

WIND POWER DEVELOPMENT ON SAAMI LANDS: THE POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF RESOURCE MANAGEMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND INDIGENOUS RIGHTS.

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Abstract:

This paper will discuss the contentions and disputes surrounding the recent expansion of wind power development in Sweden, highlighting how capital interest and the ambiguous goal of sustainable development has shaped market oriented strategies but are essentially unable to solve the ecological contradictions that lie at the heart of the disputes.

Motivated by ambitious political goals of a ten fold increase of renewable energy production by 2020, the potentials for economic gain in the wind power industry has mobilized a large number of national and international corporations claiming vast areas of land for development, mainly in the northern half of the country. The north has been particularly interesting for developers as they consider the vast areas being relatively empty of development and of people. Their plans have however been met with critique by the indigenous Saami population, who inhabit these northern territories and whose livelihood depend on accessing the areas for herding pastures. The Saami have argued that the extensive establishment of wind parks disturb the migratory habit of reindeer herds and therefore put their traditional practices at risk, but the Saami often find that by defending their herding rights they are said to oppose efforts to counteract climate change.

The Saami culture is to a great extent founded on the traditional use of natural resources, and Saami reindeer herding communities are entirely reliant on an extensive use of the land for their cultural and economic survival. In Sweden the Saami have statutory rights as an indigenous people to herd reindeer over the northern territories located above the cultivation border and customary right to use areas below the border in accordance with traditional practice. As such they should have a major role in designing the development programs that effect the local resources that they depend upon. However, existing political and legal instruments have failed to provide a supportive environment for the Saami and prioritized the demands of economic development over the protection of Saami rights and autonomy. The contemporary environmental struggles concerning wind power are embedded in a long historical record of resource management policies directed by the rational that Saami traditional land use has to give way to industrial development, thus constraining the principle that constitute the core of Saami land rights. Wind power is the most recent of over 150 years of industrial encroachments including large scale mining, logging and hydropower in the northern Saami territories. These development projects have generally failed to recognize Saami resource access rights and the Saami have not been enabled to participate effectively in resource management decisions or been granted equitable sharing of benefits arising out of exploiting these resources. The cumulative impacts of many different types of industry has exponentially constrained the exercise by the Saami herders of their inherent right to land and the resources bound up in that land. However, the Saami have continued to press for recognition of their place in the decision making, environmental governance and the disposition of resources.

Drawing on ethnography from two Saami herding communities, this paper will show different ways in which wind power development is being negotiated and contested. In the case of Östra Kikkejaure Saami village, negotiations mainly took place through direct negotiations between herders and developer after the government had approved the building of the world's largest wind park consisting of 1101 turbines in the middle of their herding pastures. In the case of Jiingevaerie Saami village, the planning of a wind park of 460 turbines was instead met with a series of protests and court litigations. Ultimately what the Saami demand is some form of influence or autonomy to be able to decide what should be made of their lands. As it stands there are no concrete state measures on how to use and manage natural resources in the best interest of the Saami population, nor are there guidelines for compensation for damages suffered by reindeer herders. Similarly the Saami Parliament have no right to stop encroachment on the environment based on the injury it may cause to Saami culture. As the integration of decision making is not clear, reindeer herders often become the subject to the authority of several agencies, leaving them with inconsistent regulation, without effective protection and ultimately with unresolved claims. Recent experiences from consultation processes between Saami communities and wind power developers have not shown any actual effect on decisions made, since it is only by institutionalizing governance and participation that actual possibilities to effect the outcome of projects can be achieved, and rights retain meaning.