

Climate change threatens age-old indigenous food systems

By [Fabio Teixeira](#)

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From the Arctic to the Amazon, the traditional food gathering techniques of indigenous communities are under threat from accelerating climate change and economic pressures, the United Nations said on Friday.



Sami reindeer herder Nils Mathis Sara, 60, drives his ATV as he follows a herd of reindeer on the Finnmark Plateau, Norway, June 16, 2018. Source: Reuters/Stoyan Nenov

Food systems used by different indigenous peoples were found to be among the world's most sustainable in terms of efficiency, avoiding waste and adapting to the seasons, said an analysis by the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO).

Because their diets rely mainly on renewable resources found close to home, indigenous communities adjust land use according to seasonality. Until recently, "waste" was an unknown concept in their food systems, the report said.

Traditional practices at risk

It cited as an example Finland's Inari Sami people, whose diet depends heavily on fish and reindeer meat. The community relies on ancestral knowledge of the land, as traditional reindeer herding is based on the animals' annual migration cycle.

The herders know where to take the reindeer every year so they can graze in a sustainable manner. They also use expert knowledge to adapt fishing methods according to the season or weather conditions, the report said.

But such traditional practices are at risk due to climate change, as well as the growing availability of imported processed foods, said Yon Fernandez-de-Larrinoa, head of the FAO Indigenous Peoples Unit.

"Climate change is adding a new layer of incredible pressure upon indigenous people and their food systems," Fernandez-de-Larrinoa told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone. He said indigenous food systems were being hit by drought, loss of wildlife and the disappearance of wild plants, changes in rainfall and seasons, erratic weather patterns and migration shifts.

The Inari Sami have started feeding supplements to the reindeer they herd because the animals can no longer sustain themselves on lichen during winter, the report said. "The lichen that the reindeer would normally be able to find under the ice, they can no longer find. The reason is very simple: the ice has melted," said Fernandez-de-Larrinoa.

Adoption of market-oriented activities

The report also looked at the impact of climate change on different indigenous communities in Cameroon, India, the Solomon Islands, Mali, Colombia and Guatemala. In some cases, an increased monetisation of the local economy led indigenous communities to move away from barter, food sharing and communal systems.

The opportunity to make money made some communities switch from sustainable practices to over-fishing or over-hunting, leading to a loss of biodiversity, said the report.



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Communities have also become more dependent on processed foods bought in local markets. "The acceleration in the adoption of market-oriented activities is profoundly transforming indigenous peoples' food systems," Maximo Torero, the FAO's chief economist, said in a statement.

Losing the ancestral expertise of indigenous communities would deprive the rest of the world of valuable knowledge as more sustainable food production is sought globally, the FAO said.

"We need to combine innovation and technology with traditional knowledge," said Fernandez-de-Larrinoa.

Credit: [Thomson Reuters Foundation](#)

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