

North Calling

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Keywords

art-based action research, art education, decolonisation, Sámi, reindeer herders, community-art, PhotoVoice

Abstract

Globalisation both urges and enables minorities and indigenous peoples to inform others about their existence. In the changing multicultural North, cultural livelihoods and lifestyles strive to survive and remain viable. This visual essay presents my on-going, art-based action research in which the Sámi reindeer herders inform about their daily lives with photos taken by themselves. A fundamental part of my research is a touring pedagogical exhibition, that is co-produced as a team, by five reindeer herder families and myself.

The Art Education program at the University of Lapland actively promotes an art-based action research method. This method utilizes a culturally-sensitive art education and community-based art approach, with the overarching aim of supporting the northern culture-identities and decolonization.



Figure 1. Young boy watching his grandfather at work
Photo: Magreeta Sara, 2017.

Avainsanat

Taideperustainen toimintatutkimus, taidekasvatus, dekolonisaatio, saamelaiset, poronhoitajat, yhteisötaide, PhotoVoice

Tiivistelmä

Globalisaatio sekä painostaa ja mahdollistaa vähemmistöjä ja alkuperäiskansoja tiedottamaan olemassaolostaan. Muuttuvassa monikulttuurisessa pohjoisessa perinteiset elinkeinot ja elämäntavat ponnistelevat säilyäkseen elinvoimaisina.

Tässä visuaalisessa esseessä esitän taideperustainen tutkimusprojektini, jossa saamelaiset poronhoitajat kertovat itse arjestaan omilla valokuvillaan. Tutkimuksen pääasiallinen aineisto muodostuu kiertävästä pedagogisesta näyttelystä, jonka olen toteuttanut yhteistyössä viiden poronhoitajaperheen kanssa.

Lapin yliopiston kuvataidekasvatuksen ohjelma kehittää taideperustaista toimintatutkimusta, jossa sovelletaan kulttuurisensitiivisen taidekasvatuksen ja yhteisötaiteen toimintaperiaatteita. Menetelmän tavoitteena on edistää ja tukea pohjoisia kulttuuri-identiteettejä ja dekolonisaatiota. Toimin tutkimuksessani poronhoitajayhteisössä fasilitaattorin ja taiteilija-opettaja-tutkijan -roolissa. Elän myös omaa arkea osana poronhoitajien yhteisöä, mikä on edesauttanut yhteistyötä poronhoitajien kanssa.

North Calling

Cultural sustainability in Arctic communities by art-based action research

This research is one of the art-based research studies by the Faculty of Art and Design in the University of Lapland. I am part of the research group called NACER, Northern Art, Community and Research (<https://nacerteam.weebly.com/>), led by professors Timo Jokela, Mirja Hiltunen and Glenn Coutts, where research members share an interest to develop visual art education and applied visual art in the context of the North and the Arctic.

The research projects of NACER applies the ABAR (Art-Based Action Research) method, utilized as a research method to explore the changing North. The ABAR method have a basis in action research, often applying the PAR (participatory action research) method, to involve a community to participate in a change situation. The research actions are of a creative or artistic kind. The art-based action method aims to e.g. develop an artistic expression or a creative action, to be used as a tool or a method. (Hiltunen, 2009; Hiltunen & Manninen, 2015; Huhmarniemi, 2016; Jokela et al., 2015.) In this research the reindeer herders PhotoVoice actions and the touring exhibition are the data and an outcome of my research intentions.



Figure 2. ArctiChildren-project in Lovozero, Russia.
Faculty of Art and Design, University of Lapland. Photo: Timo Jokela, 2007.

I have worked more than twenty-five years as an art-teacher in the North including different projects with an emphasis on cultural and environmental care. Contemporary art and art education have been my main tools in my working processes to build a platform for interactive communication. In my research, placing creative actions and contemporary art once again in significant roles, I strive to convey information, to enhance and empower cultural identity, and to build a sustainable dialogue. As an art educator and researcher, my aim is in this research to construct knowledge in collaboration with the reindeer herders, and in this way support decolonial actions.

The reindeer herders

It is June. In Northern Finland, far above the Arctic circle, the reindeer herders are marking their calves of the year. This is done during the cooler night so the reindeer are less stressed in the warmth of the never descending sun.

The custom of calf marking has been done for centuries. Reindeer herding is a traditional livelihood of the Sámis, who are the indigenous people of the North and also the only indigenous people of the European Union. The skills and knowledge of reindeer herding have descended in the Sámi families for ages and the whole family, from small children to seniors, work together. (Sámediggi, 2018.)



