Visions for a Future at the
Source of the Ume River, Sweden
The Battle against the Rönnbäck
Nickel Mining Project

Marie Persson

Marie Persson is Sámi. In 2013 she was elected as a member of the Sámi Parliament in Sweden. She has a Master’s Degree in Systems Science and is running her own business as a graphic designer. She lives in the mountains of Tärnaby/Dearna with her husband Anders and their two children, Ailo and Freja. Anders works at the Sámi Language Centre and Marie as a graphic designer at her own company, Kvanne. As of 2010, Marie has been putting great work and effort into addressing the mining issue, due to the fact that traditional Sámi land in Tärnaby/Dearna is now threatened by a huge nickel mine that the mining company IGE/Nickel Mountain is planning for. Marie is the founder of the network “Stop Rönnbäck Nickel Mining Project in Tärnaby”, and she has been struggling to connect people and share information about the global mining boom, so as to collaborate with others in the same situation. In the end of 2012 Marie was elected as the citizen of the year in the county of Västerbotten, of the readers of the new paper Västerbottens-Kuriren.

May-Britt Ohman

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Member of board of the Sámi association Silbonah Samesjidda, of UPSSAM (Association for Sámi related studies in Uppsala), member of board of the National Association of Swedish Saami (SSR), deputy member of the Swedish Sámi Parliament since elections of 2013.

Since 2009, research fellow at the Centre for Gender Research at Uppsala University. Research “Situated perspectives on the hydropower exploitation in Sapmi: Swedish technological expansion in the 20th century and its impact on the indigenous population” projects (PostDoc Swedish Research Council 2009-2010); “DAMMED: Security, Risk and Resilience around the Dams of Sub-Arctica” (Swedish Research Council 2010-2012); “Rivers, Resistance,
Resilience: Sustainable Futures in Sápmi and other Indigenous Peoples’ Territories (FORMAS 2013-2016).

Abstract
This article was first written by May-Britt Öhman based on the presentation by Marie Persson at the RE-Mindings symposium and also based on conversations between the two of them at several other occasions. Marie has added on further relevant information and statements. The article is written as a presentation made by Marie, from her point of view. In the article the course of the struggle for stopping the plans for a nickel mine at Rönnbäcken, Tärnaby, is written showing a case of resistance against aggressive Swedish State colonialism in Sápmi. The Rönnbäck Nickel Mining Project in Tärnaby, currently processing for opening, is supported by the Swedish State through the Swedish government. Despite the fact that the implementation of Indigenous Rights should have radically changed with the UN-adopted of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007), the Swedish Government and its Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications, Näringsdepartementet, has weighed the national interest concerning the Indigenous way of living with reindeer herding and the Sámi culture as less important than the interest concerning the extraction of minerals. This mine will seriously deteriorate reindeer migration routes, risking the survival of Sámi traditional cultural and economic activities along with natural resources and health of the whole river valley. Specific information on the dangers for dam failures due to mining exploitations within the hydropower reservoirs with disastrous consequences for the whole Ume River Valley, including the city of Umeå with 118 000 inhabitants, has been added by May-Britt Öhman. The article concludes that the current mineral policies of the Swedish government and the current legislation for promoting mineral extractions have severe negative consequences for local communities, the protection of land and water as well as for Indigenous Peoples all over the world.

Introduction – Rönnbäck and Rönnbäcknäset, Björkvattdalen
Rönnbäcknäset, in Tärnaby – called Dearna in Sámi, is located on an island in the major tributary river of the Ume River in the valley of Björkvattdalen. This valley used to be the most fertile river valley in the region, attracting the first
View from Rönnbäcknäset with some of the age old pine trees in the foreground. The planned nickel mining area at Rönnbäcknäset by the Ume river in Björkvattdalen, Tamaby. Photo by Marie Persson.

The island of Rönnbäcknäset within the hydropower reservoir Gardiken. The island has documented valuable nature. The mine is a high-risk project due to several aspects. Photo by Anders Östergren.
settlers to cultivate it. Since 1950s and 60s, it has been subject to colonial assaults through hydropower regulations that have had severe impacts. The dam at Gar-dikfors caused water levels of the lakes in lower regions to rise up to 20 meters. Significant forest areas, fields and meadows were inundated. Also, the village of Rönntäck was exterminated and had to be moved and several homesteads in the whole valley of Björkvattdalen were abandoned or affected. 

