

# International Centre for Reindeer Husbandry



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## Reindeer Husbandry – An Ancient Livelihood

Archaeological remains and cave paintings in France and Spain from the end of the Pleistocene, 11000-17000 years ago have led some to call that period the Age of the Reindeer. Today in the Arctic, the age of the reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*) continues. There are as many as 3 million wild and 2 million domesticated reindeer around the North and for many indigenous peoples, reindeer are their cultural, economic, social and spiritual foundation. The intimate connection between humans and animals is perhaps best embodied by this relationship as reindeer husbandry represents a connection ancient in origin and practiced almost identically wherever it is found. Eurasia marks its birthplace, but it has spread around the globe and is practiced across 9 nation states by nearly 30 different peoples. Approximately 100,000 people are engaged in reindeer husbandry today and their traditional forms of reindeer husbandry represent the very essence of sustainability and a systematic means by which fragile northern and mountain ecosystems can be utilized – thanks to generations of experience accumulated, conserved, developed and adapted to the climatic and administrative systems of the North.

### Domestication

The domestication of wild reindeer is a process that defies easy explanation. Certainly, people followed migrating reindeer as the ice retreated Northwards and used decoys to hunt them. Current archaeological evidence (cave paintings) seems to suggest that domestication emerged from the Sayan mountains between Russia and Mongolia, perhaps 2-3000 years ago. Another theory holds that Tungus (the ancestors of today's Evenki and Eveny) domesticated reindeer independently East of Lake Baikal and that instead of a single site origin, reindeer husbandry originated in multiples sites simultaneously. New evidence is continually backdating this relationship. Reindeer peoples have their own stories and theories about domestication and the relationship between wild and domestic reindeer. Debate notwithstanding, this act of domestication sparked a reindeer revolution that spread North, East and West. Sledges were adapted later, by reindeer peoples imitating the practice of harnessing dogs. Reindeer and sledges made vast areas of tundra and mountainous regions accessible that even today, are only reached by helicopter. Reindeer became the transport animal of choice throughout Eurasia.

### Taiga and Tundra

The 1600's are said to mark a transformation of indigenous reindeer economies as competing nation states began a process of colonising indigenous peoples, encroaching on their lands and utilising their resources. For some this represented an opportunity – and herds grew to feed growing markets. Russian expansion into the vastness of Siberia in search of fur was enabled by reindeer – for both food and transportation. The late 19th and early 20th century saw the expansion of reindeer husbandry into North America as attempts were made to graft Sámi reindeer husbandry onto the Inupiat and Yupik peoples of the Seward Peninsula, Alaska and later the McKenzie Delta in northern Canada. In

the 1950's a similar venture was attempted in Greenland. Although of mixed success, these experiments have persisted to this day. Today we can differentiate between tundra and taiga reindeer husbandry. 'Tundra' refers to long migrations in the summer to coastal or mountain areas to flee insects and access better pastures. Winter marks a return inland to shelter, a more stable climate and a change in diet. Herds tend to be large, up to several thousand and migration routes are long, often many hundreds of kilometres. With a focus on meat production, this type is practiced by Sámi, Nenets, Komi, Eveny, Chukchi and Koryak. Taiga reindeer husbandry is geographically widespread, is characterised by smaller herds, by the riding of animals, and much shorter migration routes in forested or mountainous areas. Animals are primarily used for transportation and milk production. In both tundra and taiga reindeer husbandry, reindeer provide food, clothing, shelter and transportation. The production of handicrafts is increasingly important for reindeer peoples and there is a large market for soft antlers (for pantocrine) in the Far East (mainly Korea).

