Foreword

My closest neighbour, when I was living among the Skolt Saami of northeastern Finland in 1971–72, was Piera Porsanger. Piera was not himself from a Skolt family. His ancestors had inhabited the area for many generations before the Skolts were resettled there after losing their original homelands beyond the postwar border with the Soviet Union. However, he had married the daughter of one of the new arrivals, and by the time of my fieldwork he had a large and bustling family. They were not well off, and Piera always wore the expression of a man worn down by the perpetual worry of having so many mouths to feed from a small and uncertain income. Fishing was poor, and though wise in the ways of reindeer, Piera had not come out well from the upheavals that had afflicted herding during the previous decade. A combination of severe overgrazing, a series of disastrous winters and attempts to use snowmobiles to round up the now scattered and depleted herds had meant that a substantial proportion of each year's crop of calves had gone unmarked, only to be snapped up the following year in auctions by the handful of younger men who had spearheaded the new techniques of snowmobile herding and thereby cornered reindeer mustering operations to themselves. Like many men of his generation, Piera had seen his herds melt away, and he was keeping afloat only thanks to his brothers-in-law, who were among the most active of the new enthusiasts for mechanised herding. Yet behind his care-worn look lay a twinkle that gleamed through the thick lenses of the glasses he always wore to correct his myopia.

For Piera was a philosopher. He thought too much for his own good, people would say, just as his irrepressibly nosy wife Maria gossiped too much for hers. That was why he had lost most of his reindeer. Indeed Piera was one of wisest and most knowledgeable men I have ever met, fluent in five languages (three kinds of Saami, Finnish and Norwegian), and immensely curious about the ways of the world. Despite his appalling eyesight, he was an acute observer of everything that was going on around him. He appeared continually and genuinely astonished, and yet nothing really took him by surprise. Astonishment, for him, was a way of being, revealing an openness to the world that,

by the same token, left him peculiarly vulnerable to its vicissitudes. Someone unfamiliar with this way of being might interpret it as a mark of timidity or even weakness. I had often wondered myself why Piera had allowed himself to be trampled on by all and sundry, with no more than his usual rejoinder of quizzical resignation. Only later did I begin to realise that his approach to life was one widely shared by Saami people of his generation and older. In their attitude of unsurprised astonishment, which for many outsiders indicates a lack of intellectual rigour and moral fortitude, lay the very source of their strength, resilience and wisdom. But it is an attitude that has earned them little respect from those who assume that the way to know the world is not by opening oneself up to it, but rather by 'capturing' it within the meshes of a grid of concepts and categories. For astonishment has been banished from the procedures of conceptually driven, rational inquiry. It is inimical to science. Yet scientists are forever being surprised by the apparent failure of the world to conform to their calculated predictions. They have even turned surprise into a principle of creative advance, converting an accumulation of errors into a record of consistent progress.

As I was reading the chapters that make up this volume, I kept thinking of Piera Porsanger and what he taught me. All around the circumpolar North there are people like him, people of extraordinary insight whose lives have been crushed underfoot by the power of a system of knowledge comprised by the history of its mistakes. Nowadays that system, as if to make up for past failures, is increasingly concerned to harness the knowledge of native inhabitants, but it can do so only on its own terms – that is, as classified information. The result, in some regions of the North, has been an unseemly scramble to collect the 'traditional ecological knowledge' of older generations before it is too late. Noone to my knowledge has asked Piera for his TEK, but if they did, I am sure they would be met with the same quizzical glance, issuing from those twinkling eyes behind the spectacles, that always seem to throw the question back at the questioner: 'Well, what do *you* know?' As I found during my fieldwork, and as many other ethnographers of the North have found both before and since, knowledge for native inhabitants consists not of information that can be transmitted, but of wisdom that one grows into. It was assumed that having grown up in my own society, I must know *something*, but to know anything of what my hosts knew I would have a whole lot more growing up to do. It is no good asking other people, I would have to find out for myself. Though they could not provide me with ready-made knowledge, they could at least provide opportunities for me to learn.

Like most wise men of the North, Piera was a great storyteller. He made up many of his stories himself, and they were by turns poignant and comic. I shall always remember one such story, about a reindeer on its way to find fresh pastures, following a migration route that it and its kind had followed for many years. As it peacefully meandered along familiar tracks, it was astonished – but not surprised – to come up against a newly constructed barrier fence that cut straight across its path. Piera concluded his story with the voice of the reindeer: '*Where the devil do I go from here?*' The deer's question, I think, goes to the heart of the issues raised by this book. It does so in three ways.

First, it reminds us of what is obvious to northern native people, that reindeer – like most other animals – are sentient and intelligent beings with points of view of their own. Piera was, of course, putting words into the reindeer's mouth, but this was only his way of describing what a real reindeer would actually feel on encountering the equally real fence. Unable to keep on going, it feels frustrated and disoriented. Now according to the canons of official science, to attribute feelings to animals is to commit the cardinal sin of anthropomorphism, of treating the animal as if it were human. It is a condition of scientific inquiry that the objective world of nature, including all nonhuman animals, should be closed off from the world of society to which human beings alone are admitted as rational and sentient subjects. Yet it is precisely by this closure that the scientist is prevented from developing knowledge about animals in the way that native inhabitants do – that is, by opening up to them just as one would to fellow humans, and by making their experience one's own.