In terms of hydropower, Ume River is one of Sweden’s most regulated waterways. It flows from the mountains on the border between Sweden and Norway, down to the coast of the Gulf of Bothnia by the city of Umeå. The water of the Ume river serves as drinking water for the whole Ume river valley, including the over 100,000 inhabitants of Umeå.¹

As hydropower and reservoir regulation expanded during early 20th century the region and its people has suffered a deep trauma. Many people had to leave their homes, the memory and loss of which is still painful. Additionally, people at present still live under threat from ongoing regulations. In wintertime, the ice cover becomes unstable; during the summer the water is filled with stubs from trees that were flooded. Previously small lakes are, due to hydropower regulation, disproportionately large in relation to their surroundings, a condition that is hazardous under windy conditions.

Freja assembling cloudberries. Photo by Marie Persson.
Our life with nature – fishing, hunting, handicraft etc. – we cannot live here if land and water are destroyed. To the left, Ailo. To the right, trout. Photo by Marie Persson.

Being a traditional Sámi territory, the people here have already suffered the impacts of Swedish State colonialism through the loss of their rights, Sámi language, religion and culture. Yet, people live here and we go on with our lives. We live from many different incomes, often mixing them to make a good living: fishing, hunting, reindeer herding, tourism, graphic design, administrative work, care work, public sector, artisan work. The Sámi cultural tradition is still alive, and presently there are many efforts to revitalize traditional Sámi culture.

I myself live with my family here, combining work on the labor market with traditional practices of fishing, hunting, duodji/handicraft as well as berry- and herb-gathering. My husband and I wish to continue this way of life and the traditions that have been passed on to us by our ancestors; we wish to pass on this culture to our children, Ailo and Freja.

The IGE Nickel Mine project in Rönnbäck
In October 2012 the IGE Nickel Mountain mining project received the Exploitation Concession from the Swedish Mining Inspectorate (Bergsstaten, 2012), a
concession that is valid for 25 years. The County Administrative Board approved the environmental impact study that was performed by IGE Mountain Nordic AB.²

But already by 2010 I had realized that mining projects were receiving support from geologists in conjunction with a political will that considered ore as a “matter of national interest.” I understood that the planned mines might become a reality, thereby destroying our way of life here for all future. This was the catalyst for my resistance against the mining. I began by setting up a network using social media, founding and administering the Facebook site “Stop Rönnbäck Nickel Mining Project”, in Swedish Stoppa Graven i Rönnbäck i Björkvattdalen, Tärnaby.

The mine is planned to become one of the largest mining projects in Sweden. Its nickel ore has been estimated to last no more than 17 years, with an annual production of 20 million tonnes. A mine on this scale has gigantic impact on its surroundings, in this case on the valley Björkvattdalen. The three open-pit sulphide mines would alter the landscape forever, leaving behind waste dumps, roads and buildings as well as tailing dams needed to manage the toxic waters from the mining process. Apart from the landscape alteration there will also be noise
pollution, vibrations, dust and increased traffic. No one can know for sure what
the consequences will be for the environment, the animals or the fish – or what
happens in the event of toxic water leakage into the Gardiken water reservoir.
Sulphide mining is always risky since leakage can erupt long after the mine has
been shut down.

In addition to the environmental risks being enormous, the planned mine is
another severe encroachment on our cultural history. Part of this is the negative
effects on the reindeer herding existing in the area. But another important mat-
ter is the fact that the majority of the Sámi people being affected by the project
are completely neglected in decision making process since they not are reindeer
herders. Because of this they lack the right to appeal within the mining process.
They are not considered “stakeholders” in the court procedures unless they are
land owners within the very limited area where the concession permits are give-

Yet, the concession area is just a small part of the total mining area. This is
a major democratic deficiency and also against current national and European
legislation. Not only is this refusal to consider appeals from persons whose water
qualities will be affected also against both the European Union water directive as
well as against the legal implementation of this directive in Swedish law. It goes against the European Landscape Convention, which has been both signed and ratified by Sweden. 5

Finally, this is also a severe neglect of Indigenous Peoples’ rights. The Sámi people is recognized as a People in the Swedish constitution and have the right to the principal of Free, Prior and Informed consent in all matters that concerns their livelihood. The Sámi people have the right to decide how the long-term development of their society should be formed. It is time that the Swedish state starts respecting the rights of the Sámi people. If the Sámi People were treated as a People, I believe we would be stronger in countering the current ongoing colonial process.

