

Sami in Sweden

Archeological finds suggest that the Sami people have lived in the Arctic region for thousands of years. Modern Sami build on their rich culture and long-established traditions but are happy to use snow scooters rather than skis in their reindeer husbandry.

Sami country – *Sápmi* – stretches over the northern part of the Arctic area of the Scandinavian countries and the Kola Peninsula. The Sami have been recognized by the United Nations as indigenous people. This means that they are given the oppor-

tunity to develop and preserve their crafts, language, education, reindeer keeping, traditions and identity.

There is no census for Sami, but it is estimated that there are around 70,000 people spread over four countries. There

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Reindeer husbandry is often a family business for Sami. Photo: Samiskt informationscentrum

are approximately 20,000 in Sweden, 40,000 in Norway, 6,000 in Finland and 2,000 in Russia (Kola Peninsula).¹ Worldwide, there are 370 million native people spread throughout 70 different countries.

The Sami were originally nomadic, living in tents during the summer and more sturdy huts built with peat during the colder seasons. Sami tents do still exist, but today Sami often live in modern housing.

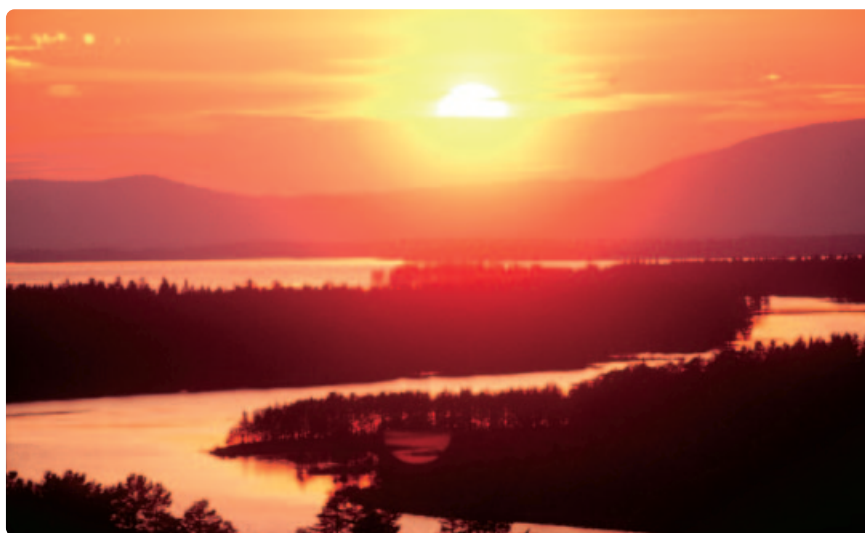
Urbanization and industrialization of southern Sweden has contributed to large movements of people towards the south to work in “regular” professions. Today 10 percent of Sami in Sweden live from reindeer husbandry, which is often a family business, in many cases in combination with tourism or fishing.

Reindeer Husbandry

The Sami are referred to as the “eight seasons’ people” because the work involved in reindeer husbandry is divided into different time intervals throughout the year and includes calving, marking, counting up, castration and slaughter.

The traditional movement of reindeer, when families moved by foot or on skis with whole reindeer herds to new areas, has with time been substituted by faster transport like snow scooters, lorries or helicopters. Some Sami prioritize environmentally friendly methods by using traditional knowledge in combination with new working practices; for instance by using a horse instead of a helicopter to round up a herd.

A Sami village is an economical and administrative union, created with the intention to keep reindeer, which is regulated by reindeer husbandry laws. Sami villages consist of several reindeer husbandry



Most of Sami country lies north of the Arctic circle, which means the sun never sets there in the summer. Photo: Patrick Trädgårdh/www.imagebank.sweden.se

companies. Each village has a sectioned off area for collective use of pastures.

The Sami Language

The Sami have their own languages, divided into three main areas. The areas’ borders stretch in a horizontal line straight across Sweden, Finland, Norway and Russia. This means that the Sami of northern Norway, Sweden and Finland speak the same language, North Sami. In Russia, Kola Sami is spoken, but North Sami is partly also understood and spoken.

In the next language area, which covers Jokkmokk and Gällivare as well as parts of Tysfjord in Norway, Lule Sami is spoken.