Secondly, the dilemma of the reindeer in Piera's story forces us to reflect on why the new fence had been built across its path in the first place. The story refers to a fence that had, in fact, been recently built along a boundary between adjacent herding districts, to prevent herds from one district from wandering onto the pastures of the other. There is nothing new about the construction of reindeer fences. They have been used for generations as devices to funnel the movements of deer towards round-up enclosures, and before that – in the days of reindeer hunting – towards pitfalls, snares or ambush positions. But in all such cases the fence, along with the contours and features of the landscape, has formed an integral part of a *trap*. The trap is a kind of story-in-reverse, embodying in its construction an account of the movement and behaviour of the target animal or herd as it proceeds towards its goal. What was relatively new, at the time of my first fieldwork in Lapland, was the use of fences to *enclose* entire pasture districts. These fences serve not to funnel but to block the movements of animals. The

rationale behind them is that the enclosure of pastures allows for better regulation of animal numbers in relation to the availability of grazing. The point of Piera's story, however, is that the animal is not just a number, nor is it in its nature to stay put on a bounded block of territory. The construction of boundary fences indicates an obsession with compartmentalisation and control that flies in the face of any sensitive understanding of the animals, and to which they cannot be expected to respond positively.

Thirdly, the story is an allegory for the situation in which northern native people increasingly find themselves. It has never been their aim to remain bound to fixed routines, forever reenacting the practices of their ancestors. 'Traditional society', in that sense, has never existed in the North. Rather, people have aimed to *keep on going*, through improvisation and adjustment in response to a close perceptual monitoring of ever-changing environmental conditions. Time and again, however, they now find their path ahead blocked by imposed regulations, restricting their access to, and use of, the land and its fauna. Like the reindeer in the story, they experience frustration and disorientation. This frustration is compounded by the insistence of those in authority that the restrictions are for their own good, or for the good of future generations. Thus northern people are caught in an impasse in which they are told that the only way to continue hunting is to stop hunting, so as to allow the herds to pick up; and that the only way to continue herding is to stop herding, so as to allow the pastures to recover.

It is undeniable that right across the northern circumpolar region, native inhabitants face enormous challenges in keeping life going. These challenges are richly documented in the chapters of this book. But we should perhaps resist the temptation to lay the blame too readily at the door of arrogant or uncomprehending scientists, patronising and overly bureaucratic managerial regimes, or distant states that co-opt both science and management to their authoritarian and centralising objectives. Whether the numbers of caribou in northern North America really declined in the mid-twentieth century, as many wildlife biologists maintained at the time, can probably never be known with any degree of certainty, nor can we ever know for sure whether – if they *did* decline – native hunters bore any responsibility for this. But it is not impossible that they did. Nor can we automatically absolve reindeer herders of any responsibility for overgrazed pastures. The scenario of the tragedy of the commons may indeed project a characteristically Western rationality, far removed from the realities of life in the forests and tundra. Nevertheless it was a truism among the Saami herders I knew that security lies in numbers, and that when

everyone strives to increase the size of their herds serious overgrazing of common pastures inevitably results. Everyone was aware that this was happening. Native people are not 'original ecologists', guided by a tradition that, unbeknown to them, causes them to act in ways that place ecosystemic sustainability before their own interests.

Nor, on the other hand, did scientists, bureaucrats and officials arrive from outer space, fuelled by an unworldly desire to run this planet according to rational principles of sustainable management to the general discomfort of its indigenous populations. For they, too, are the sons and daughters of inhabitants, people who have had their own connections to the land of one sort or another. Most often, albeit a few generations back, these connections have been established through the practices of farming. For me it was an eye-opener to work among Finnish reindeer herdsmen whose forebears had been peasant farmers and forestry workers. Here I found them thinking of their herds in terms of the yield of meat from the land; the size of a round-up would be estimated in carcasses, and reindeer owners were negotiating collective agreements among themselves in order to ensure that limits for individual herd sizes were not exceeded and that owners killed enough females and calves in each year to keep overall numbers within the capacity of an enclosed territory. It is true that they were doing all this in accordance with principles that are now enshrined in Finnish reindeer management law. But the law itself is based on conventions and agreements that evolved in the agricultural settlements of northern Finland, over a period of some three hundred years, specifically in order to deal with issues of cooperation, scheduling and conflicts of interest between farming, forestry and reindeer herding. In following these conventions, reindeer owners did not feel themselves under the heavy hand of an interfering state. Of course the state interfered in other ways, such as in its enforcement of measures to protect bears and wolves, about which they complained vociferously. But when it came to basic principles of reindeer herd management, these were felt to be deeply rooted in the practicalities of farming, not in the abstractions of science.

It would be over twenty years before I saw Piera Porsanger again. By then, a new express highway had been built through the Skolt settlement area, running through to the coast of northern Norway. Unlike the old dirt track, the highway turns its back on the community and defies the contours of the landscape. Driving along it, one would not realise that people lived there. The tiny cabin in which Piera and Maria somehow managed to cram their enormous family was deserted. The old track had veered so close to the cabin that one corner almost stuck out into it, and this proximity had enabled Maria to keep close tabs on all

the comings and goings in the community. But the new highway bypassed the cabin. I found Piera in a neighbour's house. He was sitting in the back room reading a newspaper, as always keeping up with world events. He was astonished to see me, but not in the least surprised. He began to talk as though we had last seen each other only yesterday, as so indeed it seemed also to me.

This book tells of the trials and tribulations, and of the major challenges and minor triumphs, of the people of the North whose lives revolve around reindeer and caribou. But in reading it, do not ever forget how astonishing is the northern environment for those who live there. We need to hold on to that astonishment, and to celebrate it. And we need to resist the inclination to turn the North into a world of spectacular surprise. Surprise exists only for those who have forgotten how to be astonished at ordinary things, who have grown so used to control and predictability that they depend on the unexpected to assure them that events are taking place and that history is being made. That is how the West has made a history for the North, through the catalogue of its magnificent failures, above all in predicting the numbers and behaviour of terrestrial and marine fauna. The animals, however, are never surprised, though they are often astonished. They do not expect the world to conform to expectations, and nor do the people for whom they are the staff of life. We can learn from them.

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