

PAWWS

Sled dog welfare report

The case of Finnish Lapland

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Report overview



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Purpose

This report identifies the most urgent current welfare concerns in Finnish sled dog tourism and presents practical and structural areas for improvement, based on recent research and stakeholder insight. The improvement of sled dog welfare requires significant improvements in multiple areas: this report's purpose is to provide a concise overview of key points within the sector requiring attention.

Basis

This report is based on project PAWWS, "People and Animal Wellbeing at Work and in Society" (2023-2027), funded by the Research Council of Finland (#364262). It includes input by Professor José-Carlos García-Rosell at the Oulu Business School, University of Oulu, and Dr. Mikko Äijälä at the University of Lapland. Central to this report are the contributions from the following voices in the sled dog tourism sector:

Josephin Habermann, Wilderness- and Sleddogguide and former co-founder of *Nomadic Naali Oy* [sled dog kennel].
Liisa Kokkarinen, *Visit Finland* [official national tourism organisation].
Mari Mero, Program Director, *Green Activities* [tourism-related sustainability program and certificate].
Mikaela Sauvala, official veterinarian / City of Kemijärvi.
Pihla Markkola, Head of Expertise and veterinarian, *SEY Animal Welfare Finland* [animal welfare group and animal protection expert in Finland - an NGO].
Sarah Walter, project manager for corporate sustainability, *DERTOUR Suisse AG* and *Kontiki Reisen* [tour operators].
Valentijn Beets, co-owner of *Bearhill Husky* [sled dog kennel].

Intended audience

This report is written for the public, media outlets, tourism businesses, policymakers, veterinarians, certification bodies, and other stakeholders interested in the sled dog tourism sector of Finland. Specifically, the report highlights what some stakeholders identify as the most pressing issues in the sled dog tourism sector in one open access, concise document. This report is a supplement to longer, more in-depth academic publications which are at the moment in peer-review processes.

Key points

This report identifies key aspects that need to change in the sled dog tourism sector for better dog welfare. This includes: seasonal tourism pressures on dogs' work and year-round care; gaps in kennel management expertise and resources; inadequate welfare standards and inconsistent regulation; idealised marketing and limited transparency about dogs' lives, and; uncertainty about the extent and causes of welfare problems. It presents takeaways that address each of these points, as well as the main highlights from these takeaways listed on page 11.

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Background information

Tourism experience

Sled dogs in Finnish Lapland are typically Alaskan (selectively bred mixed-breed) and Siberian huskies (purebred). Due to unregulated working sled dog registration, there are no official statistics available regarding the number of dogs working in Finnish tourism, although estimates suggest that the population is around 10 000 dogs. This data gap represents a significant challenge for the regulation of sled dog welfare. Despite not being part of Finland's traditional cultural heritage, sled dog safaris have become one of the most popular tourism activities in Lapland, contributing significantly to both the region's destination image and its economy. With approximately 1.5 million tourists visiting Finnish Lapland in 2024, growing tourism demand has increased the number of sled dogs and tourist guides required by the industry, as well as the workload placed on both. Sled dogs are workers who need to be considered alongside human employees in matters concerning, for example, their rights to good working and living conditions including, but not limited to, exercise and recovery, interpersonal treatment and veterinary care, insulated housing, appropriate nutrition, and the opportunity for social exchanges.