South Sami is spoken in Västerbotten and Jämtland, as well as near the Sami geographical border in Härjedalen and Dalarna.²

Generally, the younger generations neither speak nor write Sami. As a result, several actions to maintain and develop language skills are prioritized, such as study groups, teaching aids and other projects. In 2006 it was suggested that the administrative district for Sami languages be expanded. This would mean that the native language Sami would be an alternative to the Swedish language within the education system. Approximately 6,000 Sami speak their mother tongue; for 5,000 this is North Sami. Sami is a rich language and so there are, for instance, over 100 different ways of saying snow.³

Sami Parliament

The Sami political struggle for increased influence and self determination started in the 1950s. Today there is an authoritative body elected by the people, *sametinget*,

whose task is to safeguard, develop and coordinate all questions concerning Sami areas of interest.

Elections to the Sami parliament are held every four years. The parliament has 31 members who gather three times per year in different locations in Sweden. The democratically elected assembly is divided between six different parties. Economically the parliament is run on grants from the Swedish government and there is only one full-time politician, the chairman of the assembly. A parliament building is to be completed in 2009 in Kiruna.

The main political question is increased influence, which has partly been accomplished by the Swedish government transferring fishing and hunting permits from the county administrative boards to the Sami parliament. Other prioritized areas are increasing youth participation in elections, equality, the keeping of predatory animals and reindeer, Sami research and the survival of Sami languages.

The Sami governments in Finland, Norway and Sweden have together drawn up a Nordic Sami convention, which will strengthen their position as a minority, and also influence decision-making in Sami-related questions.

Traditional Sami Costumes

The traditional Sami costumes, *kolts*, are very different in both color and style depending on their geographical origin. The costumes, which traditionally are blue, have at least 12 different styles and are different for men and women. Some Sami have redesigned their costumes and given them characteristic patterns specific to each family. Contemporary fashion also

Did you know?

- Reindeer milk tastes sweet and looks like melted ice cream.
- Reindeer meat is rich in minerals and very lean.
- 2,000 tons of reindeer meat is the annual slaughter yield.
- Reindeer eat mushrooms, different types of lichen, grass and herbs.
- There are 51 Swedish Sami villages.
- Sweden’s largest Sami village is called Sirkas and is in Jokkmokk.
- Sami shoes are made from reindeer hide.
- Sami singing is called yoik and is meant to reflect a person or an event.
- The Sami have eleven official flag days and a Sami national day on 6 February.
- The Sami national song was written by Isak Saba.
- Typical Sami first names are Ante, Risstin and Sunna, and double names such as Nils-Anund, Per-Anders or Nils-Gustav are common.

influences the costumes. Younger Sami often prefer wearing costumes made of shiny silk in a diverse range of colors at Sami meetings. Hats are increasingly popular, possibly because of training in both hard and soft handicrafts. Educational programs have had positive effects, not just for the wearing of Sami costumes, but also for passing down knowledge of how to make them and other things, such as traditional knives.

Education

The Sami education center was formed as a high school in 1942 and is today situated in Jokkmokk in northern Sweden. The center offers training in reindeer husbandry, traditional cooking and handicrafts. The center also offers the possibility to study Sami subjects in combination with a Swedish high school program. Short courses in the Sami languages are also on offer, as is commissioned training for companies and government institutions in areas concerning culture, reindeer or other Sami industries. The two-year programs are open to applicants of 18 years and over. Applicants of all ages apply to the popular hard and soft handicraft programs to develop and relearn the Sami handicrafts.

For the school year starting in the autumn of 2006, 136 people applied, but the limited intake meant only 88 students were given places. This increased interest is still apparent, as there are already 107

applicants for 2007. There are six Sami schools in Sweden, which are compulsory schools with Sami subjects. The schools are located in Karesuando, Lannavara, Kiruna, Gällivare, Jokkmokk and, in the southern area, Tärnaby.

Sami Handicrafts – *Duodji*

The reindeer plays a big part in the Sami culture; it is the basis for many materials, everyday objects and food produce. It is important to the Sami to learn everything about reindeer and this knowledge is passed on not only through formal education but also by word of mouth from generation to generation. Everything from the reindeer is kept and used: skin and horns are the basis for shoes and knives, meat is used in cooking and in further processing.

