

DOES CULTURE PLAY A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN THE SUCCESS OF REINDEER HERDING IN ALASKA?

**By Gale K. Vick
For HLRM120 February 2014**

This paper will begin with a question and may stay a question. When you start to research an idea and take that long journey into a thousand pathways, you inevitably discover you are in a maze. We may not have time to get out of that maze but we may have time to explore a theory.¹

Has *culture* played a significant role in the success of reindeer herding in Alaska and will it continue to do so?

The most obvious answer is... of course. The federal Reindeer Industry Act of 1937² was implemented specifically to protect Alaska's indigenous cultures in the belief that reindeer herding in the hands of Alaska Natives would naturally evolve into a stable industry, supplying community herders with a facsimile to caribou, a steady traditional food source, as well as potential for cash in a growing cash economy.

But my theory is that the 19th and 20th century cultures of Alaska Natives, through millennia of hunting/gathering, were not suited to an easy transition to herding at all. In fact, those cultural values were perhaps extreme impediments to herding.³

So, the real question is, what role *does* culture play in the *future* potential success or failure of reindeer herding in Alaska?

As usual, we have to step back in history a bit before we move forward.

WHAT WAS THE ORIGINAL OBJECTIVE FOR REINDEER HERDING IN ALASKA?

And how was that influenced by culture?

So much of history is a continual clash of cultures. Well-meaning ideas can be just as disruptive or damaging as nefarious ideas. Cultures routinely collide and meld with usually no, or little thought, to the intended or unintended consequences of the dominant

¹ **Disclaimer:** The theory of this author is not meant to be, in any way, any more than a personal opinion from a relatively short period of research.

² In 1992, Reindeer Herders Association v. Juneau Area Director, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Appeal from a decision holding that non-Native commercial reindeer operations in Alaska are permissible in certain circumstances under the Reindeer Industry Act of 1937 was reversed and the intent of the 1937 law for exclusive Native ownership maintained.

³ I have additional theories relative to reindeer herding that would generally apply to a non-indigenous population.

cultures” impact on another (well meaning) or deliberate thought to eradicate or subdue the subservient culture (nefarious.)

The introduction of reindeer herding into Alaska was no different. A combination of perceived need, vision and opportunity drove the idea of reindeer herding as a way of providing steady protein to a nomadic (and sometimes starving) group of people as well as encouragement to stay in a fixed location and attend school.

But reindeer herding for subsistence is very different than reindeer herding for market. The federal government combined the two goals for Alaska but misunderstood, in the short run, what management scenario would secure reindeer herds in perpetuity.



Caribou and reindeer are relatively the same in their usage but genetically different enough in their application toward herding.

Beginnings: An argument can be made that indigenous subsistence lifestyles had already been severely impacted by the establishment of mission schools, which were created around the state through an agreement among many different ministries (religions.) This disrupted nomadic following of wild life, seasonal hunting and fishing, teaching of subsistence skills to younger generations. Like mission or government schools for indigenous populations around the rest of the country, schools punished Native kids for speaking their own language, for practicing their shamanistic religion, for even dancing and singing, not to mention deviation from learning traditional subsistence skills to more “civilized” skills like reading, writing, cooking, cleaning, sewing.

Whether out of a sense of guilt or happenstance (recognition of severe hardship when game was scarce), there were many attempts to provide alternative ways for indigenous populations to survive. The promotion of reindeer herding was perhaps the most intensive.

There are many characters in the introduction of reindeer herding to Alaska but one of the most notable was Sheldon Jackson.

Jackson was part of the U.S. government’s efforts, beginning with the Bureau of Education, to rectify the serious havoc wreaked on coastal Native populations by decades of whaling and whalers. This on top of years of basic slavery to Russian fur traders.⁴ Jackson felt that the Alaskan Eskimo populations lived in squalor and moral degradation as a result of “unwholesome White influences.” Jackson thought the only remedy was Christian missionaries.⁵

⁴. (*Eskimos*, Dr. Kaj Birket-Smith, Rhodos, Copenhagen, 1971)

⁵ “Alaskan Eskimo Education: _A Film Analysis of Cultural Confrontation in the Schools”, Alaska Native Knowledge, UAF

When Jackson and Captain Michael Healy brought the initial small herd of reindeer over from Siberia accompanied by Siberian Chukchi reindeer herders, they had high hopes that it would be an immediate and easy transition to teach Alaska Inuit and Yupik how to herd. Not so. Cultural clashes were immediate, the Chukchi herders were sent home and the search for Saami herders began. This eventually proved much more successful but the long process of establishing reindeer herds was initially accomplished by non-Natives.

In the classic work “Eskimos, Reindeer and Land”⁶ the authors talk about the years 1916-1937 when white ownership of reindeer herds caused economic and range disputes with Alaska Natives, particularly with the Loman family. While the Lomans built up their herd and created extensive Outside markets, over-grazing and range conflicts increased. By 1930, the Depression started drying up the Lomans’ markets, even though the herd peaked in 1932 with 640,000 animals. (By 1950 only 25,000 would remain.) But this set the stage for the Reindeer Act of 1937 which transferred ownership of all herds to Alaskan Natives. Herds continued to fail, however, and by 1977 there were only 15 herds in northwest Alaska. In 1980, the authors reported that per J. Sidney Rood, one-time General Reindeer Superintendent, “the roots of present problems lie in the past” (1937).

What is perhaps the most telling, however, is that this report notes the extensive subsistence lifestyle that people of the Northwest Arctic conducted over thousands of years with an abundance of marine, river and terrestrial wildlife but suffered an almost 50% reduction in population as a result of contact with whalers and others. This, coinciding with a significant reduction of wildlife abundance (some probably due to whalers), created the perfect argument for importation of reindeer, with high expectation and little real planning. Almost immediately inherent problems surfaced:

- (1) Lack of herding experience
- (2) Conflict over range use and over-grazing
- (3) Differential treatment of Lapps and non-Natives
- (4) Herd ownership disputes
- (5) Theft of animals
- (6) Inadequate supervision
- (7) Re-direction of one herd to save whalers frozen in sea ice
- (8) Flu epidemic, resulting in death of first Native herder
- (9) Slowdown of economic growth after the Nome Gold Rush
- (10) Problems with administration of expanding herds
- (11) Disagreement over payments and allotments
- (12) Sheldon Jackson’s dangerous mixing of “church and state”
- (13) Weather, predation and loss of herd to caribou
- (14) Problems transporting herds
- (15) Marketing issues
- (16) Growing non-Native ownership
- (17) Corporate model of reindeer management