Figure 3a. (Katja Magga, 2016)



Figure 3b. (Suvi Kustula, 2016)



Figure 3c. (Kirsi Ukkonen, 2016)



Figure 4. (Marjinga Sara, 2016)

Figures 3a, 3b, 3c and 4. Calf Marking.

Pictures of the North

The Sámi traditional reindeer herder scenery appears colourful and exotic in travel commercials. Tourism is the most important business in the North and also a common extra income among the reindeer herders. (Visit e.g. the website of Jaakkolan porotila - <https://luosto.fi/yritys/luoston-porosafarit#>). The Sámi reindeer herders, within tourism, have fallen into the “indigenous trap”, where they are supposed to look and act in a certain way (Valkonen, 2009). The indigenous people are often pictured from a Western point of view and are used as labels or semiotic stereotypes of the area (Niskala & Riidanpää, 2015).

The marketing pictures, (e.g. <https://www.discoveringfinland.com/destination/santa-claus-reindeer-reindeer-sleigh-ride/>) are common and might build false notions about the Sámis and continue a contemporary form of cultural colonisation. But beyond the world of tourism the Sámi reindeer herder culture is vivid. In their daily life, the herders are raising their children to combine the ancient silent knowledge and traditions of their culture with modern herding. This intuitive movement of revitalization (Seurujärvi-Kari, 2013) values traditions in a modern context and keeps the heritage alive.



Figure 5. Wet feet.
Photo: Marjinga Sara, 2016.

The exploration of the Arctic has been for long a great interest of science in many fields. The environmental issues are today a global and well-known concern, but also the scope of the social and human circumstances has arised to a new awareness in both political and decolonial discussions. The BBC documentaries of Arctic exploration and travel studies provide us fascinating views of distant lives (Visit e.g. Bruce Parry’s tour from the North <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1APMygVP1Y>). The anthropologists make high-quality research about the indigenous cultures (see Forbes & Stammler, 2009; Kuper, 2005).

The information of the Arctic is usually spread by persons visiting and observing communities from the outside. This may result in a constellation of “us and them”. The narratives of the people in the periferia might seem to you as distant and unreal as a story of the explorer on his adventures.

Information given directly of minorities and indigenous people themselves is rarely seen. This research in progress seeks to develop ways and methods of art-based action research which could be useful and provide a sustainable approach to bringing forward realistic information of the reindeer herders by themselves, and also support decolonialism. This form of decolonial activism strives to defend, enable, protect and facilitate the self-determination of the community (Smith, 2012, p. 221).

A direct call from the North

In this art-based research the reindeer herders reveal their daily chores from their own perspective. My background as an art educator, as well as my personal daily life married to and have raised a family with a Sámi reindeer herder, helps me to intertwine the two worlds. In my research, together with the families, I try to widen knowledge and perspectives of an indigenous livelihood and culture, that is constantly renewing itself along with the rapidly changing Arctic.

My research includes a touring art-pedagogical exhibition based on the reindeer herders' snapshots taken by themselves. Within the terms of art education in this research, I adopt the visual thinking and the discussions during the selection of the photographs with the family members, and also our plans and work building the exhibition (see Figure 7).

The visual material has an important role as a global means to convey information and knowledge between people who do not share the same language (Kepes, 1944). My research uses community-based visual art, as a communication tool, to evoke and bring information and awareness from people to people.

Figures 6a, 6b, 6c and 6d. Daily tasks and ordinary life.

Photos: 6a) Korinna Korsström-Magga, 2016; 6b) Jouni Lukkari, 2016; 6c) Marjinga Sara, 2016; 6d) Marjinga Sara, 2016.



