

# Male-Dominated Reindeer Herding in Greenland – A Short Story

**Maria Ackrén**

## **Abstract**

Reindeer herding and husbandry in Greenland has a short history. While the hunting tradition is much older and has always been part of the Greenlandic tradition (specifically, the hunting of indigenous Greenlandic caribou), reindeer husbandry was first established in mid-west Greenland and later in southern Greenland in the 1950s. The introduction of semi-domestic reindeer from Norway was established in 1952 due to a drop in the indigenous reindeer population throughout the 1920s to 1940s. This chapter outlines the story of reindeer herding in Greenland and its failures and relative successes.

## **Introduction**

Greenlanders have always been very dependent on natural resources for food and clothing. The indigenous Greenlandic caribou, which are considered a subspecies of the Canadian Barren-ground caribou (also called Tundra caribou), have always been part of the Greenlandic fauna but declined during the 1920s to 1940s (Cuyler, 1999 p. 81). The idea of introducing semi-domestic reindeer from Norway was part of a food security plan introduced in the 1950s. After some years of debate and discussion amongst the Danish and Greenlandic authorities, 300 semi-domestic reindeers were bought from the Karasjok reindeer district in Finnmark, Norway and brought to the mid-west of Greenland in 1952 (Cuyler, 1999, p. 81; Dzik, 2016, p. 107). The introduction of reindeer herding was also a way for the Danish state to introduce a new form of business, agriculture, to Greenland (Gaup, 2019, p. 17).

Jens Rosing was the key Greenlander involved in all aspects of the initial establishment of reindeer herding at Itivnera in Godthåbsfjord, especially between 1952 and 1959. Sámi specialists from Norway were hired and came with the reindeer to Greenland. The hired Sámi trained and educated Greenlanders on how to conduct this kind of farming according to the Norwegian Sámi model (Cuyler, 1999, p. 82). Reindeer herding was developed in two

regions, mid-west Greenland and southern Greenland, with two herds in each region. At first, there was only the Itivnera reindeer herd in Godthåbsfjord, but in 1961, a second herd was established in Kangerlupiluk, with 500 reindeer coming from the Itivnera herd. By 1978, both herds belonged to the residents of Kapisillit under the management of the local Greenlandic Cooperative, Kapisillinni Tuttuutiteqatigiit. The herd remained with the cooperative until 1998, when it was sold to the Nuuk municipality, ending reindeer husbandry in the Godthåbsfjord (Cuyler, 1999, p. 82).

Until 1978, the persons involved in the reindeer herding were almost without exception Norwegian Sámi. There was limited ownership or responsibility for reindeer herding by Greenlanders. Some Sámi were employed by the Danish State while others, after 1961, owned their reindeer. The herding practice followed traditional Sámi methods (Cuyler, 1999, p. 82). There was not much success in training Greenlanders in reindeer husbandry. Ole Kristiansen, a Greenlander and co-owner of the Isortoq herd in southern Greenland, was an exception. He received training with the herd in Itivnera and completed a two-year course in reindeer husbandry in Norway. Four other Greenlanders also received training at Itivnera (Cuyler, 1999, p. 84).

The low interest in reindeer herding in Greenland might be because this was not culturally compatible with the Greenlandic or Inuit hunting tradition (Cuyler, 1999, p. 89). Another reason was the discriminatory principle regarding salaries; Norwegians followed the same principles as Danes, while Greenlanders received lower salaries and poorer housing conditions (Gaup, 2019, p. 71). This was part of the Danish state policy at the time. Reindeer herding was more successful in southern Greenland due to their traditions of sheep farming. Thus, it has been suggested that southern Greenland was more accepting towards this kind of activity due to their better understanding of and acceptance for the demands and responsibilities of animal husbandry (Cuyler, 1999, p. 90).

Reindeer husbandry was intended to supply reindeer meat and other reindeer products to the markets in Greenland and Denmark as well as export goods to Europe (Gaup, 2019, p. 17). The idea was to secure and stabilise the meat supply in Greenland in order to prevent imports of meat from elsewhere and to diversify the country's economy. However, this was not totally realized.