⁶ Richard O. Stern, Edward L. Arobio, Larry L. Naylor and Wayne C. Thomas, Agricultural Experiment Station, School of Agriculture and Land Management, University of Alaska, Bulletin 59, December 1980

Still, the authors of “Eskimos, Reindeer and Land” concluded by 1980 that the introduction of reindeer to Alaska had been generally successful although four major trends had emerged:⁷

- (1) It became clear that it was government policy to provide for the well-being of Alaska Natives by establishing Native-only herd ownership
- (2) The period of non-Native ownership with emphasis on corporate model had been detrimental to the welfare of Native owned herding
- (3) The changes in administrative authority and government policy had not provided any sense of continuity in policy or direction for the reindeer program
- (4) Insufficient feedback between the research program and various state and federal agencies on reindeer ecology and the needs of Native herders had created a negative impact on herd management

OUR ROMANCE WITH REINDEER AND CARIBOU And what it has to do with herd management



Most people immediately connect reindeer with Santa and his sleigh. In a modern day culture long disassociated with hunting/gathering or even herding and farming, there is actual public outcry against selling reindeer meat because people “don’t want to eat Rudolph.” We have a similar phenomena with wild deer because people “don’t want to eat Bambi.” This is not just a subset of Vegans, but a result of our general acculturation to both Santa Claus and other modern myths. We teach our kids that reindeer can fly and, as adults, we still find that concept magical.⁸

In essence, our *culture* influences us to act in certain ways that may not be logical.

This raises the issue of whether or not a reindeer herder in Alaska could overcome some of these stereotypes in order to just be able to sell reindeer meat to a local market.

⁷ Richard O. Stern, Edward L. Arobio, Larry L. Naylor and Wayne C. Thomas, Agricultural Experiment Station, School of Agriculture and Land Management, University of Alaska, Bulletin 59, December 1980

⁸ There may be some basis in fact for this concept as both Ancient Saami shaman and their reindeer got high on hallucinogenic mushrooms and that could result in all kinds of observations.

In Alaska, where caribou culture reigns, we cannot sell wild game so we only get caribou through regulated hunting. But we generally have no compulsion eating it since our hunting culture, for both indigenous and non-indigenous populations, is strong.

The transition to eating reindeer meat in Alaska is only inhibited by another cultural factor; hunters, regardless of their ethnicity, want to hunt their wild game, not buy it. However, as it becomes harder to accommodate a growing human population versus declining caribou populations, buying wild game in the form of reindeer meat becomes more and more palatable.

This relationship between people and caribou does not exist in general outside Alaska (except northern Canada) because most people in the world do not associate with caribou in the same way Alaskans do, nor do they have access to caribou. But they might relate caribou back to reindeer back to the whole Santa Claus effect.



(1) The author offering a treat to reindeer during a New Year's Eve celebration
(2) A Lapp herder in traditional dress and harness

Another cultural change is occurring in America. We have long been a beef eating nation but with all the emphasis on reducing animal fat, a transition from beef to bison is occurring, which could include reindeer if there was a supply. (In the past, reindeer herders have found ready buyers around the country. This would have been before Rudolph's creation by Robert L. May in 1939.)

In reindeer herding parts of the world, the demand is strong but the supply is threatened by increasing encroachment on grazing lands, borders closing migratory paths and climate change threatening herds in general. In Finnish Lapland, the heart of Saami and reindeer herding country, the demand for reindeer meat is far greater than the in-country supply so Finns actually import reindeer meat from Russia.⁹

This bodes well for the potential of reindeer herding in general but Alaska's history with reindeer and its subsequent impediments (restrictions in the law, range regulations, meat inspections, etc.) has not really come close to realizing this potential.

⁹ "But Can They Fly?", David MacDougall, AP, December 22, 2013

Markets, whether specialty or not, depend on a reasonably steady supply of product. Product, whether it is beef, bison, reindeer or wild salmon, depends on a significant infrastructure to provide a reasonable supply. Margins must exist to make good business sense. Alaska needs to do some reconsideration of its regulatory and infrastructure process in order for that potential to be fully utilized. And that means changing our culture.

HUNTER-GATHERERS VS. HERDERS / FARMERS **Commonalities and differences**



This could be either a reindeer herder or Inuit hunter, similar dress from the skins of reindeer or caribou

On the surface, it would seem that integrating reindeer herding into a culture that already has a reliance on caribou would be a slam-dunk. During the time of introduction of reindeer to Alaska, both the Inuit and Yupik of the Northwest and Western Arctic and the Saami of northern Europe shared a similar reliance on caribou/reindeer. Both groups knew how to maximize the use of the animals. But there were some very distinct differences in that reliance. (See chart.)

- Saami reindeer herders have had over 5000 years of acculturation to a herding lifestyle
 - Saami were/are nomadic in the pursuit of managing their herds
- Mongolian reindeer herders
 - Mongolians were/are nomadic in pursuit of managing their herds
- Before establishment of mission schools, Alaska indigenous people were exclusively hunter/gatherers for thousands of years
 - Alaska Natives on the Arctic and Western coasts and in the Interior were mostly nomadic in pursuit of wild game

If we further examine the underlying differences between caribou hunters and reindeer herders, we might see significant reasons why reindeer herding among indigenous people has not generally succeeded in Alaska.

Indigenous cultures in Alaska have been almost exclusively hunter/gatherers for over ten thousand years. This is a huge impediment to transitioning to herding. *Even when faced with cyclic starvation* as the result of wild herd variables, indigenous communities were not able to sustain reindeer herds beyond a generation or two. Natural instincts were to follow traditional subsistence hunting and fishing. This was an acculturated survival mechanism. This combined with many natural obstacles makes those herds that did thrive all that more remarkable.