Seasonal conditions

Sled dog tourism is highly seasonal, with kennels generating the majority of income during an intensive and rapidly shortening winter due to climate change. The high tourist demand within this shrinking timeframe of snow results in intensive, repetitive work for sled dogs and guides. Providing appropriate workloads, regular rest, variation in routes and activities, and opportunities for play and free runs throughout the year requires suitable kennel infrastructure and sufficient, experienced managers and staff even during the less profitable spring through late autumn months (i.e. outside the snow season). Seasonality and changing weather extremes affect both the working and living conditions of sled dogs, and the ability of kennels to recruit enough staff to care for the animals. As a result, during the peak winter tourism season, many kennels rely on a large number of seasonal workers and subcontractors who travel to Finland with their dogs from other European countries on a temporary basis. Seasonal workers often possess varying levels of training in working with tourists and sled dogs in extreme weather conditions, and their knowledge of Finnish legislation and industry practices may differ substantially, creating additional animal welfare concerns. Further, kennel managers who invest in welfare standards for sled dogs and staff that exceed current legal requirements often face a pricing disadvantage compared to kennels that do not make similar investments. In a sector where regulation remains limited, businesses that incur the costs associated with higher welfare standards may be placed at a competitive disadvantage, while those assuming less responsibility can benefit financially.

Legal status

In Finland, sled dogs are protected under the Animal Welfare Act (693/2023) and Government Decree 674/2010, which explicitly includes sled dogs within the legal category of companion and hobby animals. However, despite their role in commercial tourism, sled dogs do not have a distinct legal status as working animals with protections specifically tailored to their work. Although existing legislation establishes requirements concerning their treatment, housing, health and exercise, these general protections do not provide a comprehensive framework addressing the particular demands of sled dog work, including seasonal workloads, recovery and year-round care.

Current welfare concerns

Recent media reports identify welfare concerns about the living and working conditions of sled dogs and kennel staff. Simultaneously, research shows that some kennel owners seek to improve welfare practices and challenge sector-wide norms. Nevertheless, the management of sled dog tourism kennels vary greatly. As discussed in this report, two primary reasons for this are: 1) kennel owners not required to obtain a permit to open a tourism kennel, and 2) kennel management not offered an education about sled dog welfare, as well as business management. The lacking standards within the sled dog tourism sector raise questions about how organisational oversight, veterinary inspection and care, working and living conditions, and, therefore, welfare can be ensured.


Nämä kuvat rekikoirista eivät sovi herkille – kertovat karua kuvaa koiratarhojen arjesta

Videot ja kuvat näyttävät, kuinka koirat palelevat, niiden vammoja ei ole hoidettu tai ne viettävät suurimman osan ajasta liian lyhyessä kettingissä tai häkissä.

Image 1

Image 1 description

An YLE article by Laura Valta and Eve Kuivas from 30.04.2026.
Translation of text in image: "These pictures of sled dogs are not for the faint of heart – they paint a stark picture of everyday life in dog kennels", "Videos and photos show how the dogs are freezing, their injuries have not been treated, or they spend most of their time on a chain or cage that is too short."

Voices from the sector: what needs to change?

Professionals in animal welfare, veterinary inspection, kennel management, tour operations, and tourism promotion were invited to share what they identify as the most pressing concern affecting dogs, based on their professional experience. They were then asked to propose initial steps to address them. Drawing on their different professional experiences, this section identifies what they see needing to change in the sled dog tourism sector, namely: 1) seasonal tourism pressures on dogs' work and year-round care; 2) gaps in kennel management expertise and resources; 3) inadequate welfare standards and inconsistent regulation; 4) idealised marketing and limited transparency about dogs' lives, and; 5) uncertainty about the extent and causes of welfare problems.

1. Seasonal tourism pressures on dogs' work and year-round care

Pihla Markkola, Head of Expertise and veterinarian, *SEY Animal Welfare Finland*, identifies:

> "Because of the strong seasonal nature of the work, staff may lack sufficient knowledge of dogs, and staffing levels may be not enough in relation to the large number of animals. The basic welfare needs of sled dogs are consistently not met."

Sarah Walter, corporate sustainability project manager at tour operator *DERTOUR Suisse AG & Kontiki Reisen*, identifies pressure on kennels to generate a year's income during a short winter season:

> "Kennels might pack their tour schedule so tightly, that the dogs do not get the necessary rest days. A dog's rest day might begin to feel like an economic loss for the company."

Walter also identifies risks when dogs are purchased or bred to meet seasonal demand but must be supported all year, including concerns about the long-term care of surplus, retired or unsuitable dogs. Walter notes price competition between businesses that invest in care and those that cut these costs.

