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## Documenting Sami Cultural Landscapes

Ewa Ljungdahl

‘Over there, it looks like it has been something, maybe a hut-foundation.’ It is Sigrid who first responds that the vegetation within a defined area looks different from the surrounding area.

We are several people, walking in the mountains in order to document the Saami cultural landscape in a Sami village, in the south part of Sápmi. There are five of us: Sigrid, a woman who is about 70 years old; her daughter Inga; her grandchildren Ante and Silje; and I, an archaeologist (Figure 3). It is not the first time that Sigrid and I have documented Sami cultural heritage. We have spent several days in the mountains, both in rain and sunshine. Sigrid is well acquainted with the landscape, with hut-foundations and other important old sites. Her *aajja*—her grandfather—and other elderly relatives told her about their old places. But her grandfather did not tell her everything. Sigrid remembers a time when she was young and she and her grandfather were herding reindeer together with her father. They passed a collection of stones, like a cairn, next to the path, and Sigrid understood that the stone collection was something that people had built up, but she did not understand why. Could it be a grave? But both her father and grandfather were quiet and mumbled that people should not ask about everything. The best thing to do was to walk past and not worry so much. This approach has been common among old Sami.

Sami history is a fairly quiet history. We have no written sources of our own, and when the Sami are found in Swedish and Norwegian archives, it is mostly in connection with baptism, trials and paying taxes. The South Sami language was not written until around 1900, and therefore knowledge, stories, and history have mainly been disseminated orally, from one generation to the next, from father to daughter, in the same manner that Sigrid's father had told her. But such living memories rarely survive more than two or three generations. Therefore, Sami history is almost unknown. You can still see the old fireplaces from the huts and the sacrificial sites, but the names of the old places have usually been forgotten. For previous generations, this was no problem, because in old Sami tradition, buildings and other things that were no longer used would be returned to nature, like the abandoned hut whose birch bark and turf lay like a ring around the hut, slowly being handed back to Mother Earth. You should not interfere with the ancestors, they should be allowed to rest in peace. In this way, Indigenous peoples around the world manage their history, and for this reason, the traces from previous Sami settlement are weak and difficult to discover. Climate change now means that vegetation hides the traces of ancient settlements at a faster pace.

Today, there is a need for the Sami people to demonstrate their existence. There are many conflicting activities and parties who are interested in their landscape, for example mining, wind-power parks, large-scale tourism and forestry industries. Such activities can destroy the traces of the ancient Sami settlements forever.

There are different views among the Sami people. Some want to show their history, and are proud of restoring huts, building up old reindeer pens, and putting up information boards, while others feel strong aversion to marking ancient settlements as dots on a map, because this is contrary to the old ways of thinking, and is merely a concession to modern society. But, if the old places are not marked on a map there is nothing that actually says they exist, and they cannot be protected from exploitation. Sami ancient monuments such as hut foundations, bone deposits, and graves are protected by the Culture Heritage Act in Sweden, like all other ancient sites, but it is difficult to protect sites that are not marked on maps. There is generally a well-founded fear of leaving out the old traditions and knowledge. Many persons have had bad experiences of researchers and authorities digging up graves and other relics, collecting bones and drums, and taking them to museums far away, sometimes in completely different parts of the world.



Figure 3. Undertaking survey work. Ewa Ljungdahl is standing to the left. Sitting beside her is the archaeologist Bernth Ove Viklund. To the right of them are reindeer herders Lasse Kuhmunen and Magnus Kristoffersson.

Source. Photographed by Åsa Viridi Kroik, between Voernese and Vilhemina Södra Saami villages, June 2010. Used with permission.

Sigrid has given much thought as to how she should relate to her own history. She is proud of her history, but she feels ambivalent. While she is deeply involved in searching for and documenting her history, she is afraid that the same history will end up in the wrong hands. But she would like to bring her knowledge to her children and grandchildren. If she does not show them the important old places that her grandfather showed her, those places will soon be forgotten. Sigrid is the last person who knows where her family's hut sites and bone deposits are. When she is dead, her knowledge will also go away, and her grandchildren will never get to know who lived in the hut on the hill over there.

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