GIRJAS SAMI VILLAGE VS. THE SWEDISH STATE

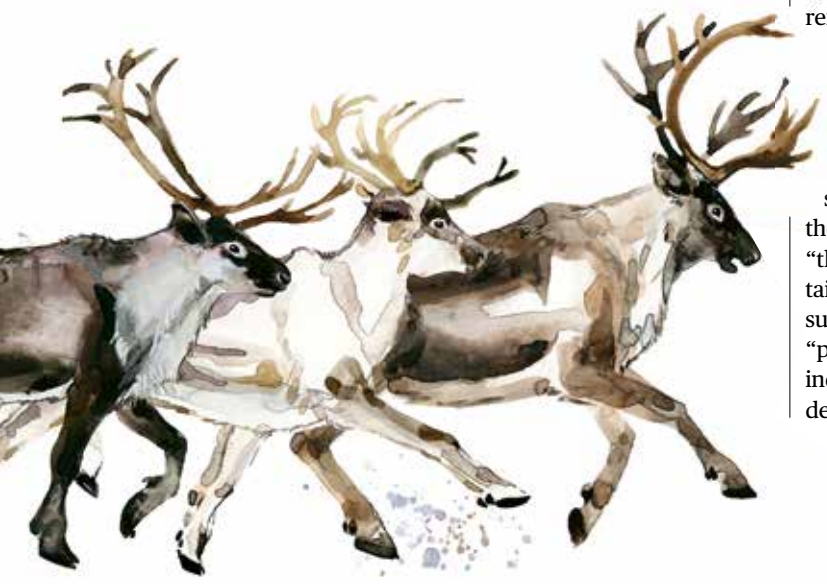
BREAKTHROUGH FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

by **Påhl Ruin**

Reindeer herding Sami won huge success when the Supreme Court last year gave the Sami village Girjas the right to decide on hunting and fishing within the village boundaries. Now the Sami hope to have a greater influence over land use also in other areas, such as mining and construction of wind farms. But the prospects there are not as good.

Girjas Sami village is located in Norrbotten, some 200 kilometers from Sweden's northernmost border with Norway. The nearest airport is in Kiruna. In the arrival hall it is clear that you are in Sápmi, the land of the Sami. An advertising pillar column describing the region's attractions also includes a picture of a Sami and the English text: "Learn about the Sámi culture, the Sámi are one of the indigenous peoples of the world and for centuries they have lived close to nature".

When you get out of the airport, however, something completely different dominates your view: the mine. The low-lying sun has already set behind the mountain Kirunavaara, which towers a few kilometers away. Here, the state-owned company LKAB has mined ore for over a hundred years and today it is the world's largest underground mine for iron ore. About fifteen years ago, it was discovered that the cracks caused by the explosions were beginning to approach the city – with the result that parts of the city had to be demolished and rebuilt some distance away. The city of Kiruna exists because of the mine and thus has to move when the mine needs more space. The contrast could not be greater: When the mine needs to expand, then the city gives way – but when the reindeer trade loses pastures, the flexibility is not as great.



EVEN BEFORE INDUSTRIALIZATION, there was extensive discrimination against Sweden's indigenous people, but it was in the 20th century that the situation became acute. Reindeer-owning Sami who were used to letting their herds move long distances between pastures noticed how their way of life was made difficult by the development of society: by roads, train tracks, forestry, hydropower and of course also by mining. In more recent decades, the reindeer herding industry has also been challenged by the growing tourism industry and the construction of wind turbines.

It is against this background that one should see the Sami reindeer husbandry's perhaps greatest success to date, the ruling in the Supreme Court from January 2020. Girjas Sami village had for many years pointed out the problems for reindeer husbandry of the large number of recreational fishermen and hunters in sensitive areas. Reindeer are fugitive animals and are easily disturbed by noise and movement. When state authorities did not heed their concerns, they turned to the courts. And after ten years of litigation, the Sami village won "the right to lease small game hunting and fishing in the mountain areas". And it was the court's motivation that was the most surprising: That Sami land rights have been worked up through "prescription from time immemorial" and that a convention on indigenous peoples' rights (ILO 169) is binding even though Sweden has not ratified the convention.

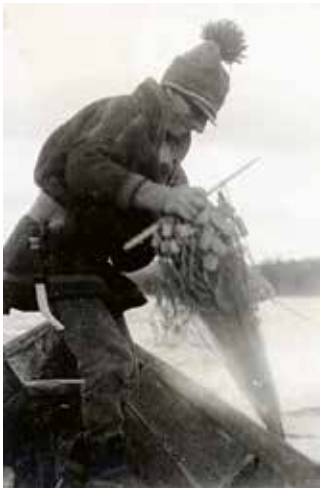


PHOTO: E. KARLSSON, NORDISKA MUSEET/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

