

Southern Sámi language could be in danger if reindeer herding is restricted

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The Supreme Court of Norway ruled that the development of wind power at Fosen in Trøndelag county violated human rights and the Sámi's right to carry out their cultural livelihood. What will happen to the wind farm and the mountain area remains uncertain. Credit: NTB

Wind turbines are contributing to the Southern Sámi losing grazing land for their reindeer husbandry. This livelihood is central to the identity of the Southern Sámi culture and thus to their language, researchers say.

The Sámi's fight against the billion-dollar development in Roan and at Storheia in Trøndelag county won an important victory when the Supreme Court of Norway in 2021 determined the government's concession for wind power development at Fosen to be invalid.

The Supreme Court ruled that the development was a violation of human rights and the Sámi's right to their cultural practices. What will happen to the wind farm and the mountain area remains uncertain.

"This is a pattern that has been going on for generations, and it makes me wonder about the process. We're talking about a small microgroup that gets stung. That upsets me," says Trond Risto Nilssen, an NTNU researcher at the Department of Teacher Education.

Threat for entire culture

Nilssen is one of the authors of the book [The Indigenous Identity of the South Saami](#), which was published in 2019, two years before the remarkable Supreme Court verdict. In the book he writes about how the practice of reindeer herding for the Southern Sámi—"a minority within the minority"—is central to both the [language](#) and culture of the ethnic group.

"The construction of [wind turbines](#) in Southern Sámi lands raises issues of the greatest importance for the Southern Sámi as an ethnic group. This is about rights and about the Southern Sámi language. Furthermore, many Southern Sámi believe that reindeer herding is the most important carrier of their culture, such that threats to grazing areas are a threat to the entire culture," Nilssen wrote.

He maintains that the Southern Sámi identity is strongly linked to reindeer herding itself.

"We're talking about a marginalized group under great pressure, where reindeer husbandry is an identity marker. Every area that is gobbled up by development thus takes on great importance."

"An identity marker can be understood as something that is important for an individual's understanding of him- or herself," Nilssen said.

"Who are we, who is in the group we belong to? What are the characteristics of this community? Reindeer herding includes traditional knowledge and that's one thing, but this also has linguistic aspects. This becomes apparent when older and younger Southern Sámi are interviewed," Nilssen said.

Southern Sámi language is almost extinct

The Southern Sámi language has long been characterized as endangered and is described as a minority language even in the Sámi context. How many people speak Southern Sámi is uncertain, but it is assumed that fewer than a thousand people have mastery of the language. The difference between Southern Sámi and the much more widespread Northern Sámi is often described as being like the difference between Norwegian and Icelandic.

"Without reindeer herding, the Southern Sámi language wouldn't exist today," says linguist Inger Johansen.

Johansen is a senior lecturer at Nord University where her research includes Sámi language and culture. She says that the Southern Sámi language is now in the process of improving its position after almost being threatened with extinction. The language has been particularly vulnerable due to extensive assimilation among the Sámi in southern Norway. She notes that reindeer husbandry has served as a counterweight to assimilation.

"The Sámi have always engaged in various types of industry, not just reindeer husbandry. On the coast, the Sámi have tended to combine farming and fishing in the same way as Norwegians, whereas reindeer herding has been more common in inland regions," she said.

Reindeer husbandry has given the Sámi a livelihood that is unique to them and that they have managed independently.

Reindeer husbandry has thus played an extremely important role, especially in the Southern Sámi areas. It would be wrong to say that they've had the mountains to themselves, because reindeer herding has been regulated, and cabins and roads have been built, snowmobiles are a presence and windmills have been erected. But they have been left alone to practice their livelihood.

The further south in the country you go, the more the Sámi have been in the minority.

"The Sámi have assimilated to a greater extent in the south than in the north, and in coastal areas the Sámi have disappeared to a greater extent than in the mountains, where they have been able to exercise their livelihood more independently," she said.

Tiny and invisible minority

On the Trøndelag coast, the Sámi language and culture have largely disappeared. Traces of the language can still be found in many place names or in anecdotes.

"The Sámi on the Trøndelag coast have been a tiny and invisible minority, and those who pursue reindeer herding at Fosen today have been completely overrun by society at large in the wind power case," says Johansen.

What consequences will there be for the language if the Southern Sámi lose their reindeer husbandry ranges?

"I think the loss of grazing lands will have major consequences, even though the language today has more legs to stand on than just reindeer herding. Not that many years ago only a handful of public positions used Southern Sámi as the working language. Today there are so many positions that it's impossible to fill them all. But there are still a lot of Southern Sámi children who aren't receiving the education they're entitled to, and we're seeing that the language has been lost in many families," Johansen says.

Johansen says the lack of resources continues to be a problem.

"The Southern Sámi population is scattered, and Sámi who don't live in Snåsa or Røros, where there are Southern Sámi teachers, find that they have to go through a lengthy process to get adequate language teaching. Things look good on paper, but the reality is that there aren't enough teaching aids and knowledge," she said.

Commission requests an explanation

The two researchers are now looking forward to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report, due to be released by 1 June 2023. The commission was set up by the Norwegian Parliament in 2018 to investigate injustices committed against the Sámi, Kven and Forest Finns as a result of the Norwegianization policy.

Dagfinn Høybråten, the commission's chair, last autumn asked the Ministry of Petroleum and Energy (OED) to explain how the ministry plans to safeguard both the state's ownership interests and the state's human rights obligations in the Fosen case and in future land conflicts regarding industrial development in the reindeer herding district.

Høybråten told NRK earlier this year, "We've noted from the many inquiries that we've received for the commission, that a lot of people are worried about whether they can count on this Supreme Court judgment to actually have consequences."

OED has announced that they will secure a solution to maintain the operation of the wind power plants, while simultaneously safeguarding the reindeer herding rights. Leif Arne Jåma in the Fosen reindeer herding district told the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) that the Sámi perceive the time the ministry is taking as a great burden, and that he fears they will be the last Sámi able to pursue reindeer husbandry as a livelihood in Fosen.

"The Southern Sámi must be guaranteed the possibility to preserve their culture and language," says Nilssen.

"Preserving the culture and language requires having an active and lively cultural practice. My observation is that reindeer herding is very important for maintaining the Southern Sámi identity, including for Sámi who don't engage in reindeer herding themselves," Nilssen said.

Linguist Johansen also emphasizes the importance of reindeer husbandry to the culture.

"The Sámi language can't survive independently of the rest of the culture and the Southern Sámi identity. Reindeer herding is very central as a culture and identity marker here. It's critical for the entire Southern Sámi [culture](#) to make arrangements so that engaging in [reindeer](#) herding in the future will continue to be possible as well," she says.

Provided by Norwegian University of Science and Technology

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