## **Sámi Reindeer and Traditional Knowledge**

Reindeer husbandry is seen as a pastoralist economy, which is a nomadic or semi-nomadic form of subsistence economy that is mainly dependent on herds of domesticated animals. The Sámi reindeer herders hold traditional knowledge based on experience on the use of resources, which is linked to the relationship with the reindeer. It is a system of Indigenous resource management, keeping balance between the number of animals and the carrying capacity of the pastures. The herds are moved according to season between the various grazing areas (Gaup, 2019, p. 30).

The International Reindeer Herders Association is an active participant within the Arctic Council. However, with the new observer states from Asia and elsewhere, the organisation has found itself taking a back seat. It has had difficulty getting its voice heard in the processes within the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna working group and other fora relevant for the organisation (Eira et al., 2015, p. 39).

The natural environment and climate in the Godthåbsfjord, near Nuuk, is similar to that of Finnmark, which is why this location was chosen for reindeer herding. There was also a great deal of lichen available in the fjord, which made the area ideal for reindeer herding (Gaup, 2019, p. 34). In 1951, the Provincial Council (Landsrådet) gave the Danish State Ministry the right to regulate the area for reindeer husbandry (Gaup, 2019, p. 35). The Danish state granted annual funding to the reindeer husbandry experiment. In 1956, the state began to receive revenue from the new industry through the slaughtering and selling of reindeer products, which encouraged the authorities to grant the experiment a permanent status (Gaup, 2019, p. 37).

## **Management of Reindeer Herding Areas**

The Itivnera herd was under public ownership with Danish state management from 1952 to 1956. After 1956, it was still publicly owned under the Danish state, but the Royal Greenland Trade Department<sup>1</sup> (Den Kongelige Grønlandske Handel [KGH]) administered the operation.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Royal Greenland Trade Department was established in 1776 and had taken over all management of trade between Greenland and Denmark. This was a colonial monopoly system that operated until 1950. The political administration was also operated underneath the KGH until 1912 (Augustesen & Hansen, 2011; Marquardt & Caulfield, 1996).

The KGH was also financially responsible for the reindeer herd, functioning as the producer, buyer and distributor of the reindeer products (Gaup, 2019, p. 37). In 1964, a slaughterhouse was established. In October 1974, the KGH sold private ownership of the Itivnera herd and leased the slaughterhouse to the Sámi reindeer herder Anders Triumpf. The Itivnera herd remained under Anders Triumpf until 1978, when it then became the property of the Kapisillit Cooperative. Unfortunately, no one in the cooperative had received any training in reindeer husbandry, so the herd became a mixed herd of semi-domestic and wild reindeer (Cuyler, 1999, p. 84; Dzik, 2016, p. 107).

The second herd in the Godthåbsfjord region began in 1961 when Sámi reindeer herder Johan Hætta established a private herd on the Kangerlupiluk peninsula, north of Itivnera. The initial herd consisted of 500 animals, all of which came from the Itivnera herd. A fence was built in order to keep the herds separated from each other. Johan Hætta sold the Kangerlupiluk herd in 1971 to Greenlander Pavia Berthelsen. Pavia Berthelsen had received an education in reindeer husbandry, but due to neglect of the herd, minimal slaughter and no seasonal migrations between winter and summer pastures, the Kangerlupiluk herd became private property of the residents of Kapisillit under the management of the Kapisillini Tuttuutiteqatigiit cooperative (Cuyler, 1999, p. 87).

The Kapisillini Tuttuutiteqatigiit's herding methods were simple. The reindeer roamed unsupervised the entire year, with an annual slaughter in September. Despite the lack of herd control and contact, slaughter records for 1981 to 1990 showed annual harvests of between 700 and 1500 reindeer. These successful harvests were the result of using helicopters to herd the reindeer (Cuyler, 1999, p. 88). However, this management or lack thereof resulted in a complete loss of control over the herd, and in the end, the Greenland home-rule government granted the Nuuk municipality permission to buy the remnants of the Itivnera herd but not to farm it. In June 1998, the Itivnera herd became the Nuuk municipality's responsibility. Lacking jurisdiction to farm the herd, the municipality decided to liquidate it through hunting by both commercial and sport hunters (Cuyler, 1999, p. 89).

