Reindeer herders are fighting to save their land and a way of life

Story by Nell Lewis, CNN
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Sámi people in Skaule, Sweden, herd reindeer for the annual marking of the calves in July.

Editor's Note: Call to Earth is a CNN editorial series committed to reporting on the environmental challenges facing our planet, together with the solutions. Rolex's Perpetual Planet Initiative has partnered with CNN to drive awareness and education around key sustainability issues and to inspire positive action.

"Call to Earth Day - Connected Generations" celebrates the links between people and cultures and how these can help to play a vital role in preserving our planet.

Thirteen-year-old Risten Alida is learning to mark her family's reindeer. It is past midnight, the sun's afterglow still on the horizon. The quiet of the mountaintop plateau is broken by the grunts and bells of some 500 animals milling about their corral as herders work through them, identifying mature females and lassoing and marking their calves.

As her mother Marja Skum holds a calf down, Risten Alida uses a knife to cut the family's distinctive pattern into its ear. The process looks brutal and bloody, but it is part of a centuries-old tradition the indigenous Sámi people use to show ownership, which they say is integral to how they look after the animals.

"We have a contract with the reindeer — that we are put here to take care of them and then they will provide us with food and clothes and everything we need," says Skum, 47. "That relationship goes a long way back, and it's difficult to explain … but everything we do is to protect them, and (for this) we need land. But the land is shrinking day by day."

In the remote mountains of northern Sweden, just 15 miles east of the border with Norway and 22 miles south of the Arctic Circle, it is hard to believe there is a shortage of land. Wide expanses of green fill each vista, a scattering of snow tops the scree-covered peaks and a chain of lakes lined with thick forest winds through the valley.

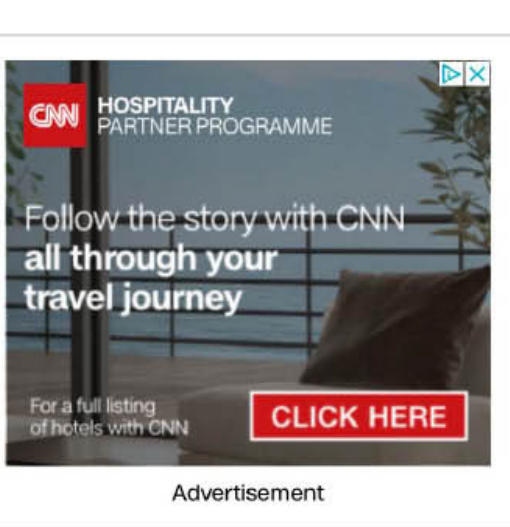
Maile Bäckström, who is in the mountains with her husband and two sons, marks a reindeer calf.

Marja Skum and her daughter, Risten Alida, work to spot and mark their reindeer.

Lakes and mountains are seen from a helicopter between Skaule and the village of Adolfsström.

Yet the Sámi's traditional grazing areas have declined substantially over the last century in Sweden, Finland and Norway. According to one study, 85% of the grazing land in the region is affected by at least one land-use pressure, such as intensive forestry, mining or wind farms. A 2016 report estimated that in the last 60 years, Sweden had suffered a 71% decline in its lichen-rich forests, which provide essential food for reindeer during winter.

At the same time, the climate is rapidly changing. With the Arctic warming nearly four times faster than the rest of the planet, the Sámi find themselves on the frontlines. Mild weather and rain in winter is affecting how the reindeer graze and migrate, and unusually hot summers are leading to an influx of parasitic insects which spread disease among herds.