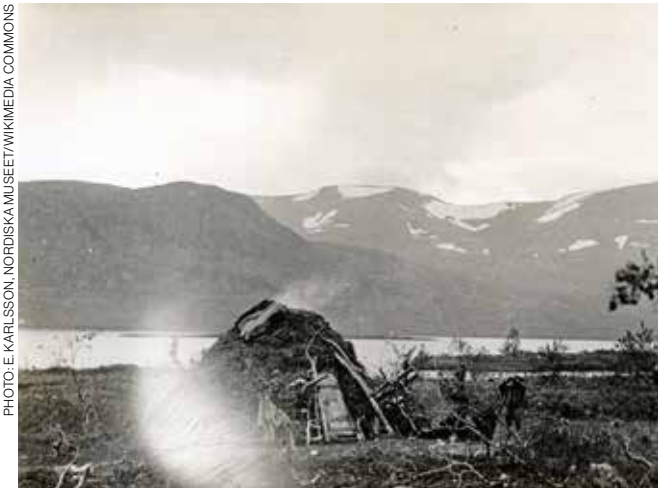

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PHOTO: GURLI LÖÖF/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Life in Girjas Sami Village, 1925; Anders Saitun, is fishing with net, J. Erikson Vennis, and Tomas Pittja beside a boat.

What further consequences does the judgment have? No one can say for sure. Several of the other 50 Sami villages in the country may now obtain a similar right to control fishing and hunting. What do local fishermen and hunters say about this? And what do those engaged in tourism say? And what does the Judgment mean for the Sami's influence when it comes to the construction of new mines and new wind turbines? I took these questions with me on my trip to northern Sweden and started by interviewing the mayor of Kiruna. With the help of GPS, I drive towards Kiruna town hall, with the mine as the dominant silhouette on the left. When I arrive at the place where the town hall is supposed to be, I find the spot empty – because the GPS took me to the old town hall which has already been demolished as a result of the town move! Around the newly built city hall a few kilometers away, the construction of a new district is underway. Inside the super-modern building, it echoes empty as a result of the on-going pandemic. The mayor Gunnar Selberg receives me with a fist bump. What does he think of the Girjas judgment?

"It was a good thing that Girjas got its case tried; I fully understand that they wanted to go to court. But I was surprised by the judgment. In particular, the wording about ancient traditions and "prescription from time immemorial". Reindeer herding Sami have never had a tradition or a custom of selling hunting and fishing licenses. They have never run tourism, they have hunted and fished as part of their self-sufficiency."

He agrees that Sami have been badly treated through generations:

"Of course they were robbed of their land, they did not know what kind of contracts they were signing. But should we go back 100 years in history and change this? No, it's not sustainable. I understand the Sami, absolutely, they have been through terrible things. But the claim that they were here first? No, that's not really true; before them there was a hunting and fishing culture here. But should it matter? I do not think so. I myself was born and raised here, does that mean I should have other rights than those who moved here later? No, we cannot have that."

Gunnar Selberg believes that Kiruna and the surrounding area has tourism potential that has not been fully developed, and that this potential will not be easier to develop if the Sami village is allowed to control fishing and hunting:

"I myself have been self-employed in the tourist trade; there have been times when we wanted to ride dog sleds and scooters where no reindeer graze, yet I was told that we should stay away. I get the feeling they do not want us anywhere at all. But these conflicts seem unnecessary. The Sami culture is extremely important for the tourist trade; I myself have been feeding reindeer together with tourists."

He has several acquaintances among the reindeer owners. Many of them have other jobs in addition to reindeer herding to make ends meet.

"I spoke very recently with an acquaintance whose business concept is, among other things, to gather tourists around a fire and *joik* for them (a traditional form of Sami song) in the light of the flames."

THE CHAIRMAN OF Girjas Sami village, Matti Blind Berg, still has some reindeer, but together with his wife he also runs a guide company with Icelandic horses. They offer tours around the village of Puoltsa in the valley next to Kebnekaise, Sweden's highest mountain. On the phone he argues that Gunnar Selberg doesn't understand what the judgment really means:

"It's not about any custom of selling fishing licenses, it's about protecting reindeer husbandry, which is part of the Sami culture. We wanted the right to control fishing and small game hunting to protect our culture. When the hunt starts in the autumn, the reindeer become frightened and flee, thus burning a lot of energy. And they are greatly disturbed by the hunters' dogs."

PHOTO: KIRUNA MUNICIPALITY

"OF COURSE THEY WERE ROBBED OF THEIR LAND, THEY DID NOT KNOW WHAT KIND OF CONTRACTS THEY WERE SIGNING. BUT SHOULD WE GO BACK 100 YEARS IN HISTORY AND CHANGE THIS?"

Gunnar Selberg, mayor of Kiruna

PHOTO: MARIE BIRKL/THE SAMI PARLIAMENT

"IT'S NOT ABOUT ANY CUSTOM OF SELLING FISHING LICENSES, IT'S ABOUT PROTECTING REINDEER HUSBANDRY, WHICH IS PART OF THE SAMI CULTURE."

Matti Blind Berg, chairman of Girjas Sami village

He is extremely relieved by the judgment. He feels that the Sami can finally put pressure on the state, that indigenous issues after all these years finally have ended up high on the agenda.

"For over a hundred years, various interests have come here to northern Sweden and claimed the riches that exist on the Sami lands: minerals, forests, hydropower, wind power. Colonization has taken place here and it is still taking place today."

He claims that protecting the land where the reindeer graze is a way of protecting the indigenous people of the Nordic countries, a way of developing their culture:

"We are not a museum specimen; we are a living culture."

