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Cultural Activity And Market Enterprise: A Circumpolar Comparison Of Reindeer Herding Communities at the End of the 20th Century

Abstract:

Reindeer herding throughout the circumpolar North is in decline. Investigating this decline, this dissertation takes a comparative approach with a focus on four case studies: the Chukchi of Chukotskii Peninsula, the Iñupiat of the Seward Peninsula, the Saami of the Kola Peninsula, and the Saami of Finnmark. Comparing and contrasting the various types and rates of trajectories of declines in reindeer herding helps to identify and explain the dimensions of specific local-global processes, and to situate them in wider contexts. A comparative method leads to a systematic analysis of how patterns develop in the practice of contemporary reindeer herding, centering on implications which can foster the development of critiques.

By focusing on changes in reindeer herding over the last decade and its dependence on existing infrastructure, this study reveals the effects of the incorporation of reindeer herding into the global economy, and demonstrates the social position of reindeer herders and the cultural meaning of reindeer herding to the herders themselves. The willingness of regional and national governments to subsidize herding, and to ensure its survival through consistent access to pastures, is critically important to the success of reindeer herding as a productive agricultural enterprise. Beyond this, changing ecological factors potentially threaten reindeer herding as a subsistence activity. The consequences of decline, then, are explained through the identification of decline-inducing factors, such as ecological degradation, political abuse, and the inappropriateness of reindeer herding as a capital-based enterprise under existing conditions and infrastructural development.