

## Season 2, Episode 6 · Interview with Anna Kuhmunen, owner of Silba Siida

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Welcome to this episode of the W-Power podcast created to share the stories of business women from across the arctic rim and hear from them about growing and running businesses in some of the most remote regions of Northern Europe. I am your host, Jennifer McDonald-Nethercott. And our series will feature amazing women, who have overcome the challenges posed by the remote geography to set up thriving small businesses.

All them have received support of one kind or another from W-Power, a project funded through the Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme of the European Regional Development Fund.

My guest today is Anna Kuhmunen, owner of Silba Siida. Anna and her partner Erik are a young indigenous Sami couple and created an experience where guests enjoy real Sami hospitality, from food to stories around the fireplace. They live the traditional lifestyle based on reindeer herding and love to share this with visitors. Welcome to the podcast, Anna!

Anna Kuhmunen:

Oh, thank you so much, Jennifer! Thank you! It's such an honor!

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

It's great to have you on, and to be able to share your story more with the listeners today. So, I suppose, it'd be great to get an idea of why you started with it, was it to do with your lifestyle anyway and being able to share the experiences?

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yeah, all right! How many hours do we have?

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

(laughs)

Anna Kuhmunen:

I'll try to keep this short. So, all right. I'm like you said, I belong to the Sami people. Many of us do reindeer herding. Not everyone, but I come from a reindeer herding family anyway. Well, how to start? This is a really long story. So, okay. I worked with basically everything that you can work with, of course as well, you know from anything, from waitressing to, yeah. You name it – I've done it. But everything really started off, I would say, in 2013, when I had my first child my baby boy. To really try to keep this story short, I don't know how much you know about my people, and the situation, and what's going on here in Sápmi, which is the land where we, Sami, live. And it's in 4 countries. So, it's Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

And this is a big area!

Anna Kuhmunen:

This is a really big area. And, you know, people say that colonization was something that went on hundred years ago, while we are facing, and this is the truth, we're facing colonization every single day still there. So, my people are still battling to keep our herds safe, to keep the land safe. And this is an ongoing fight every single day and I think this really-really became... not clear, because clear it has always been, but being a mother, I became a lioness. Okay. I really understood that it's up to me now. I will have to fight, so my children will also be able to be reindeer herders. If they want to be reindeer herders, they should be able to become it. And because of the land is everyday taken away from us and also reindeers are not, you don't have them like in an enclosure. They're not farmed. Reindeers go through big areas, you know. I come from a mountain Sami village, which means that our reindeers are down in the forest now in winter time, and then in summertime we migrate with them up to the mountains, and of course this needs a lot of land, you know, to migrate on.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yes. Yeah, it does!

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yeah, but because of this, you know, we need this a lot of land but we have a huge problem. And it is that our land is so often sold out to, and they say it's, you know, wilderness. And this is a problem, because this is not wilderness, where I live, I'm in Jokkmokk, in the Swedish Sápmi. And this is not wilderness, you know, there's my ancestors have been here for ten thousand years. There's not a square kilometer in forests and lakes up here, where my people haven't been, you know. But because we didn't raise a big monument or there's no Great Wall of China in Sápmi. We've been leaving the land as it was when we were born, you know. It's from generation to generation. I'm brought up with a culture that you're not allowed to destroy nature or leave tracks, you know, because everything is just, you just have it for future generations. Sorry. We're probably already now starting to lose listeners (laughs)! It is such a long story! Well anyway, so, because of this, you know, so people say 'Oh, this is wilderness, come here! You can do anything here!', you know. And this is a massive problem, because a lot of industries, and now we're talking the big industries, we're talking mining industries, we're talking forest industries, you know, tend to not understand the complex situation with us being here for 10,000 years. And this become, this was especially clear then, when my baby boy was born. Because that summer, he was born in March, and that summer a huge British-based company being able to mine came here, and to, I don't know the English words, but to test dig for iron ore.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yes, exactly.