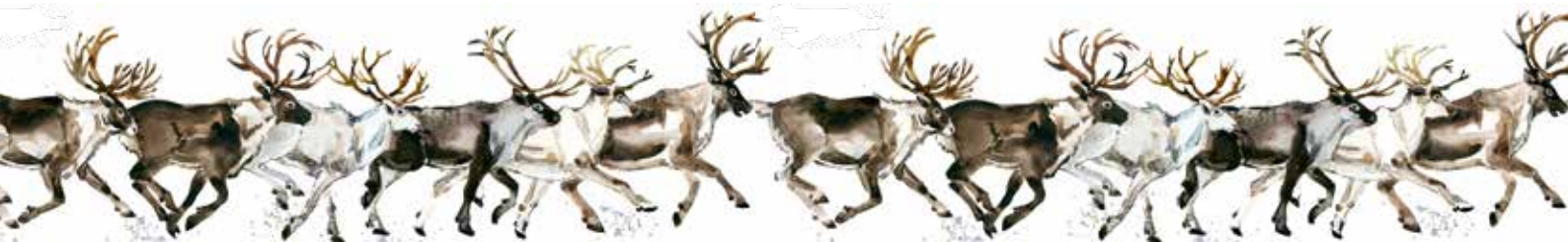
WHEN I AM IN KIRUNA, Matti Blind Berg has had to leave the municipality for a few days at short notice. But I still drive out to his farm in the village of Puoltsa which is a few miles from Nikkaluokta where the public road ends and where hikers usually begin the ascent of Kebnekaise. On the farm, the horses are out in the powder snow and one of the dogs happily follows me down to the Kalix river, which is frozen and whose surface sparkles in the morning sun. Matti Blind Berg has said in interviews that there were far-reaching plans to dam the river, but together with nature conservation forces, the reindeer herding trade managed to stop the project.

His own and his wife's guide company is called Ofelaš, which means guide in Sami. They want to show the visitors the beautiful landscape but also the Sami culture. In addition to horseback riding, visitors can look for wolverines and lynx together with knowledgeable reindeer herders or learn how to bake *gáhkku* (Sami bread) over an open fire.

This morning, the caretaker Henry Svonni is the only one on the farm. I come across him when he is on his way to the stable with hay for the horses. He is himself a Sami from a family of reindeer herders, but has no reindeer of his own these days.

"In early autumn, the *sarv* (the Sami word for male reindeer) must eat before slaughter, and that process is disrupted by both hunting and fishing because it involves a lot of movement in the area," he says when we settle down in the heated living room next to the stable. "Local hunters usually know the conditions, but the tourist hunters are worse. For example, they may think that it is ok to start hunting if they see a single reindeer in the distance; then they believe that the herd itself is far away. But that is not the case, reindeer are often scattered."

NOT FAR FROM WHERE we are sitting, wind turbines rise towards the sky. They are also a problem since the reindeer are disturbed by the noise and do not want to graze in the vicinity. Nowadays, many reindeer owners keep their herds together with the help of helicopters and then problems arise because there is a flight ban around the wind turbines. But perhaps the biggest challenge for the reindeer herding trade is the mines. For several years, a very sensitive issue has been on the agenda of a number of Swed-



ish governments: The British mining company Beowulf Mining wants to start a mine in Kallak, west of Jokkmokk, some 200 kilometers south of Kiruna. The mining company's promises of new jobs stand against environmental considerations and the reindeer trade's need for pastures. As I write this, at the end of November, Swedish Public Service Radio reports that the government has asked UNESCO to assess whether the mine in Kallak would threaten the mountain area Laponia's world heritage status and whether mining would infringe on Sami constitutional rights.

Henry Svonni, who is also politically involved in the new nationwide left-wing party Vändpunkt, is of course strongly opposed to the mine. His main point, however, is of a general kind. Whether it is the exploitation of minerals or the construction of wind turbines: Why not start an early dialogue with Sami interests?

"Here lies the intended mine in Kallak," he says, putting his finger on the rustic wooden table between us. "And here is an extremely important route for the grazing reindeer," he continues, pointing further down the table. "Once we Sami have a say in a matter, it has often already gone so far that all intended access roads are planned, and all surrounding buildings are budgeted. That's crazy! If they had asked us in time, we could have shown how the road can be drawn to avoid disturbing the reindeer's migration," he says and makes a wide half circle from one point to the other on the table.