Walter proposes diversifying income beyond the high season, placing less marketing emphasis on peak travel, and explaining how animal care contributes to tour prices. Walter also proposes long-term planning for changing snow conditions.

Valentijn Beets, head musher and co-owner of *Bearhill Husky*, questions growth based on increasing dogs' workloads or acquiring more dogs:

> "If demand doubles, an operator may need to ask the existing dogs to do substantially more work or acquire substantially more dogs. Both can create welfare risks. Increasing workload, particularly with inexperienced guest drivers, can increase physical and psychological strain and accident risk. Increasing dog numbers creates a much larger year-round responsibility for feeding, housing, staffing, veterinary care, exercise and retirement."

For short, family-oriented experiences, Beets proposes rides driven by a professional musher: keeping workload, speed and handling under professional control. He would retain self-drive tours as longer experiences with fewer departures and more meaningful interaction between guests, mushers, and dogs. Beets adds:

> "Any increase in capacity must remain within the dogs' individual capabilities and appropriate rest and recovery limits."

Further, Veterinary Surveillance Veterinarian Mikaela Sauvala also emphasises the importance of balancing exercise throughout the year:

> "Balanced exercise is essential, so that on-season dogs get enough rest and off-season they get enough daily exercise out of the pens."

The need for year-round appropriate exercise was also raised by Mari Mero, Program Director at *Green Activities*, in addition to the need for kennel owners to document the work, care, health, rest, and exercise that sled dogs receive:

> "Based on our experience, ensuring continuous summertime exercise as well as logging of sled dog work, rest, health and free exercise is the most urgent topic."

2. Gaps in kennel management expertise and resources

Sarah Walter stresses the importance of staff knowing individual dogs: "Since dogs can have very subtle ways of expressing distress or discomfort and every dog expresses itself differently, staff need to know the animals very well to detect early warning signs." Walter links staff turnover to the risk of missing these signs.

Valentijn Beets identifies a gap between sled dog expertise and management skills: some kennels have good management yet insufficient knowledge of sled dog work and care. Other times, managers experienced with sled dogs lack the management skills needed to run a successful kennel where guides and sled dogs experience a good standard of welfare:

> "Having competent dog handlers is essential, but it cannot compensate for poor decisions at management level about workload, staffing, training, breeding, veterinary care, retirement, infrastructure or budgets."

Beets proposes that Lapland's educational institutions, public authorities, and sled dog industry jointly develop a recognised education programme for kennel managers. Experienced mushers could strengthen their leadership, financial, and organisational skills, while managers entering the sector could receive structured education in sled dog behaviour, training, care, welfare and working practices.

Mikaela Sauvala shared that official veterinarians have identified the need for those interested in opening a kennel being legally required to obtain an assessment by an official veterinarian of their plans for a kennel before they begin operating. Sauvala proposes that this would allow their planned kennel layouts, dog and staff numbers, and care plans to be reviewed proactively:

> "We have also suggested that sleddog kennels should be approved before starting so that kennels would not just pop-up."

Sauvala notes that introducing such a requirement would conflict with the government's strategy of reducing bureaucracy. Yet such a requirement would help veterinarians "check that the structure of the kennel is inline with regulations and kennels would not be unreported".

3. Inadequate welfare standards and inconsistent regulation

Pihla Markkola raises a fundamental barrier to sled dog welfare:

> "The most urgent issue is that the minimum legal requirements are commonly not followed, and the supervision in the area is inadequate."

Specifically, Markkola uses veterinarian inspections as an example:

> "It is also all too common for supervising veterinarians to give only advice on illegal practices instead of issuing formal orders. A practical first step is that the legal requirements should be applied consistently throughout the country."

Markkola looks to Sweden to consider alternatives approaches to ensuring welfare standards and regulations are upheld:

> "In Sweden, supervising authorities hand out fines when the law is broken. Additionally, Swedish authorities require a commercial license/permit to keep dogs for commercial purposes. If you do not meet the requirements or if you break the law, the permit can be withdrawn."