- Indigenous people of Alaska were hunter/gatherers and knew little to nothing about herd management.
 - The concept of continual maintenance / preservation of a herd into perpetuity was foreign and almost directly opposite subsistence hunting
 - The concept of herd management as a business model was completely foreign when reindeer were first introduced
 - When reindeer herds were “swallowed up” by caribou herds, it proved a point that reliance on the herds was even more unpredictable than reliance on availability of multiple species of wild game
- Hunting/gathering is opportunistic and the skill sets needed require knowledge of multiple animal habitats and patterns
 - Reliance on caribou was *not* universal; there were many places that remembered times when neither caribou or moose existed in that area.¹⁰
 - Getting caribou or moose often required months of hunting, leaving families behind in a central location (mostly after mission schools established) or families migrating all together

The following chart was developed (by this author) to illustrate some basic differences or similarities between the hunter/gatherer Alaska Natives and the herder Saami, as example.

CATEGORY	HUNTER/GATHERER	HERDER
SKILL SETS NEEDED (KNOWLEDGE OF)	NOMADIC LIFESTYLE HUNTING/ STALKING TECHNIQUES GATHERING TECHNIQUES TRAPPING TECHNIQUES COMPLETE SURVIVAL TECHINQUES USE OF WEAPONS MAKE/OBTAIN WEAPONS STRENGTH AND AGILITY CRITICAL WEATHER VARIABLES VARIABLES IN TERRAIN CARIBOU MIGRATION PATTERNS PREDATOR AWARENESS	NOMADIC LIFESTYLE GATHERING TECHNIQUES TRAPPING TECHNIQUES COMPLETE SURVIVAL TECHNIQUES HERD CONTAINMENT LASSOING / USE OF WEAPONS MAKE/OBTAIN WEAPONS MAKE /OBTAIN MANAGEMENT TOOLS STRENGTH AND AGILITY CRITICAL WEATHER VARIABLES VARIABLES IN TERRAIN HERD MIGRATION MANAGEMENT PREDATOR CONTROL TRAINING HERD CORRAL CONSTRUCTION AND MAINTENANCE RECORDS MANAGEMENT / MARKING & TAGGING BREEDING MANAGEMENT CULLING/ CASTRATION DISEASE CONTROL / MEDICAL TREATMENT

¹⁰ “The first caribou came to Selawik later than 1994.” Discussions with elders, “Uqausriptigun: In our own words Selawik elders speak about caribou, reindeer and life as they knew it”, Selawik National Wildlife Refuge. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2007

<p>RELIANCE ON MANY ANIMALS GATHERING WILD BERRIES, VEG.</p> <p>SLAUGHTERING PRESERVATION MANY MEATS PRESERVATION OF HIDES UTILIZATION OF ANTLERS FULL UTILIZATION OF ANIMAL MAKING CLOTHING</p> <p>NO DEPENDENCE ON OUTSIDE INFRASTRUCTURE TRADITIONAL USE OF DOG TEAMS</p>	<p>PROVIDING FORAGE /DIETARY NEEDS OF HERD CALF BIRTH MANAGEMENT AND SURVIVAL TRAINING HERD DOGS MILKING AND MAKING MILK PRODUCTS RELIANCE PRIMARILY ON REINDEER GATHERING WILD BERRIES, VEG REINDEER CONSUMPTION OF MUSHROOMS TRAINING FOR TRANSPORT MAKING/OBTAINING GEAR FOR HARNESSES SLAUGHTERING</p> <p>PRESERVATION PRIMARILY OF REINDEER PRESERVATION OF HIDES UTILIZATION OF ANTLERS FULL UTILIZATION OF ANIMAL MAKING CLOTHING QUALITY CONTROL OF MEAT PREPARATION OF MEAT FOR MARKET MARKETING TECHNIQUES TRANSPORT OF MEAT TO MARKET SOME DEPENDENCE ON OUTSIDE INFRASTRUCTURE TRADITIONAL USE OF REINDEER TEAMS</p>
--	--

CATEGORY	HUNTER/GATHERER	HERDER
MINDSET NEEDED	ARCTIC SURVIVAL ADJUSTMENT TO FOOD SOURCE SEASONAL/OPPORTUNISTIC SUBJECT TO MANY VARIABLES CONFLICT IN OPPORTUNITY FISHING/HUNTING SKILLS CRITICAL LAND/RIVER/LAKE/OCEAN KNOWLEDGE GATHERING TECHNIQUES ESSENTIAL STRONG FAMILY UNITY SOME COMMUNAL RELIANCE NO OWNERSHIP OF FOOD ANIMALS IMMENSELY VARIED DIET	ARCTIC SURVIVAL RELIABLE FOOD SOURCE 24/7 YEAR ROUND SUBJECT TO MANY VARIABLES HERD PRESERVATION IS PRIMARY FUNCTION FISHING/HUNTING SKILLS LESS CRITICAL LAND/RIVER/FJORD/LAKE KNOWLEDGE GATHERING TECHNIQUES OPPORTUNISTIC STRONG FAMILY UNITY STRONG COMMUNAL RELIANCE OWNERSHIP OF ANIMALS CRITICAL LESS VARIED DIET CONTINUED PRESERVATION OF HERD
TIME FRAME (YEARS OF EXPERIENCE)	CENTURIES OF SUBSISTENCE STEEP LEARNING CURVE	CENTURIES OF HERD MANAGEMENT STEEP LEARNING CURVE

CONFLICTS IN CULTURAL PRIORITIES

The conflicts between Native reindeer herders, non-Alaska Native herders (Saami, Caucasian) and Native herders desire to own and manage reindeer versus the very strong acculturation to a subsistence lifestyle are clearly reflected in the many sides of reindeer management there were tried or considered.¹¹

- Managed as a government subsidy with long-term Saami participation
- Managed as a government subsidy with short-term Saami participation
- Managed as a government subsidy with Saami ownership
- Managed as a government subsidy with long-term Caucasian participation¹²
- Managed as a government subsidy with long-term Native ownership¹³
- Managed as a private enterprise without regard to ethnicity
- Managed as a Native-owned subsistence only enterprise
- Managed as only Native-owned commercial enterprise¹⁴
- Managed as a combination¹⁵
- Owned privately by non-Natives for commercial or recreational purposes IF purchased outside the State of Alaska and imported pursuant to applicable federal and state laws¹⁶

¹¹ This conflict extends to this day, specifically in the use of grazing lands.

¹² Pursuant to the Act, the Department of the Interior purchased all non-Native-owned reindeer in Alaska. The acquisition program was completed in the winter of 1939-40. 6/ Thereafter, it seems to have been generally assumed that the Reindeer Act precluded the re-entry of non-Natives into the reindeer industry in Alaska. (1992, Reindeer Herders Association v. Juneau Area Director, Bureau of Indian Affairs.)

