

Hunting and trapping in the Saami area

Although the concept of "Saami livelihoods" has been used for a long time, what it actually means is still vague. When speaking of indigenous Saami livelihoods (or occupations) the common understanding is a reference to a primary production's source of income. It includes such activities as agriculture, reindeer herding, fishing, small-scale family forestry, the gathering of natural products, together with the handicraft-like manufacture of these articles. Nowadays, due to changed circumstances, modern money-earning activities exist together with the traditional ones. Over the last few years, the relative proportion of industries pertaining to nature among the Saami has been reduced by a quarter or even by a half, depending on the municipality.

The economic significance of hunting at the moment is rather small. Hunting is largely a side-line alongside other forms of livelihood, or a leisure time pursuit. Hunted animals are used principally by the hunter's household, with the exception of willow grouse, which constitutes the Saami's most important commercial game animal. In cash terms, willow grouse snaring brings to the Saami region a total income of 200 000 Euro a year. Moreover, the economic significance of so-called permit hunting of the European elk is increasing and is becoming appreciable to local tourism entrepreneurs. Hunting has been declining for some time already, and its significance remains marginal among the Saami. (tämä kaikki oli jo yllä tullut ilmi) Alongside reindeer husbandry (korvaisin farming-sanan, koska se voi ärsyttää joitakuitakuita ajattelemaan vallan tarhaporjoja), fishing forms one of the most important forms of Saami livelihood and as a source of income it is of considerably more importance than hunting. Professional fishing is concentrated around Lake Inari and the Lokka and Porttipahta reservoirs.

Hunting, which may have occupied the primary position in the Saami economy up to the beginning of the 19th (20th?) century, was still of some importance in the pre-war Saamivillage way of life. Now, however, it has fallen to position of negligible importance. The increased settling of Lapland, improved firepower of modern rifles, and other factors have so depleted game in the Finnish arctic that game laws and closed seasons must everywhere be strictly enforced to protect the animals still at large. European elk may be shot during the fall hunting season, provided a fairly expensive permit is obtained. In the fall of 2004 30 elk permits purchased by Saami were wasted, for the failure to get any elk. The previous year 30 elk were downed. It is likely that an illegal elk, or 30, are killed every year.

Willow grouse hunting and trapping (with wire snares) is a favourite source of winter income for boys and young men. The birds are worth about sixty to seventyfive cents apiece at Norwegian stores, and a good hunter-trapper could earn nearly as much as the average Saami earns in wage labour. Only one Saami man spends much of the winter in such hunting, however, and perhaps twelve or fifteen boys and young men spend as much as two weeks yearly in this activity. The willow grouse crop varies from year to year, but recently there has appeared to be a plentiful supply of them in the remote regions of eastern Lapland.

Occasionally foxes are shot, but the bounty paid by wildlife research authorities and the fur price is very low. During the 1950s to 60s, even up to early 1990s, foxes were poisoned, which was an effective means of hunting. The fox price was reduced after the second world war because of increased fur animal farming, and subsequently because of the anti-fur campaigns by animal right activists. Bounties for the wolf and wolverine used to be very high, but no Saami have managed to get either animal in recent times, though these carnivores still kill reindeer every year.

The emergence of the traditional solitary reindeer hunting for procurement of domestic meat supplies, as a response to the breakdown of symbiotic pastoralism, has already been described. Other traditional forms of household consumption hunting have almost disappeared, and game in the area is scarce. Elk hunting has become regulated with permits, and to many a Saami elk is most easily acquired from Saariselkä restaurants. Animals that are predatory on reindeer are hunted to protect the herds. A few men take foxes, receiving a price for the skin and a small bounty. Bears and wolves, also a menace to reindeer, are often encountered in regions adjoining the Russian border, but have hardly been known to penetrate the resettlement area. Although figuring prominently in traditional mythology, only a few of the oldest Saami can claim to have experience with them.

Of wildfowl, the ptarmigan is of greatest economic significance. During the autumn, from September to November, it is hunted with rifles in the pine-forest. It is most vulnerable when the plumage begins to change colour from brown to white, as winter camouflage, before the snow cover sets in. At this time, the bird is most conspicuous, a hunter may bag some three to four birds a day. Fowling is popular among young men in this season, and may provide an important addition to the household diet.

When the snow crust forms, the ptarmigans move from feeding on berries in the pine-forest to higher tundra where they eat the buds and shoots of birch scrub. Here they may be trapped during February and March. The snare consists of wire noose set in a gap between twigs, rich in shoots, laid between adjacent bushes. Each snare takes less than a minute to set up, and about a hundred can be laid in a day, placed along the line of a familiar route in order to aid retrieval. One set of snares around ten kilometres long may contain several hundred snares.

The ptarmigan population undergoes major oscillation, and catches vary according from year to year. Ptarmigan trapped in this season may be traded to Saariselkä or sold locally to merchants, through whom they eventually reach the tables of high-class restaurants in south Finland. Current prices are about 10 euro a piece. In good years, trapping may therefore show a handsome profit, in bad years it may barely suffice to cover the extra expenses nowadays incurred by the snowmobile.

Jouni Kitti