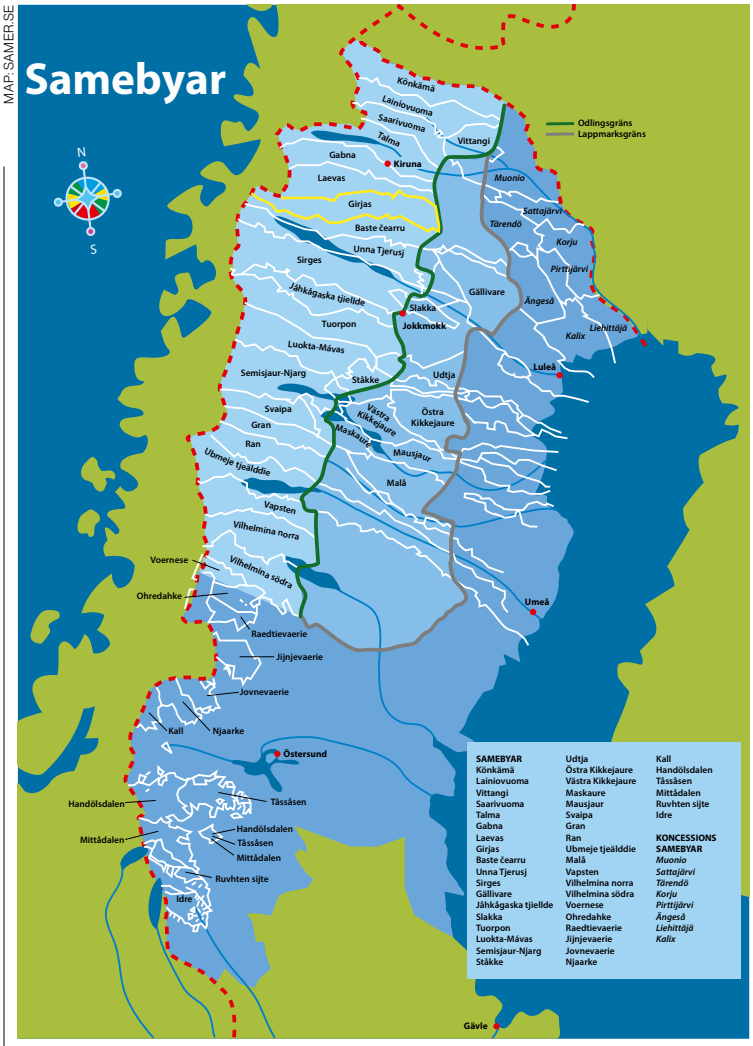
THIS IS HOW IT HAS BEEN for many decades, he sighs, and voices strong criticism of a number of Swedish governments: "They have been hypocrites for over 100 years! They have talked about the injustices that have affected indigenous peoples in Canada, the United States, Australia and a number of other countries – but at the same time they have treated their own indigenous people in an unacceptable way."

It is not only Henry Svonni on the farm in Puoltsa who is of that opinion: Sweden has repeatedly received similar criticism from various UN bodies. This year, a scathing report was also issued by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, which states that "the Sami are not allowed to participate in a meaningful and effective way in the decision-making processes that affect them". It is Marie B Hagsgård who quotes from the conclusions in the report. She is Vice President of the Council of Europe Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

For reasons of challengeability, she did not herself participate in the compilation of the report on Sweden – but she was not particularly surprised by the result.

"It's not about banning all other activities on the land of an indigenous people, it's about how to proceed when conflicts of interest arise," she says in a telephone interview. "In Canada, for example, it is obligatory to obtain the views of an indigenous

MAP: SAMER.SE



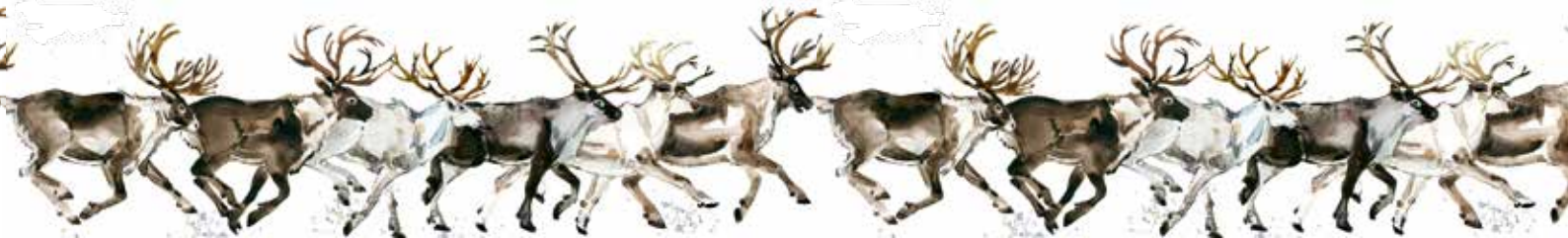
There are 51 *samebyar* (Sami villages) in the north of Sweden. Girjas is highlighted in yellow on the map.

people. There was a case recently when a mining company that wanted to start an open-cast mine in a place sacred to the indigenous people was forced to shelve their plans – and instead just mine the mineral far underground."

MARIE B HAGSGÅRD welcomes Girjas' victory in the Supreme Court:

"The Judgment has finally given the Sami a trump card, something that made the other stakeholders adapt to the Sami and not the other way around. Of course, it is a defeat for society as a whole that this had to be decided in the courts, but I understand that the Sami felt compelled to choose the legal path. It is even stated in Sweden's constitution that the Sami culture should be protected."

She is convinced that the judgment will be important for the other 50 Sami villages that also want to control fishing and hunting. But she believes that the court's ruling will have even further consequences:



"The Judgment is very clear: special emphasis must be placed on Sami culture and Sami interests, whatever the area concerned. In this case, it is about hunting and fishing, but the interpretation should also apply to mining, forestry, wind power and all other activities where Sami interests are threatened."

Sweden has both a reindeer husbandry law and since 2009 a minority law, both of which contribute to giving the Sami a stronger legal position. But among officials who have to handle the interpretation of the laws, the level of knowledge is highly variable, says Marie B Hagsgård, who a few hours before our conversation had lectured to officials in Åre municipality, about 1,000 kilometers south of Girjas Sami village.