¹³ In 1961, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) promulgated reindeer grazing regulations, which restrict grazing privileges on public lands to Natives and Native organizations. See 43 CFR 4310.2. (1992, Reindeer Herders Association v. Juneau Area Director, Bureau of Indian Affairs.)

¹⁴ Section 1 of the Reindeer Act, 25 U.S.C. § 500, provides:

[A] necessity for providing means of subsistence for the Eskimos and other natives of Alaska is hereby declared to exist. It is also declared to be the policy of Congress, and the purpose of this subchapter, to establish and maintain for the said natives of Alaska a self-sustaining economy by acquiring and organizing for and on behalf of said natives a reindeer industry or business, by encouraging and developing native activity and responsibility in all branches of the said industry or business, and by preserving the native character of said industry or business thus established.

(1992, Reindeer Herders Association v. Juneau Area Director, Bureau of Indian Affairs.)

¹⁵ Prior to 1937, Congress had made some substantive provisions for reindeer operations in the context of appropriations acts. See, e.g., 48 U.S.C. § 39 (1934), derived from provisions in various appropriations acts enacted between 1907 and 1927:

"All reindeer owned by the United States in Alaska shall as soon as practicable be turned over to missions in or natives of Alaska, to be held and used by them under such conditions as the Secretary of the Interior shall prescribe. The Secretary of the Interior may authorize the sale of surplus male reindeer and make regulations for the same. The proceeds of such sale shall be turned into the Treasury of the United States. The Commissioner of Education is authorized to sell such of the male reindeer belonging to the Government as he may deem advisable and to use the proceeds in the purchase of female reindeer belonging to missions and in the distribution of reindeer to natives in those portions of Alaska in which reindeer have not yet been placed and which are adapted to the reindeer industry." (1992, Reindeer Herders Association v. Juneau Area Director, Bureau of Indian Affairs.)

¹⁶ "In December 1986, Thomas E. Williams, a non-Native resident of Alaska, informed the Area Director that he intended to purchase reindeer outside Alaska, import them into the state,

Long before ANCSA (Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act), the corporate model to run reindeer herds challenged the strong ties to subsistence and communal living that was a Native characteristic. This was a fundamental cultural shift. The elders didn't like it. They were concerned that the younger generations would lose their subsistence lifestyle skills.

Large scale industrial herding had been more of a priority of non-Native herd owners, like the Loman family, but the corporate model has eventually melded into a combination model (subsistence and business) in today's herding. This requires a whole set of business management skills that neither the Saami nor pre-reindeer Alaska Natives generally had.



Saami reindeer herders making a long migration. They have inhabited the northern arctic and sub-arctic regions of [Fенно-Scandinavia](#) and Russia for at least 5,000 years
Only about 10% of the Saami population in Northern Europe remain herders¹⁷

In the short booklet by Chester Asakak Seveck, "Longest Reindeer Herder; A true life story of an Alaskan Eskimo covering the period from 1890-1973", it is abundantly clear that Chester was often conflicted between management of his reindeer herd and his traditional hunting and fishing. He kept a meticulous diary about his herd management and other activities, an unusual record keeping for the time. This gives us insight into many of the daily conflicts and problems of herd management. Chester managed these conflicts amazingly well and is the quintessential success story for reindeer management in Alaska *for a short period of time*. He essentially proved out a major problem. Even though reindeer herds were "owned" by Native Alaskans, the primary responsibility for the herds remained with the federal government, which eventually "retired" Chester from his

and establish a private herd for commercial purposes. He requested an opinion from the Area Director as to whether the Reindeer Act would apply to his proposed enterprise. The Area Director sought advice from the Regional Solicitor's Office. By memorandum of January 26, 1987, an attorney in the Regional Solicitor's Office responded, stating in conclusion:
In our view there is nothing in the 1937 Reindeer Act to prohibit a non- Native such as Mr. Williams from importing live reindeer from outside of the State of Alaska and raising them within the State as either a hobby or a business. He would be, however, subject to the reporting requirement of 25 U.S.C. § 500b, and the requirement that he file a declaration of ownership would apply not only to animals initially imported, but on an annual basis to any increase in his herd through calving as well. While it is true, as you observed, that establishment of non-Native commercial herds could have a serious impact on the Alaska Native reindeer industry, the Secretary of the Interior has the statutory authority to ameliorate or eliminate such impact at such time as he determines that it is necessary to acquire the non-Native owned reindeer by purchase or exercise of the power of eminent domain. (1992, Reindeer Herders Association v. Juneau Area Director, Bureau of Indian Affairs.)

¹⁷ Sami People, Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sami_people

reindeer herding life and his herd was sold to other herders, who did not manage as well as Chester. There is no doubt that Chester was an amazing individual all the way around but his story was not ultimately of success of reindeer herding. Ironically, he is often remembered more as being a tourist host (with his wife) for Kotzebue.

John Stalker was a Native reindeer herder in the 1940's, herding for the government, working with Chester Seveck. He brought a herd to Noatak. His son Johnson, started working with the reindeer, in and out of school, did not get a formal education because of that but became a good "reindeer reader."¹⁸ The oral histories of Johnson Stalker are fascinating for their detail and description of immense obstacles their herd faced over many years, ultimately resulting in the reindeer being integrated into a wild caribou herd, and therefore being lost. Johnson Stalker felt, despite the loss, that the *caribou* herds might ultimately be lost and it would be important to have reindeer herds. Johnson became a very good herd manager and offered much advice to future herders. He talked about the real conflicts between subsistence priorities and what it takes to manage a reindeer herd. He seemed to be both fatalistic and optimistic at the same time.

In Alaska, what primarily remains of a dramatic history of reindeer herding, are the herds of the Seward Peninsula, "In accordance with the 1937 Reindeer Act, all Alaskan reindeer are owned by Alaska Natives (or in some cases, by Native Village governments). There are approximately 20 reindeer herders on the Seward Peninsula and neighboring islands. Each of these herders is represented in the [Reindeer Herder's Association \(RHA\)](#) which is part of the Natural Resources Division of [Kawerak, Inc.](#) This group provides assistance in the development of a viable reindeer industry to enhance the economic base for rural Alaska and to improve the management of the herds."¹⁹ This is more or less a corporate model of herd management.

