

Climate change plea from tribe of herders who face extinction

By Emily Dugan
Saturday, 10 May 2008

Olav Mathias-Eira is a reindeer-herder. So was his father. And his father's father. He is a member of the Sami community, one of the largest indigenous groups remaining in Europe, and his family have been herding reindeer in the same stretch of the Norwegian Arctic since the 1400s.

But, because of climate change, their lifestyle, unchanged for centuries, is now at risk. So Mr Mathias-Eira, 50, has travelled to Britain to issue an urgent plea in the hope that his people and livelihood can be saved.

The atmosphere in the Arctic is warming twice as fast as anywhere else in the world, putting Mr Mathias-Eira and the Sami in the front line of global climate change.

"Climate change is threatening our economy as reindeer herders," he said. "Because this is part of our traditional way of life, if the economy goes, probably the entire Sami culture would go with it.

"Everything about climate change is happening too fast, much faster than we predicted. The [weather] is so unpredictable, so unusual. It can rain in the winter when it usually didn't rain before. The actions need to be fast too. World participation is most important now, but also our voices are not heard, and that's a pity. "

An interview with reindeer-herder Olav Mathias-Eira



The heavy winter rains and storms, previously unheard of, are making their ancient ice-roads treacherous. Because these thinning pathways are necessary to reach their reindeer, they turn herding into a life-threatening experience. Now only 10 per cent of the remaining Samis are herding reindeer, which means that a cornerstone of their traditional way of life is in jeopardy. "The reindeer [weighs] about 80kg, and it needs a good, solid ice when you are moving the herd," said Mr Mathias-Eira. "But traditional knowledge is no good any more, we just can't trust the ice."

Two of his nephews were nearly killed after falling through while herding. "It was minus-30 degrees that day, and they were more than 100km from home," he said. "It was very scary. They managed to a phone and get shelter where they could get a fire, but they were lucky." The unseasonal rain caused by climate change also means an additional layer of ice forms over the snow, so reindeer cannot reach food. Mr Mathias-Eira has about 500 reindeer, but many herders have seen up to 90 per cent of their stock starve to death.

Mr Mathias-Eira, who is married with three children, added: "To Gordon Brown I say, 'Cut the emissions, but also be aware that your ways of acting against climate change also affects indigenous people through the world'. We're paying a double price because we suffer all the climate change and also we're going to suffer all the actions Western states take to tackle it."

In another threat, wind turbines and hydroelectric dams have sprung up in reindeer herding areas that had been protected, cutting grazing and forcing the Sami off their traditional land.

The Sami live across northern Europe, in Norway, Finland, Sweden and Russia. There are believed to be only 100,000 left.

Sami culture

*There are about 100,000 Sami remaining in northern Europe

*Sami have lived in the same northern region of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia for more than 2,500 years

*Their traditional livelihoods include fishing, trapping for fur and reindeer herding

*The Sami were previously known around the world as "Lapps", or Laplanders



Independent.co.uk



The Web



Advanced Search ▶

©**independent.co.uk** [Legal Terms & Policies](#) | [E-mail sign-up](#) | [RSS](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Syndication](#) | [Work for INM](#) | [Advertising Guide](#) | [Group Sites](#) | [London Careers](#)