



## Boreal forest dwellers: the Saami in Sweden

L.-A. Baer

**Lars-Anders Baer**, a Saami, is vice-president of the Saami Council (the pan-Saami non-governmental organization grouping Saami in Russia, Norway, Finland and Sweden) and president of the Union of Saami People in Sweden. He is based in Jokkmokk, Sweden.

*An estimated 2 million indigenous people live in the Arctic zone, the majority living in the boreal forest area - the taiga. This article considers the Saami, reindeerherding forest dweller, and the impact on their lifestyle of changing land-use patterns and industrial forests, primarily in Sweden.*

The Saami are the indigenous people of Sápmi (Lapland-Saamiland), an area stretching across parts of what is now Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. The Saami people call their land Sápmi and call themselves Saami. They are the oldest surviving ethnic group in the Nordic countries and on the Kola Peninsula, and probably also in Europe. The oldest archaeological sites (mostly pits for catching animals), discovered along the coast of the Arctic Ocean in northern Norway, are about 10 000 years old. About 9 000 years ago, almost the whole of Scandinavia was free from ice. Evidence of later human habitation has been found throughout Sápmi.

The Saami language belongs to the Uralic language family which is divided into two main groups: the Samoyedic languages and the Finno-Ugric languages. Saami belongs to the Finno-Ugric language group.

The Saami people are few in number, officially estimated at about 70 000 (35 000 in Norway, 17 000 in Sweden, 5 000 in Finland and 2 000 in Russia) However, it is difficult to estimate the true size of the Saami population since no census has been taken among the Saami as a whole and there are indications that the true numbers may be as high as 100 000. Keeping the population estimates of the Saami people low has been in the political interest of the different nations.

The present Saami settlement area can be divided into four or five natural geographic areas: the Arctic coast; Finnmark: the high mountain range with its eastern spurs and the low mountains with their adjacent forests in the deep river valley; and the boreal woodlands (taiga) of northern Sweden and northern Finland, as well as the Kola Peninsula.

In former times, Saami settlement areas reached much farther south but, as with other native populations, the Saami have had to retreat from the aggressive advance of "civilization". The Saami people were traditionally nomadic or semi-nomadic and their culture was closely tied to reindeer hunting. Since the Saami were so scattered, living in small communities, they soon became a minority group in most areas that were exposed to immigration. There are exceptions, however, and some municipal districts in northern Finland and Norway still have a

Saami majority.

## [A boreal forest area in Sweden](#)

### Saami history

The history of the Saami people is the history of human adaptation to the Arctic climate and nature. This has been the foundation of their society, with its specific cultural and religious traditions, and also the basis of the recent evolution of the Saami people's relationship with the forest and with other social elements.

Historically, the Saami have always been hunters and fishermen with wild reindeer being their most important game (see section on Saami use of forest resources, p. 19). The Saami view of the relationship between humankind and nature was one of an integrated whole. The Saami community was based on the principle of the *sii'da*, one or several collective units (not necessarily related by family ties), each with its own council and administration and assigned hunting ground and fishing waters. The *sii'da* was responsible for the rights of the collective, "owned" the land and its resources and decided how they were to be used and distributed. A *sii'da* or several together made up a village which collectively used the assigned hunting ground and fishing waters.