Figure 6a. (Korinna Korsström-Magga, 2016)



Figure 6b. (Jouni Lukkari, 2016)



Figure 6c. (Marjinga Sara, 2016)



Figure 6d. (Marjinga Sara, 2016)

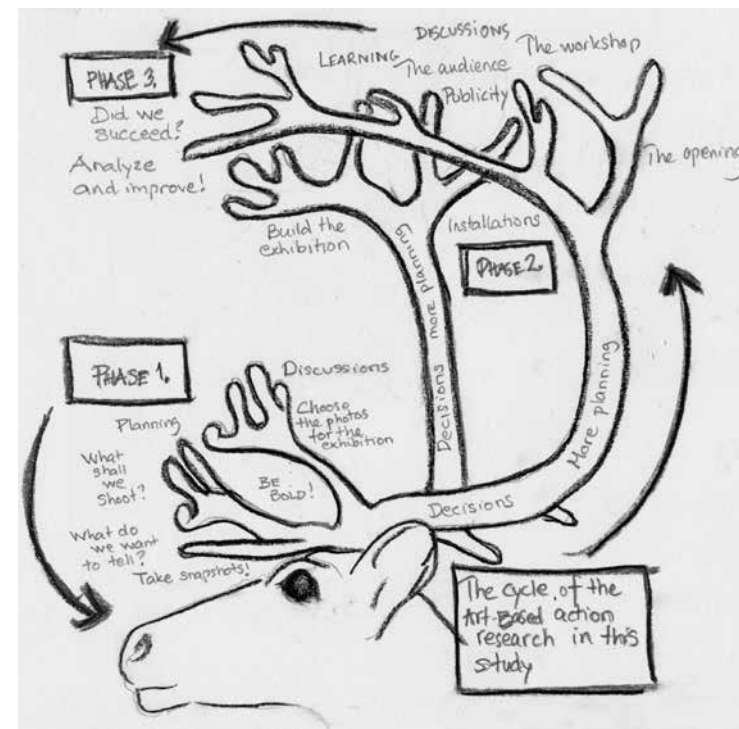


Figure 7. The different acts of Art Education and Contemporary Art in this study forms a cycle in three phases building an exhibition. The reindeer drops its antlers and grow new ones every year.

The research team

The research involves five reindeer herder families from the northern parts of Finnish Lapland documenting their daily lives by taking snapshots with their cellphones. It is important for me to seek the most propitious terms of cooperation and teamwork. The photos taken by the families, in mutual consideration, are shown in the exhibition.

The decolonial actions of the reindeer herders, examining and performing their daily tasks and their surroundings, bring new informative perspectives that have not been shown to audience before. The documented information that is brought forward from the insiders angle, might rectify or bring up new insights of minorities and indigenous people. (Hiltunen & Korsström-Magga, 2018; Kantonen, 2005; Smith, 2012; Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2009).



Figure 12. The family of Liinu Törvi and Jouni Lukkari.
Photo: Jouni Lukkari, 2016.



Figure 13. The family of Kirsi Ukkonen and Petri Mattus.
Photo: Kirsi Ukkonen, 2016.



Figure 8. The family of Hilikka and Oula Sara.
Photo: Magreeta Sara, 2016.



Figure 9. Korinna Korsström-Magga.
Photo: Henrik Magga, 2009.



Figure 10. The family of Kirsti and Ari Kustula.
Photo: Suvi Kustula, 2016.



Figure 11. The family of Katja Magga and Jouni Alakorva.
Photo: Katja Magga, 2016.

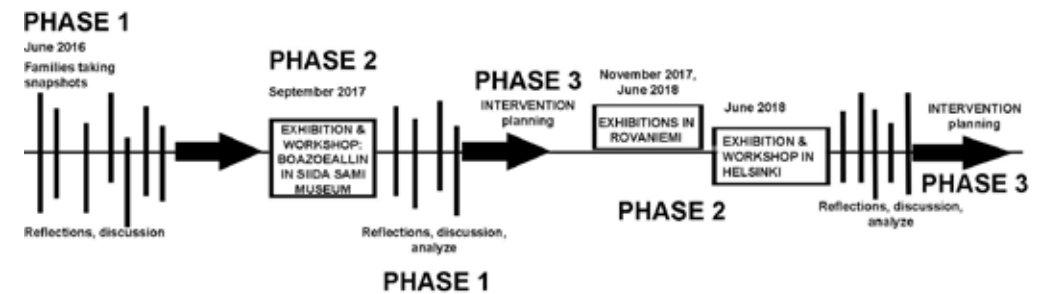


Figure 14. Operating with art-based action research.

The art-based actions of this research can be seen as an overlapping three-phased process.

Phase 1. The photos are chosen and gathered to Phase 2. an exhibition. Phase 3. The reception of the exhibition is reflected and is renewing the shape of the exhibition for the next showing.