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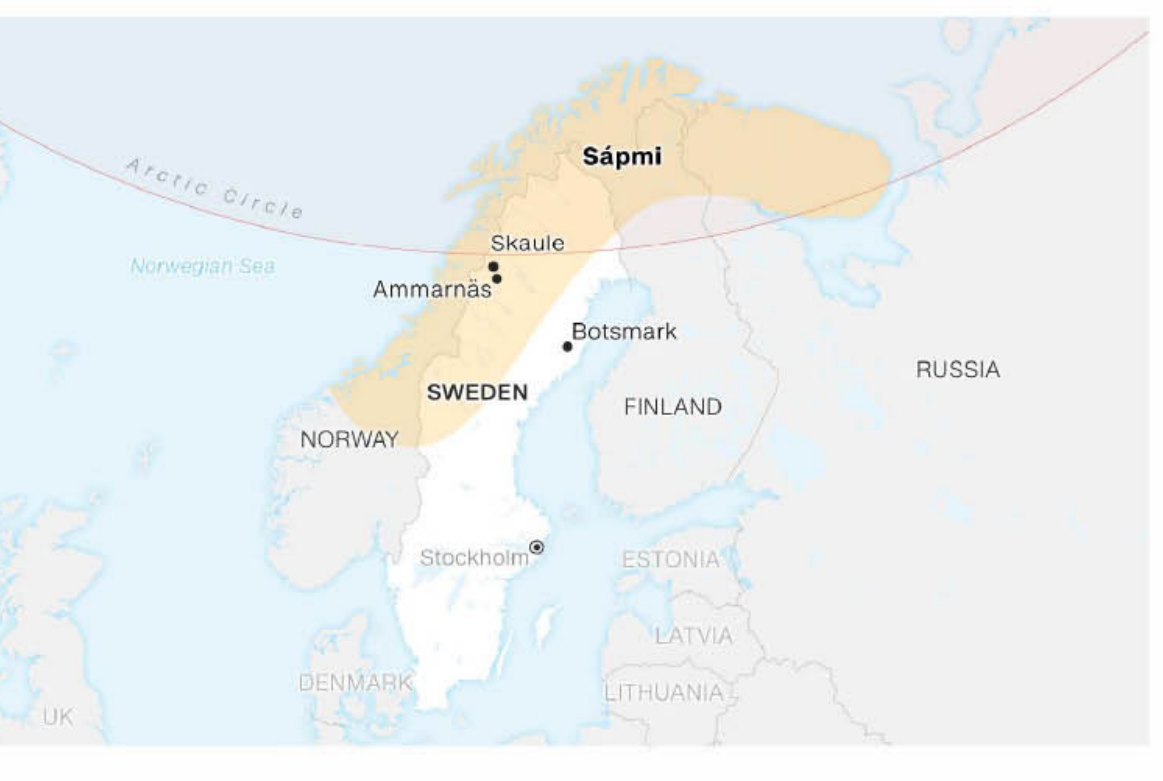
The Sámi are no strangers to adaptation. There are an estimated 80,000 living across Sápmi, their ancestral homeland, which spans the northernmost parts of Scandinavia and Russia's Kola peninsula. As the only indigenous group recognized in the EU, they have survived this harsh environment for thousands of years and have dealt with a long history of persecution and encroaching development. But as the threats compound, even they are beginning to question whether they can survive the coming storm.

"We are very resilient, we are very adaptable, but it comes to a certain level, because when the land is gone, it's gone and then our reindeer don't have anywhere to graze," says Skum.

Sápmi, the ancestral homeland of the indigenous Sámi people, spans four countries

Sámi reindeer herders from Sweden's Gran community migrate from the winter pastures in Botsmark to the summer pastures in Ammarnäs, spending a few weeks in July in the remote mountains of Skaule to mark the calves.



Note: The area of the ancestral Sápmi homeland is approximate.

Source: Arctic Data Center
Graphic: Woojin Lee, CNN

Natural instinct

Skum and her husband Juhán Áslat Siri belong to Gran sameby, a Sámi "village" that migrates annually between summer and winter pastures. They spend four months of the year in Botsmark, near the coast, for winter, before migrating more than 300 kilometers (186 miles) north to Ammarnäs. Her two children, Risten Alida and ÁnteJohanMáhtte, 9, split the year between two schools.

For the marking of the calves, most of the villagers, along with those from the neighboring sameby of Svaipa, head even further north, setting up camp in the mountains for a few weeks, near where their combined herd of around 10,000 reindeer is grazing. According to Skum, it's one of the only times in the year when the community comes together and shares stories across generations, and where the Sámi are in the "majority."

"The rest of the year we are the 'un-normal' people," she says. "We live another culture, another life, parallel to the Swedish."

"For the children, (it's an) opportunity to mark your first calf … to eat when you're hungry, sleep when you're tired. There is no clock, there are no scheduled activities. They are just free. It's more like how we're supposed to live," she adds.

Risten Alida practices her lasso technique on her younger brother, ÁnteJohanMáhtte.

Reindeer antlers are gathered behind a family's tent.

A calf is lassoed as Sámi people herd reindeer for the annual marking of the calves.

Much has changed already. Ingemar Israellson, 73, is the oldest person at the calf marking and has been a reindeer herder his whole life. He recalls how they used to walk or ski between the seasonal pastures, with the journey taking two or more weeks. They followed the frozen rivers and there were forests along the way where the reindeer could graze. After the reindeer had made the route once, they would remember it year after year.

These routes are now fragmented by roads or other development, he says. The rivers don't always freeze over and much of the native forest has been cut down. The reindeer struggle to dig for lichen as the unpredictable winters turn melting snow into layers of ice, trapping the winter food source underneath.

As a result, herders are having to feed them with pellets and are transporting the reindeer in trucks, while they themselves use all-terrain vehicles (ATVs). All of this is making their way of life both more expensive and less environmentally sustainable. As for the reindeer, "they have lost a little of their instinct," says Israellson.

The indigenous Sámi people have been herding reindeer for centuries.

Preserving old ways

These changes have an impact on the ecosystem. Reindeer have grazed in these areas for thousands of years, helping to spread seeds and increase species diversity. Research from the University of Oxford and a report published in the Journal of Environmental Management suggests that reindeer could mitigate climate change by helping to control the growth of tall shrubs and keeping the landscape open, preventing vegetation from absorbing heat and thawing permafrost, which releases carbon.

