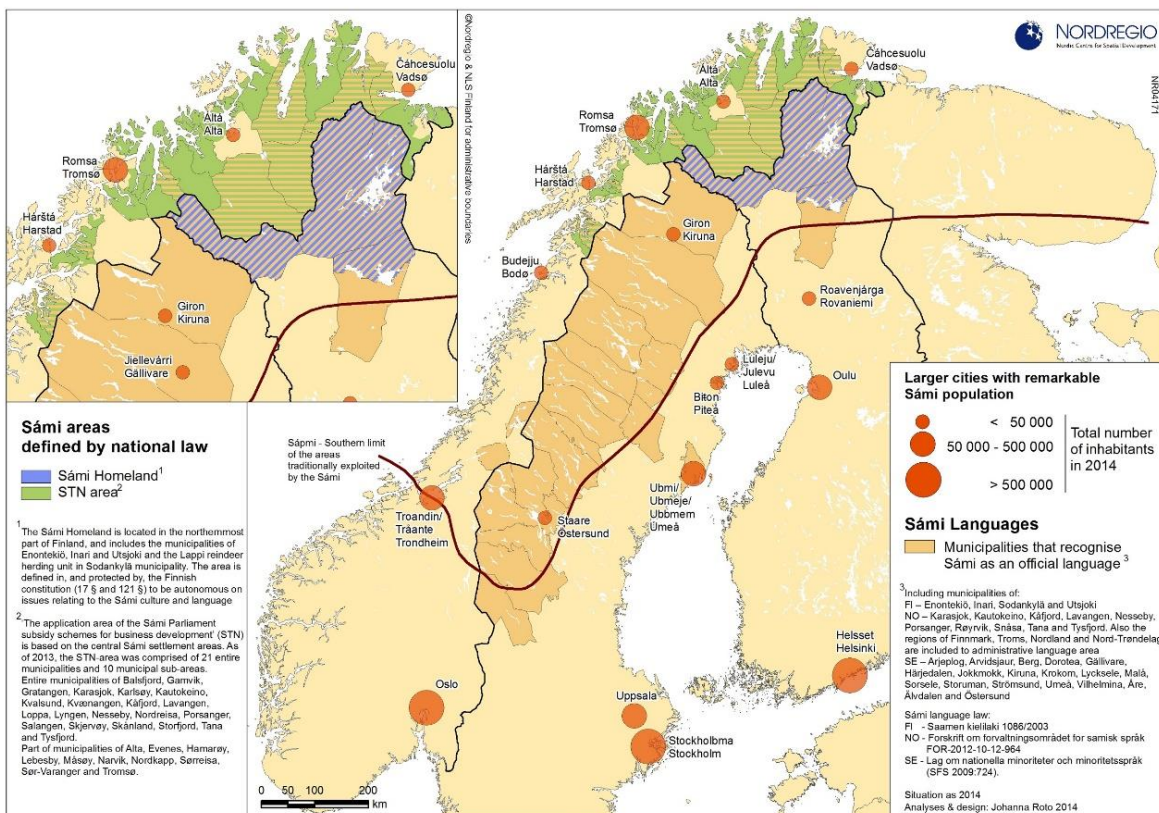


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 GEO 503 – Environmental Governance
 Spring 2024

Indigenous reindeer herders are under threat, but they could hold the key to Norway's climate strategy

The Sámi are an indigenous people that have been inhabiting parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia for thousands of years. They refer to their traditional territory as "Sápmi," and estimates of the number of Sámi people vary between 50,000 and 100,000.¹ The range of their territory and different national influences has led to the development of 55 separate dialects of the Sámi language based on various factors, including occupation and the place of birth and upbringing.² Their language is significantly influenced by their historical homeland through the use and interaction of their surrounding environment.



Legally recognized Sámi areas

Roto, J. (2015, February). *Sami areas defined by national law* [Map]. Nordregio. Retrieved 12 May 2024, from <https://nordregio.org/maps/sami-areas-defined-by-national-law/>

¹ IWGIA (Sapmi)

² Shchukina et al., p. 189

Like many indigenous peoples of the world, the Sámi have had to endure forced integration at the hands of their respective governments whose ideals and practices are at direct odds to the Sámi's. The damage done to Sámi language and culture has been widely studied, especially to the groups living in Norway.