"The officials called for more information in order to comply with the law. For example, they asked for a map of exactly where in the region the most sensitive reindeer pastures are located, they wanted to know exactly which places were important for Sami culture, and they wanted to know which Sami they should consult with. Just the Sami village? Other Sami? They wanted to find agreements that the Sami could live with."

Aren't these questions that should have been answered a long time ago?

"You might think so, but I guess the questions illustrate how insufficient the knowledge is about what activities can affect the Sami culture and reindeer herding. I often hear about Sami villages being drowned in documents from various authorities who want to make sure that the Sami are informed about all conceivable matters. But this order is not sustainable; the authorities must become better at understanding when matters really have a bearing on the Sami culture."

Like Henry Svonni in Puoltsa, she is upset about the low quality of the consultation process:

"For decades, many have pointed out that the Sami interests must be included earlier in all decision-making processes, but so little has happened. It is of course a matter of economy: the company that has to change its plans to meet Sami interests risks losing a lot of money due to the delay. And the municipality eager for new employment opportunities is annoyed by the wait. In fact, the Sami found it easier to protect their reindeer pastures in the 19th century than today!"

About 20 years ago, Marie B Hagsgård was secretary of a parliamentary committee that tried to come up with new proposals on how the reindeer trade could coexist with other trades and industries and other interests in northern Sweden. But it was difficult to agree on any new concrete proposals.

"Several of the members of the committee were hunters themselves; they did not want to lose their opportunities for hunting. I suggested to all parties that they take more account of each other's interests, but that track led nowhere. In the next committee, I think that parliamentarians from southern Sweden should also be represented. If their views were given more weight, the interests of the indigenous people would have a stronger voice."

PHOTO: THE SWEDISH SAMI NATIONAL ASSOCIATION

"THE STATE HAD NOT ANTICIPATED THIS WORDING, AND NOW IT IS DIFFICULT TO FIND THE BALANCE. LARGE-SCALE ECONOMIC INTERESTS ARE AT STAKE."

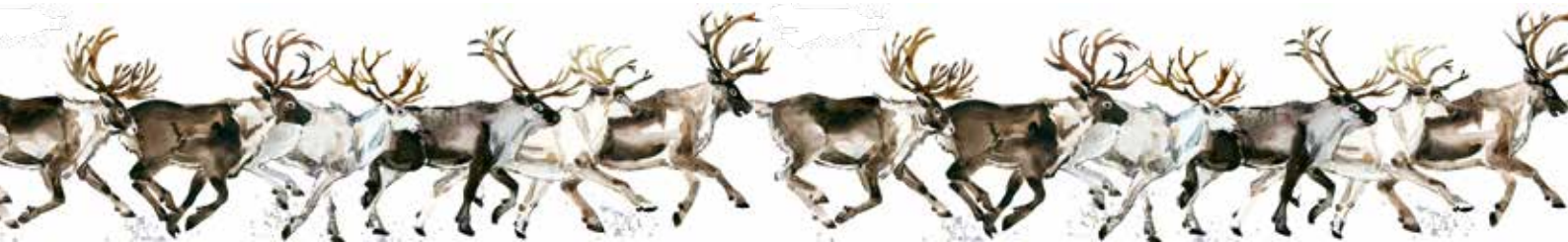
Jenny Wik Karlsson, operations manager, The Swedish Sami National Association

NOW A NEW PARLIAMENTARY investigation is under way; the directives are supposed to be ready in the spring. But they have already generated debate. Some want to make the investigation as broad as possible, bringing in all aspects of land use. Others want to make it narrower, trying not to encompass too much. The Secretariat of the investigation wants to collect as many views as possible at this stage, and Marie B Hagsgård has already contributed hers:

"The investigation must be based on the Sami's statutory rights as an indigenous people. The majority society must, through the state, introduce positive measures that guarantee this right. It must be clearer both for the Sami themselves and for the state and municipal officials what the Sami right to their land means."

The Swedish Sami National Association (Svenska Samernas Riksförbund) appreciates that a new investigation is underway, but operations manager Jenny Wik Karlsson is worried that it will take too long before new decisions come into place:

"We helped Girjas Sami village to pursue the case all the way to the Supreme Court because we needed answers about what influence we can have in order to protect the reindeer herding trade. Of course, it is welcome if the investigation can give all



parties a clearer picture of how a consensus can be reached between different interests regarding the issue of land use, but the specific question of an individual Sami village's possibility to control small game hunting and fishing must be answered more quickly. I know that several of the other 50 villages have been in contact with the government, but have not yet received any clear information. The legal effects of the judgment must be investigated quickly."

Her organization maintains that the other Sami villages can also argue for the tradition of "prescription from time immemorial" and thus obtain the same rights:

"But the state is clearly not prepared to go so far. So how does the government and parliament want to address the issue? We get very few answers since questions about land resources are sensitive. There are so many interested parties."