It is the Swedish Government that holds the ultimate possibility of weighing the different interests against each other. On the one hand, Sámi reindeer herding has been classified as a “national interest” of the Swedish State; on the other hand, the mining enterprise is also claimed to be a “national interest” of Sweden. On August 22nd, 2013 the Swedish Government declared that the mining should be prioritized over reindeer herding and thus approved of the mining concessions at Römbäck applied for by the mining company, which met strong reactions from the whole Sámi community, including the Sámi Parliament. 6

Before discussing what a legitimate interest is, it is of importance to remember the risks involved in the unique location of this mining project. The planned

To the left: the mining area in Björkvallsdalen. To the right: the same area applied to the center of Stockholm, the capital of Sweden. The v-shape in the top of the area – turning the form into the shape of a heart, is due to the paying respect to our graveyard and church Völjåpare kapell located there. Illustration by Marie Persson.
mining site with three open day-pits of sulphide mining is located on an island and on both sides within the hydropower reservoir Gardiken, created as the dam Gardikfors, constructed between 1959 and 1965. The regulation amplitude of the Gardiken reservoir is 20 meters. Gardiken is one of the largest hydropower reservoirs in Sweden, with a regulation capacity of 875 Million m³, and an average production of 287 GWh per year.

Furthermore, Gardiken and Gardikfors are located downstream from several other dams and reservoirs – Abelvattnet, Överuman, Klippen, Ajaure and Gejmán. Of these, Abelvattnet and Ajaure are classified to be within the high-consequence group of dams/reservoirs within the Swedish framework for assessing consequences resulting from technological failure. The location of Gardiken/Gardikfors, downstream from several high-risk dams, means that not only is there a risk for the mine to cause disturbance and dam failure to Gardiken/Gardikfors. It also means that a dam failure in any of the upstream dams might cause failure to the planned tailing dams and mine further down.

Overview of a small part of the planned mining area and what it looks like today. This is a small fraction of where the waste from the nickel mine is supposed to be dumped in the water, of the Ume River. There will also be huge sand deposits. Photo by Torkel Stängberg.
the river.\textsuperscript{7} In case of a dam failure at the tailing dams drinking water for the whole river valley of the Ume River would be directly affected. Furthermore the ground water can be severely polluted for a long time. This risk, added to the presence of asbestos already detected in the ground, poses a lethal danger to all living beings in the river valley. Furthermore, the county of Västerbotten and Norrbotten contain many mining projects and the county administration boards have several reports from existing mining companies. A recent study, made by journalist Arne Müller, shows that the risks of dam failure of tailing dams are considerable due to their different, more short-term and simple construction compared to hydropower dams.\textsuperscript{8} This risk should also be considered when discussing the idea of constructing mining dams inside hydropower dams.

\textbf{The New Swedish Mineral Act and Policies – Giving Away the Swedish Ground for Free}

The current Swedish Mineral Act has its roots in the establishment of a specific authority – the Mining Inspectorate – Bergväsen – in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century. The aim of the Inspectorate was and still is to strengthen and enhance mining projects within the State of Sweden.

The Mining Inspectorate is, today, the official body in Sweden responsible for issuing permits for exploration and mining, and since 2009 the Mining Inspectorate has also a part of the Geological Survey of Sweden (SGU). The Mining Inspectorate is headed by the Chief Mining Inspector.\textsuperscript{9} The first mineral rights were determined as early as the 14\textsuperscript{th} century, both in Sweden and other States. Though there have been several laws and regulations for mining, their common denominator has always been to secure the possibility to extract minerals from the ground, even when such activity has conflicted with other interests.