### Change, Loss, Resilience and Revival

The 20th century was a period of intense social, cultural, ecological and economic change for all reindeer peoples. The transformation was perhaps most dramatic in Russia after the 1920's and 1930's. During this time nearly all reindeer in Russia were confiscated and placed in large herds to be administered by the state in collective farms (kolkhozy). In the 1960's these were restructured into State farms (sovkhozy) where reindeer belonged to the state and herders became employees. In Scandinavia, the establishment of national borders transformed Sámi reindeer husbandry. Cross border migrations were ended in some areas and placed under strict legislative supervision in others. This period was followed by an intense period of infrastructural development and post war reconstruction. Although reindeer remained in private ownership, traditional Sámi structures of herding were completely transformed, modernised and mechanised. In all areas of reindeer husbandry the changes wrought during this period have completely reorientated the traditional social structures of reindeer husbandry. Laws and regulation have reduced or eradicated the role of women in reindeer husbandry in many regions. Economic insecurity and inadequate supports have meant that in many regions, younger people are reluctant to choose reindeer husbandry as a livelihood, threatening the intergenerational transfer of knowledge that is crucial to reindeer husbandry. In the turbulent 1990's, some areas in Russia completely lost reindeer husbandry. The cited birthplace of reindeer's domestication in the Sayan mountains is one of the areas currently most at risk, in common with other areas of taiga reindeer husbandry, suffering from fragmentation and loss of pastures, industrial development, small herd size, poor animal health and cultural encroachment.

However, in other areas such as the Yamal Peninsula in Russia, reindeer husbandry is continuing to expand. In Chukotka, herders are building up their herds again and Sámi herders in

Scandinavia continue to hold reindeer husbandry at the centre of their annual cycle. This speaks to characteristics that reindeer peoples possess in abundance: resilience, rapid adaptability and flexibility. Reindeer peoples have shown that not only have they survived the onslaught of the last century on their cultures, languages and livelihoods, they have managed to survive and in some areas even thrive.



### Sámi (Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia)

The traditional areas of Sámi reindeer husbandry have been divided between the borders of four nation states – Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia in the 19th and 20th Centuries, the effect of which has meant a major disruption in traditional herding practices. The traditional unit of organization in Sámi reindeer husbandry is the 'siida' which is basically a group of households who cooperate with each other when looking after the reindeer herd and divide communal lands and waters between kin groups or clans. National borders (1852 to Norway, and Sweden in 1889 by Russia, then rulers of Finland) permanently divided reindeer siida. Approximately 6500 Sámi people work as reindeer herders in Scandinavia. Reindeer husbandry in the Sámi region is characterised by larger herds in Norway and Sweden and a high degree of mechanisation in all regions. Reindeer are primarily used for the meat production, though hides, bones and antlers are an important source of material for clothing and handicrafts. Recruitment to the industry has been limited in Norway and Sweden by legislation, and a lack of pastures and economic opportunities has limited the expansion of the livelihood. All animals in the Sámi area, excluding Russia, are privately owned though many aspects of herding are practiced collectively in the siida system. In Norway there are six 'reindeer pasture areas' divided into 77 'reindeer pasture districts'. Only Sámi people may herd reindeer in these areas. Reindeer herding is also carried out in southern Norway in special 'concession areas', where Norwegians can also herd reindeer. Reindeer are herded over an area of approximately 146,000 km<sup>2</sup> in the counties of Finnmark, Troms, Nordland and Trøndelag, which is equivalent to 40% of the mainland area of Norway. Reindeer husbandry is administered by the Reindeer Husbandry Administration a body which is directly under the Norwegian Ministry of Agriculture. 2936 reindeer herders herd ca. 240,000 reindeer, the majority of which are in the county of Finnmark.

In Sweden, reindeer herding is pursued throughout practically all of Norrbotten, Västerbotten and Jämtland counties and in parts of Dalarna, Västernorrland and Gävleborg counties. Reindeer pastures cover about one third of Sweden's area. Only Sámi people may herd reindeer in Sweden, except for a 'concession area' in the Torne valley, which marks the border between Sweden and Finland. The 'sameby' is the organisational unit of reindeer husbandry in Sweden and is both an economic association and a geographical area. Its members have the right to engage in reindeer husbandry in this area and in certain areas, they also have fishing and hunting rights. There are 51 Sámi villages for reindeer herding, and there are some 3 500 reindeer-owning Sámi, herding over 200,000 reindeer. There are about 1000 people of non-Sámi descent who primarily keep reindeer in the concession Sámi villages.