Sami handicrafts, *duodji*, are made with nature's materials and often have soft rounded shapes that are pleasing to the touch but are mainly functional. Traditional objects have kept the same designs, and knives and bowls make statements through their intensive ornamentation. Decorating was, and is, an important part of the handicraft, in part to display the maker's technical skills, but also to preserve family and cultural patterns.

Many Sami make handicrafts to boost their income, often as a side line to their ordinary work, but a select few earn their living from it.

An important development for Sami handicrafts is a quality marking that

guarantees authenticity for the buyer.

The marking is equally important for the craftsman as an indication of establishment in the industry.

Sami Religion

The Sami religion, *schamanism*, disappeared with the establishment of the Swedish church and attempts to convert the Sami people to Christianity. The Sami faith constituted worship of various spiritual beings, where the dead had great influence over the living. The Sami had many different gods, for example the God of Thunder Tiermes and his wife Akka. The sun always had a central place in their worship and so it was often drawn in the middle of drums.

Sami places of sacrifice and holy objects, *seitar*, became a threat to Christianity, so threats of worldly punishment were made if the Sami did not abandon their faith. The Sami drums were burnt on bonfires and their religion disappeared completely in the 1700s.

References

- ¹ *Samer – ett ursprungsfolk i Sverige*, Regeringskansliet (2004).
- ² Nickel, Klaus Peter, *Samisk Grammatik*, Universitetsforlaget (1990).
- ³ Røung, Israel, *Samerna i historien och nutiden*, Bonnier Fakta (1982).

Related links

www.same.net

The official Sami website (limited content in English)

www.samer.se

Sami Information Center (in Swedish)

www.ajtte.com

Sami Museum, Jokkmokk (in Swedish)

www.jokkmokksmarknad.com

Sami market, Jokkmokk (in English)

www.turism.jokkmokk.se

Jokkmokk tourist office (in English)

www.laponia.nu

World Heritage Sweden (in English)

www.info.samefolket.se

Samefolket, Sami magazine (in Swedish)

www.samernas.nu

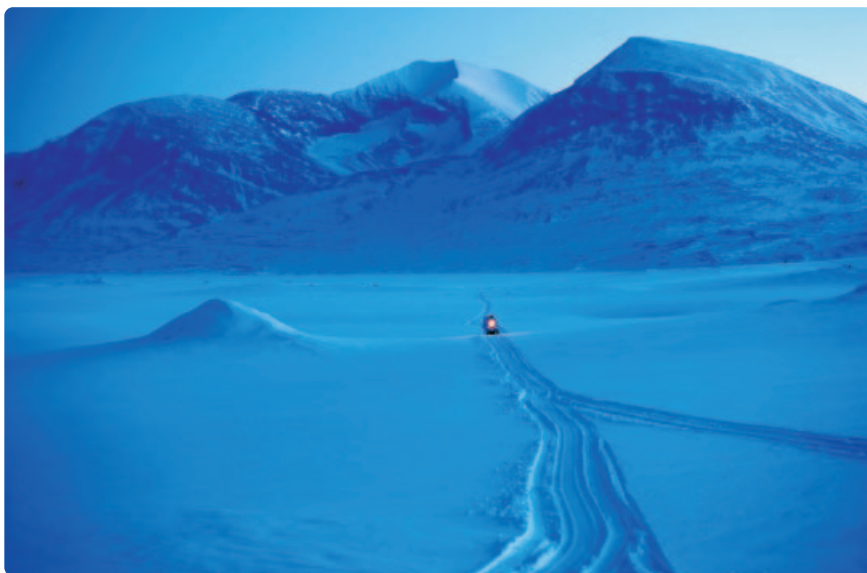
Sami educational center (in Swedish)

www.sameslojdstiftelsen.com

The Sami handicraft foundation (in English)

www.sapmi.se

The National Union of the Swedish Sami People (limited content in English)



Many of today's Sami use motorized vehicles like scooters, motorcycles and helicopters to round up their reindeer herds. Photo: Samiskt informationscentrum

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