Anna Kuhmunen:

And if that, it's still up, you know, no one really knows, it's been going on now for seven years, and no one really knows, if this mine is going to happen or not. It's still like a little battle. It's so many parts now into it, and everything. But we were there striking anyway, you know, trying to keep the trucks coming in and, you know, basically a lot like what happened in North Dakota, but on our, of

course, very small base. But we really tried to stop the industries to come in. And basically, there I understood that we need more information. We need people to understand the complex situation what's going on up here. A lot of people come here and they don't even understand they don't even know the history of this land and my peoples' history and everything. Because you tend to forget it, because Sweden says 'Oh, it's wilderness! Come here! It's wilderness!', you know,

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yes, that's it.

Anna Kuhmunen:

Selling, selling out the country! And selling out the land. And, basically, I think, the mineral tax in Sweden is like 0.05 percent or something.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

All right.

Anna Kuhmunen:

So, you can just understand how many industries testing digs we have in this area, and it's just constant fight. So, then I just realized I have to do something about it. And, yes, it became especially clear when I had my first child. And because of the land is ... Sorry!

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

No, that's all right, that's All right. So, from, obviously, the history and, obviously, trying to raise awareness of what your people are going through with it, with these industries, and as you said, that sort of tourist ideal, I suppose, of this wilderness.

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yeah.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Do that then lead you to want to bring people into the uncommon and experience for themselves your way of life?

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yes, absolutely! To raise awareness and especially for them, for my own children. I now have two boys, and it just feels so important for me to take people, because there's a lot of people coming into this area, you know. And it's a beautiful area. It's the, it's the one of the most beautiful places on Earth. But I think it's very important that you can see here the history of this land as well, you know, and people find it interesting. So, I really understood that I have to, I have to start to speak up, raise awareness. That's really like the keyword in my (laughs), in what I do!

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yes!

Anna Kuhmunen:

And, of course, also because the lands are constantly getting smaller because of well, they damned all the river, and, like, the big rivers here, and they, the forest industries are coming and all the time taking the land, you know, the land just gets smaller and smaller, and this land where we will be finding our test digging, it's like the heart of our neighbor Sami village. So, if this mine like starts, in the, basically, the best Sami village, it's like, it's so terrible.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Is that an opencast mine? How would that be? Would that just be blocked access to the land then?

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yeah blocked access to the land.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yeah, and you've been there for years.

Anna Kuhmunen:

And all the infrastructure...

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yeah, that goes with it...

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yeah, that goes with it. And the pollution of the land...

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

That's it, and therefore, the feeding ground is, for the reindeer, is...

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yes, getting smaller,

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

yes, dramatically. And have you had challenges along the way with setting up the business and resistance from some of those other Industries?

Anna Kuhmunen:

Well, not really my business. But, you see, the problem is, because the lands are getting smaller, it's less feeding grounds for the reindeer, which leads to starvation. And, of course, this is with, it also goes hand in hand with the climate change. So, we just see for every single year that goes, like, normally, the reindeer should be able to be just, you know, out in the forest, and we go out to them every day to make sure that they are okay, but, you see, because of the climate change, we can no longer, because we don't have so much land that we can move around, you know. My grandparents, they would have like a plan A land, if that if bracing was locked there, they couldn't move to another land, to another land, you know, so they were able to find food in another way than my generation can. Because, you know, you would have forest industries there, a mine there, and then you would

have a forest piece there, and it has to be good there on the way. Otherwise the reindeer, they won't find food at all.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yes.

Anna Kuhmunen:

So that's a big problem. Um is that we need to take home a lot of reindeers, you know, because they're starved, basically. When we find them, there they're not well, they need to go, they need to see a vet and everything. So, this is, of course, a big challenge, because you would have to take them home and the amount of money

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yes.

**Anna Kuhmunen:**

to support feed them, and put on back bills and everything. So, it was also fantastic if something is, like, something really-really good is, that we could have an income because these rangers, we would have had them at home. You know, I've been feeding reindeer at home, since I was a small child. I remember my grandparents, but they would have home just a couple, you know, and we tend to now take more and more in, because they need help, they need food, you know, they need to survive. So, of course, this was a fantastic way for my family to also have an income of the reindeer herding, you know, except from selling the meat. And this is a fantastic way for my family to have a small income of it.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Does it, and being able to share directly with visitors, as you say, it exactly, sort of your way of life, the challenges you're now experiencing, also giving people that access to reindeer that they wouldn't have in towns and cities, wouldn't they?

