

# Mining threatens Sami reindeer herding in Sweden

December 24 2013, by Anna-Karin Lampou

---



A reindeer near the Swedish village of Vuollerim, Lapland province, west of the coastal city of Luleaa

As winter approaches, the Samis of northern Sweden move thousands of reindeer down from the snow-covered mountains for lowland grazing. They have done so for centuries, but they wonder how much longer they can continue.

The mining industry is one of several modern threats to the unique way of life of the Samis, the only indigenous people in the EU, and one small, tightly-knit community has decided to fight back.

The roughly 100 residents of the Jaahkaagasska area near the subarctic town of Jokkmokk are deeply worried what will happen if the proposed Kallak iron mine, an open pit project mostly located inside the district, is allowed to go ahead.

"There's no way our [reindeer](#) herding will be able to continue," said Niklas Spik, a spokesman for the Jaahkaagasska Sami community. "The natural straying won't be possible if the reindeer can't move freely."

Roughly 80,000 Samis inhabit a huge swathe of land stretching from Norway across Sweden and Finland to Russia.

Friction with the 21st century economy is not unusual, but rarely is it played out as dramatically as here.

Samis and environmental activists have protested against the plans for the mine the entire year.

Malin Norrby, 27, was fined 2,000 kronor (220 euros, \$300) last week for an incident in July when she and other activists tied themselves to a self-built wooden tower that blocked access to the mine.

"I went to Jokkmokk to protest against the mining boom and the unsustainable use of finite resources," she told AFP after the fine was meted out.



Ulf Bergdahl from the Sami village of Saarivuoma shows his talent with the lasso on a stuffed reindeer at the Skansen Open Air museum in Stockholm, Sweden, on February 6, 2006

Norrby and other activists argue that the mine makes no allowances for the shape of a Sami district such as Jaahkaagasska, which is long and narrow, stretching through different types of vegetation suitable for different seasons.

Spik said a mine located in the passage between the mountain pastures in the west and the eastern winter grazing areas would prevent the animals from moving between the seasonal pastures, leaving them to starve.

## **Economic value pitted against cultural value**

"Sami villages already encounter so many forms of encroachment on their areas, from roads to windmills, that they just can't take anymore," said Mattias Aahren, head of the human rights unit of the Sami Council, an umbrella organisation of Sami groups.

Prospected mines in Kiruna and Roennbaeck, also in northern Sweden, likewise cut the grazing land in half and affect nearby areas with dust and transport, critics said.

"The mines are located at the worst site possible for reindeer herding," said Aahren, who represents the affected villages, including the one in Roennbaeck that submitted a petition to the UN's human rights committee in September 2013.



Tor Lundberg Tourda stands in test mining holes at the Kallak prospecting area near Randijaur village, 40 km north-west of Jokkmokk, in Swedish Lapland on November 6, 2013

But Fred Boman, CEO of British Beowulf's subsidiary Jokkmokk Iron Mines, Jimab, told AFP he thought the fears were exaggerated.

He expressed confidence the mine would be approved by the government.

"This is a very solid and large ore find and the [economic value](#) of this weighs more than the local reindeer herding business," he said.

"But (reindeer herding) has important cultural value, and we are absolutely convinced that we can get on with this together."

The conflict between cultural heritage and mining is still being debated, and advocates of the mines argue that the industry will create jobs in areas otherwise troubled by high unemployment rates.



The Sami flag next to snow covered trees at the Kallak prospecting area near Randijaur village, 40 km north-west of Jokkmokk, in Swedish Lapland on November 6, 2013

In Jokkmokk, with a population of 5,000 citizens, the Kallak mine would lead to 500 jobs, for at least 14 years, according to advocates.

But Tor Lundberg Tourda, a local activist, is not impressed, and sees it all as a continuation of a pattern of exploitation.

"The Swedish state has colonised these areas for over 300 years, land that has been used by Samis for thousands of years", he said, standing by one of the test holes on top of the kilometre-long iron ore deposit.



A reindeer on the E10 highway between Gallivare and Lulea in Swedish lapland on November 18, 2012

What is more, it is not just the natural environment which the Samis seek to preserve.

They also hope to keep their culture, which has undergone enormous changes over time but has always maintained one constant: The close relationship with the reindeer.

Johan Andersson may just be 18 years old, but he is determined to help take the proud Sami heritage through the 21st century.

With other young Samis, he attends a boarding school in Jokkmokk, where he learns the materials and techniques of traditional handicrafts and is taught how to distinguish between different kinds of reindeer and even between different types of snow.

"I like the handicrafts, studying the Sami language, the reindeer herding business and learning about nature guiding," he said. "There are so many things that are useful to know."

© 2013 AFP

Citation: Mining threatens Sami reindeer herding in Sweden (2013, December 24) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-12-threatens-sami-reindeer-herding-sweden.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.