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The Reindeer Christmas connection

By Eva Wiklund

For the Reindeer herding peoples of the northern hemisphere, associating Reindeer with Santa Claus and Christmas is a foreign concept.

In fact, in the Scandinavian countries Reindeer are not used at all as a Christmas decoration and Scandinavian kids do not expect Santa to arrive in a sleigh pulled by Reindeer.

About a quarter of the Earth's land surface is used for Reindeer herding. Most of this area is in the remote arctic and subarctic regions where farming and other human enterprises have been all but impossible until recent times.

Exactly how the traditional Reindeer husbandry cultures of the North originated is unknown, but we can actually get an insight by turning to North America. In northern Yukon, Canada, remains of old logs forming massive constructed structures have been found which were used to catch Caribou some 30,000 years ago. The indigenous population have labelled them "the Caribou corrals". These corrals were designed to capture migrating Caribou. The animals entered at a site where the corrals were about five kilometres wide. The corrals gradually narrowed until the Caribou were trapped, providing an easy target for slaughter.

The Reindeer corrals of today are in fact not so different, except for the use of modern materials. The Scandinavian Saami Reindeer herders have only added one refinement to the structure which is found in the narrow end of the corral. Here you find a set of doors or openings used to sort Reindeer destined for slaughter from the rest of the herd.

The domestication and breeding of Reindeer developed among the indigenous peoples of each area, and it is still mostly an indigenous enterprise. Different types of Reindeer were bred according to the need from the herders, the most common type is a combined meat and transport animal. The Reindeer herders in Russia are still nomadic and move over vast areas with their animals and therefore Reindeer are an important source of transport.

In the Scandinavian countries the traditional way of using Reindeer for transport is not so common anymore, however Reindeer races, with a skier towed after the Reindeer, are a very popular winter sport. They are short-distance, sprint-type events, racing normally over 1000m (1 km).

Nowadays the northern region is exploited in a number of other ways such as forestry and mining which causes problems for the Reindeer herders. Present and future utilisation of the large quantities of oil found in northern Russia is one example of a major threat to the Reindeer herding cultures

So where did the myth about Santa and Reindeer start? Apparently it was a wealthy New Yorker, linguist and father of seven, Clement Moore who formed the Santa and Reindeer connection when he wrote a poem for his family called *A visit from St Nicholas* in 1860. He took some of the ideas that people had brought to America from various European traditions and created a cosy, cute and wintry story. (The red-nosed Rudolph character was created in 1939 for an American department store advertising campaign.)

Therefore many people still might think of Reindeer as a fairy-tale animal, not only in the United States (where there actually are lots of both Caribou and Reindeer) but also in countries far away from Reindeer and from the traditional forms of Reindeer herding. Almost everyone is positively interested in Reindeer as an animal and also fascinated to learn about the indigenous peoples in the North who have been dependent on Reindeer for transport and food supply for thousands of years.

At University of Alaska Fairbanks and the Reindeer Research Program (RRP), some enthusiastic researchers have taken advantage of peoples' genuine interest in Reindeer and developed a school curriculum focusing around the animals.

Reindeer have played a strong role in shaping Alaskan history, particularly along the western coast. Alaskan Natives and others have been raising Reindeer for about 100 years, both behind fence and on large, remote grazing areas. Reindeer are well adapted to thrive in northern climates and have provided meat, hides, antlers and many other useful products to Alaskans. As an economic resource for rural Alaska, this industry has largely been obscure, even to many Alaskan residents.

The RRP has a mission to further develop and promote the production of Reindeer in Alaska through research and collaboration with producers and local communities. The RRP Educational Outreach Program began in 1998 in local schools in Nome and Fairbanks for all grade levels. The program is designed to teach students science and maths, along with Alaskan history, Alaskan Native culture, economics, renewable resource use, and sustainable agriculture, using the context of the Reindeer industry. By integrating region-specific information and knowledge with conventional disciplines, the program augments usual school curriculums.

The educational material *Reindeer roundup!* was developed as response to countless requests received by the RRP to visit classrooms and present information on Reindeer in Alaska. It was built up in part using lesson plans written by Nome and Fairbanks teachers who attended Reindeer education workshops. RRP produced a unit that uses Alaska's Reindeer industry as a working model to study the management of a sustainable natural resource in a northern ecosystem, a model that broaden the curriculum and expose students to applied science. Reindeer are found to be an excellent way of introducing study of the characteristics of tundra ecosystems and adaptations of animals living in the Arctic.

During the development of *Reindeer Roundup!* it was clear that there is a true benefit of university researchers and scientists working with local educators and people in the community to teach future generations to preserve and continue a traditional way of life in rural Alaska.

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