The Mineral Law of 1974 stated that 50\% of the mineral value was to be paid by the extractor to the Swedish State. This law was altered in 1991-1992 to the most recent Mineral law – Minerallagen (1991: 45). Within this new version of the law only a half per mille, or 0.05\%, of the mineral value is to be paid to the Swedish State each year by mining companies, and one and a half per mille, 0.15\%, is to be paid to the landowner. This means that the exploiter gets 99.8\% of the mineral value per year. There will be extremely little, probably nothing, in return in monetary value to the local communities affected and having to deal with gigantic environmental consequences for all future.
Schematic image of the dams and reservoirs in the Ume River, by Vattenregleringsföreningen. The location of the planned nickel mine at Römnäset, within the reservoir Gardiken, is pointed out. It is planned to be placed below several hydropower dams and upstream of several others. Locating a mine here will create an extremely risky situation and might cause dam failures downstream and thus the destruction of the Ume River waters for years to come, and also the cities along the Ume River, in particular the city of Umeå. Illustration by Vattenregleringsföreningen/May-Britt Ohman.
Furthermore, according to the Swedish State landowners and municipalities have no right to stop the prospecting – test drilling – unless there are specific circumstances, such as protected water sources or other important industrial activities in the area. Reindeer herding has so far never been considered as an important enough activity by the Swedish State to stop prospecting activities. This means that the Sweden’s mineral policy of today is extremely favorable to mining exploiters. Internationally Sweden is ranked as no. 2 in the world as the most favourable country for mining projects.\textsuperscript{11}

Furthermore, the law on mineral rights states that mining enterprises have no obligations, whatsoever, to contribute to the local communities affected by the prospecting or mining. Today, within the Mineral Strategy adopted by the Swedish Government, in March 2013, we see how the Swedish Government promotes the facilitating of mining concessions to an even greater extent, referring to this as an important effort in creating a more “efficient” process.\textsuperscript{12} This is, by and large, funded by using the Swedish tax funds, for example in building infrastructure such as roads and railroads. Also worth mentioning in this regard are the open archives of the Geological Survey of Sweden (SGU). This agency is the Swedish expert for issues relating to soil, bedrock and groundwater in Sweden. SGU serves under the Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications.\textsuperscript{13} The Mining Inspectorate is, as mentioned, one of the departments of the SGU. SGU was established as a government agency in 1858, with the task to identifying and mapping mineral resources in Sweden.\textsuperscript{14} An extensive work has been made and the majority of Swedish mineral assets have been mapped. Until 1992, the Swedish State itself performed the prospecting; to be able to access the information and core samples specific permission was required, provided by the Board of the State’s Mining Property (NSG).\textsuperscript{15} This board, established in 1973, was dissolved in 1993, along with the State mining lands being sold as the State mine-prospecting was stopped.\textsuperscript{16}

Today there is open access to information assembled through this work that is financed by Swedish tax funds. Data is available online, with map viewers available in both Swedish and English, to find all sites of interest in terms of mineral findings and locations. The core test samples are also an open archive, available to all interested parties. In this archive there are more than 3 million meters of core samples. The low cost to visit the core test samples archive, in Malå, is about SEK 1,000, approximately 100 Euro, per 24 hours, including a room to work in. The staff provides the ground data, and then the visitors are free to create their own analyses.\textsuperscript{17}
The Swedish Mineral Strategy – A Strategy to Colonize Sápmi

On February 16, 2013, the Swedish Government took the decision to adopt the “Swedish Mineral Strategy.” This strategy was developed by the current minority government of Sweden without ever having been discussed with the Swedish Parliament itself. This strategy includes an increase of existing mines in Sweden within less than 10 years. Today there are, in total, 16 functioning mines in Sweden; by 2020 there should be 31 mines; by 2030, this strategy envisions the existence of 47 mines. The strategy is summarized on the Swedish Government’s website as follows:

With this mineral strategy, the competitiveness of the Swedish mining and mineral sectors will be increased so that Sweden maintains, and reinforces, its position as the leading mining country of the European Union.

Within these statements I see how the mineral strategy of the European Union (EU) is pushing forward the mining exploitation of Scandinavia. I find that the mineral politics of the Swedish Government represent, along with its old-fashioned mineral laws, the continued colonization of Sápmi and the whole of the Northern regions of Sweden.

Sweden Needs to Become a Role Model

In my opinion, the strategies and laws currently at play in Sweden are completely wrong; the big picture is missing. Indigenous Peoples’ Rights – including the rights of us, the Sámi – are omitted from consideration and completely ignored. As a result, our way of living is both disregarded and degraded.