In southern Greenland, Greenlander Ole Kristiansen established the Isortoq herd in 1973. The herd was bought from Itivnera. A station for the Isortoq herd was first founded in 1990. This herd came under private co-ownership by Ole Kristiansen and Icelander Stefan H. Magnusson, both of whom had received educations in reindeer husbandry (Cuyler, 1999, p. 90). Today, the reindeer herd is owned by Stefan Magnusson, his two children

and his wife, and they have also included an Icelandic investor, Ingvar Gardarson (Gaup, 2019, p. 44). Isortoq has an area of over 1500 km<sup>2</sup> and slaughters the animals in an EU approved slaughtering house. The meat is sold domestically in Greenland and exported to Canada, Iceland and the EU. Isortoq also grants permission for trophy hunting. In 2016, 523 of approximately 1650 animals were slaughtered.

Another herd in southern Greenland west of the town of Narsaq also began under private ownership by Greenlander Søren Janussen. This small herd was established in 1992 on Tuttutooq Island (Cuyler, 1999, p. 91). This reindeer herd functions today as a subsidiary income for the family (Gaup, 2019, p. 45). Tuttutooq has an area of 200 km<sup>2</sup>, and the animals are slaughtered in Narsaq. The meat is sold on the domestic market in Greenland only (Lehmen et al., 2017, p. 28).

### **Relationships Between Sámi Reindeer Herders and Greenlandic Apprentices**

The reindeer station at Itivnera was organised as an ordinary state institution, with a leader of the station and employees consisting of reindeer herders and apprentices. The Danish state employed Sámi herders to supervise and train Greenlanders as reindeer herders. The work at the station also consisted of practical work such as building corrals, collecting lichen and fetching supplies from Kapisillit. The reindeer herders were employed on a two-year contract. Only one Sámi woman stayed at Itivnera; she came with her husband in 1968 when he was station leader (Gaup, 2019, pp. 45–46).

The Greenlandic apprentices were engaged in vocational training as reindeer herders and helped with all the work at Itivnera. They were employed for four-year apprenticeship contracts and were all young men (around 17 to 18 years old) without families. Only six Greenlanders became fully trained as reindeer herders (Gaup, 2019, p. 46).

During the Sámi period in the Godthåbsfjord (1952–1978), reindeer husbandry was practiced in a similar way as in Sápmi by following the traditional reindeer husbandry yearly cycle with some adaptations to the Greenlandic context (Gaup, 2019, p. 54). The herds were moved between summer and winter pastures, slaughter occurred in the fall and a variety of other activities took place during the year.

## **Laws and Regulations on Reindeer Herding and Hunting in Greenland**

In 1996, the Greenlandic government introduced the legal right to reindeer husbandry in Greenland. Prior to 1996, the only laws available were those regulating sheep farming (Cuyler 1999, 91). The 1996 law was a universal law for the agricultural sector in Greenland. This means that it covered all businesses involved in the usage of land, delimitation or animal husbandry, including aquaculture (Agricultural Commission, 2014).

Regarding the hunting of indigenous caribou, a great deal of effort has been put into its management. Caribou hunting plays an important economic, recreational and cultural role in Greenland. Since the early 1990s, caribou have been managed through conservation and hunting restrictions, and their preservation from 1993 to 1995 increased their numbers from approximately 10,000 to 17,600 (Jepsen et al., 2002, p. 402).

According to the law regarding hunting in Greenland (Lov nr. 29 af 29.10.1999 om fangst og jagt), a license is required to be either a full-time or seasonal/recreational hunter. In order to acquire a hunting license, a person must be a permanent resident of Greenland and have lived on the island for the previous two years. A full-time hunter must also be part of the Greenlandic community, meaning that they must have a permanent residence on the island through work or housing. Licenses for seasonal/recreational hunters are based on an application that is available to anyone who has lived on the island for the previous two years. Seasonal/recreational hunters must follow the quota systems that each municipality has and register their catches to the authorities. This also applies for full-time hunters, for whom economic revenue also has some importance (seasonal/recreational hunters only hunt for personal use).

