

Aslat
Black snow

Interview dramatised by Ursula Rani Sarma

Reindeer have a sixth sense, they can tell what kind of weather is coming. If you watch them, learn how to read their signs; you can also learn to predict the future... to prepare for what is to come.

I've been a reindeer herder since I was a teenager. Working with the animals, walking with them every day, watching them graze, protecting them. This life is all I know. My people, the Sami people, have been looking after reindeers for as long as we can remember and before that, maybe for 500 years, maybe for 1000, as far back and further than anyone can recall.

When I talk with the older people, they tell me there was a time when there would be 30 years of good grazing and then a couple of years of bad followed by another 30 of good. Now things are different. We have maybe ten years of good grazing and then ten years of bad. This makes a huge difference for the reindeer, for their survival is dependent upon it.

In the summertime, we go to the mountains where the grass is lush. This is when they can stock up, nourish themselves in preparation for the harsh times ahead. Then in the autumn, we start moving them down to the winter grazing lands, moving them to the best areas so they can continue to get into good shape. Then when the winter comes, we break them into family groups because it is easier to feed and protect a smaller herd. It's easier to move them too. We move into the woodlands so they can graze on the lichen, both tree lichen and on the ground beneath the snow. Lichen has a very low energy content; the reindeers must eat a lot of it for it to sustain them – and now the climate is changing. Last year we had a lot of rain during the first snow and it turned everything into ice. The first 5cm of snow was very thick and below that, the lichen was frozen. The reindeer couldn't get the scent of it so they used too much energy trying to find it. When they did manage to locate and eat it, it filled their stomach with ice which their bodies then had to use more energy melting. So, they spend all their energy digging and digesting food which the food can't replenish, the whole effort becomes in vain. It is difficult for us to watch.

This means the weakest animals, the older ones and the younger ones who are passing their first year without their mother, they can't survive. A few years ago, we lost about a third of them. The most vulnerable starved to death and the females weren't strong enough when they gave birth to their calves. This made it easier for predators, only the strongest made it through that winter; and so our herd became smaller.

All this is because the weather is changing, but not because of something that I am doing. It's something that other people are doing. Most of them far away from here.

Take last year for example, we had all this weather blowing in from the south-east. There was a very heavy snowfall over night and when we came out in the morning we could see that it was black. The snow itself was black. It had come up from the areas on the continent, where the big industries are. Their polluted air travels miles and miles to us here and falls as black snow. What can I do about that? About how it is affecting my life? My herd? Nothing. We talk about it amongst ourselves but we know we are powerless, all we can do is try to cope, to adapt, but we need support for that. The politicians are the only ones who have the power but they don't hear us. They don't seem to understand that our survival is based on our ability to be flexible, to be able to move freely.

Traditional reindeer herding is adapted to the reindeer and the environment here, we need to be able to move through our traditional land easily, to access the old forests with tree lichen, the good pastures, to have free paths to move and migrate. But the space that we are allowed access to is decreasing all the time. Industries like deforestation and mining, they buy up these huge tracts of land. They plant fast-growing trees that lichen won't grow on. They use the land and then they leave the area destroyed, they don't clean, they leave nothing behind but a gravel pit that can't be used for anything.

So, we are losing all the wilderness. Every hill here has a name and a history, and my ancestors are woven into the fabric of that. We have stories about every stone. But now we are in the way of these companies, they tell us, 'Go somewhere else with your reindeer', but if everyone says this then where can go? We cannot go to the moon.

If you think of me, where I am living my life and how, the way my forefathers have lived their lives, this is all I know. If I can't live like this, then how should I live? If I have to change my way of life then the whole Sami culture will change... and all will be lost.