Anna Kuhmunen:

Absolutely! Absolutely! I like the idea that people come here, they get to hear the stories, you know. I tell all my visitors that there are ambassadors, you know. And they leave, when they leave from my place, I tell them, share the stories, you know. Because not so many people, you would be shocked to know how few know about my people, even if we in four countries, we've been here ten thousand years, you know. It's not so many people that even heard about the Sami people, you know. So, for me, it's very important that people can just spread the word that we're here, you know, raise awareness.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

That's it! And you really, so, giving people that an experience, that they wouldn't get somewhere else either, would they? With being able to come round and listen to the stories of your people around a campfire. You share meals with them as well, so.

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yeah, we cook together traditional Sami food. I love the Sami food, of course.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yes.

Anna Kuhmunen:

It's very, as in many cultures, the food is very important, you know (laughs), so yeah. Yeah, we share means together and we sit down for as many hours as people want to stay. They get to meet the reindeers, they get to talk about, well, different, of course, beautiful things, but also the struggle. And I think that's the best thing, you know, of being my own boss, is that I can, I have no one over me to say, well, 'Oh, Anna, you cannot be so, so political!', you know.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yes.

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yeah, I think I can say whatever I want them in the end of the day. I will have no boss phoning me up saying 'What did you tell those people!?'

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Which is great, isn't it to be in charge of your own destiny in that way.

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yes.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

And in terms of this year, what challenges has covid-19 brought to you in your business?

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yeah, so my business is basically open from mid-December to end of March because in April we start the migration up to the mountains again, so I, my business is only open during the winter period where the herders were my husband and them have brought the reindeers down from the mountains down to the forest.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yeah.

Anna Kuhmunen:

So as soon as the reindeers are down, I open my business. And, so covid really hit, you know, from mid-March, so, I was only, I was supposed to have 2 more weeks open.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Right.

Anna Kuhmunen:

So, I was very-very blessed in that way, that I was closing anyway, you know. Then, really the second week, the third week of March was affected a bit and the last week of March I had no guests at all.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yeah.

Anna Kuhmunen:

But, I guess I'm quite lucky, you know, that it was the last week. So now, so now I'm opening again and I think, I put date this year to 18th of December. So, we still have a good couple of weeks, you know, to see where this is coming into. There's some bookings, you know, but I don't know. I don't know what will happen, you know.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

No, that's it. That's it. So, it will be a case of just, so, waiting to see how tightly the season coming will affect you.

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, the reindeers are coming anyway, you know.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

That's it.

Anna Kuhmunen:

(laughs) This circus is unstoppable. So, the reindeers will be there for sure. But if we will have an income of it, I don't know. I don't know what will happen now.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

And I think that the issue is, as you say it, your herding continues whether there's a pandemic or not.

Anna Kuhmunen:

Oh, yeah. It does.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Because the reindeer need to come down for the winter and they'll need food and care for.

Anna Kuhmunen:

They do, indeed. But the climate also, you know, the climate. The climate change is the biggest, you know, it starts really, really, really tough here. And winters here are not what they used to be. It's milder. It's just so unpredictable, you know, Jennifer, it's impossible to predict. Some winters the snow will come first in mid-December and some winters it comes earlier, but the real problem is that the winters here are milder, you know. It's way warmer, which makes the snow melt. Even if it's in December or January, we will have the snow will start melt, and, of course, the day after it might be minus 35 again, and what happens then? It's ice, you know, so the reindeer can no longer find food. The reindeer has a brilliant nose, they will smell through snow, but they cannot smell through ice.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

And, of course, they're trying to get through ice to get to the food.

Anna Kuhmunen:

No, impossible!

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

They can't do that with their dog hoofs.

Anna Kuhmunen:

No, they cannot, no... So, they start to walk, you know, because they won't dig just, you know, they just dig for fun because they would lose too much energy.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Exactly!

Anna Kuhmunen:

So, the reindeer really wants to know what's underneath.



Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yes! (laughs)

Anna Kuhmunen:

But even, you know, with the icec now, because now it's like, it's from day to day is like, oh that's 7 degrees in December and then it's like - 35 the next week and then it's + 5 the next week, you know. It's just like you don't even know what the next day will bring. It's impossible to know. And then, all of a sudden, you know, was it 4-5 years ago in February? It was like green in forest, where we normally have like a meter, a meter and a half. It had been '+' for such a long time. So, it was green in forest and then the week after it snows like half a meter. So, it's just, it's so many challenges! I mean, covid-19 is just, you know, it's just...