Highlights, thoughts and concerns that appeared from the photographs

I started my research together with the reindeer herders visualizing their daily lives (see Figures 7 and 14). The families took snapshots during one year of their daily chores. The motives of the shots were free for each to choose, but the team sought particular moments that could, in some way, renew the insight of what a life of a contemporary Sámi reindeer herder might be. All of the families provided the collection with pictures of reindeer and the herders work, but also of moments of leisure and daily life that reflected their Sámi culture and way of living. Each family provided the research data with approximately 300-500 photos.

The photos were carefully examined and discussed (see Figures 7 and 14, Phase 1). Each family had different topics that they found essential to present in the exhibition. All families were proud to show their way of living. All families had confidence for the future and saw the importance of bringing up their children into the reindeer herders' culture.

A mutual concern of the families was the feeling that their livelihood was not accepted by the outsiders as a "real" work, as one of the participants points out:

"When people hear I'm a reindeer herder they often ask me next: 'what is my real occupation?' - as I wouldn't have in their opinion a real work." (Forty-year old woman, personal communication, April 2016).

The most important topic that turned out from the snapshots was, nevertheless, the care of the reindeer.

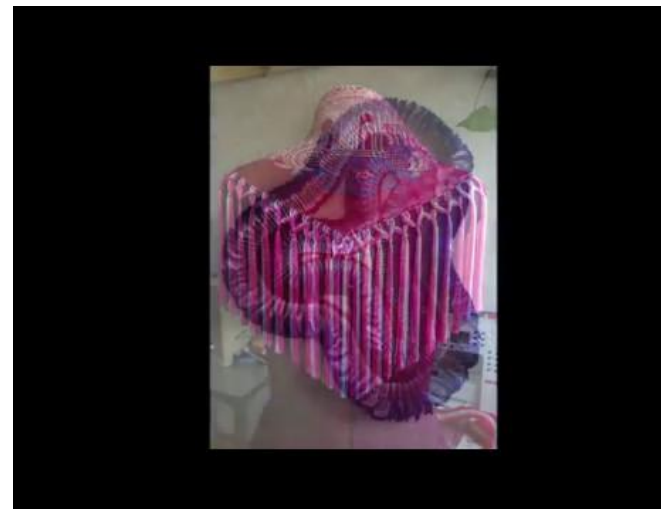
The families mentioned their concern about the general dispute about the destruction of the reindeer herds caused by the predators, and their compensation. The compensating lump sum paid by the government does not repair the damage and the loss of a killed female reindeer. One of the installations addressed this issue.

Some samples of the work with the reindeer and the cultural heritage in the daily life



Video 1. Photo Collage of the reindeer herders' work. Photos taken by the five reindeer families 2016.

<http://www.insea.org/IMAG/imag7/Korsstrom-Magga-Reindeer.m4v>



Video 2. Photo Collage of cultural heritage. Photos taken by the five reindeer families 2016.

<http://www.insea.org/IMAG/imag7/Korsstrom-Magga-CulturalHER.m4v>



Video 3. "The Truth", by the family Kirsi Ukkonen and Petri Mattus, 2016.
Photo Series of the installation by Korinna Korsström-Magga, 2018.

The exhibition called "Boazoeallin"

The PhotoVoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) method, that we used for gathering information of the daily lives with the reindeer herder family members, formed a collection of photos, from which we created an exhibition called "Boazoeallin" (in translation "Reindeer life"). The first showing was held in the families' home region in Siida Sámimuseum, (<http://www.siida.fi/contents/sami-museum>). Siida is not only a museum presenting Sami history and culture, but also a center for the North providing events and seminars. The snapshots of the contemporary reindeer herders' life pictured moments that had not previously been available to audiences. Siida is the main attraction for the tourists in the region. Local people and the participating reindeer herder families, friends, and relatives were also interested to visit the exhibition. After the first showing in Siida, Boazoeallin has been showcased in Finland twice; once in Rovaniemi and once in Helsinki.

The pedagogical exhibition tour along with workshops, forms the second phase (see Figures 7 and 14, Phase 2). We discussed how to present the snapshots in the exhibition. All agreed that the photos ought to be installed aesthetically with items from the reindeer herders' daily sceneries. I served, at this point, as a facilitator curating the exhibition, using my skills and experience as an artist and art educator.

The Boazoeallin exhibition forms an unique opportunity for the audience to step in to the daily lives of the reindeer herders. The visitors of the exhibition primarily get an independent understanding. The voluntary questionnaire available to the audience, gathered the visitors thoughts and comments.

