

The Northern Lapland forest conflict: Ethical aspects of local livelihoods, culture, legality, sustainability and global markets

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Reindeer husbandry and forestry production have a long history of co-existence and conflicts in Finnish Lapland, where unlike many other parts of the northern hemisphere most reindeer are managed in the forest zone that is also traditionally used for commercial forestry. In spite of decades of mutual cooperation and modification of forestry practices, during the past 10 – 15 years conflicts have arisen that have concentrated around the state forests of Northern Lapland, where they cover nearly 90% of forests in the region. The reasons for this development are manifold. An increasing share of state forests used for nature conservation and restrictions caused by wilderness and recreational demands have significantly reduced the allowable cut from the northernmost state forests, weakening the economy of state forestry and wood supply for local saw-milling and regional pulp and paper industries. While the reduced cut has eased the situation for reindeer husbandry in general, there still remain local cutting pressures on some reindeer management units. In particular some native Sami reindeer herders have strongly opposed the old-growth cut in their own areas and brought the legality of logging into consideration of United Nations Human Rights Commission. They claim that logging activities endanger the continuity of reindeer management, traditionally forming the economic base of the Sami minority culture. Furthermore, the general decrease in profitability of reindeer management has worsened the conflict, which also is characterized by the low productivity of range land due to overgrazing and forestry impacts, both debated by the parties and have been difficult to be objectively and unanimously quantify by still intensively ongoing research activities.

The conflict has taken international dimensions also as a result of the activities of national and international environmental groups gaining extensive coverage in the media. This has caused concerns among forest industries operating in international markets. A recent major research project on the sustainable use of the forests of Northern Lapland by the Finnish Forest Research Institute attempts to gain a holistic knowledge about the possibilities to reach a compromise on the conflicting demands, including, besides forestry and reindeer husbandry, tourism, nature conservation, wood-based industries and their local spin-offs, for maximising the welfare of the people of Northern Lapland. This paper attempts to identify and structure – but not to solve – some of the ethical and moral standpoints and issues of major stakeholders and argumentation involved – including the roles of the scientific community.