When we, the Sámi, speak of our rights to continue our traditional livelihoods, we are met with suggestions of “technical solutions” and compensation – fences, tunnels and money. Hereby, the exploiting companies and the Swedish state are ignoring the whole concept of our human rights and rights as an indigenous people. The government has proven to view upon the Sámi people from a strictly economical perspective – how much income the reindeer herding specifically are generating in a certain area, compared to assumptions of what a planned mine would generate. This is a severe violation of the human rights of the whole Sámi people. We have the right to pass our culture on to our children and also the right to self-determination – the ability to decide how the Sámi society should develop in a long-term aspect. The reindeer herding is more than an ordinary enterprise.
Marie Persson, to the right, with Erena Rhöse at the Gålöck protest art and barricade, Jokkmokk, August, 2013. Private collection.

Ailo and Freja. Marie's children. Photo by Marie Persson.
since it is an important part of the whole Sámi culture. The Sámi people are working in a wide range of professions but the connection to land and water is fundamental. I ask: What happens to the Sámi people when the government starts to put price tags on different Sámi groups in different areas of Sápmi?

The government also talks about the importance of dialogue and co-existence. But sometimes it is impossible to combine two different activities in the same area. We don’t have very large geographical areas in the mountain region of Tärnaby. Money and rocks cannot be eaten and we cannot exist parallel to this mine. We need land and water to keep our culture alive. We cannot accept that these things are given away to the short-sighted interests of a handful of investors from elsewhere. They do not live here; they will not have to live with the consequences today, nor in the future.

Sweden is a traditional mining nation and Sweden should take on the responsibility to be a role model thus—to show by example how a democracy pays respect
to its local and Indigenous Peoples affected by mining and related activities. And that we can avoid specific high-risk projects and protect water, air and environment where it is needed. What Sweden does is of importance to other nations around the world. Since Sweden is a mining nation the multi-national mining companies use Sweden as an example when they want to start mining projects in other countries, for instance Latin America, Africa or Philippines. Sweden – and we, as citizens of Sweden – need to stand up for health, nature, waters, Indigenous Peoples and local communities around the world. And if we cannot do this, what signal do we then give to the global mining industry?

Notes
1 Umeå city and Tärnaby use the surface water of the Ume River, whilst other villages use groundwater in the valley. However, even if the groundwater is used, this water interacts with the surface water of the Ume River. Thus it is reasonable to say that all communities downstream of the planned mine will at some point be more or less affected by toxic discharges from the mine. It is mainly a matter of time, as any tailing dam continuously releases waste as water flows through. There is a constant leakage. Cf. the websites of the municipalities: Storuman – storuman.se; Lycksele – lycksele.se; Vännäs – vannas.se; Umeå – umea.se. Also see Västerbotten County Administrative Board – Regional Water provision plan for Västerbotten county, 2013 with appendix; Länsstyrelsen Västerbotten Regional Vattenföringsplan, 2013, Bilaga 2 Viktiga driktsvattenresurser i Västerbottens län. Remissversion [Accessed Sept. 16, 2013].
3 Appeals against the mining concession permission (Bevaringskoncessionen) was made by several individual and networks. Only the appeal made by the reindeer herding community was accepted for consideration, whereas all the others were not considered at all. Amongst these were the appeal by Marie Persson, and also that of May-Britt Öhman and Eva-Lotta Thunqvist, claiming expertise in environmental and social aspects of the planned project. See Najinsky, Department of Environmental Protection, Resolution 2013-08-22. Överklaganden av bergmästaren beslut om bevaringskoncession for centinära Rönnbäcken K nr 1 och Rönnbäcken K nr 2 samt Rönnbäcken K nr 3 Storuman kommun, Västerbottens län. (Private archive).
4 EU:s vattendirektiv [Ramdirektiv för vatten – Europaparlamentets och EU-rådets direktiv direkt 2000/60/EG], Förordning (2004 660) om förvaltning av kvaliteten på vattnemiljön.
10 Vattenregleringsförslagen, 2012., Schematisk bild av Umeåområde [Schematic picture of the Ume river]


Näringsdepartementet [Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications]


Näringsdepartementet [Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications]

Website of National Archive Database, Riksarkivet, Statens Industriverk [Accessed July 17, 2013].

Källa: Roshammar, Charlotte, "Kammarkåttheck [Sourceful huge archive]." In Arbetet, April 5, [Accessed July 17, 2013].

Sveriges Mineralstrategi, 2013.

The current Swedish government, formed after the general elections in September 2010, consists of four political parties, which together have 173 out of 349 seats in the Swedish Parliament. The next elections will take place in September 2014. Cf. the website of the Swedish parliament – Riksdagen, Ledamöter–Partiet [Accessed July 17, 2013].