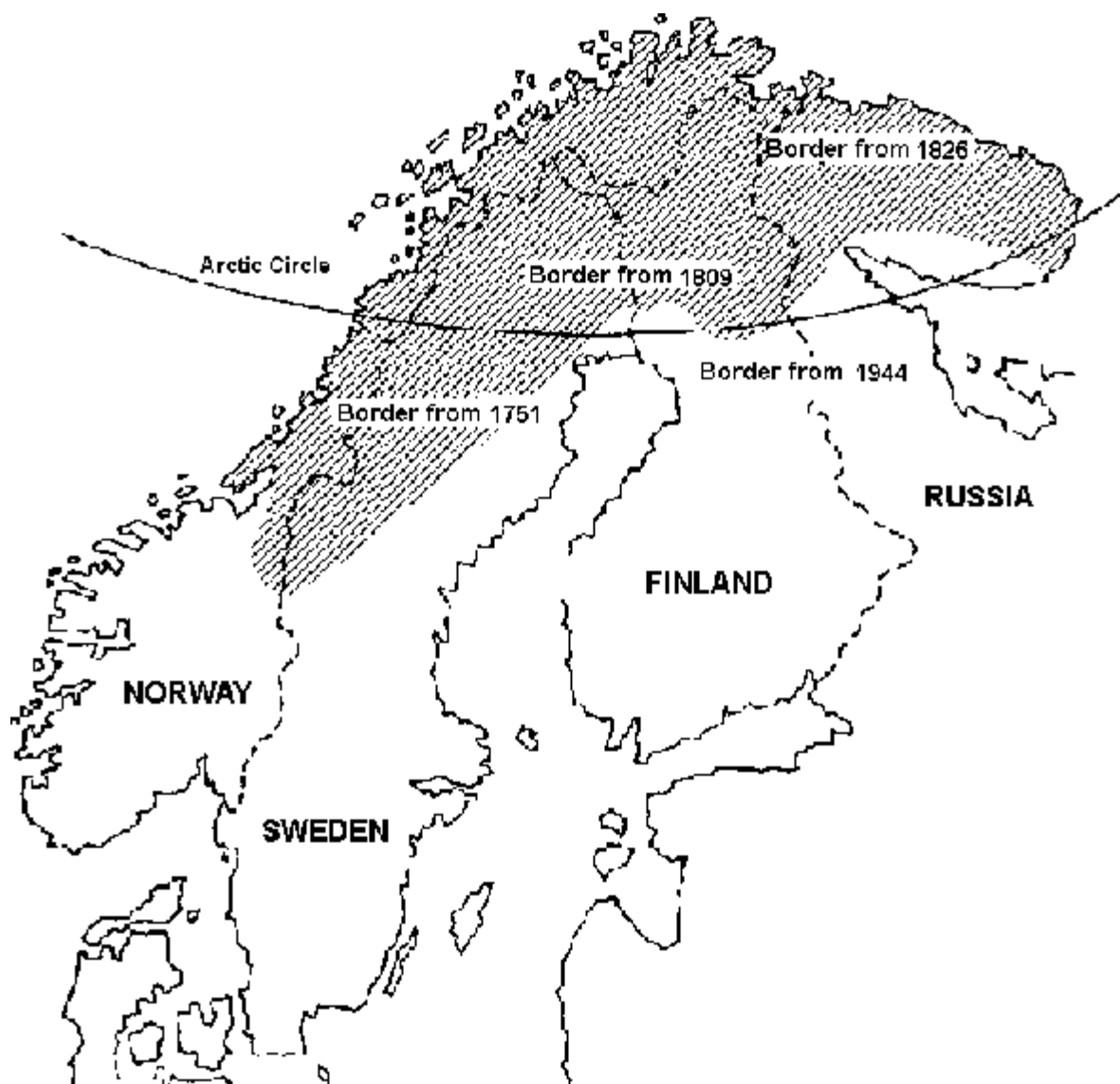
The colonization of the Sápmi area, the exploitation of its resources by non-Saami and trade between externals and the Saami began at the dawn of the Middle Ages and increased during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Several states claimed sovereignty in the region and the Saami were forced to pay tax to several crowns. Christianization followed.

In time, the nations that had claimed Sápmi as their own divided up the Saami area; the first stage in this division was the 1751 border drawn up by Sweden and Denmark-Norway, dividing Sápmi along the mountain ridge from Jämtland to Finnmark. The border between Sweden and Finland was established in 1809 and, in 1826, the border between Norway and Russia was established, completing the division of Sápmi (see Map).

Despite the colonization and political division of the Saami area, the Saami people were able to maintain a great deal of their independence, at least in areas under Swedish sovereignty. When the national border between Sweden and Denmark-Norway was established, the Saami were guaranteed ownership of land and water in what was known as the Codicil to the Border Treaty. A year later, in 1752, the provisions of the codicil were transformed into Swedish law through a proclamation of the Svea Court of Appeal. Saami courts and Saami case-law became a part of the Swedish legal system.

The base of the traditional Saami way of life was the taiga - the boreal forest. The first wave of colonizers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were farmer-settlers and the main conflict between the settlers and the Saami was over the use of land. At that time, however, the human impact on the forest was localized and mostly concentrated in the coastal areas and along the rivers. Large areas of land were still undisturbed and available to the Saami.

**The region (shaded area) inhabited by the Saami**



### [Reindeer swimming across a river towards a forested area In the summer](#)

#### **The advent of industrialization**

The status of the Saami and their land and water rights, formulated during the reign of King Gustav Vasa, remained intact until the second half of the nineteenth century. This was a period of upheaval in the economy, social legislation, culture and science not only of Sweden but of other countries as well. During the Industrial Revolution, the demand for raw materials increased enormously. Whereas Sápmi had earlier been considered a worthless no-man's land, it now became Sweden's storehouse of raw materials, the equivalent of Africa and India for Great Britain. The boreal forest in the Saami area was suddenly a resource that could be exploited technically and economically.

