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REINDEER HERDERS WITHOUT REINDEERS: THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OR ECOSYSTEM-BASED APPROACH IN THE RUSSIAN ARCTIC

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Ecosystem-based approach is increasingly gaining momentum as a method towards solving complex environmental problems. The use of this approach is seen promising in the Arctic as it fosters finding a balance between conflicting economic priorities and safeguarding fragile environment. Scientific and policy efforts in the Arctic are increasingly guided by ecosystem-based approach (Hoel, 2009), which refers to balanced application of integrated strategies for sustainable management of resources and conservation (Arctic Council, 2013). There has been, however, little research on how these well-intended developments affect and evolve in practice in the Russian Arctic. This paper analyses the discrepancy between the scientific approach to ecosystem-based management and its implementation into concrete practices on the ground, in this case bird conservation and reindeer herding in Kolguev Island in the Russian Arctic.

The case study of Kolguev Island involved participant observations, semi-structured, open-ended and biographical interviews, as well as document analyses. The data was collected during three visits to the Nenets Autonomous District in Russia between 2012 and 2014 and an expedition to Kolguev Island in May 2014. Kolguev Island was selected as a case study because it represents a unique subarctic ecosystem, including large migratory birds populations, and the home of indigenous Nenets people engaged in reindeer herding.

The focus of the article is on information co-production and sharing between large international research project ECORA and indigenous Nenets community. The ECORA project was launched in 2004 and selected Kolguev Island as one of the model zones attempting, among others, to test an ecosystem-based approach to preservation of migratory birds and reindeer herding. The results indicate that birds conservation priority was addressed rather successfully; both scientific information and indigenous knowledge was taken into account in the process of creating the nature reserve. However the project had different results with regard to the reindeer herding. The scientific information targeting sustainable reindeer herding was neglected by the indigenous people and in 2013 reindeer population experienced outstanding mortality. Despite the involvement in the project of local Nenets people the ecosystem-based approach was not institutionalized and not translated into sustainable local practices. External factors, such as unfavourable weather conditions in combination with ineffective management, have contributed to the failure of the science-based model.

The concept of informational governance (Mol, 2008) is used to analyse the data and interpret the different roles that information plays in implementation of the ecosystem-based approach in practice. In the case of Kolguev island diversity of information, represented by scientific information, indigenous knowledge and locally-generated information, lacked coherent combination. This resulted in discrepancy between the scientific ecosystem-based model of reindeer herding and concrete management practices on the ground.

References

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