Historical reindeer management is similar in many ways to historical sheep herding management and possible old-time free-range cattle ranching. But there are significant differences and that is a paper for another day.

MILLENNIA OF REINDEER HERDING ACCULTURATION Herding as a way of life

The **continued preservation of the herd is one of the primary responsibilities of a herd manager.** That means that herd must be provided for regardless of sickness, diversions of death of some of the managers. This means that the herd must be protected against predators, disease, incorporation into wild herds, loss of range. It also means that herders must be migratory themselves if the herd outrages its range. This is similar to sheep herding; herders must follow the animals' food source.

Michael Bouchard, Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Northern British Columbia and Jeremei Gabyshev, Professor, Department of History,

¹⁸ Oral history, Johnson Stalker, Buckland, Alaska, Tape Number H2000-102-08. / UAF

<http://jukebox.uaf.edu/reindherding/htm/jsh.htm>

¹⁹ UAF/ Reindeer Research Program Blog, posted by D.S. Blodgett, 2/16/12

Shahka State University of Russia describe a typical reindeer herders cycle of following the herd:

“The typical cycle for most reindeer herders is to leave their winter range in spring (March or April) and then to begin a long trek to their summer grazing lands. Along the way, a stop is usually scheduled on spring calving grounds to allow the female reindeer to give birth (usually in mid-spring: in late April or early May). After the calving is over, the reindeer herders can then lead their herds to their summer pastures, where they remain for several months. In the fall (October or November), the herders then lead their herds back to their winter range. It is usually at this time, in late fall or early winter, that the herd is culled and reindeer are butchered for their hides and their meat, as it is at this time of the year that the reindeer provide the best hides.² The herders then continue their migration to their winter range in forested territory—with proper forage—where they spend several months before the annual cycle begins again.

The annual cycle also requires the ability to pack and set up residence in a matter of hours. Given that much of the year is often spent in the tundra, where there is little wood, the reindeer peoples carry all of the necessary belongings as the herd moves over the course of the year. The peoples of the reindeer have adopted a material culture that facilitates their movement over the territory.”²⁰

They further discuss an extremely important factor regarding herd ownership structure, at least for Even and Evenki herds of Russia, that enabled the herd to endure through generations.

“Though the basic economic unit was the nuclear family, the reindeer were not the property of the family, but were rather under the control of larger units—clans. Because the size of herds could fluctuate drastically, owing to predation or epidemics, reindeer were redistributed within the clan to ensure the survival of everyone. Likewise, the clan had a traditional territory over which intermarrying families migrated through the course of the year. The families congregated in the summer, at which time a clan council oversaw the redistribution of reindeer. The ideal marriage partner was a cross-cousin; for example, a man could marry his mother’s brother’s daughter. Since the clans were patrilineal, a cross-cousin would belong to another clan and would therefore be a suitable marriage partner. Quite often, two clans intermarried with each other over the generations, solidifying the alliance between the two clans. The Soviet collectivization of reindeer herders brought about forced social change: rather than centred on the clan, social organization and leadership was centred on the collective or state farm in the Soviet era. Traditional social structures had to accommodate the change imposed by the state. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the collective farms remained. One of the challenges today is how to restructure the social order; this is an ongoing process across Russia.”²¹

Most of the reindeer herds of the world are owned or managed by indigenous people.²² This is a powerful argument for reindeer herding as culture and way of life.

²⁰ Peoples and Cultures of the Circumpolar World I Module 4 Peoples of the Reindeer
Developed by Michel Bouchard, Assistant Professor, Department of
Anthropology, University of Northern British Columbia; and Jeremei Gabyshev,
Professor, Department of History, Sakha State University of Russia

²¹ Ibid

²² <http://reindeerherding.org/herders/>

But, is it also the law? (The following descriptions are verbatim from the acknowledged web links. They are meant illustrate how most of the world's reindeer herders are not only indigenous but are still largely subsistence societies, hundreds, if not thousands of years old, and being threatened en masse by geopolitical changes. There are some notable exceptions, such as the Evenky.) This is not a complete list.

- (1) Northern Europe/ "Lapland" – Finland, Sweden and Norway: Saami / Lapp Rights to Own Reindeer According to the New Norwegian Reindeer Herding Act from 2007 (Lovom reindrift 2007-06-15-40), which regulates reindeer herding in Norway, only those who have the right to a reindeer earmark can conduct reindeer husbandry in the Sámi reindeer herding area. The right to a reindeer earmark requires that the person is a Sámi and themselves, their parents or their grandparents have or had reindeer herding as their primary occupation.²³
- (2) Northern Mongolia (China): Tsaatan (Dhuka), Taigana and Eveny, Evenk
 - a. The Dukha/Tsataan are a nomadic peoples whose traditional migration patterns have been disrupted by border closures in the 1920's and are present day Mongolia's only reindeer herders. Currently just over 200 Tsataan live in the Mongolian taiga and their family based herding system comprises of herds of between 7 and 160 reindeer. The number of reindeer has been in flux over the last two decades and has fallen from over 2000 in the late 1970's to approximately 700 in 2006. Reindeer are used for milk production, transportation and more recently, antlers for handicrafts.
 - b. Evenki / China: Reindeer husbandry in China is limited to a small region in the North East of the country, between 50° and 53° North. There are currently 234 Evenki engaged in reindeer husbandry across 20 families herding approximately 1000 reindeer. These reindeer herding Evenki are the surviving members of what had been a larger Evenki population of hunters that moved freely across the Russian-Chinese border. When Russian-Chinese border hostilities erupted in the 1960's, they happened to be in Chinese territory. Intent on curtailing their free roaming across the border, the Chinese authorities relocated them farther inland, first in Alonson, then Manqui and finally building the settlement of Alougoya.²⁴
- (3) Siberia (Russia): Yukaghir, Chukchi, Evenky, Nenets
 - a. Yukagir are a small people spread across three regions of Eastern Siberia – the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), Magadan and Chukotka, along the Kolyma and Indigirka rivers. They have become known as Tundra and Taiga Yukagirs. Together they number just over 1500 people. The Yukagir have traditionally been nomadic and semi-nomadic hunters, with wild reindeer being one of the preferred game. Yukagir in the tundra regions also practiced small-scale reindeer herding primarily for transportation purposes. Yukagir are today settled, but some lead a semi-nomadic life during

²³ <http://reindeerherding.org/herders/sami-norway/>

²⁴ <http://reindeerherding.org/herders/evenki-china/>

reindeer herding and hunting seasons. Since collectivism, both tundra and taiga Yukagir have practiced reindeer husbandry within the collective system.