In Finland, Markkola proposes, national authorities are initially responsible for such change:

> "The first step in addressing this issue should be taken by the *Finnish Food Agency*, as they regulate and supervise the industry. First of all, the authorities should have access to data regarding how many sled dog kennels and individual sled dogs there are in Finland. This could be arranged by registering sled dog facilities as a separate category in the existing animal premises register."

Josephin Habermann, Wilderness- and Sleddogguide and former co-founder of *Nomadic Naali Oy*, also identifies the need for stricter legal requirements that recognise sled dogs as working animals rather than companion or farm animals - moving away from a reliance on voluntary labels for working with and housing sled dogs:

> "From my perspective, the Finnish Animal Welfare Act needs to be revised, as the current minimum standards for 'commercial animal keeping' unfortunately still permit the housing of dogs in conditions that are not species-appropriate."

Sarah Walter, project manager for corporate sustainability, *DERTOUR Suisse AG & Kontiki Reisen*, proposes stronger monitoring and follow-up after welfare problems are identified, and shared standards across Finland, Sweden, and Norway. Further, Walter proposes shared funding of kennel audits (which are checks against agreed standards):

> "Another idea is for tour operators to come together and pay for the kennel audits. Most tour operators share suppliers. A collective animal welfare guideline and audit system could raise animal welfare standards and create a fair audit structure, while keeping costs lower for each individual business."

Walter considers that kennels may withdraw from certification if its requirements become too demanding and participation offers insufficient value, and proposes stronger legal standards alongside support for voluntary certification, including greater promotion of certified kennels to customers:

> "There needs to be a healthy balance between certification and law enforcement, where both strive to advance better animal welfare practices."

Liisa Kokkarinen, from *Visit Finland*, distinguishes the existence of legislation from whether they are understood and followed, emphasising the need for knowledge of requirements to reach all employees, not only managers.

Mari Mero, Program Director of *Green Activities*, highlights that welfare standards need to be reflected in the organisational processes of commercial sled dog kennels:

> "Defining acceptable levels of work (in hours/kilometres) and the minimum age for working dogs based on scientific evidence would be much needed for setting criteria requirements."

Such organisational considerations will need to be made explicit as part of the standards that certifying bodies meet within the sled dog sector.

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4. Idealised marketing and limited transparency about dogs' lives

Josephin Habermann argues that marketing can encourage acceptance of chaining and poor housing by portraying these conditions as part of the Arctic experience:

> "In the Lapland tourism sector, the target audience's cognitive dissonance regarding 'dogs as pets' versus 'dogs as working animals' is exploited for marketing purposes. Dogs are portrayed as inherently 'cold-loving and hardworking'—which is certainly true, but it is only part of the story. This narrative is used to market poor housing conditions and the practice of keeping dogs on chains."

Habermann proposes better education of tour operators and resellers about the conditions and practices they should examine, questioning how marketing defines what is normal for working dogs, including their housing, feeding and socialisation. Habermann criticises "the tendency to laud the mere meeting of minimum standards of care as an achievement".

Sarah Walter raises concerns about public-facing idealised imagery:

> "Marketing occasionally paints an idealistic picture of husky tours. Details such as the noise before the tour, what the living conditions actually look like or other animal welfare information are left out in favour of descriptions of the magical experience to attract customers."

Walter further describes how the supply chain involving international tour operators, local companies, and kennels can make welfare conditions difficult to verify and responsibility difficult to establish. Walter proposes disclosure of subcontractors:

> "Companies should lay open who their sub-contractors are, in what capacity they are being used and what agreements they have to follow. This makes sure that animal welfare can be tracked accordingly."

Liisa Kokkarinen notes that many businesses, tour operators and destinations market and sell sled dog services. Kokkarinen proposes shared guidance a way to support responsible selling and communication across these organisations.

