

Sami people: natural resources and climate change

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The Sami people are strongly dependent on available natural resources. Therefore, it seems important to consider how they perceive their natural resources and climate change when working with assessments.

How vulnerable are the Sami people to risks connected to climate change? Their entire way of life is strongly connected to the surrounding natural environment. For centuries, they have endured the severe policies of the Scandinavian states alongside the harsh Arctic environment. The Sami have adapted, persevered and survived. Climate change is a new threat, which seems to give them fewer possibilities to adapt.

Do the Sami people perceive the effects of climate change differently to us in the Western world? They have a relational worldview, very different to ours. I suggest that it is necessary to understand this difference during assessment work. This paper will look into how the Sami people perceive their natural resources and the effects of climate change as well as trying to distinguish the vulnerability of Sami to risks associated with climate change.

The Sami people

The Sami are an indigenous people of Northern Europe who live today in a cultural region, which stretches across the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia (see Fig. 1). They choose to call the Sámi traditional homeland “*Sápmi*” (Gaski 1993, p. 115; Kailo & Helander 1998, p. 17). In Sweden, Sápmi covers between 35% and 50% of the total land area (Sametinget 2004; Svonni 2011). The oldest historical documents available provide evidence of Sami inhabiting the northern part of the geographical region of Fennoscandia (cf. Uddenberg 2000, p. 13).

We know little about the Sami people's history before the old Swedish name *Lappmarken*, a denomination for Northern part of the old Kingdom of Sweden, appears in a letter by Swedish King Magnus Eriksson in 1340. When the Swedish state began to build up during the 16th and 17th centuries, the Sami found themselves at the borders of this society.



Figure 1. Map of Fennoscandia showing the geographical extension of Sápmi

Reindeer and the Sami have ancient bonds with each other. This relationship has been constant for thousands of years. In the beginning the reindeer were essentially prey for the hunting Sami, who also domesticated some as draft animals or for milking. Towards the end of the 16th century, the Sami shifted from wild reindeer hunting to domesticated reindeer herding. The combination of a growing Sami population with more intensive state taxation pushed the old hunter society to become shepherds. The Sami, who had been relatively sedentary, became nomadic shepherds within the landscape (Svonni 1976, p. 9; Uddenberg 2000, p. 16). The phenomenon of large reindeer herds that we associate with Sami lifestyles nowadays are actually only about four hundred years old.

Background: Sami pre-Christian religion

Pre-Christian Sami religion retained its significance well into the 18th century, until the true colonization of Sápmi began (Michael 2014, p. 3). Our knowledge of the origins of the Sami religion is incomplete. The little we know comes from unbiased missionary priests’

descriptions. As Christian representatives, these priests distanced themselves from other worshipping and shamanism. Correspondingly, the Sami concealed parts of their cult from priests and other non-Sami people. It was easier to practice their religion in silence and thus avoid trouble with the state authorities (Uddenberg 2000, p. 33).



Figure 2. Group photo of Sami from Sorsele. Photo: Lotten von Düben, No Copyright, Wikimedia

Sami philosophy and worldview

There is a close relationship between the concepts of “philosophy” and “worldview”. Considering “a philosophy” in its broadest sense denotes a worldview. This is the case when we speak about the philosophy of the Sami people. People have diverse concepts and diverse ways of perceiving the world. Worldview consists of the central assumptions, concepts and premises which a specific group of people shares and upon which they base their activities. Every behaviour or ideology has its own purposes and functions (cf. CoE 2009, p. 29; Vidal 2008, p. 3). These originate from personal or community needs.

Worldview is the basis of all aspects of human life that influences specific cultural and life structures as well as religious beliefs. The Sami structure their worldview around the elements and phenomena of their natural environment. They believe that all living things and natural elements - which other cultures may not even consider alive such as rocks and mountains - have a connection to one another.

Sami people's belief system and their environment

In anthropology, the religious belief that various objects, places, and creatures possess distinctive spiritual qualities is described as animism. It is the oldest known type of belief system in the world. Many traditional societies still practice it in a variety of forms.

In Sámi belief, animism is manifested in the belief that all significant natural objects (such as animals, plants and rocks) possess a soul and, from a polytheistic perspective, traditional Sámi beliefs include a multitude of spirits. When animism is the dominant belief system, human norms and values have to take into consideration the outlook and the interests of a multitude of other beings, such as animals, plants and these spirits (cf. Harari 2015, p. 235). In order to survive in their harsh environment the Sami needed and still need to understand the superhuman order that regulates their environment and to adjust their behavior accordingly.

Studies show that modern Swedes perceive nature as a source of sensory experience and recreation. To them, nature appears “wild” and relatively untouched by man (Uddenberg 1995). The Sami, however, perceive nature as a religious experience. They describe nature in terms of relatedness, where each organism has its place and plays a particular role. Nature's ideal condition, its “balance”, should be respected; therefore, a practical consequence is that any engagement with nature should be as minimal as possible (Uddenberg 2000, p. 142).

Climate change and the Sami people

The Sami are very concerned about climate change and even more concerned with being heard by the governing authorities on this matter. Nature in the Arctic region is fragile; therefore, climate change threatens to upset the natural balance of the region. A shift in the arctic tree line, pushing it further north as well as the introduction of invasive species, will undoubtedly affect the flora, fauna and, consequently, the traditional use of nature in the area (Keva 2015).

Back in the 1990s when the subject of climate change was becoming a common topic, Sami reindeer herders were noticing anomalies in the season's cycle. Because of this, they made some changes in their herding methods (Pasotti 2016). Reindeer herding activities are important for other species in the fell areas. When the reindeer leaves an area, the grouse arrives, followed by small rodents and soon after that the fox (Kihlberg 2016). Within the ecosystem, everything is connected.

Sami vulnerability to climate change

Indigenous peoples are particularly vulnerable to the impact of climate change. Nature, economy and culture are strongly linked in Sami society. They have relied for centuries on a long-term ecological vision, which is based on a respect for nature, their source of living.

History shows that the Sami are a resilient people. Those who practice reindeer herding have acquired the ability to be mobile and disperse over large areas. They are flexible, something which is crucial in adaptation (Tennent 2015). Thus, probably their greatest obstacle is adapting not to climate but to politics (Keva 2015). Indigenous peoples have limited opportunities to influence policy and decisions on land use issues.

The Sami people can draw on the utmost detailed knowledge about weather conditions and available natural resources. They have an ethical relationship with nature (Tisdall 2010). The Sami have solutions to climate change adaptation, but their ideas seldom reach the appropriate political or scientific spheres. Their solutions rely on having access to the land and being able to apply their traditional knowledge in a more flexible manner (cf. Pasotti 2016).

Concluding observations

The Sami people have a deep relationship with nature, which is hard to capture in words. They have a living approach towards the surrounding environment in which each organism has its place and a particular function. Nature's ideal condition, its "balance", should be maintained. Thus, great parts of the Sami value foundations are strongly connected to a life in direct contact with nature.

The Sami people possess a local and traditional knowledge, which is a vital resource in confronting climate change. Sami people are also vulnerable to risks connected to climate change; however, they are also resilient, flexible and have a solid ethical relationship with nature. The problem is that governments continue to reject the idea that indigenous peoples have something useful to say on the subject.

As an analogy, when working with an assessment within Sápmi, it is inappropriate and misleading to proceed from an exclusively westernized point of view. The same applies to coping with climate change in the Sápmi region. Not taking into consideration Sami traditional knowledge in the process only makes it more difficult to arrive at a solution.

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