- b. Chukchi practice both taiga and tundra reindeer husbandry. They differ in clothing, some practices and transportation usage. The tundra form continues the tradition of long migration routes and large herds. At one time, Chukotka was one of the world's largest regions of reindeer husbandry, in terms of numbers. In the 1980's there were over 500,000 reindeer. The collapse of the Soviet Union saw a more precipitous decline in herd size than anywhere else in Russia. The number of reindeer fell to around 90,000 in 2001. The number of people employed in reindeer husbandry fell from 2,272 in 1976 to 837 in 2001. Many collective farms were closed which had a severe effect on the rural villages. Many reindeer herders were forced to abandon reindeer husbandry. Since then, substantial progress has been made in regenerating Chukchi reindeer husbandry, thanks to the benevolence of Governor Roman Abramovich.²⁵
- c. Evenki are the most widespread of the Tungus speaking peoples and can be found through the Lower Yenisey valley through Evenkiyskiy Avtonomnyy Okrug, Irkutskaya and Amurskaya Obl. to Khabarovskiy Kray, Buryatiya, NorthWest and South Sakha (Yakutia); also in China (see below) and a small group in Mongolia. In other words, from the coast of the Sea of Okhotsk in Russia's Far East, throughout southeastern Siberia, and up the entire length of the Yenisei River to the tundra regions of the Taimyr Peninsula. In total they probably number 50,000, with most residing in Sakha (Yakutia). Nomadism is crucial for Evenki herding culture. Due to Soviet collectivisation nomads were forced to settle and experienced a subsequent dissolution of their social structures and cultural identity.

Reindeer are used for travel (riding animals) and transportation and herded without dogs. Modern transportation has only partly substituted the reindeer. Evenki reindeer husbandry is the model of small scale taiga reindeer husbandry in its use of reindeer for transportation and milk production. Traditionally, the number of reindeer ranged from a few animals per family up to two or three dozens. Relationships with reindeer are close and animals are used to being saddled and milked and continue to be domesticated through millennia old techniques such as the use of salt, smudge pots against insects and protection against predators. Evenki reindeer husbandry is closely related to Sayan (Tozhu, Tofalar, Tsataan) reindeer husbandry from whom they probably adapted it. Evenki used reindeer to spread the length and breadth of Eastern Siberia, over an area of 7 million square kms according to one estimate. As a result there are some 20 distinct Evenki subgroups and the reindeer has become a strong marker of Evenki identity. The development that has occurred in parts of Siberia has been disastrous

²⁵ <http://reindeerherding.org/herders/chukchi/>

for some Evenki and this process is intensifying in recent times with accelerated mineral extraction, pipeline construction and industrial forestry. The fate of the Evenki reindeer herders of the Higher Bureya Region of the Khabarovsk Krai serves as a reminder that reindeer husbandry can disappear from regions.²⁶

- d. Nenets live mainly in the tundra, forest tundra and Northern taiga belt of the European and Western Siberian part of the Russian Federation, from the Kanin Peninsula in the west, along the banks of the White Sea to the Gydansk-Peninsula of the Yenisey delta. They form the largest indigenous group of the Russian North and are one of the world's great reindeer herding peoples who have come to personify large scale tundra reindeer husbandry. Administratively, their territory is divided between the Nenets Autonomous Okrug of the Arkhangelsk Oblast and the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Okrug. Combined, this covers a vast territory of about 1 million square kilometres. The bulk of Nenets reindeer husbandry is situated on the Yamal Peninsula which is the world's largest area of reindeer husbandry. Nenets herders and their families practice nomadic herding and migrating over long distances (up to 1000km annually) between summer and winter pastures, with several migratory routes crossing the Ob River. The Nenets number around 41,000 of which about 13500 are involved with reindeer husbandry. The number of reindeer has long been the highest in Russia, currently standing between 600 – 800,000. Herders in this region maintain close connections to their reindeer on a year round basis. Reindeer are used for meat production, traditional handicraft production and transportation. Reindeer are central to the social, cultural, spiritual and economic life of the Nenets people. Their large herds comprise of both collectively and privately owned animals but are administered by enterprises that date back to Soviet times, though family based units are central to the internal organization of the livelihood. Unlike most other regions of reindeer husbandry in Russia, the number of people choosing reindeer_husbandry as a livelihood is actually increasing, speaking to the vibrancy of the livelihood in the region. Private reindeer ownership within the collective herds has been increasing over the last decade.²⁷

(4) Southern Siberia: Tuva

Like many indigenous peoples, the Tozha Tuvans have fallen under the borders of differing states, under Mongolia, China and currently Russia, as a Republic since 1993. There are approximately 5200 Tozha Tuvans. Tozha Tuvans, along with the Soyot, Tofalars, and Tsataan practice reindeer husbandry and have a millennia old link to reindeer, and mark the southerly limit of reindeer husbandry. As with those peoples, reindeer were used for transport, and used their products for clothing and milked reindeer for food. Collectivisation dramatically altered traditional structures

²⁶ <http://reindeerherding.org/herders/evenki-russia/>

²⁷ <http://reindeerherding.org/herders/nenets/>

and the end of the Soviet Union saw severe economic and cultural disruption – in 1990 the Tozha-Tuvans herded 8100 reindeer yet currently, there are less than a 1000 reindeer left. There are approximately 250 Tozha Tuvans engaged in reindeer husbandry.²⁸