While the Sámi have been granted many concessions over the past few decades – including official language status and Sámi Parliaments – they have now found themselves fighting the test of climate change, which has shaped their modern culture. The colonial governments have their own ideas and practices related to the management of the environment. In implementing Western solutions, the government have violated the Sámi's established, legal rights.³ To combat climate change in Sápmi, the government must use the Sámi's unique relationship with the affected environment to lead mitigation discussions.

Traditional Sámi reindeer herding practices helped shape their language and knowledge

To the Sámi, human cultures are aspects of nature alongside animals, trees, air, temperature, and all other characteristics of the natural world. They view their role as managers of their environment as one of many natural processes.⁴

Historically speaking, the Sámi have sustained themselves through interaction with the environment around them. Originally, they would eat reindeer meat and use their hides for clothing. Sámi people were included in nation building and the political divisions that were forming around them starting in the 1600s, which led to their taxation. In lieu of money, they would provide reindeer products to the governments. An increase in demand of their tax money led to their adoption of organized reindeer herding.⁵

The Sámi continue to integrate their “human-included” view of nature into their reindeer herding practices, and they hold their role as stewards to the environment and reindeer in high regard. A herder who finds stray deer without an earmark can earmark them themselves. A group of earmarked reindeer (called a herd) allows a herder to claim their right to their land, which is important since the customary use of their land is what gives them the right to herd reindeer and earn a traditional livelihood. Herders view nature as the determining factor behind how many deer are available to herd, which is at odds with the government's capitalist mindset.⁶

Important to reindeer herding practices are the various words for snow in the Sámi language. There are around 360 words that refer to different types of snow.⁷ These different words can imply information that is relevant to reindeer herding. For instance, the word for a specific type of snow can express whether it is easy to move across,

³ IWGIA (Green colonialism)

⁴ Østmo & Law, pp. 356

⁵ Foster

⁶ Johnsen et al., p. 7

⁷ Arctic WWF (Climate Change)

whether it gives herders the ability to see tracks more easily, or if the snow allows deer to find food better.⁸

The interdependence of the environment and the Sámi language, as well as the traditional practices that their governments viewed as “primitive,” have made them easy targets for discrimination in the past.

Gaining Indigenous rights after a period of forced integration

The Norwegianization of the Sámi is the primary example of forced integration. It started becoming official policy in Norway in the early-1850s. The Sámi were viewed as primitive beings that needed to become civilized, which meant abiding by Norwegian cultural practices. The Sámi people were banned from teaching in multilingual schools in 1899. Two years later, the first Church-ran boarding schools were opened for Sámi youths to be educated in Norwegian. Most (if not all) Sámi place names were replaced with Norwegian language alternatives.⁹

Norwegianization was removed from government policy with the passing of the Sámi Act by the Norwegian Parliament on 12 June 1987, which defined the authority of the new Sámi Parliament of Norway.¹⁰ The Parliament was officially opened on 9 October 1989 in the small village of Karasjok in northern Norway. Anyone who speaks Sámi at home or has a Sámi parent, grandparent, or great-grandparent can register to vote in parliamentary elections.¹¹

A year after the Sámi Parliament was established in Norway, the Sámi language became an official language of Norway and to this day enjoys equal status with Norwegian. The idea behind this legislation was to allow the Sámi people to move towards preserving and developing its language and traditional way of life.¹²

In contrast to the Sámi’s inclusive view of nature, the governments of Norway and the other three countries have a view that excludes humans from nature. To the non-indigenous governments, science-derived understandings of nature and the environment result in a worldview that differentiates “culture” from “nature.” In this worldview, the Sámi are a culture that should have no influence over nature and its processes.

While the Sámi Parliament provides the official recognition of their language and a level of self-governance over cultural matters, the government’s distinction between “nature” and “culture” hinders the Sámi’s ability to engage in traditional environmental management practices which are viewed by those in power as unnatural interference. In fact, governments still maintain regulations that are at direct odds with the Sámi worldview, including the creation of fishing seasons and prohibiting clearing river inlets

⁸ Eira et al.

