

Economical importance of Finnish reindeer industry

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Changes in reindeer management, the current situation and future prospects are examined in terms of their professional implications. The subject is examined from four angles: 1) overall trends in reindeer management, 2) reindeer ownership, 3) the socioeconomic aspects of reindeer management, and 4) the "image" of reindeer management, with particular reference to the state of the profession, its future and the challenges facing it.

The 1970s and '80s were years of rapid expansion for reindeer management. Within 15 years favourable weather conditions, antiparasite medication, supplementary feed, modern technology, calf slaughter and other factors all contributed to a vast increase in reindeer, and hence reindeer meat production, so much so that by the early '90s the total number of reindeer was approaching 430 000, and reindeer meat production exceeded 4 million kg. Due to excess numbers of reindeer, stocks had to be culled. At the same time problems arose with the processing of reindeer meat. As a result, demand slumped and prices plummeted. In a few years the outlook for reindeer management changed drastically. Since then the profession has been marked by uncertainty and change. The number of reindeer is now below the permitted level. In the 1996/97 season, number of living reindeer in herds totalled over 202 000, slaughtered reindeer 80 000 (Fig. 1) and meat production about 2 million kg. Income from slaughtered animals amounted to FIM 58 million.

Reindeer ownership is very dispersed. Of the about 7 000 reindeer owners, two-thirds own fewer than 25 counted reindeer, and 3 000 not even ten; only 500 own 100 or more reindeer. Two in three reindeer are owned by people with at least 50 animals. The number of reindeer owners is highest in Sodankylä, over 900; there are fewer than 700 in Inari and around 500 in Rovaniemi rural district. In Utsjoki, Enontekiö and Savukoski, reindeer owners account for just over 10 per cent of the population. The average age of reindeer owners is 42 years; weighed by number of animals owned the figure is 45. Reindeer management still attracts young people, almost 1300 reindeer owners being under 25. Age is seldom an excuse for retiring from the profession, as shown by the 850 reindeer owners over 65 years of age. Only a fifth of owners are women, which is a fairly high proportion.

Reindeer management differs markedly from one area to another. In the southern reindeer herding area animal numbers are relatively low and reindeer management tends to be an auxiliary occupation. Due to the shortage of lichen and other winter feed, intensive supplementary feeding is required through most of the winter. In the north, reindeer density and numbers per owner are greater, and natural grazing is more common than farther south. Two-thirds of all reindeer are to be found north of the line Salla-Sodankylä, in an area designated specifically for reindeer management.

There are an estimated 800 full-time reindeer herders in Finland. Two-thirds of them live in the above designated area and almost every other one in the Sami homelands. In Inari there are almost 170 professional reindeer herders and in Sodankylä around 90. In Utsjoki, Enontekiö and Savukoski, reindeer herding accounts for over 10 per cent of jobs.

In 1994, reindeer management provided a good half of the gross earnings of herders with more than 50 reindeer; agriculture and forestry accounted for 20%, salaried income for 12% and pensions for about 10%. Reindeer management provided at least four-fifths of the income of around 440 people. Relatively speaking, its significance for income was greatest for young owners, that is, under 35-year-olds, even though the number of animals they own is still rather low. This finding reflects the poor employment situation of young people in remote districts.

The volume of work involved in reindeer management has declined by roughly a third in just over a decade. Work input amounts to over 200 000 working days, or roughly 900 manpower years. The average number of working days per reindeer in the northern management area is 0.8; farther south one half day more. The larger the herds, the smaller the work input per animal, owners of more than 150 animals working no more than 0.6 days per reindeer. Collecting of reindeer account for a quarter of the work input; a similar proportion goes into supplementary feeding and feed production.

The gross margin of reindeer management is about 40-50%. The costs arising from both supplementary feeding and the use of vehicles total FIM 20 million, and from other activities over FIM 10 million. Reindeer owners do not consider their profession particularly profitable. Above all they value closeness to the nature, independence and the opportunity to foster the traditional way of life.

The professional status of reindeer management could be raised by promoting rotational grazing, developing small-scale meat processing facilities, introducing structural changes, enhancing the image of the profession, and putting a greater effort into training, guidance and research. In the northern management area the dialogue between nature and the economy is deepening.

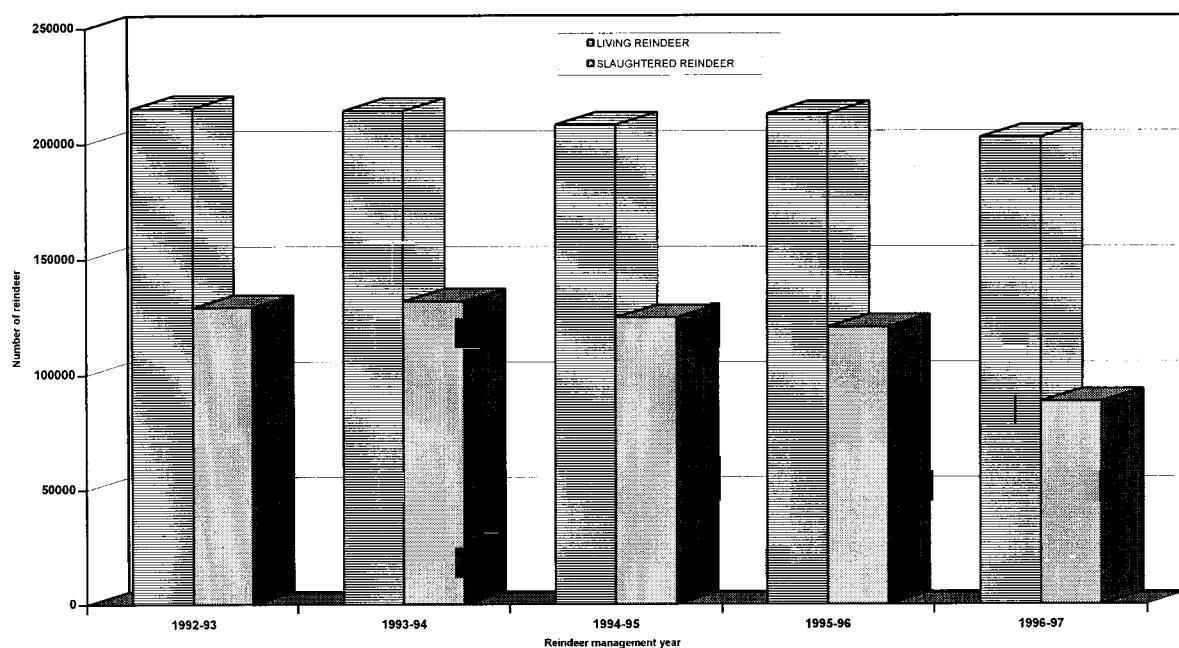


Fig. 1 Living and slaughtered reindeer in Finland 1992-96.