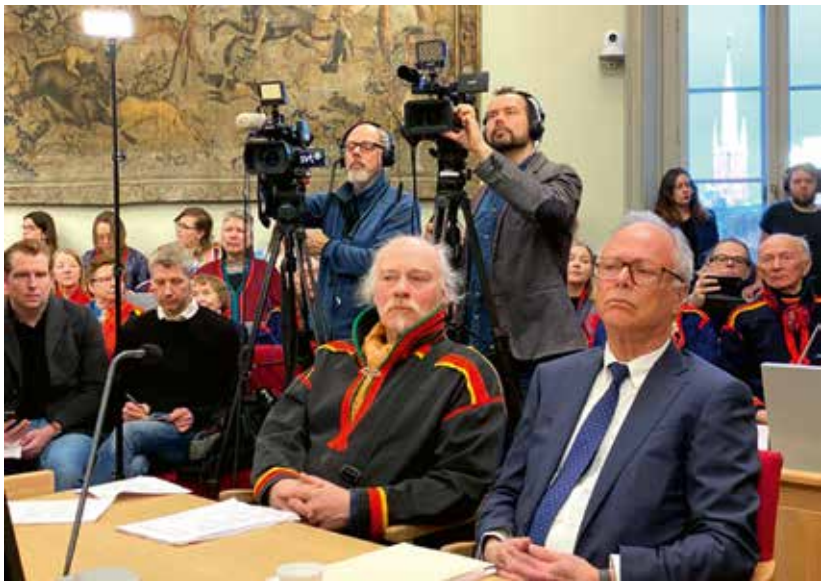


PHOTO: PATRICK TRÄGÅRDH/UMEBILD

Matti Blind Berg and Peter Danowsky in the Supreme court. The ruling in Girjas' favour is considered the Sami reindeer husbandry's perhaps greatest success to date.

WHEN SWEDISH PUBLIC RADIO, in one of its most prestigious in-depth programs, made a long feature on this theme a couple of months ago, they asked for an interview with the minister responsible, Ibrahim Baylan. He declined to participate, however, and only sent an email to the editors with the message that nothing has been decided and that the issue is rather in the hands of parliament. Jenny Wik Karlsson is disappointed that the government does not even show up for an interview to discuss the issue. But she is not surprised:

"It's depressing, but this is a very difficult field to navigate. Most parliamentarians from northern Sweden, not least from the governing party (the Social Democrats), do not like the Sami rights to the land to be highlighted. You do not win elections by defending the Sami."

But the question has been gone over again and again for so many years, shouldn't government representatives have talking points ready even in this difficult area?

"Before the Girjas judgment they probably had, but the situation is different now. The Supreme Court's reasoning about 'prescription from time immemorial' makes it more difficult. The state had not anticipated this wording, and now it is difficult to find the balance. Large-scale economic interests are at stake."

One thing that makes the issue so complicated is the painful history of relations between the Sami and the state. If the reindeer herding trade had only been one of many trades and industries that had to agree on land use, it would certainly have been possible to find a solution that everyone could live with. But reindeer trade is not like any other since it is a central part of a Sami culture that has been oppressed by the majority society for several hundred years. "The government and parliament are careful not to clash with us with regard to the history," as Jenny Wik Karlsson puts it.

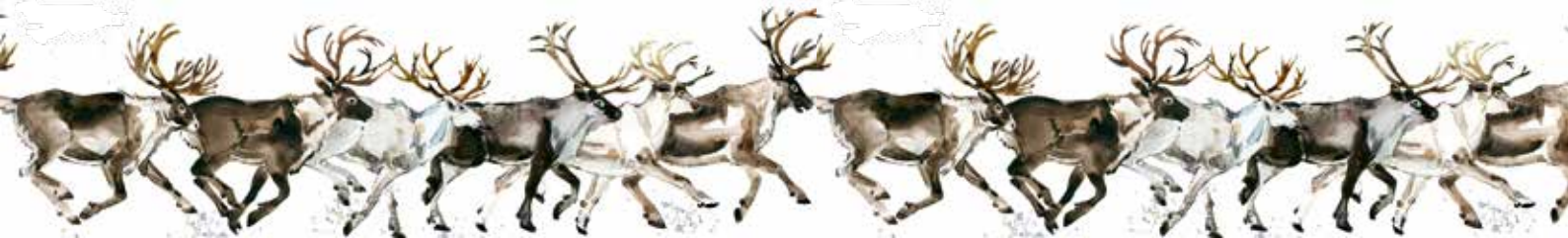
Several other countries where indigenous peoples have been treated badly have carried out truth and reconciliation commissions. Preparations for such a commission are under way in Sweden as well, but the head of the Swedish Sami National Association is not convinced of the benefit:

"Of course I welcome another formal apology, but honestly I wonder what the purpose of the results is. We already know what wrongs have been committed and it is impossible to hold anyone accountable. We are dealing with a long history of oppression and land has been taken from us. But we cannot demand it back from people who have inhabited the land for four generations! Our wounds remain and I have a hard time seeing how they will heal by a truth commission."

Here, the chairman of the Sami village, Matti Blind Berg, has a slightly different opinion:

"I think the Commission could be useful if we use it properly. It can make more people realize what Sweden as a nation has done to the Sami people."

To complicate matters further, over the years the needs of the reindeer herding trade have also led to intra-Sami conflicts, conflicts that to some extent have escalated since the Girjas judgment. When the Sami village is now to decide who is allowed to hunt and fish, the Sami who do not own reindeer or who are not part of the village are also affected. One of the loudest Sami critics is Niklas Sarri, who runs wilderness tourism, partly on



the Sami village's land. He has long fought for Sami rights even though he does not belong to any Sami village:

"My family has lived in the area since time immemorial, yet it is not obvious that we will be allowed to hunt and fish here. The ruling protects a small group of reindeer-owning Sami, who can exclude the rest of us. It is pure discrimination!"