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5. Uncertainty about the extent and causes of welfare problems

Liisa Kokkarinen asks whether reported welfare cases are isolated or indicate wider structural problems. Before prioritising responses, Kokkarinen proposes hearing the relevant parties and considering the resources available for supervision:

> "Before the most effective solutions can be identified, it would be important to understand how widespread the animal welfare challenges are, what causes them and where in the operational chain they arise."

Pihla Markkola proposes a practical approach to document and thereby establish sector-wide understandings of sled dogs and their welfare:

> "Another alternative could be adding in the official national dog register a category specifically for sled dogs. Currently, the majority are registered as "mixed-breed dogs" and supervising authorities have no way of knowing how many sled dogs live in a specific area, let alone the entire country. Effective monitoring is difficult, as there is currently no comprehensive information on the number or identity of active sled dog operators. The registration should also include subcontractors' dogs and kennels, which are very commonly used in industry. Once the number of kennels and dogs is clear, the number of supervising authorities should be made proportional to the population of dogs and other animals."

Kokkarinen further proposes practices that identify and prevent welfare problems and support businesses in developing responsible practices, rather than responding only after problems have arisen. Animal welfare need to be a central concern of sustainable tourism:

> "Tourism cannot be sustainable if the welfare of the animals used in its activities is compromised."

Takeaways: Responsibilities towards sled dogs

The following takeaways bring together the previous section's comments from the sector with the interpretations of the researchers authoring this report. An overarching takeaway is: where dogs' working and living conditions cannot meet their individual needs, sled dog safaris should be changed, suspended until improvements are ensured, or not offered.
The welfare of the dogs must take precedence over the commercial demands of tourism.

Kennel owners & tour operators are responsible for workloads and rest.

While the Animal Welfare Act addresses workloads (693/2023 13.2§), commercial working sled dogs experience exceptionally intensive winter schedules to meet growing tourist demands within a decreasing snow season. This can have a significant detrimental impact on the rest and recovery of sled dogs and guides with some kennels not meeting legal requirements. Professionally driven shorter rides, fewer and longer self-drive experiences, and income outside the peak season offer alternatives to increasing workloads and expanding dog numbers beyond a manageable amount. Work, rest, and changes to either should be assessed against individual dogs' capabilities and needs, rather than solely meeting tourist demand.

Kennel owners are responsible for lifelong care.

Animal recovery and year-round care is covered by the Animal Welfare Act (693/2023 20§). However, particularly due to seasonal tourism demands, commercial tourism kennels are placed in an exceptionally challenging position to provide *appropriate* year-round, lifelong care. Providing working sled dogs with appropriate housing, staffing, veterinary care, rest, and exercise is a responsibility that continues when dogs become injured or sick, temporarily unsuitable for work, or retire. Kennel expansion and business planning should account for lifelong care, rather than treating dogs *solely* in terms of their productive capacity.

Kennel owners are responsible for competent decisions about welfare.

Educational institutions in Finland, public authorities in Lapland, and the sled dog sector could develop a recognised education programme combining sled dog knowledge with management skills. This would strengthen welfare by helping to ensure that management has well-rounded expertise in sled dog work and care, as well as business management. Further, while professional or large-scale dog owners need to notify the *Finnish Food Authority* of their dogs, a mandatory veterinary assessment, pending a legally required approval or permit, before opening a *commercial* kennel could proactively support welfare. Once a kennel is established, detailed documentation and well-informed staff can maintain familiarity with individual dogs to identify and track discomfort, pain, or other symptoms suggesting decreased welfare: allowing staff to respond in appropriate and timely manners.

National authorities are responsible for stronger legal protections.

While sled dogs are covered by the *companion* and *farm animal* categories of the Animal Welfare Act (693/2023), national authorities need to legally recognise them and their unique requirements as *commercial working* animals in the tourism sector. Finland's *Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry* would need to lead reform preparations, with statutory amendments requiring parliamentary approval. The *Finnish Food Authority* and municipal veterinarians would play central roles in implementing and supervising strengthened legal requirements. Kennel operators, veterinarians, animal welfare organisations, and tourism businesses can contribute evidence and expertise to develop these standards. The clearer standards and welfare protections that would result from such recognition of working animal status and improved protections would ideally be shared across the Nordics.