- (5) Scotland: Cairngorm : Mikel Utsi (a Sami from Sweden) and his wife Dr. Ethel Lindgren were the co-founders of the Reindeer Company and introduced the reindeer into the Cairngorms back in 1952. Mr. Utsi devoted his latter years to the practical day to day management of the project, and it was his own zeal and devotion to reindeer that really made the project a success. Dr. Lindgren supported him throughout and continued his efforts after 1979 when he died until her death in 1988.
- (6) Greenland: Reindeer husbandry in Greenland has a short history. In 1952, 300 reindeer were brought to West Greenland (near Nuuk) from Karasjok, Norway with some Sami herders who were brought to train local Inuit. Reindeer husbandry was modeled on Sami methods and two herds were established East of Nuuk, with combined pastures of 2260 km².. By the late 1960's, the herd had grown to 4500 animals, but dropped precipitously in the 1970's, as seasonal movements were stopped and supervision reduced. Sami involvement ended by 1978. Mixing with wild reindeer occurred and by 1998, reindeer husbandry in West Greenland was declared to be finished. Reindeer herding in southern Greenland fared somewhat better. Established in 1973 and by the mid 1990's had grown to between 1500-2000 animals over 1477 km².. By 2008, there was only company actively engaged with reindeer husbandry remaining in South Greenland, so the future of reindeer husbandry seems uncertain.²⁹
- (7) Canada – After unsuccessful introductions of reindeer into Canada during the early decades of this century, a herd brought from Alaska in 1935 was maintained successfully under government management (latterly under the Canadian Wildlife Service) for almost 40 years in the Mackenzie Delta region, Northwest Territories. Sold in 1974 into private ownership, the herd has since increased substantially in size; new management techniques have been developed to herd, handle and slaughter the animals. Meat, antlers in velvet and skins are the main products of a small but profitable local industry under native ownership. Currently numbering some 16 000 animals, the herd now justifies new management decisions affecting its future size and the scope of the enterprise.³⁰
- (8) Alaska: Inuit, Yup'ik, Reindeer Husbandry in Alaska has its roots in the purchase of 1280 reindeer from the Chukchi in Russia as part of a US government plan to provide a source of economic development and meat for the indigenous inhabitants,

²⁸ <http://reindeerherding.org/herders/tozha-tuvans/>

²⁹ <http://reindeerherding.org/herders/greenland/>

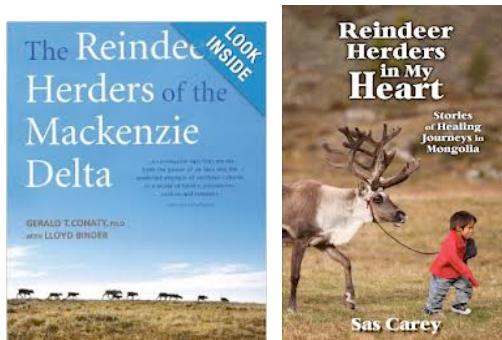
³⁰ Reindeer herding as private enterprise in Canada

J. K. Stager^aDepartment of Geography, University of British Columbia Vancouver, BC, V6T 1W5, Canada

the Inupiaq. In 1894, Sami herders were brought to the Seward Peninsula in 1894, which brought increased commercialization and a large increase in numbers (over 600,000 by 1932). The economic depression, protectionism in the lower 48 states, confusion over ownership, predation and the loss of reindeer to caribou saw a sharp decline in the ensuing decades. Sami involvement ended in this period. Currently there are approximately 10000 reindeer managed by 21 herders who are members of the ~~Kawerak Reindeer Herders Association~~ who practice an extensive management style of herding. Reindeer in this region are relatively sedentary and do not make long migrations. Currently the entire Seward and Baldwin Peninsulas are designated as reindeer pastures along with St. Lawrence Island and areas near Shaktoolik and Stebbins. The Canadian government initiated their Reindeer Project in the 1920's, and by mid 1930, reindeer had been brought from Alaska to the Mackenzie Delta. Sami families from Norway were brought to train herding practices and to this day, Inuvialuit and Sami descendants of the Reindeer Project, herd approximately 3-4000 reindeer near Inuvik locally owned and managed by the Kunnek Resource Development Corporation.³¹



(1) An Evenk reindeer. The fat content of reindeer is six times higher than domestic cattle³²
 (2) Saami reindeer herders in Bethel 1903



(1) The Reindeer Herders of the Mackenzie Delta is the fascinating true history of the Canadian Reindeer Experiment as experienced by Otto Binder, an Inuit herder, his Sami wife, Ellen Pulk Binder, and their son, Lloyd Binder, who continues to herd reindeer. (2) Nomadicare's book about treating traditional reindeer herders in Mongolia

³¹ <http://reindeerherding.org/herders/inupiaq-eskimo/>

³² "Survival" <http://www.survivalinternational.org/news/8898>

DESTRUCTION OF CULTURAL PRACTICES

Reindeer herding being threatened around the Northern Hemisphere

We know from countless studies (and experience) that the destruction of traditional subsistence lifestyles leads to great social upheaval. Whether or not we are currently in a transition time that will stabilize is unknown. There is a reliable school of thought that many traditional lifestyles are healthier and more sustainable than modern alternatives.

America displaced most of its indigenous people to reservations, destroying traditional food sources (bison) or force-removing people far from traditional hunting areas ("Trail of Tears") or just plain annihilating whole populations (wars, disease, poison.) The inevitable result of loss of both identity and traditional survival options was poverty, despair, addictions. Now there is a lop-sided resurgence of American Indian culture, some trying to combine traditions with contemporary life, but many feeling as though those connections to the land, a truly communal life and to a balance of nature has been irrevocably lost.



Mongolian reindeer herders leading a comprehensive subsistence lifestyle are in decline through dwindling woodland access, climate change,

Displacement of many indigenous people of the world through loss of land, migration routes, creation of new borders, government regulations, violence, addictions, and just plain choice is an ecological loss as well as cultural and personal loss. Ancient and not-so-ancient indigenous civilizations had very little carbon footprint. It can be argued that people were far healthier in their subsistence lifestyles, with much evidence that people lived to 100 and beyond. Whether they were generally happy is often not known. Life was hard and complaints probably rarely tolerated. There was squabbling, war, famine, enslavement, accidents, pain, loss and disease. Still, there must have been a sense of knowing your place in the universe and with that, a kind of peace that is more elusive today.

However, I say this with caution as here I have an anecdotal story. In 1975, the first time I went up the Kobuk river about 100 miles from the village of Shungnak to the Pa River and stayed in an Inuit camp, I found myself drinking tea made over a scrub brush fire and eating boiled beaver (not a favorite) with four elderly Inuit women. We were sitting high on a bluff where there was an ancient trading trail with the Athabascan Indians from the Koyukuk River. The trail was quite visible, having worn down both stone and tundra over

the years, and there were several mounds on either side which did not look geologically natural. My hosts told me they were the graves, mostly of children, who had died during these trading sessions as a result of premature birth, accident or war. Those women, with an age range from 60 to 90+, told jokes in Inupiat, remembering old stories. At the end, they said they would never want to go back to those times. Why? Modern medicine and washing machines and sewing machines. Even though, at the time, water still had to be hauled up from the river, women had gas-powered ringer washers and lap sewing machines they were very proud of.