When the forest industry started to develop during the nineteenth century, major changes were introduced in the forest landscape. The cutting of timber in the Saami area increased twentyfold during the period between 1850 and 1900. The dominating harvesting method was high grading and forest regeneration was almost completely neglected.

Saami traditional ownership of land and water became an obstacle to the exploitation of the natural resources of Sápmi - iron ore, the forest and water power. Powerful forces within Swedish society manipulated the law to weaken the Saami people's rights to their land and water and open up the natural resources of Sápmi to exploitation. In 1886, Sweden passed

the first Reindeer Husbandry Act, the application of which effectively reduced Saami ownership of land and water to a kind of usufructuary right to grazing lands for reindeer, hunting grounds and fishing waters. This interpretation was the result of the new ideas and conception of that era and deprived the Saami of their decision-making rights.

Swedish policy towards the Saami was defended with a racist ideology that claimed to have found "scientific verification" of Darwin's theory of natural selection and the survival of the fittest within the human community. These "social-Darwinists" claimed that the Swedish culture and race were much more advanced than the "racially primitive" Saami with their "backward" culture. "A Lapp is a Lapp" - an expression coined at the beginning of the twentieth century was used to indicate the difference between superior and inferior races and cultures. The first attempts of the Saami to organize themselves were forcefully opposed during this period.

Commercial logging during the twentieth century has brought about a profound change in the use of all forest land, regardless of historical exploitation practices. During the last 40 years, clear-cutting has been virtually the only harvesting method, although some sustainability elements have been introduced such as reducing the size of areas to be cut at a given time, and the deliberate retention of seed trees. In the Saami area, the first rotation of forest exploitation - old-growth logging and subsequent artificial regeneration - is now almost complete. The annual harvest increased tremendously during the first half of the twentieth century. As a result of successful regeneration policies and management, the growing stock has also increased, and continues to do so. In fact, the volume of growing stock is now larger than it has been during this century - but there is very little old-growth forest left in Sweden. Logging has been carried out there on more than 97 percent of the productive forest area, which means that very little "virgin" boreal forest remains in the country.

The Swedish forest sector generates about 110 000 jobs while forestry production in monetary terms represents about 16 percent of the total value of Swedish industrial production and the sector is the leading export industry. The forest industry and the unions are a strong and forceful group in Swedish society, at least compared with the reindeer-herding Saami.

## **Saami use of forest resources: reindeer**

The Saami have traditionally used forest areas for a variety of purposes, in particular for hunting, trapping, reindeer breeding, for food and fuel gathering and for the extraction of raw materials. By far the most important aspect has been, and continues to be, that of reindeer production.