In Finland, reindeer husbandry is not ethnically restricted to Sámi and the livelihood is open to any individual from the European Union. In total there are approximately 5600 reindeer owners, the vast majority of whom are Finns. The reindeer husbandry area in Finland lies in the most northerly parts of the country and covers almost the entire area of the Province of Lapland and part of the Province of Oulu. The reindeer husbandry area The northernmost part of the Finnish reindeer husbandry region is classified as the 'Sámi reindeer herding area', where Sámi reindeer husbandry is concentrated. Reindeer herding is administered through a reindeer cooperative system of which each reindeer owner is a member. These are economical units and geographical areas and there are 56 such cooperatives. The current maximum number of reindeer in Finland has been set at just over 200,000 with individual ownership restricted from between 3-500 reindeer depending on location. The entire reindeer husbandry cooperative areas in Finland are fenced, as are the borders to Finland, Sweden, Norway and Russia.

Kola Sámi in northwest Russia saw their reindeer husbandry transformed in the 19th Century with the arrival of 65 Komi herders and 600 reindeer to. Semi pastoral

reindeer husbandry was transformed into a large scale livelihood with an emphasis on productivity. Collectivisation in the 1930's further transformed the livelihood as herd sizes increased. Reindeer herding has been in a state of flux since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The livelihood is administered by two sovkhozy (state farms) and reindeer herders are salaried employees of the state farms, just as in Soviet times. Approximately 200 people in total are engaged in reindeer husbandry, still practiced primarily by Komi. Sámi make up the rest with some Russian and Ukrainians also herding. Reindeer numbers have plummeted, with approximately 40 - 50,000 reindeer being herded, less than half the figure of a few decades ago. Private ownership of reindeer has increased dramatically in the last decade.



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### Komi

Komi are relative newcomers to reindeer husbandry adopting and adapting it from their neighbours, the Nenets. Komi are a Finno Ugric peoples the majority of whom live in the Komi Republic, with reindeer husbandry primarily focused in the North and practiced by the Izhma Komi. There are also Komi practicing reindeer husbandry in the Kola Peninsula, the Nenets Autonomous Okrug and the Yamal Nenets Autonomous Okrug. It was not until the 18th Century that Komi started migrating with reindeer herds. Large scale herding emerged and from its conception was a market oriented activity and Komi proved to be very successful. Over time, their herding routes mingled with Nenets routes to the North. Winter pastures are located in the forested regions and forest tundra in the Southwest, with summer pastures located in the tundra region to the North and Northeast in the herding area of the Nenets in the Nenets Autonomous Okrug. Komi reindeer herding is organized in teams, of which there are 52, composed of six to eight herders and one or two tent workers which herd a total of approximately 115,000 reindeer. Migration routes are long, every spring and early summer, reindeer herding teams travel up to 400 km each way to reach their pastures, with the same routes being used annually. Reindeer are used for meat production, transportation, clothing and handicrafts. The production of reindeer antlers has been important. The majority are owned by the agricultural collectives, but some 20% are in private ownership and a small number are in private reindeer farms.



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## World Reindeer Husbandry People, Distribution and Challenges

### Nenets

The Nenets live mainly in the tundra, forest tundra and Northern taiga belt of the European and Western Siberian part of the Russian Federation, from the Kanin Peninsula in the west, along the banks of the White Sea to the Gydanok-Peninsula of the Yenisey delta. They form the largest indigenous group of the Russian North and are one of the world's great reindeer herding peoples who have come to personally large scale tundra reindeer husbandry. Administratively, their territory is divided between the Nenets Autonomous Okrug of the Arkhangelsk Oblast and the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Okrug. Combined, this covers a vast territory of about 1 million square kilometres.

The bulk of Nenets reindeer husbandry is situated on the Yamal Peninsula which is the world's largest area of reindeer husbandry. Nenets herders and their families practice nomadic herding, migrating over long distances (up to 1000km annually) between summer and winter pastures, with several migratory routes crossing the Ob River. The Nenets number around 41,000 of which about 13500 are involved with reindeer husbandry. The number of reindeer has long been the highest in Russia, currently standing between 600 – 800,000. Herders in this region maintain close connections to their reindeer on a year round basis. Reindeer are used for meat production, traditional handicraft production and transportation. Reindeer are central to the social, cultural, spiritual and economic life of the Nenets people. Their large herds comprise of both collectively and privately owned animals but are administered by enterprises that date back to Soviet times, though family based units are central to the internal organization of the livelihood. Unlike most other regions of reindeer husbandry in Russia, the number of people choosing reindeer husbandry as a livelihood is actually increasing, speaking to the vibrancy of the livelihood in the region. Private reindeer ownership within the collective herds has been increasing over the last decade.