Niklas Sarri thinks that the reindeer owners in the Sami villages constitute a privileged elite who do not represent Sami interests but, on the contrary, sow division between different Sami groups. He has been active in party politics focusing on Sami issues and is today a controversial debater.

"Giving the Sami villages such a great influence over the land is deeply problematic. These villages came into being as state legal structures to regulate the reindeer herding trade, but now we have to review the whole system when the villages contribute to discrimination not only of us other Sami but also of other citizens who want to spend time in the mountains."

MATTI BLIND BERG DOES NOT agree with the description:

"It is not at all as difficult as he says to become a member of the Sami village. And we have said time and time again that local hunters and fishermen will be given priority when we issue permits. We do not discriminate against other Sami, absolutely not."

He still understands Niklas Sarris' outrage, which he believes is rooted in government decisions made several generations ago:

"The state has 'divided and ruled' among us Sami; we are all victims of this policy. The Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish states' decisions a hundred years ago all paved the way for the situation we have today. The policy of assimilation and forced relocations has had a great and lasting impact on the entire Sami community".

The question of whether Girjas Sami village might engage in discrimination has also led to a report to the Discrimination Ombudsman – in this case it concerns a hunter in southern Sweden (Nyköping) who thinks that the Sami village discriminates against everyone outside of the Norrbotten region when it is said that only people within the region should be given priority. Furthermore, the Sami village has encountered criticism from experts on EU legislation who believe that EU citizens would be unfairly discriminated against if they were prevented from competing on equal terms with others who want to hunt and fish in the area.

Matti Blind Berg sighs at the criticism:

"The Supreme Court has given us this right and we intend to exercise it. When it comes to fishing, guest cards can be a suitable solution which opens up opportunities for tourists from all over the EU. But hunting has a larger impact on reindeer husbandry, so this year we said no to all foreign hunters. For this we have been called xenophobes and racists. But I don't care."

There is no doubt that the Supreme Court ruling has stirred up a lot of emotions, especially among people in the immediate area who attach great importance to spending time in the mountains. Immediately after the verdict, a marked rise of hateful and threatening comments about reindeer-owning Sami could be seen in social media. "Selfish disgusting fucking asses is what you are, I hope you realize that you have started a war now", was one of many. In the weeks following the judgment, several incidents also occurred where reindeer were killed and mutilated. Reindeer owner Sara Skum in the village of Puoltikasvaara, 70 kilometers southeast of Kiruna, found severed reindeer heads strategically placed so that she could see them, as a warning. She spoke in various Swedish media outlets, but when I call and ask if we can meet, she becomes hesitant and eventually says no: "I have already been in the media and it leads nowhere; the hunters do not seem to understand that we have a judgment and thus the right on our side".

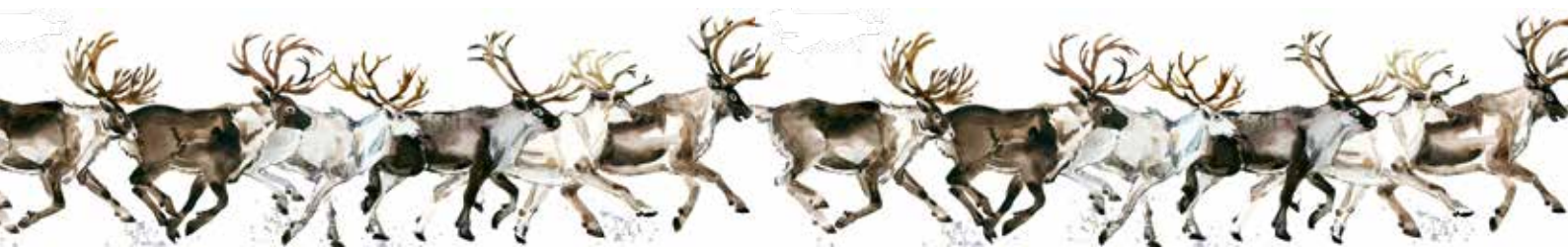
The bloody attacks on animals decreased as months went by, but they did not stop and in late autumn another incident occurred. It is difficult to find people who would openly defend the attacks, but it is quite obvious that opinions about the newly acquired rights of the Sami village vary greatly when you walk around and ask people in Kiruna. At a hamburger restaurant in the city center, a mother with a small child answers that, "it was good that the Sami village got these rights; it is their land that was taken from them. I myself would also like to have control over who stays on my plot!" A few tables away sits a man of retirement age who thinks that, "the Sami cannot just decide who has access to the land". He thinks that the Sami village "creates conflicts and in the long run hatred". In addition, he is afraid that the Sami villages' protests against other trades and industries gaining access to the land could lead to reduced growth and increased unemployment.

Opinions are divided and sometimes there are conflicting views even within the same person, as the young woman I met at the hotel reception:

"On the one hand, I appreciate the court's decision. I have friends whose parents are reindeer owners and I know how problematic it is for them when scooters drive near the reindeer. On the other hand, my family and I have been worried. We have a cabin by the Kalix River; at certain times of year we may not even be allowed to drive a scooter to our plot."