I tell this story because the call to live the kind of tough lifestyle that nomadic hunters or herders have lived is becoming less attractive to people when they have a choice. Our sadness at the loss of losing certain ways of life may be romantically misplaced.



(1) Norwegian Lapps of unknown vintage

(2) A Saami (Lapp) family in Norway around 1900³³ (Check this site... incredible photos!)



(1) Saami reindeer herd in Sweden 2005 (2) A teenage Tsaatan herder ropes a bull reindeer in remote Mongolia.³⁴

In Siberia, “Not only urban groups are experiencing the dilemma of choosing between traditionalism and assimilation. Most indigenous Siberian groups – large and small alike – experience conflict between their traditional lifestyle and modern economic conditions. Time-honored economic activities like reindeer herding and hunting are not competitive in

³³ ‘Before the Fall of the Reindeer People’ Environmental Graffiti

<http://www.environmentalgraffiti.com/featured/before-fall-reindeer-people/18225>

³⁴ “Rolling with Thunderbolt” Michael McRae <http://www.outsideonline.com/adventure-travel/asia/mongolia/Rolling-with-Thunderbolt.html>

modern markets: the production volume is too small, while production and transportation costs are prohibitive. Moreover, the intensive industrial exploitation of land and natural resources in Siberia (which will be discussed in more detail in forthcoming *GeoCurrents* posts) curtails the ability of indigenous groups to maintain their traditional economic activities. Territories that were used for reindeer herding or hunting have become sites of oil and gas extraction, pipelines, railways, processing plants, and reservoirs. Forests, reindeer pastures, and walrus nurseries have been destroyed, and traditional fishing grounds – polluted. Valleys have been inundated and villages destroyed or moved.”³⁵



- (1) The Orochon of Northern Manchuria are breeders and hunters of reindeer whose nomadic culture and economy are based entirely on that animal. Even their name reflects this. On the left is an old musket, on the right a palma, the wooden shaft surmounted by a blade with which the Orochon formerly hunted bear.³⁶
- (2) Kolyma area, Russia. No child of the tundra Yukaghirs ever falls out of these saddles. Reindeer are entrusted even with cradles containing young babies.³⁷

CONCLUSION

Alaska Native herders have becoming increasingly more sophisticated in their approach to herd management so the issue of acculturation is possibly moot *except* for the nagging belief that reindeer herding *is a way of life*. This is how it has survived for thousands of years within certain groups of people. Alaska and Canadian Native people were generally people of caribou or moose or marine mammals or a combination, but were skilled at hunting gathering. Whether Native or not, can we fully transcend our hunter/gatherer modality to commit, for generations to come, to the protection and preservation of reindeer herds in Alaska? Do we want to? We seem to be still uncertain.

With modern technology and increased ways to regulate, manage herds, handle records, provide for markets, etc., there is ample reason to believe that we can do both. There is also ample reason to believe that we should revisit the question of ownership and range conflict and open herd ownership up to non-Native participation as well.

³⁵ Source: <http://www.geocurrents.info/place/russia-ukraine-and-caucasus/siberia/traditionalism-vs-assimilation-among-indigenous-peoples-of-siberia#ixzz2t5aX4qjW>

³⁶ Lissner – “Man, God and Magic”

³⁷ Lissner, “Man, God and Magic”

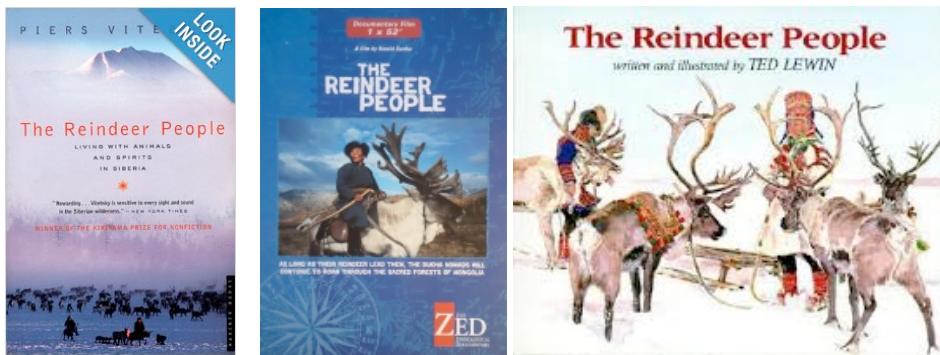
The romance of reindeer remains. The need for protein is increasing and the availability of options is decreasing. Climate change is affecting habitat everywhere. Perhaps the greatest issue is: Can reindeer and caribou co-exist with optimal opportunity for both?

HAVE WE ANSWERED OUR QUESTION?

What role does culture play in the future potential success or failure of reindeer herding in Alaska?

Yes. No. Maybe.

The answer is a lot more complex than is discussed here. There is such an amazing wealth of information and the information is so mesmerizing that a report like this could go on forever. I spare you. Do your own searching and enjoy!



- (1) The Reindeer People: Living With Animals and Spirits in Siberia by Piers Vitebsky³⁸
(2) Movie: The Reindeer People – Available for viewing in full

<http://www.axismundifoundation.org/movies.php>

The Dukha reindeer nomads, living in the forests of Mongolia's northern Hovskol province, are Mongolia's smallest ethnic minority. Like all nomad cultures in the world today, they face new challenges and threats to their lifestyle and the health of their herds.

- (3) Ted Lewin's fabulously illustrated book about a traditional Lapp Saami family

³⁸ ‘Drawing on nearly twenty years of field work among the Eveny in northeast Siberia, Piers Vitebsky shows how Eveny social relations are formed through an intense partnership with these extraordinary animals as they migrate over the swamps, ice sheets, and mountain peaks of what in winter is the coldest inhabited region in the world. He reveals how indigenous ways of knowing involve a symbiotic ecology of mood between humans and reindeer, and he opens up an unprecedented understanding of nomadic movement, place, memory, habit, and innovation.’ Amazon.com