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

Sami herder Ella-Karin Eira in her reindeer herding area in Sweden's Lapland region. Photo: Jonathan Nackstrand/AFP via Getty Images

Anders Eira (left) is a Sami in a CNN editorial series committed to reporting on the issues and stories that matter to Indigenous communities around the world. Photo: Jonathan Nackstrand/AFP via Getty Images

Article 1 from Call to Earth is a CNN editorial series committed to reporting on the issues and stories that matter to Indigenous communities around the world. Photo: Jonathan Nackstrand/AFP via Getty Images

Tarja Kuhmi-Oskal, Chairperson of the Sami Parliament, moves from between people and reindeer and says their lives are tied up in the herd. It's precisely why we need to protect them.

Sweden's Sami people have been herding reindeer for centuries. It's a way of life, and a lifelong bond, the sort of intimacy with a fellow human. The spirit of the mountains shines in broken by the granite and lashes of some 500 animals milling about their corral as herders work through them, identifying animals through a complex system of marking their ears.

"Reindeer herding is a way of life, it's a culture, it's a language," says Ella-Karin Eira. "It's a way of life that has been passed down from generation to generation, and it's a part of our culture. It's a way of life that we want to keep and we want our children to be able to carry on, they are so important to us. We want our children to be able to carry on."

"We have a contract with the reindeer — that we are just here to take care of them and they will provide us with food and clothes and everything we need," says Anders. "We," Eira remembers giving a long sigh, "we are, and it's difficult to explain, ... we belonging with the reindeer, we belong to the land, we belong to the mountains, we belong to the forest."

In the remote mountains of northern Sweden, just 20 miles east of the border with Norway and 20 miles south of the Arctic Circle, it is hard to believe there is a shortage of land. Here, the sky stretches on and on, the mountains are dotted with birch and stream-blanketed valleys and a mixed of dwarf birch and mixed forest stands through the valley.

Sami herder Anders Eira in his reindeer herding area in Sweden's Lapland region. Photo: Jonathan Nackstrand/AFP via Getty Images

Sami herder Ella-Karin Eira in her reindeer herding area in Sweden's Lapland region. Photo: Jonathan Nackstrand/AFP via Getty Images

Yet the Sami's traditional grazing areas have declined substantially over the last century in Sweden, Finland and Norway, according to one study. 80% of the grazing land in the Swedish Sami reindeer herding area has been lost, it says. In Finland, it's 60% of herding lands, in Norway, it's 40%. Sweden had suffered a 20% decline in its herd since the Swedish government started the reindeer herding count.

The Sami are no strangers to adaptation. There are an estimated 80,000 living across Nordic lands scattered between, and spans the northernmost parts of Scandinavia, Russia's Kola Peninsula and Finland's Lapland region. Over the years, the Sami have survived the Black Plague, been ostracized by Swedish scientists and forced to abandon their ancestral lands and herding practices. Today, they are organizing 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 time is gone, it is gone and we can't adapt anymore and I have everywhere to go," says Eira.

Sápmi, the ancestral homeland of the Indigenous Sami people, spans four countries

Sápmi, the ancestral homeland of the Indigenous Sami people, spans four countries. The current situation is alarming, Eira says, and it's the same for herders across the Arctic. Climate change is the culprit, she says, and it is the same mechanism of feedback is at work everywhere.

"The rest of the year we are fine," she continued, "and we, she says, "We find another culture, we find another way of living, we adapt."

But the climate CO2 cuts disappeared, the rivers and the land — the land, she said, it's hungry, what used to be fed. There is no longer, there are no scheduled activities. They are just there. It's more like how we're supposed to live." she adds.

Natural instinct

Never since the heatwave, under Sami, the herding to Sami starting a "dark." Village" that originate around the reindeer survival and climate pressure. They spend the crunch of the herding season, the herding season, the herding season,