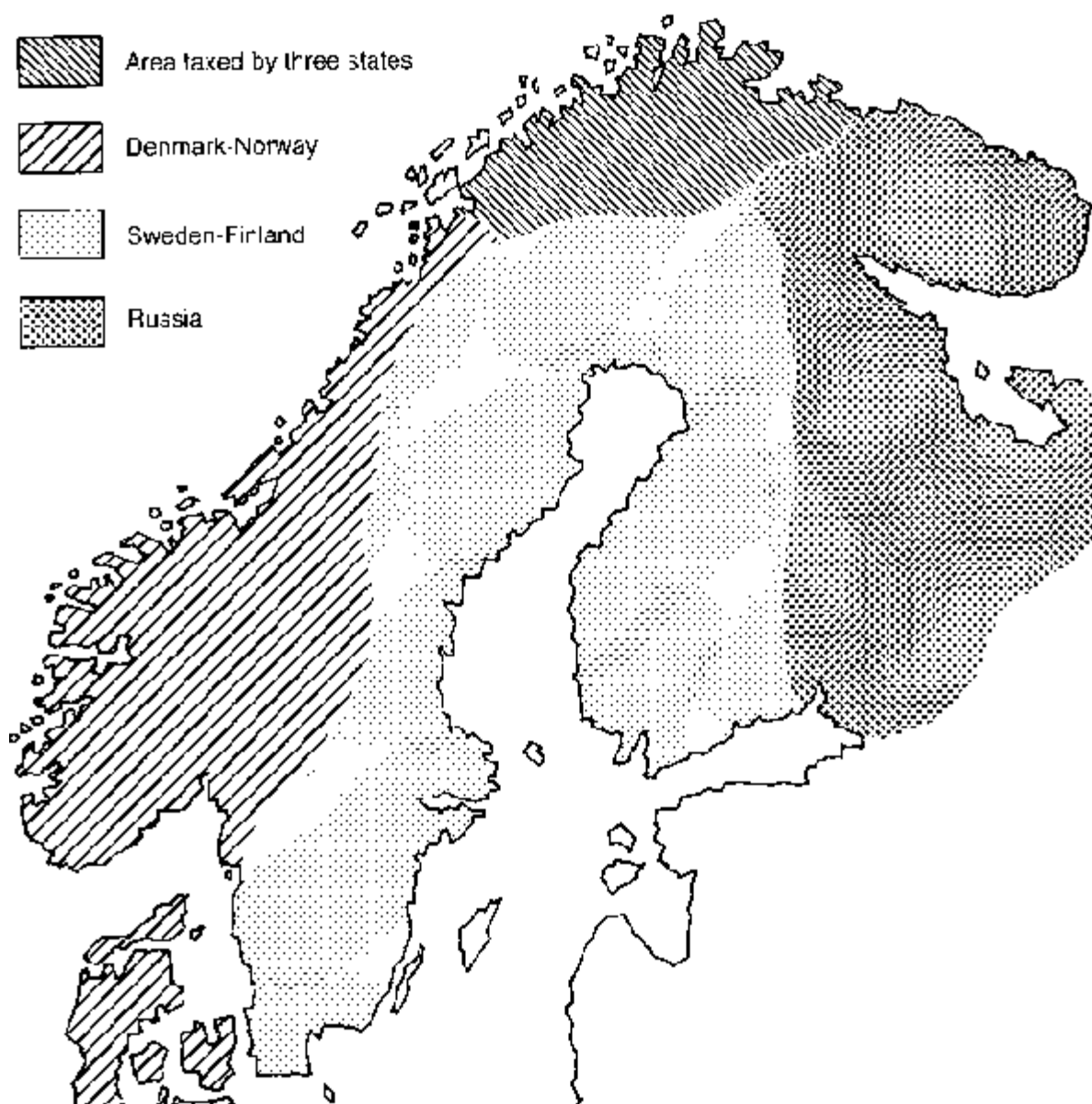
According to the Reindeer Husbandry Act, only the Saami have the right to herd reindeer in Sweden. Of the 17 000 Saami in Sweden, about 3 000 make their living from reindeer-related activities. Of the 4 million to 5 million reindeer worldwide, about 850 000 live in the Saami area and, of these, about 250 000 in Sweden. The total area over which reindeer range in Sweden is approximately 137000 km<sup>2</sup> (35 percent of the national territory), mainly in the boreal forest area.

There are two types of reindeer herding in Sweden. Among the Saami who live in forested areas, a relatively stationary form of reindeer breeding had evolved whereby the reindeer remain in the forest for the entire year. The "mountain Saami", on the other hand, move between summer pasture areas in the high mountains near the Norwegian border and winter pasture in boreal woodlands in the east, sometimes close to the coast of the Gulf of Bothnia. Members of Saami villages also have the right to hunt and fish.

During the last 30 years, reindeer-herding Saami have lost large tracts of pastureland as a result of economic encroachment. Modern forestry, in particular clear-cutting and ploughing to improve soil quality for reforestation, has made it increasingly difficult for the Saami to feed

their reindeer during the winter. Clear-cutting of large areas together with ploughing destroys the ground-growing lichens which are the reindeer's main food supply in the winter. Large-scale clear-cutting also changes the pattern of snow deposit and makes it more difficult for the reindeer to dig through to the lichen on the ground. Pendulous lichen is another important food supply for reindeer during the winter but this form of lichen only grows on old trees. Swedish forest practices, which have left little old-growth forest, have virtually caused this food supply to vanish. Another constraint to reindeer herding resulting from modern forest industry is the fragmentation of forest land. Modern forest industry requires a sizeable infrastructure and the reindeer grazing lands are being increasingly fragmented by a web of forest roads. This has led to the permanent fragmentation of the reindeer herds and has introduced the need for the Saami to use modern equipment such as snowmobiles, cross-country motorcycles and helicopters in order to be able to supervise the divided groups of animals adequately.