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Another one to add to it!

Anna Kuhmunen:

It's like, well, just hit me with that as well. (laughs) We're just struggling with so many other things on top of the forest Industries, mining industries, climate change, so it's, covid-19 is just like bring it on,

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Just another one.

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yeah, that as well.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

And in terms of the business itself and hosting guests, do you have any particular objectives for this year, you know, going into the next season in December? Do you have or is it just a case of waiting to see in the moment?

Anna Kuhmunen:

Well, now it's just waiting to see, yeah. It's hard because now all the focus is, will be on getting the reindeer down, you know. The herders will go out and it's weeks and weeks before they come down. Everything is really about preparing for the winter, you know, to be as prepared as possible. Because when herders start to come down, of course, we're talking about huge land. So, it's not just one herders' group that will come down. It's, it would be like the herders will put reindeers into the corrals, almost every single day for a couple of weeks, you know, different herding groups will bring their reindeer down and it's all about picking your reindeers up, you know. So, there's no wild reindeers, every single reindeer belongs to someone, so you have to go around to all the different

groups to see if your reindeers are there and then you have to take them bring them home. Oh... (laughs)

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

So, there's a real, I suppose, community effort as well, because everybody brings the reindeer in but then you've got to work out, which one's part of my herd that I then need to take home, to mine, to look after for the winter.

Anna Kuhmunen:

It's really like the clan system over here as well, you know. You have to bring your clan's reindeer home. (laughs) Yeah, so everything is just focused on that, and then, and then the tourist side of it starts when everything is, now my mind is just in like, now it's the hunt, the hunt has started here. So, now it's all about the hunting season. And as soon as the hunt stops, then it's back to the reindeer herding season and get the reindeer down from the mountain. So, it's really, you know, the seasons are very strong here. Our people say that it's not 4 seasons, it's 8 seasons. So, it's really strong, what you're doing in every season, you know, so focusing on Silba Siida, of course, it's very-very important. But now it's just like everything has to come now. Now the hunt has to go well, you know. We have to bring, we have to have food.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

That's it, ready for winter, yeah.

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yeah, but the winter so now, we all focus, it's just like training the hunting dogs, you know, it's just like a dub dub dub dub dub dub, trying to get food for the winter. Berry picking season is now, you know, just trying to... It's a very, how to say, 'strict' is the were wrong word, but it's really, you know, focusing on every single season.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

So, it would be to put it all together, isn't it?

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yes, indeed!

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

That's it. And in terms of the W-Power network, how has that helped you with the, with the tourist side of the business and support?

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yeah. I think the W-Power for me has been very like... We have meetings here in Jokkmokk. And also last year, W-Power... No, this was this year, this spring,...was here, and it's just so refreshing to meet other women, you know. You just tend to think that you're all by yourself, struggling in your own business, you know, and it's just fantastic to hear other women's success stories and what people do and how they overcome, you know, a lot of obstacles and it really is, it brings, you know, you kind of tend to think that you're alone in your own bubble.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yes.

Anna Kuhmunen:

He's just hear all the other women and what they do and I was listening to your pod here a couple of weeks ago and it was amazing, it was so fun to listen. It was about a lady who had a lamb rescue.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

That's right.

Anna Kuhmunen:

Ah, fantastic! Like, I was smiling for like a week afterwards. Shout out to her. I don't even now remember her name, but that was amazing!

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

That was Yvonne, isn't it. Yes. You're right, it is. Listening to everyone's stories. Everyone's got a different, different path...

Anna Kuhmunen:

But it's so brilliant! Like, a lamb rescue. Wow, that is...!!! So, you just get to see so many sides and, you know, you get so many ideas. And yeah, everyone is just really trying to do good things and a lot of others, like myself, have small children at home and how it is to be, you know.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yes!

Anna Kuhmunen:

To be, like, a good mother, but also to try to get your business to work and how to, you know, you, it's just so fun to just listen to everyone else and yeah, see how everyone overcome small obstacles.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

That's! It definitely gives an opportunity to learn from, yeah, from each other as well. And, as you said, have that support network as well. And in terms of your business, is there one thing you'd wish you'd known at the start.