BUT THE GREATEST CONCERN is felt among local hunters. One of them is Tomas Hedqvist who lives right next to the Torne River in the village of Paksuniemi, a few kilometers from Jukkasjärvi's world-famous ice hotel. The Torne river thunders when we go down to the water and sit on the sauna's landing to carry out the interview in a corona-safe way. The view of the river is breathtaking with Mount Etnuloitin on the other side of the water. The sun barely manages to stay above the edge of the mountain when it is at its highest, in the middle of the day, during my visit on November 10.

"Tomorrow the sun will disappear behind the mountain and



will not return until spring," he says, squinting a little at the sun. "Etnuloitin means 'the mountain that follows the water' in Sami. My acquaintances from Texas, who worked with us at the space company Esrange, were quite excited; they thought it sounded just like something from their own indigenous people."

Tomas Hedqvist is retired after 33 years at Esrange. Being close to nature is one of the most important things in his life. That is why he is so upset when the Sami villages now talk about restricting that right on the pretext of protecting the reindeer herding trade.

"They seem to want to control everything! They deny us the right to be here, even when we are careful not to disturb the reindeer. We local hunters know the conditions of the reindeer trade; as locals we take reindeer husbandry into account."

The first decision that Girjas Sami village took after the court gave them power was to move the grouse hunt forward a few weeks, so that the reindeer would not be disturbed during the most sensitive time. For Tomas Hedqvist, the grouse hunt is among the most precious things of the year, but he understands why they wanted the hunt to be postponed; some hunters have not always taken the sensitive weeks around 1 September into account. "But I still thought it was a little strange that they also banned hunting in areas where they have no reindeer."

So far he thinks that Girjas Sami village has made balanced statements about the future, that local hunters and fishermen will be given priority. He is more worried about a couple of other Sami villages on his favorite lands which even before the Girjas judgment were reluctant to permit the presence of others in their lands. Due to the judgment he fears that they will become even more anxious to keep others away.

"The Sami villages are angry that the mountain hunt became free after 1993. But that is not true! Even after that, there have been regulations for where in the Sami village you can hunt and at what times, all to protect the reindeer. Some villages have been stingy in letting us in, and now it could get even worse."

He is afraid that an even clearer division between "us and them" will be formed now, that those who are within the Sami villages get rights that others outside of the villages are denied. This in turn risks leading to further conflicts.

"I am worried about cohesion in society. The members of the Sami villages work in the mine and in the hospital, they buy food from their neighbors, they are simply dependent on everyone else here. We have to find a way to live together."

He disapproves of the "black and white image of the Sami" that is spread in the rest of Sweden and in the rest of the world, that they are supposed to be so oppressed.

"My foreign visitors to Esrange have asked me where the huts are where our indigenous people live! I then tell them that I had several classmates at Luleå University of Technology who were Sami, that several of my managers at Esrange were Sami. They do not live in huts; they are integrated into our society."

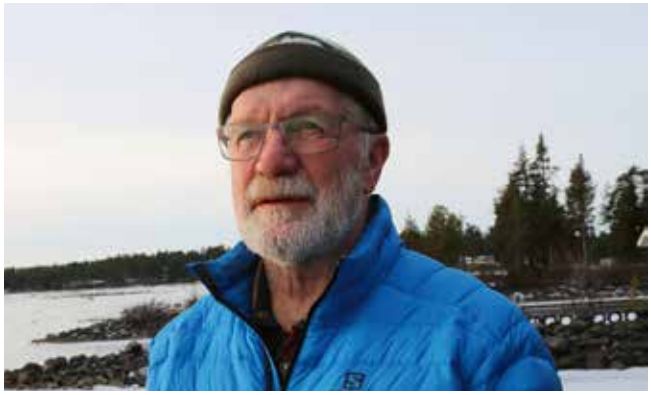


PHOTO: PÅHL RUIN

"THEY SEEM TO WANT TO CONTROL EVERYTHING! THEY DENY US THE RIGHT TO BE HERE, EVEN WHEN WE ARE CAREFUL NOT TO DISTURB THE REINDEER."

Tomas Hedqvist, local hunter

He dislikes the talk about Sami on the one hand, and other citizens on the other hand. It's more mixed than that:

"My grandmother was Sami, she and her brothers were forcibly relocated from Karesuando (by the Finnish border, some 200 kilometers from Kiruna). And my son's mother was half Sami. We are many who protect our Sami roots."

TOMAS HEDQVIST SAYS that he often sees reindeer in his yard when they come down from the mountain. He usually gives them food.

"I remember how my grandmother's brothers told me about their reindeer, how they could stay for a while with the Johansson family over there," he says, pointing up the hill, "when the reindeer needed to rest and eat during the migration down from the mountains. But these contacts between reindeer owners and the rest of the population are less common today. I think that is unfortunate."

On the phone, I ask chairman Matti Blind Berg about the conflicts that the Sami village's newly acquired rights have given rise to. Is he worried about them?

"No, not really. Maybe the conflicts are, after all, necessary. Maybe we need the conflicts to find new solutions; they might lead to more people realizing the threats facing reindeer husbandry and the Sami culture."

Påhl Ruin, freelance writer and journalist based in Sweden.