METSÄLEHTI no. 6 / 2004

Dilemma in northern Lapland: Too many reindeers, too many reindeer owners

In recent public debate about forests in northern Lapland, it has been strongly suggested that forestry alone has brought reindeer husbandry to financial despair. No material evidence has been presented to prove that forestry carried out in the area would restrict the amount of reindeer or impede reindeer husbandry.

The reindeer population has increased two-and-a-half-fold since the 1970s. At its peak, at the turn of the 1990s, the reindeer population was more than three times what it was in 1970. During the same time period, the number of state forests decreased by 20 percent, and at its peak, at the turn of the 1980s, the number of fellings was nearly one-and-a-half times what it was compared to the 1970s. Since then, fellings have decreased by a half, although Greenpeace and reindeer herders claim otherwise.

In northern Lapland, reindeer husbandry is most lucrative in the area of the Ivalo herding co-operative, where there are no old lichen forests at all. And in the same co-operative, where the most intensive forestry of all the northern Lapland co-operatives was practised after the Second World War, reindeer husbandry is on the healthiest base, according to various indicators. It requires the lowest amount of supplementary feeding for reindeer, has the best does, the best fawning percentage, etc.

Bearing that in mind, it must be said that the difficulties of reindeer husbandry have more to do with the internal financial issues of the co-operatives than with Metsähallitus' activities in the area. The poor condition of lichen grounds is mainly due to too many reindeer.

The goal of the Sami Parliament and environmental organisations is to drive forestry under in order to secure the interests of reindeer husbandry. Unfortunately, that is not the answer to saving reindeer husbandry: its problems lie beyond the activities of forestry, and have more to do with the increased subsidisation of an already subsidised livelihood.

The profits of forestry benefit not only the Sami, but also the economic life of the area in general, by bringing more economic activity to the area. If reindeer husbandry is seen only as a means of livelihood, it seems absurd to support it by suppressing another, more profitable, means of livelihood.

There is no longer anything traditional about reindeer husbandry in the area aside from freely grazing herds. Work on the terrain is done with snowmobiles and two- and four-wheel all-terrain vehicles, and even slaughtering has been transferred, by EU regulations, to well-managed and hygienic slaughterhouses. Furthermore, intensive feeding of herds is not a part of traditional reindeer husbandry.

In northern Lapland, the real problem of reindeer husbandry is not forestry, but rather that there are simply too many reindeer owners. There are currently 1,107 Sami reindeer owners in the Sami home district, 60 percent of whom own fewer than 50 reindeer. The average annual profit those owners make off their reindeer is about 3,500 euros, which means that an increasing number of Sami reindeer owners are forced to supplement their income by means other than reindeer husbandry. The fragmentation of reindeer owners has, in part, led to the current situation of over-grazing, which can be seen in the form of excessively damaged

lichen areas and a lack of new birch offshoots in the national park areas of northern Lapland.

Earlier reindeer herding communities lived apart from one another, so the type of over-grazing problems we see today were locally restricted. The period following the Second World War has been a time of far-reaching changes in the whole reindeer herding area, including the co-operatives of northern Lapland.

Nowadays, in many reindeer herding co-operatives, the reduction of natural grazing is compensated by bringing in additional fodder from outlying areas more than ever before. This means that the once self-supporting reindeer husbandry has increasingly been transformed so that it is now dependent on external resources.

Traditional reindeer husbandry was in harmony with the natural environment, satisfying all the subsistence needs, including food and clothing, of each member of the community. The requirements of reindeer herding families in those days were more modest than they are today, and communities could live well within the limits of natural grazing.

This no longer works in reindeer husbandry today, by any means. I believe that the most important factor behind the current grazing crisis is the continual fragmentation of reindeer ownership due to internal issues in reindeer husbandry. The result is that ever-fewer reindeer owners can rely on their herds as a primary source of livelihood. Reindeer owners for whom their herds are the most important source of livelihood have a different outlook from most of those who own just a few reindeer. Today's reindeer husbandry and support systems do not work towards supporting natural grazing for the long term.

Reindeer herders and ecologists see the current problems facing reindeer husbandry differently. A reindeer herder observing the reindeer-meat market sees the lowest real rates for meat in 15 years. Pasture researchers, on the other hand, have, for many years, observed extreme deterioration in lichen areas, which are important as winter ranges throughout the reindeer husbandry area. Because the researchers know that maintenance of the current reindeer herds is done with the help of over-grazing and supplementary feeding, they are worried about how the continued deterioration of lichen reserves will affect the condition of the reindeers' winter ranges and the profitability of the entire livelihood.

The goal of forest management and reindeer husbandry, respectively, is to efficiently produce wood and reindeer meat, both of which are the result of physiological processes. I believe that attention must be paid to what is ecologically necessary, technically possible and economically feasible in the management of forests and reindeer grazing lands. The latter two principles have apparently dictated most of the solutions adopted in forestry and reindeer husbandry, but in recent times ecological points of view have also increasingly been taken into account because of the problems that have begun to emerge.

Taking proper consideration of the ecological point of view in forest and pasture management also requires research on the ecosystem. It must be determined what effect activities will have on the forest ecosystem as a whole. The current state of reindeer grazing land in areas where felling was conducted in the 1950s and 60s should also be looked into as part of the soon-to-be-launched research project initiated by the Finnish Forest Research Institute (Metla).

Reindeer herders nowadays participate in reindeer husbandry via a system of reindeer herding co-operatives. The large-scale adoption of modern technology by reindeer husbandry since the 60s, coupled with the strong growth in the number of reindeer since the 70s, changed the Sami reindeer husbandry co-operatives more

than anything ever had before. With the help of supplementary feeding, they were able to bring greater amounts of meat to the market – the storage and distribution of which the herders' own Poro ja Riista Oy (Deer and Game Company) played a central role in. I affirm that things went well for the herders for as long as the company existed. Following its bankruptcy, blame for the problems faced by reindeer husbandry has been laid on the administration, research, Finland's accession in the EU, or on other things.

To date, it is still wholly unclear how a reindeer husbandry based on continuous supplementary feeding will affect reindeer herders. To what extent will it lead to cultural and environmental instability? Will it weaken, together with other problems, the ability of reindeer herding co-operatives to survive future political and social problems? I will be expecting answers to these and many other questions faced by reindeer husbandry in the project soon to be launched by Metla.

JOUNI KITTI
Sami Parliamentarian
from 1976 to 1999