Anna Kuhmunen:

How helpful everyone can be. That, I wish, I thought, I probably thought it would going to be more complicated than it was. I was very afraid in the beginning, but I don't know if it's, if it's particular this place Jokkmokk, but here people just are so willing to help! I just, like, briefly said it in a room that I was starting my business. And before I knew it, like, someone had done my website. Someone had helped me with my logo. Someone was dadada, dadada, dadada, dadada, dadada, dadada...

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yes!

Anna Kuhmunen:

And it really, you know, and to be, It's easy to ask for help. You know, if people can help they will help you, you know. So, I really wished I knew that and I think this spreads, like, I don't know if the word in English, but we say it as 'circles on the water'. Is that it? Do you say that in English? Does this mean something good happens? You know, it will spread out.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yes, yes!

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yes, circles on the water?

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

It's only maybe we really call it 'givers gain'. It's that if give something to someone else, then it will come back to you.

Anna Kuhmunen:

Oh, true.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yes, it's depending, it is not necessarily from that person. But yeah, so the more you give him, something comes back.

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yeah, definitely! So, I mean, next time, every time now I hear someone saying, like, 'Oh, I'm thinking about starting up my business and I 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, what can I do!? Can I help you? Do you need dududu, dududu, while, well, if someone would have said to me, like, 'Oh no, that will never work. Oh, you shouldn't even bother...', you know. I would probably respond the same way as that someone had said to me. But because people here were so friendly helping me out, it's just, you know, it makes me so also willing to help and support. So, it's very important that, you know, you have good people. Good people around you.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

It is, it is! And having that strong network, as you said, of that people you know you can ask on and who you know will be willing to help you out and be able to bounce ideas and problems off as well, isn't it? Because there's always someone out there that has been through it before and is happy to share with you too."

Anna Kuhmunen:

True.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

So, in terms of the business and the vision for you, do you have a goal over the next five years?

Anna Kuhmunen:

Hmm... Good question, Jennifer! Well, I just hope that people will still come, you know. I think, I'm very happy with where I am. Maybe grow a bit in terms of maybe being able to take guests overnight, do overnight trips. People who want to immerse themselves a bit more, learn a bit more about my culture and you know, now I only do, like, a couple of hours every day. People will come in, to show them around, we cook together and now, but, yeah... In five years, I really-really hope that I have a little place where people can come and can stay for a bit longer to learn more. So, I, I really-really hope that that would be in the next couple of years.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Which would be a fabulous experience for people to come and just kind of reading about it, and being able to then really see, you know, the Northern Lights. You probably go all over night then to experience that along with the reindeer, and the fire, and the stories, isn't it?

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yeah, absolutely. And the traditional way they will live, like in summertime still, we live up in the lavvus, like, in the teepee tents, in the summertime, but it just so, for people who are not used to it. You know, I think that would be a fantastic, you know, to just be out and camp out and...

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yeah!

Anna Kuhmunen:

An amazing experience!

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

And as you're saying then it really gets back to nature, doesn't it?

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yeah, yeah, yeah!

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

A traditional way of life.

Anna Kuhmunen:

Just to cook over fire, you know, it's not so many people, my guests coming to me are mostly from, you know, they're from the bigger cities, you know, they're all around the world, but, you know, their generation lost the whole thing with cooking over fire, you know. So, it's back to basic and I think that's good, you know, people... it didn't then, but they haven't, haven't tried yet. So, it can be anything from just cooking over fire or not sleeping in a bed or just you know, it's...

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

It's that whole being of great repute of distractions of a smartphones and the net, isn't it?

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yeah, true.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yeah, people at some stages need that.

Anna Kuhmunen:

The simple things, you know, the simple things.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yeah, which sounds like exactly what you're offering.

Anna Kuhmunen:

Yeah.

Jennifer Mcdonald-Nethercott:

Yeah, brilliant! Well, thank you so much for your time today. And if you want to find out more about Anna and Silba Siida, we'll pop links in the short notes for you.

More information about W-Power and the support available in your area is included in the short notes, as well as links to join the project's local and international Facebook pages and LinkedIn group. We thanks to the Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme of the European Regional Development Fund, and Highlands and Islands Enterprise for their support with this project. Until next time!