Struggles over Resilience and Sámi Reindeer Pastoralism in Norway

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Abstract

Resilience thinking has growing purchase in the context of current Arctic policy, resource management and indigenous politics. This paper outlines and compares two conflicting versions of the "resilience" concept, as these are currently at work in the fields of indigenous Sámi reindeer pastoralism, research, governance and advocacy.

First, while the resilience literature emerged as a challenge to mainstream equilibrium ecology in the 1970s and 80s, we observe a re-appropriation of the resilience concept by equilibrium theory in recent debates about reindeer management. A number of Scandinavian researchers, mostly biologists by training, argue that reindeer pastoralism is currently not sustainable and that it has lost resilience due to overstocking. Here, increasing reindeer populations and low carcass weights serve as the main indicators of lost resilience - defined as decreasing capacity to cope with adverse winter conditions. "Resilience" is thus linked to the ability of the system to maintain itself in a steady state, as measured primarily through population numbers: this, in turn, is closely linked to long-standing government objectives of "stabilising" the reindeer population, regularising production and ensuring "predictability" over time. This interpretation of "resilience" does not take into account that the Arctic pastoral system is highly unstable and variable over time.

In contrast, pastoral activists are using the resilience concept to draw out key elements of pastoral practice that have ensured its continuity over time, in such an extreme and often unpredictable environment. Describing "resilience" in terms of e.g. flexible organization, control over space, sophisticated technical terminology and mechanisms for intergenerational transmission, activists use the concept to formally capture the ability of reindeer pastoralism to accommodate, survive and adapt to a much wider range of "shocks" - including unpredictable climatic and environmental change, but also social and political shocks, such as new regulatory frameworks, state interventions and changing market structures. "Resilience" as it is defined here also incorporates the ability of herders to flexibly manage (and modify) the size and structure of their own herds, calibrating populations against a shifting, inherently variable resource base, determined by a range of complex and unpredictable environmental factors. In other words, pastoral activists are developing notions of "resilience" based on an understanding of pastoral ecology as a dynamic, non-equilibrium system, whose resilience is threatened primarily by the loss of pastures to competing forms of land-use - including extractive industries, energy and infrastructure developments, expanding tourism and a growing population of protected carnivores - and the ongoing pressure from state agricultural and environmental authorities to de-stock, as a step towards "modernizing" production.

By contrasting these two versions of "resilience", and situating them more generally within
the political and historical landscape of reindeer governance in Norway, we draw out the potential of the resilience concept as tool for critique and resistance to dominant political agendas.

**Keywords:** Resilience, Political Ecology, Resistance, Land Management