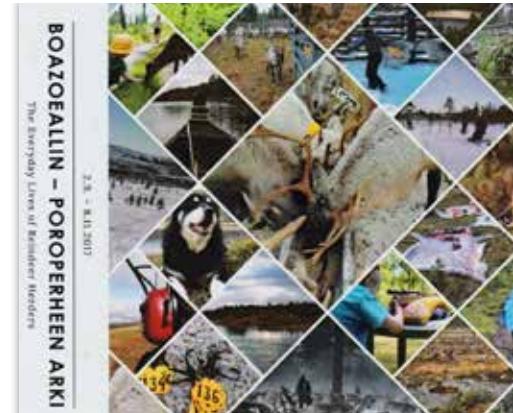


Figure 15. The invitation card of the Boazoeallin exhibition. Graphical design by Ada Helenius, 2017.



Figure 16a



Figure 16b



Figure 16c

Figures 16a, 16b, and 16c. The Boazoeallin exhibition in Siida Sámimuseum. Photos: Korinna Korsström-Magga, 2017.



Figure 17. The research team building the exhibition. Photo: Mirja Hiltunen, 2017.



Figure 18. The opening of the exhibition. Photo: Korinna Korsström-Magga, 2017.

The Boazoeallin workshops

The optional workshops of the exhibition provided the visitors with creative work and more information. I served as a supervisor for the workshop.

The theme of the study was planned separately for each group to serve the participants in the best possible way. The reindeer herder families gave their approval for the creative program. I start the workshops by briefly presenting the art-based method in the research and showing each family's photos and installations. There was also an opportunity for open discussion and questions. One comment on a collected exhibition survey, in September 2016, mentioned:

“It was eye-opening to realize that reindeer slaughter and carcasses are common scenes also for minor children”. (Sixty-five-year old woman, exhibition survey, September 2017)

Some questions have required deeper explanation, (e.g. concerning the welfare about the nature and animals and also about the way of living in the North).

The creative activity in the workshops strived to connect people with the life of the reindeer herders, using material as the snapshots or items of the daily surroundings in the North.

At the 2018 InSEA European Regional conference in Helsinki, the participants were requested to pick one of the photos that the herders had chosen for the workshop. The participants posed and took photos of themselves, cut themselves out and after that glued the pictures of themselves into the reindeer herders' photos. The imaginary visit in the reindeer herder's daily life brought about curiosity and a desire to learn more about the people and their lives in the North.

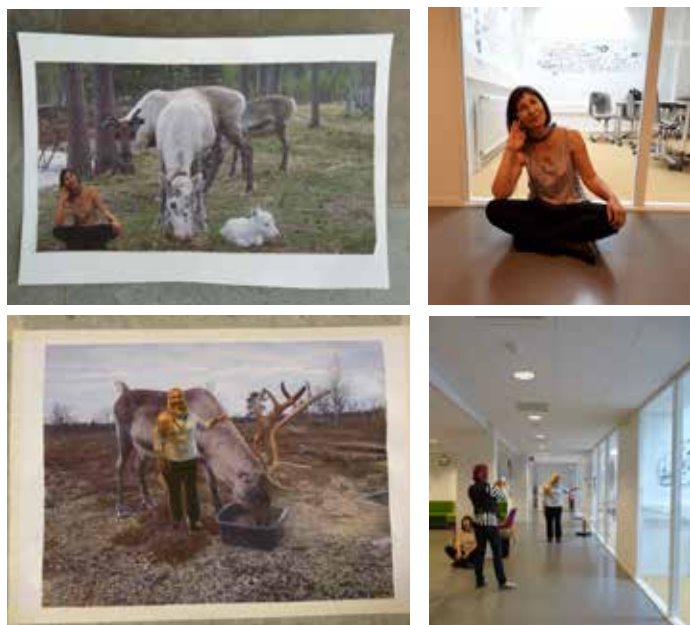
The third phase (see Figures 7 and 14, Phase 3) in this research action is a moment of reflecting, evaluating and analyzing. The touring exhibition is on the road and new places bring new audiences. The comments of the exhibition, that was found in the discussions with the family members, and in the questionnaires of the audience, provides headlines for the following showing of the exhibition. We try to form the entity of the exhibition to serve the audience in the best way. Therefore, the exhibition is in a constant state of modification.



Figure 19. Workshop at the InSEA European Regional conference in Helsinki, 2018. Participants choosing a reindeer herder's picture. Photo: Korinna Korsström-Magga, 2018.