⁹ Minde

¹⁰ Norwegian Parliament, 1987

¹¹ Sámi Parliament of Norway

¹² Minority Rights

of natural dams.¹³ Attempting to arrive at a mutual understanding has proven difficult. One study shows that the difference in worldviews makes it extremely difficult for the Sámi people to adequately explain to the governments many concepts and practices that are integral to their culture and way of life.¹⁴

On top of disagreements with their governments and a lack of complete self-determination, the Sámi people have run into additional problems with the acceleration of climate change.

Modern issues require modern solutions – but these threaten Sámi culture

A majority of Sápmi is located within the Arctic Circle. The Arctic is warming around four times as quickly as the rest of the world.¹⁵ Specifically, the average temperature in Finnish Sápmi has increased by over 2 degrees Celsius since post-industrial times.⁷ The warming of the Sámi's historical lands has led to the creation of multiple cultural issues.

One Sámi youth climate activist mentioned that around 50 of her dialect's words for different types of snow have effectively been removed from the language because climate change has prevented their formation in nature.¹⁶ In fact, contemporary snow is so different compared to years past that the Sámi have no idea what to call it.¹⁷ Reindeer struggle in these "new" snow conditions, which make it harder for them to dig underneath thick snow and ice for food. Herders have had to feed reindeer herds directly to prevent them from wandering in search of food.¹² Not knowing exactly what to call these new conditions has consequences for the Sámi way of life.

Being able to fully conceptualize certain elements of their environment and management practices requires perceiving and engaging in them themselves. Passing on knowledge that relies on others' experiences, or experiencing drastic changes to environmental conditions, depraves that knowledge. Trying not to pass it on at all and having to adapt to new conditions leads to the progressive elimination of traditional concepts from the Sámi knowledge system and changes to their livelihood.⁷

As Sámi knowledge systems and livelihoods change, so does the Sámi people's desire to learn the Sámi language and integrate themselves into the Sámi way of life. Scholars suggest that these rapid changes will lead to the disappearance of Sámi culture and language in favor of adopting more modern lifestyles and the languages of their respective nation.¹²

With the lack of resolve from their governments, the increasing burden climate change has placed on them, and the threat that these two factors have on Sámi culture, the

¹³ Østmo & Law

¹⁴ Joks, Østmo, & Law, p. 306

¹⁵ Voosen

¹⁶ Arctic WWF (A Saami Youth Climate Activist)

¹⁷ McVeigh

Sámi have had to advocate for themselves to try to figure out solutions to their pressing issues.

The Sami can't trust their government to respect their rights – what needs to be done

Three of the four countries with indigenous Sámi populations maintain separate, semi-autonomous parliaments that give their communities the power over their language, culture, and education. Russia is the only country that does not maintain a separate Sámi Parliament, although the Sámi here are still represented by NGOs.¹ The primary NGO that represents all Sámi people is the Saami Council, established in 1956 to promote the interests and rights of the Sámi and to handle Sámi policy matters that span international borders.¹⁸ After many years, their rights to practice their traditional ways of life are starting to be recognized.

The Norwegian Supreme Court ruled in 2021 that the construction of two wind energy projects in Sámi territory violated the rights of Sámi reindeer herders. It cemented the absolute right of Sámi reindeer herders to practice their culture and ways of life. However, the Norwegian government has refused to deconstruct the projects and insists that wind energy and Sámi reindeer herding can both be conducted and have called for further research into different solutions.³

Further measures will need to be adopted to guarantee the Sámi people are able to practice their traditional livelihoods and develop their culture. Even though their rights are enshrined in Norwegian law, the Sámi of Norway clearly cannot trust their government to respect their traditional knowledge system and ways of life. Some recommendations are a legally binding agreement between Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia that secures perpetual rights and the free mobility within the Sápmi, as well as inter-agency coordination within the European Union to work with the Sámi to come up with climate change mitigation strategies that take their rights and traditional environmental knowledge into consideration.¹⁹ The international collaboration would carry a lot more weight and could be the pressure that countries of the Sápmi require to abide by the rights they ensured in their legal codes.

It would be in the countries' best interest to actively incorporate the Sámi in environmental governance practices and climate change mitigation strategies. Their environment has shaped their language and knowledge system. It would only make sense to recruit the help of the people whose intimate knowledge of the environment has shaped their language and, as a result, how they perceive the world around them.

¹⁸ Saami Council

¹⁹ Environmental Justice Foundation

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