

Back from the tundra

NORUT Samfunnsforskning rapport SF 17/94: INN FRA VIDDA, Hushold og økonomisk tilpasning i reindrifta i Guovdageaidnu 1960–1993 («Back from the tundra, household and economical adaptation in the reindeer husbandry in Kautokeino 1960–1993») by Ragnar Nilsen & Jens Halvdan Mosli (in Norwegian). Bajos/NORUT. Guovdageaidnu – Tromsø 1994. 121 pp. To be delivered from KonTur AS, N-9056 Mortenhals, Norway. Price NOK 125.

The household of Saami reindeer herders is actually the controlling factor of overgrazing in parts of the Finnmark tundra. This is asserted in a socio-economical study «Inn fra vidda» (Back from the tundra) by the Norwegian social scientists Ragnar Nilsen (University of Tromsø) and Jens Halvdan Mosli. The composition of the household and the tasks of the household members are key factors to understand changes in the life style of herders and the household-based economy of Saami reindeer pastoralists, which has expressed itself in increasing reindeer herds with a concomitant overexploitation of pastures.

Since 1960 Saami reindeer husbandry has undergone drastic changes due to the introduction of modern housing and permanent residence in central communities and more compulsory education. This forced women away from work with the animals on the tundra to spend more time at home. Husbandry and herding were left to the men. Snowmobiles and other off-road conveyances only strengthened men's cultural separation from the family. The new opportunities of women outside the household, like education and various jobs, had direct consequences for the household economy. Thus, households were secured a cash income which again reduced the need for slaughtering animals of the herd. These and other opportunities (like social welfare payments) enabled herders to build up greater herds, the traditional symbol of importance and cleverness in Saami culture, the report concludes.

The authors argue that there is no single reason why this process, which resulted in increasing numbers of animals and deterioration of pastures, came about. Alternative to blame the authorities for their herding policies or herders themselves, they emphasize the complex interrelationships of state policies, herding strategies and the many factors intermingled in peoples' increasing involvement with and dependence on new technology and participation in a modern society in the North.

The main point of the study is the importance of the household and the rural economy of reindeer husbandry. However, this insight which is based on perspectives on the character of household economies developed in several sciences has never been applied in the policies for modernising the reindeer «industry». The study by Nilsen and Mosli will probably be a break-through for a more total view on reindeer husbandry as both a socio-cultural and a biological system, and should be taken into consideration for developing a sustainable management of the tundra.

For biologists, ecologists and agriculturalists the report is most important. The herding operations of Saami reindeer pastoralists have of course not only biological implications, but are part of the cultural context of reindeer management. The report must be read by reindeer owners, managers, administrators and researchers not only in Norway and it deserves a wide distribution.

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