Figure 20. Participants gluing selfies in the workshop.
Photo: Korinna Korsström-Magga, 2018.



Figures 21a, 21b, 21c and 21d.
Material and result of the workshop.
Photos: The participants of the workshop, 2018.



Figure 22. The reindeer herder families observing their work in the opening.
Photo: Korinna Korsström-Magga, 2017.

Summary

This visual essay presents the art-based actions that offer the reindeer herders a way to showcase themselves about their work and contemporary lives in Northern Lapland. Their self-documentation resulted in an exhibition that presents a decolonial angle of the livelihood of the reindeer herders daily lives. The touring exhibition, with its workshops, elicits admiration as well as questions and renews thoughts about the livelihood.

The first research cycle corroborated the goal of art-based actions to make a meaningful impact of spreading information. Based on my analysis, I noticed how the reindeer herders were able to use the visual material to point out values in their daily lives. Furthermore, the exhibition helped them to reflect on their lives from a new angle. The audience has appreciated authenticity of the given information and showed interest in learning more about the herders' contemporary lives. The terrain of the exhibition forms a dialogical platform where the reindeer herder families and the audience meet. In my research, I propose that the art-based actions of making the exhibition can enhance and empower cultural identity and achieve social change and promote a sustainable dialogue.



Figure 23. Father and sons heading for calf marking. Photo: Kirsi Ukkonen, 2016.

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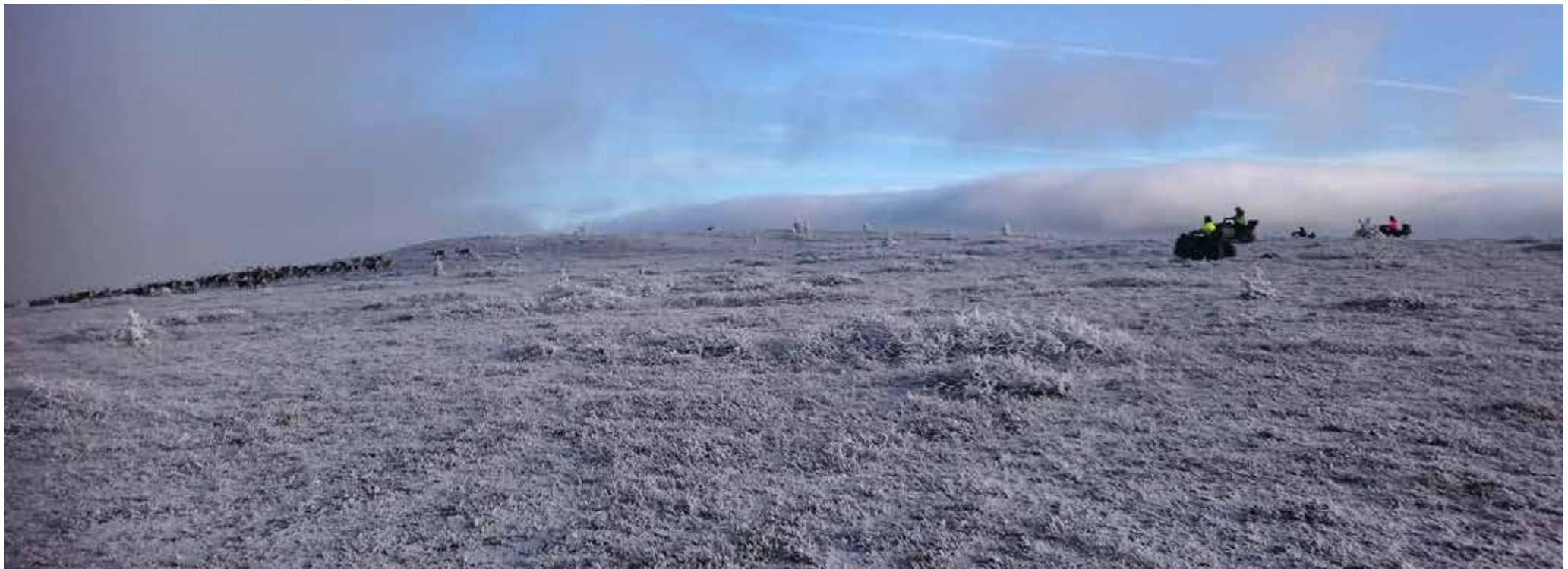


Figure 24. Collecting reindeer in October. Photo: Suvi Kustula, 2016.