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Not as black and white as it seems

# Foreign berry pickers in northern Finland

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**WHEN THEY LOOK** at discussions in the media, people in northern Finland might get the impression that attitudes toward commercial berry pickers from Asia and other parts of the world are wholly negative and that local people feel that their rights have been violated. However, a survey carried out in Finland in 2009–2011 and feedback from Lapland in 2012–2013 show that attitudes are not so black and white.

The survey targeted nature-oriented Finns, mainly those living in the northern part of the country. The results indicated that a slight majority (55 % of respondents) felt that berry picking restrictions are either not needed or should be minor ones. About 45 per cent wanted to restrict picking by foreigners more than picking by Finnish citizens. Those who advocated restrictions most (approx. 9 %) wanted rather harsh ones – for foreign as well as non-local Finnish pickers.

Thus, the results of the survey suggest that there are some problems. Messages to a telephone and e-mail service set up in response to the issue show that although attitudes in general are mainly positive, problems exist on the local level. As Lapland is sparsely populated, people's personal space is rather extensive and foreign pickers are sometimes seen as trespassing if they pick berries close to dwellings. Local

residents may also feel that berry-picking in certain areas, especially close to villages, is a facet of their right of enjoyment.

**THE BROADER CONTEXT** of the discussion of foreign berry pickers and commercial picking is the role and future of everyman's right. Everyman's right is common to all Nordic countries and allows – generally speaking – free roaming, camping and picking of natural products for everyone regardless of land ownership. Several land uses sometimes considered to be disturbing (commercial tourism, for example) have raised the question whether everyman's right should be modified in some way. Berry picking by foreigners is one such case.

One conclusion to be drawn from the survey results is that it might be important to discuss the limits of everyman's right in Finland, and this is consistent with other surveys about the right. Some stricter rules for commercial picking may be needed. Because more than half of nature-oriented people even seem to accept commercial picking by foreign pickers, and about 90 per cent accept organised picking by Finns with slight or no restrictions, it can be expected that informing both Finnish people and berry pickers may change attitudes in a more positive direction.

**IN NORTHERN FINLAND**, there have been negotiations between different stakeholders to achieve an agreement on berry picking. Regional authorities, village representatives and berry companies have engaged actively in these negotiations and an agreement of sorts has been reached on acceptable picking practices. The results of the survey and the feedback show that, in general, organised berry picking by foreign labourers is accepted if some basic guidelines or rules are respected, with these perhaps being based on local customary laws or traditions.

Another factor which would improve local acceptance and promote social licence for organised berry picking by foreign and non-local labourers is the distribution of benefits. At present, organised berry-picking is seen as benefiting stakeholders outside the local community, whereas local communities have to bear the costs of increased picking activity in areas that locals have traditionally used.

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**Please read more about the topic  
in Barents Studies 2/2014**