The Nenet Reindeer Herders

The Yamal Peninsula in Russia juts into the Arctic Ocean from the coast of Siberia. Yamal, meaning “the end of the land,” is tundra—a flat and mostly treeless land that gets little rain. In this harsh region, few plants grow, winds can be strong, and winter temperatures can drop to \(-58^\circ F\) \((-50^\circ C)\). The permafrost, or permanently frozen ground, is more than 1,000 feet (300 m) deep in some places.

**Life on the Tundra** The Nenet people live on the Yamal Peninsula about half the year. The Nenet are reindeer herders who live a nomadic way of life. Each spring, they travel with their reindeer to summer pastures on the Yamal Peninsula, where the reindeer give birth to calves and feast on grass. As summer ends, the Nenet and their herds move to spend winter in the shelter of the forests just south of Yamal.

Like the reindeer they tend, Nenets have adapted to life in the Arctic. They use grass from the tundra to insulate their boots. Pulp scraped from birch trees is used as toilet paper and as diapers for their children.

The Nenet people depend on their reindeer for survival. The animals pull sleds and can provide guidance in a blinding blizzard. Nenets butcher the animals and make use of almost every part of the body. Meat, blood, and lard are used for food. Skins are used to make boots, leggings, coats, and hats. Tendons are made into thread. Antlers are turned into tools. The Nenet live in traditional tents called chums, which are made of reindeer skins and larch poles. Chums provide warmth and shelter and are the center of family life.

About 10,000 Nenets continue the centuries-old tradition of migrating with their herds each year. More than any other native Arctic people, the Nenets have managed to hold on to their unique culture.

**Surviving Communism** During the communist era, the Soviets attempted to break up Nenet clans. The Soviets organized the Nenet into state-run groups, called brigades, and forced many reindeer breeders to work on farms. In addition, the Soviets killed or exiled the Nenets’ spiritual leaders and the wealthy, and forced Nenet children into boarding schools. Many of these children grew up and forgot much of their native language and traditional way of life.

Some Nenets abandoned their traditions, but others persisted. Eventually the Nenet people—and their culture—outlasted the Soviets. Today many Nenets continue as they have for centuries, living as nomads on the fringes of modern society.
Environmental Case Study
continued

**Underground Threat**  The main threat to the Nenet people today is no longer the Soviets. It is natural gas—vast fields of it, which lie under the frozen ground of Yamal. The gas is nearly one mile (1.6 km) beneath the Nenets’ feet. One of the fields is the third largest in Russia and contains 145 trillion cubic feet (4.1 trillion cu. m) of gas.

In the 1980s, gas developers began moving into Yamal. Thousands of workers followed them to the tundra, and today drilling is damaging the fragile ecosystem, polluting the environment, and shrinking the grazing land the Nenets need for their reindeer. As more and more reindeer are being forced onto less grazing ground, the land is becoming overgrazed, which means it is unable to restore itself.

**Greater Freedom**  Fortunately, the Nenet people have more rights and greater freedoms now than they did under the Soviet Union. The head of each clan of reindeer herders has final say about drilling, and the clan gets paid if they agree to allow it. Many Nenet children still attend boarding schools, but they are no longer forced to go. After completing boarding school, many students decide to return to the tundra. There they live a nomadic way of life with their parents, continuing the Nenet traditions that have gone on for centuries.

---

**It's a Fact**

1. The reindeer is the only deer species in which both males and females grow antlers.

2. Natural gas was first discovered in Southwest Asia between 6000 and 2000 B.C. The Persians became aware of it when gas seeped out of the ground and caught fire. The Chinese were the first people to drill for gas. They used bamboo poles for drills. Europeans did not discover natural gas until 1659.

3. Siberia is known the world over for its brutally cold winters. Temperatures can plunge as low as –90°F (–68°C). Being exiled to Siberia was once the punishment for Russian criminals and political prisoners.
Tigers prowl the vast forests of Siberia. For years, conservationists worried that these endangered cats, the largest of all the tigers, might be headed for extinction. Good news came in 2005. The largest survey ever of Siberian tigers showed that the animals are doing fine.

To get a count of the tigers, nearly 1,000 people searched the icy Siberian forests. On foot and on skis, using vehicles and snowmobiles, workers combed the woods, looking for footprints or other signs of the animals.

The final count: 300 to 400 adults, plus about 100 cubs. This means that Siberian tigers are faring better than tigers in other parts of Asia. The reason may be the way logging is done in the tigers’ habitat. In Siberian forests, loggers tend to cut down only the old trees, rather than clear-cutting the entire forest. This leaves large expanses of forest intact, giving the tigers room to roam.

**Environmental Case Study continued**

2. **Explaining** What happened to the Nenet people during the Soviet era?

3. **Determining Cause and Effect** How is drilling for gas on Yamal causing overgrazing?

4. **Analyzing** What role do Nenet clan leaders have in decisions about gas drilling?

5. **Predicting** How would clear-cutting Siberian forests impact the Siberian tiger?

**Review the Facts**

**Directions:** Read the information about the Nenet reindeer herders. Then answer the questions below.

1. **Listing** What are three ways the Nenet people depend on reindeer?
   A. 
   B. 
   C. 

Copyright © by The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.
Environmental Case Study
continued

Write a Magazine Article

✔ For Investigation

Journalists for such news magazines as National Geographic and Smithsonian report on various cultures around the world. Reporters will visit a community and talk to the people who live there to understand what life is like for them. All communities have traditions. Learn more about what makes your community unique by writing a magazine article.

What to Do

1. Imagine that you are a magazine reporter from another country. You have come to learn about life in your community. Think about and take notes on the ways people live and work in your area. How might your community appear to a foreign reporter? What traditions does your community have? What gives your community a sense of identity? What fills people with pride? Talk to other people in the area to learn what they think makes your community unique.

2. Think about day-to-day life in the community. What foods do people eat? How do they dress? Do men and women have different roles? What is life like for children in the community? How do people earn a living? What do people do for fun?

3. Write an outline for your magazine article.

4. Use your outline to write a rough draft of your article. Organize the information you have collected to give a clear description of life in the community. Be sure to explain where your community is located. Include information that you think other people will find interesting about your community.

5. Revise your draft as needed.

Assessment Checklist

Assess your magazine article using the checklist below:

☐ Explains information about the community, including where the community is located
☐ Explains what makes the community unique
☐ Explains daily life in the community
☐ Is engaging, with interesting and accurate descriptions
☐ Is well organized and logically developed

Materials

- student journals or notebooks
- pens or pencils