National authorities are responsible for registering sled dogs and kennels.

To enable effective welfare supervision, national authorities should establish dedicated working sled dog categories within existing official registers. This could additionally involve registering sled dog kennels separately in the animal premises register, or identifying sled dogs within the national dog register. Registration should also cover subcontractors and their dogs, allowing authorities to establish the sector's scale and allocate inspection resources accordingly.

Veterinarians are responsible for consistent inspections and enforcement.

Improving sled dog welfare requires consistent application of existing legal requirements, and timely action when violations are identified. Differences in how veterinarians interpret and enforce requirements calls for more consistent use of formal enforcement measures.
With the limited resources currently available to veterinarians, jointly funded kennel audits supported by, for example, tour operators, could enable veterinarians to more regularly monitor a greater number of kennels.

Tour Operators & Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) share responsibility for welfare.

Tour operators and DMOs can both benefit from the sales and brand image of sled dog safaris, and should therefore invest in their welfare financially and through improved processes. Operators should know the practices and welfare standards of the kennels providing their services. Greater transparency between tourism companies and kennels could strengthen accountability across the tourism supply chain. Pricing should recognise the costs of *appropriate*, *year-round* dog care and staff employment, rather than rewarding lower prices at the expense of dog and guide welfare.

Certification bodies are responsible for thorough welfare assessments.

Certification and inspections are important. However, kennels complying with these on paper does not necessarily reflect how dogs are cared for in practice. Additional measures proposed by this report's authors include unannounced audits by independent certifying bodies and carefully designed "mystery shopper" assessments to evaluate the standards that kennel practices meet. Such regulation should complement rather than replace veterinary inspections and ongoing assessments of dogs' working and living conditions. We also see importance in an independent body acting as formal representation on working sled dogs' behalf within the sector.

Tour operators share responsibility for representation of sled dogs.

Portraying all breeds of sled dogs as requiring the same care (e.g. hut insulation) can encourage acceptance of detrimental housing or handling practices. Better education for tour operators and the tourists they sell to should avoid misleading representations, and communicate welfare requirements to help tourists make informed choices.

There are inherent challenges in acting on these responsibilities.

Acknowledging the responsibilities presented here acts as an initial, important step. However, following through on them raise various challenges that cannot be addressed in full in this report's format. An example includes what municipality veterinarians have already identified: efforts to implement required assessment and approval before a kennel opens speaks directly against the Finnish government's strategy of reducing bureaucracy. However, the goal of reducing bureaucracy should not come at the expense of unregulated industries that are potentially harmful to the animals and people working within them. These challenges do not act as permanent barriers, but rather as points that require communication and collective effort between various relevant stakeholders to find appropriate solutions.

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Main highlights

To improve sled dog welfare, the sled dog tourism sector needs to:

- Explore alternative incomes beyond peak season.
- Reduce self-driven in favour of musher-driven safaris.
- Educate kennel managers in sled dog welfare, work, *and* business management.
- Require approval from municipality veterinarians before kennels open.
- Strengthen Finnish legal protections for sled dogs.
- Identify sled dogs, kennels, and subcontractors in official registers.
- Share sled dog tourism standards across the Nordic region.
- Increase resources for official veterinary inspections and timely follow-ups.
- Disclose tour operators' suppliers.
- Improve kennel audit resources through tour operators' financial support.
- Reflect the costs of *good* year-round dog and staff care in safari pricing.
- Verify actual welfare through certification processes.
- Normalise unannounced kennel audits and mystery-shopper tour checks.
- Represent dogs' lives and needs accurately in tourism marketing.
- Change or suspend safaris when dogs' welfare cannot be secured.

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