## **Gender Issues Within Reindeer Herding and Hunting**

As can be seen from the above description of reindeer herding in Greenland, it has been a completely male-dominated system. Only one woman ever worked at the Itivnera station because she came with her husband from Norway. The stations operating in southern Greenland are also operated entirely by men. Traditionally, hunting and fisheries have also been dominated by men in Greenland. According to current statistics, this has not changed much over the years (Statbank, n.d.). Full-time hunters are predominantly men, with only one to three women per municipality. The majority of seasonal/recreational hunters are also men,

but here more women do participate (accounting for about 10–20% of seasonal/recreational hunters across the municipalities; Statbank, n.d.).

### Conclusion

Reindeer husbandry has not seen any major success in Greenland, where hunting and fishing are rooted in traditions and customs. There are only two reindeer herds left, and both are in southern Greenland, where sheep and cattle farming and cultivation of crops are managed. The reindeer initiative, which dates back to the 1950s, was greeted with scepticism as a result of the Danish colonial system at the time. The 1950s was also a period of large housing, education and health care projects. Due to the major developments all happening at once in Greenlandic towns and settlements, the Greenlandic people were not receptive to further innovative ideas at the time.

### References

- Agricultural Commission. (2014). *Landbrugskommissionens betænkning februar 2014*. [https://naalakkersuisut.gl/~media/Nanoq/Files/Attached%20Files/Fiskeri\\_Fangst\\_Landbrug/DK/2016/Final\\_Rapport%20landbrug%202014\\_Chair\\_DK\\_pdf.pdf](https://naalakkersuisut.gl/~media/Nanoq/Files/Attached%20Files/Fiskeri_Fangst_Landbrug/DK/2016/Final_Rapport%20landbrug%202014_Chair_DK_pdf.pdf)
- Augustesen, R., & Hansen, K. (2011). *Det moderne Grønland – Fra koloni til selvstyre*. Bogforlaget Frydenlund.
- Cuyler, C. (1999). Success and failure of reindeer herding in Greenland. *Rangifer*, 19(4), 81–92.
- Dzik, A. (2016). Settlement closure or persistence: A comparison of Kangeq and Kapisillit, Greenland. *Journal of Settlements and Spatial Planning*, 7(2), 99–112.
- Eira, R., Hansen, K., & Mathiesen, S. D. (2015). Experiences from reindeer husbandry. In *Local knowledge and resource management – On the use of indigenous and local knowledge to document and manage natural resources in the Arctic* (pp. 38–40). Nordic Council of Ministers.
- Gaup, L. S. K. (2019). *The history of Sámi reindeer husbandry in Greenland and the transfer of traditional knowledge from Sámi herders to Greenlandic apprentices* [Unpublished Master's thesis]. Arctic University of Norway. <https://munin.uit.no/handle/10037/15667>

- Jepsen, B., Siegismund, H., & Fredholm, M. (2002). Population genetics of the native caribou (*Rangifer tarandus groenlandicus*) and the semi-domestic reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus tarandus*) in Southwestern Greenland: Evidence of introgression. *Conservation Genetics*, 3, 401–409.
- Lehmann, J. O., Sharif, B., Kjeldsen, C., Plauborg, F., Olesen, J. E., Mikkelsen, M. H., Aastrup, P., Wegeberg, S., Kristensen, S., & Greve, M. H. (2017). *Muligheder for klimatilpasning i landbrugserhvervet – status og handlemuligheder, maj 2017*. Aarhus University.  
<https://naalakkersuisut.gl/~media/Nanoq/Files/Attached%20Files/Klima/Klimatilpasning%20Landbrug/Klimatilpasningsredeg%C3%B8relse%20-%20dansk%20-%2020170519.pdf>
- Lov nr. 12 af 29.10.1999 om fangst og jagt. <http://lovgivning.gl/lov?rid=%7B1A6BE69B-3B89-4173-BAC1-1C61736FF93C%7D>
- Marquardt, O., & Caulfield, R. A. (1996). Development of West Greenland markets for country foods since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. *Arctic*, 49(2), 107–119.
- Statbank. (n.d.). *Grønlands statistik: Fangst*.  
[http://bank.stat.gl/pxweb/da/Greenland/Greenland\\_\\_FI\\_\\_FI20/FIXBEVIS.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=7329337e-57ed-46ba-b673-0131b35e9b08](http://bank.stat.gl/pxweb/da/Greenland/Greenland__FI__FI20/FIXBEVIS.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=7329337e-57ed-46ba-b673-0131b35e9b08)