### In 1600, the northern part of Sápmi was taxed by three states simultaneously



### Legal protection of reindeer breeding lands

Since the first Reindeer Husbandry Act was passed in 1886, reindeer areas have been protected against permanent conversion to types of land use which would impede reindeer grazing. Traditional reindeer herders have the right to graze their reindeer on public and

private land and even have a right to use forest land in traditional ways and to practice sustainable fishing and hunting. However, the Act was by no means wholly positive in its impact on the Saami. In the first place, the concept of reindeer- and non-reindeer-herding Saami was introduced. Under the Act only the nomadic reindeer-herding Lapps were entitled to be called "Lapps". Thus, the legislation created a division between reindeer-herding and non-reindeer-herding Saami. This meant that legally those Saami who did not herd reindeer (non-nomadic Saami who made their livelihood primarily from fishing) lost their traditional land and forest use rights.

There were also significant differences between the spirit and the practice of the law. For example, as recently as the mid-1980s, some Saami villages took legal action claiming that a government-owned company, Domanverket, was violating the Act by clear-cutting some reindeer breeding areas in the county of Norrbotten. The villages lost the case and the court concluded that the legislation did not address forestry in that the land was not being permanently converted to another form of use that was incompatible with reindeer grazing.

Forest resources use rights have been a source of ongoing conflict between the reindeer-herding Saami and private landowners, particularly in the southern part of the reindeer breeding area in the county of Jämtland. In the early 1990s, some of the main forest companies and private landowners took legal action claiming that customary rights for winter grazing should not extend beyond the Saami village borders. In 1990, the National Council of the Saami stated in a petition to the Government that:

"The mere opening of a case means a threat against the Saami industries and the Saami culture in the area. On the side of the prosecutor about 700 landowners and three forest companies are to be found. There should be no economic restrictions to carry on this lawsuit from the Landowners' point of view. The economic means of the Saami villages to finance a case are extremely limited, considering the amount of investigation needed and, furthermore, the total need of assets for the case, a case that will require many years before having gained legal force."

### [Saami often use snowmobiles to herd reindeer](#)

In 1992, a new Reindeer Husbandry Act was adopted by the Swedish Parliament which clearly stated that the forest owners cannot change the land use in such a way that reindeer breeding is made impossible, even in the short term. Although, in theory, the new legislation gives reindeer breeders some protection in relation to forestry, the Saami villages claim that the protection offered by the Act is more cosmetic than real. According to the legislation, a forest owner is obliged to consult the Saami villages if he or she is going to engage in large-scale forest exploitation but, after the consultation, the forest owner is basically free to do whatever he or she decides. This means that in reality the Saami villages have very little impact on how forest management is implemented.

In 1993, the Saami and the companies came to a compromise agreement under which the Saami could continue to use the company land for winter grazing if they reduced the total size of the reindeer herds, but the private landowners continued the lawsuit. In February 1996, the Sveg District Court ruled that the Saami had no customary rights at all to reindeer winter grazing. This verdict was a surprise not only to the Saami, but also to the public. The Saami parties have appealed against this decision to the Court of Appeal and the case will probably end up in the Supreme Court. This lawsuit is not only a legal matter but also a political question.

## **Saami political activity**

The end of the Second World War and the adoption of the United Nations Universal



Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 represented a turning point for the Saami people. The United Nations declaration made it easier for the Saami to organize themselves, racist values could no longer find sanction within official Swedish policy and in 1950 the Union of Saami People in Sweden was founded.

Today, the Saami in Finland, Norway and Sweden are, to some extent, recognized as indigenous people with some political rights within individual nations. Compared with other indigenous peoples, the Saami have come a relatively long way. Yet discrimination exists in a number of different ways. Saami rights have been undermined both in the name of communism and in the name of democracy. Rights to land and water, which the Saami have considered to be theirs for several thousand years, are now being questioned. The political demands of the Saami are simple; they want to have the same rights to take decisions about issues which affect their lives, culture and land as many other indigenous peoples have in other parts of the world.

In 1986, the 13th Saami Conference adopted the Saami Programme for the Environment. The programme's principles draw attention to the fact that the Saami are an indigenous people who have inhabited Sápmi (Lapland-Saamiland) since time immemorial, tending the land and water with respect and care. The programme points out that the environment within the Sápmi area is very sensitive and that, as a result of colonization, the rest of society has influenced the environment and the economic activities of the Saami.

With reference to the political stand of the Saami, the Programme for the Environment states:

"It is our inalienable right to preserve and develop our economic activities and our communities in keeping with our own common conditions, and together we wish to preserve our lands, natural assets and national heritage for future generations."

[A Saami stone carving: the reindeer image is unmistakable](#)

---