Environmental organizations such as Rewilding Sweden see preserving the Sámi lifestyle as a way to boost biodiversity: "We have a joint interest," says Henrik Persson, the organization's director and team leader. "We want to restore the forests and the ecosystem, and that is the same ecosystem that they want to have back for their reindeer."

Much of the group's work is aimed at reversing the damage done to the environment from years of intensive forestry, he explains. In the past two centuries, many of Sweden's rivers were straightened and cleared to transport logs, causing erosion and affecting plants, animals and habitats. Clear cut forestry, the practice of felling an entire forest before replanting it, has stunted the growth of ground lichens and other species.

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Henrik Persson, team leader and director of Rewilding Sweden, works on a river restoration project in July.

The organization is targeting reindeer migration corridors, working with Sámi people to identify places along the routes that need restoration most and using their traditional ecological knowledge to inform decisions. This way, the work not only helps to rewild and restore nature, but it helps to keep the Sámi lifestyle alive, he says.

Skum welcomes the assistance of environmental organizations, as it helps apply pressure on the government to prevent large-scale development of land. Other battles have taken place within the courts, with the Sámi fighting to restore land rights from the state. In a landmark case in 2020, judges ruled that the rights stemming from the Sámi's historical use of the territory in the Girjas sameby superseded those granted more recently by the Swedish state.

"We need allies, we need to work together, and we need people who also care about the environment," Skum says, adding that, for the Sámi, protecting the land goes beyond providing a livelihood.

"This is our culture, it's our language, it's our lives," she says. "We lose everything if we lose this."

A few people make coffee around a campfire between reindeer-marking sessions in Skaule.

Reindeer are herded in Skaule.

Years of intensive forestry have had a detrimental effect on many of Sweden's rivers, Persson said.

Uncertain future

At camp, the question of what life will look like in the future hangs in the air. There is a contrast between the old and the new, an acceptance of modernizing some things while preserving age-old traditions in others. Most people wear Gore-Tex and puffer jackets but add a traditional belt with an exquisitely made knife in a sheath on top. They say the clothes are more practical and they want to save their brightly colored traditional dress for special occasions, like weddings or the annual Sámi winter market.

Most people speak to each other in Swedish, with many near fluent in English too. Only a few still communicate in a Sámi language, including Skum's family; they speak to each other in North Sámi, the most widely spoken of the 10 Sámi languages — all are considered endangered by UNESCO. The decline is partly rooted in discrimination by the Swedish state, as during the 19th and 20th centuries, Sámi children were forcibly taken from their parents, sent to boarding schools and banned from speaking their mother tongue.

Israellsson was one of those children. While the times have changed and the Sámi are increasingly recognized by the state, he knows theirs is a tough life and won't force his children and grandchildren into it. "It's hard to live off reindeer nowadays, because the costs are so high," he says. "It's up to the young people here to take it in their own hands. I have done my job already."

As the only indigenous group recognized in the EU, the Sámi have dealt with a long history of persecution and encroaching development.

Each morning, the younger generations head up to a rock at the top of the hill, where they can get a signal on their smartphones. Skum's daughter Risten Alida wants to maintain her streak on Snapchat, whereas her son ÁnteJohanMáhtte downloads Minecraft.

Yet despite this exposure to a more modern way of life, the children seem committed to preserving their ancestral ways. Some, whose parents or grandparents did not speak the Sámi language, have started to learn it themselves. All the boys interviewed say they want to be reindeer herders when they grow up, and while the girls give more varied answers — often the women take up a different profession to supplement the household's income — they too want to see the lifestyle continue in some way.

The older generations believe that something has shifted — there is a resurgence of pride in the Sámi identity as the shame felt by those who were persecuted has lifted.

"They are not afraid anymore, like my parents' generation and maybe myself also," says Skum.

Marja Skum threads the tips of reindeer ears that were cut off during the annual marking process. It's a way of accounting for the reindeer.

A close-up of Elena Lango's knives. Aged 33, she comes to the mountains every summer for the marking of the calves.

After two days of good weather and hard work, a thick fog descends over the mountains and the families retreat to their tents, spirals of smoke rising from the stoves in each one. Skum and her family cosy up in the warmth, as she sews onto a thread the ear tips they have cut from each calf. This is the "old school" way of counting their stock, she says.

Risten Alida sits on a mattress, her dog Ritni curled up beside her. She speaks with an air of youthful confidence: "It's going to be harder in the future with climate change, it's going to be tougher on the reindeer, and it's going to be a lot of work — a lot more work than it is now."

But, she adds: "I have to keep the tradition going."

Marja Skum prepares a meal in her family's tent in Skaule with her son, ÁnteJohanMáhtte, and daughter, Risten Alida.

This story has been updated to clarify that the Sámi are the only indigenous group recognized in the EU.

Credits

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