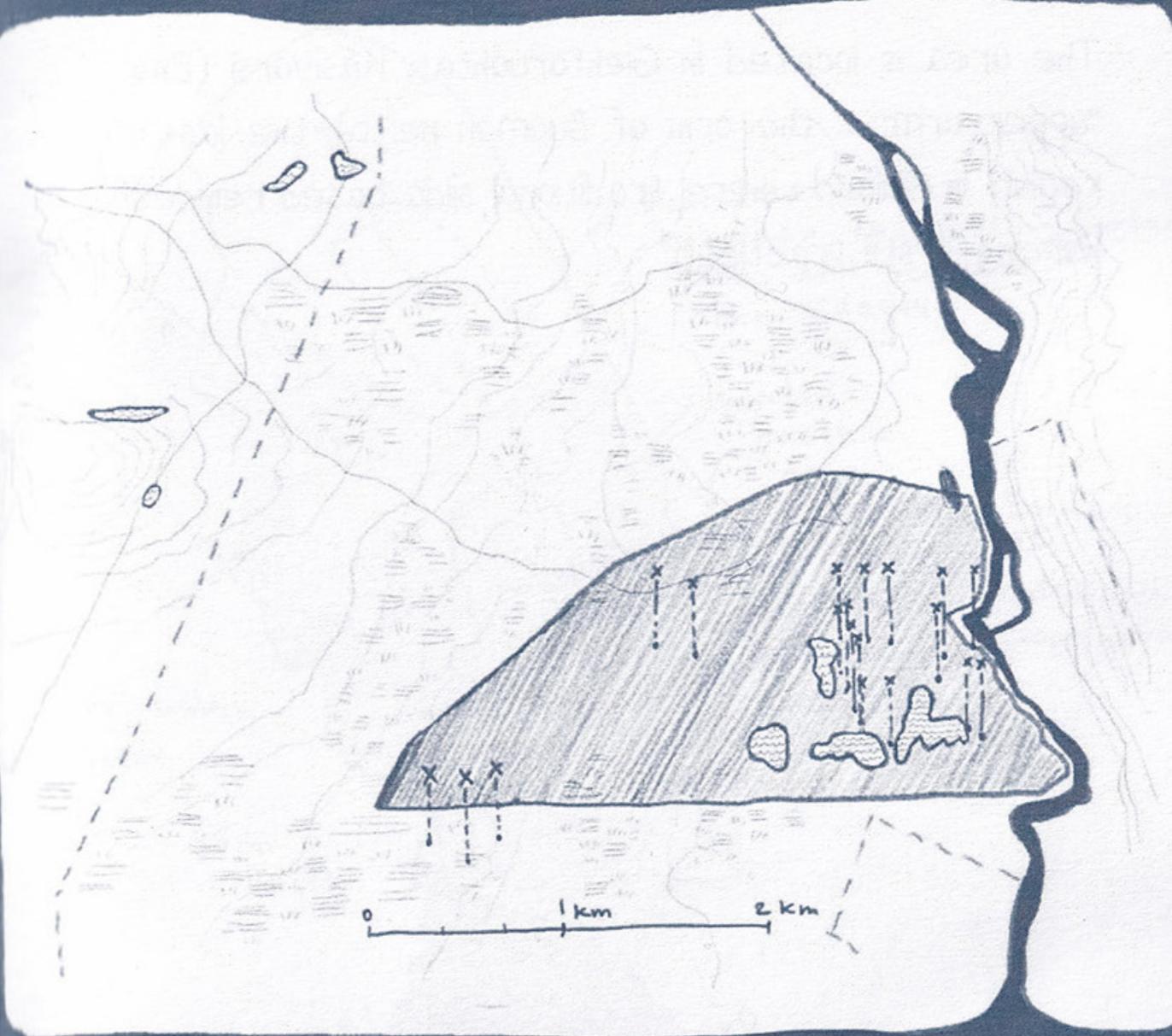
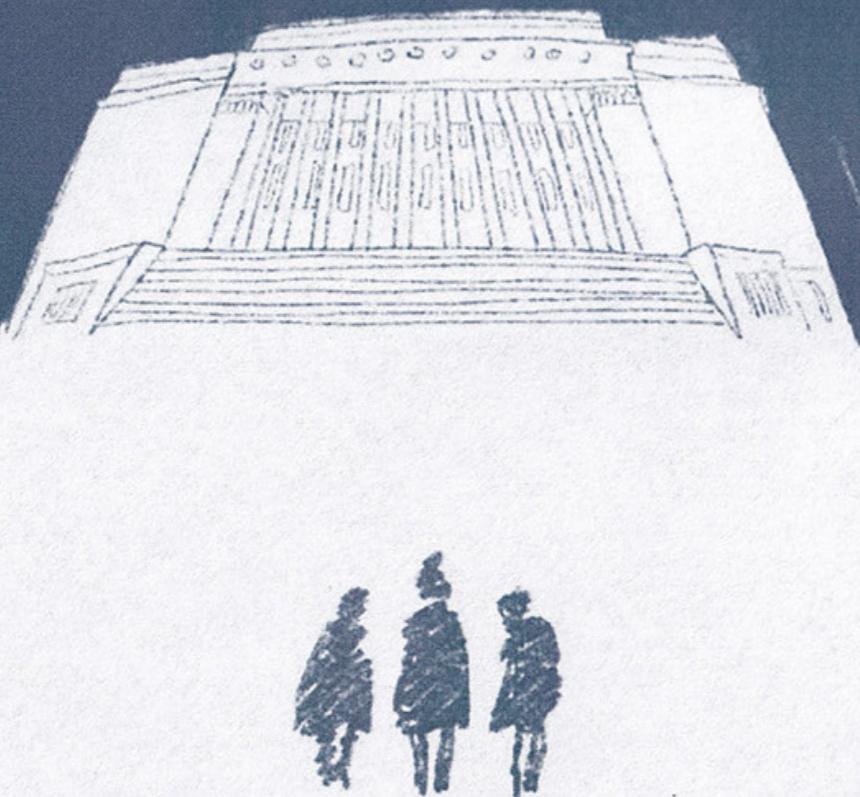


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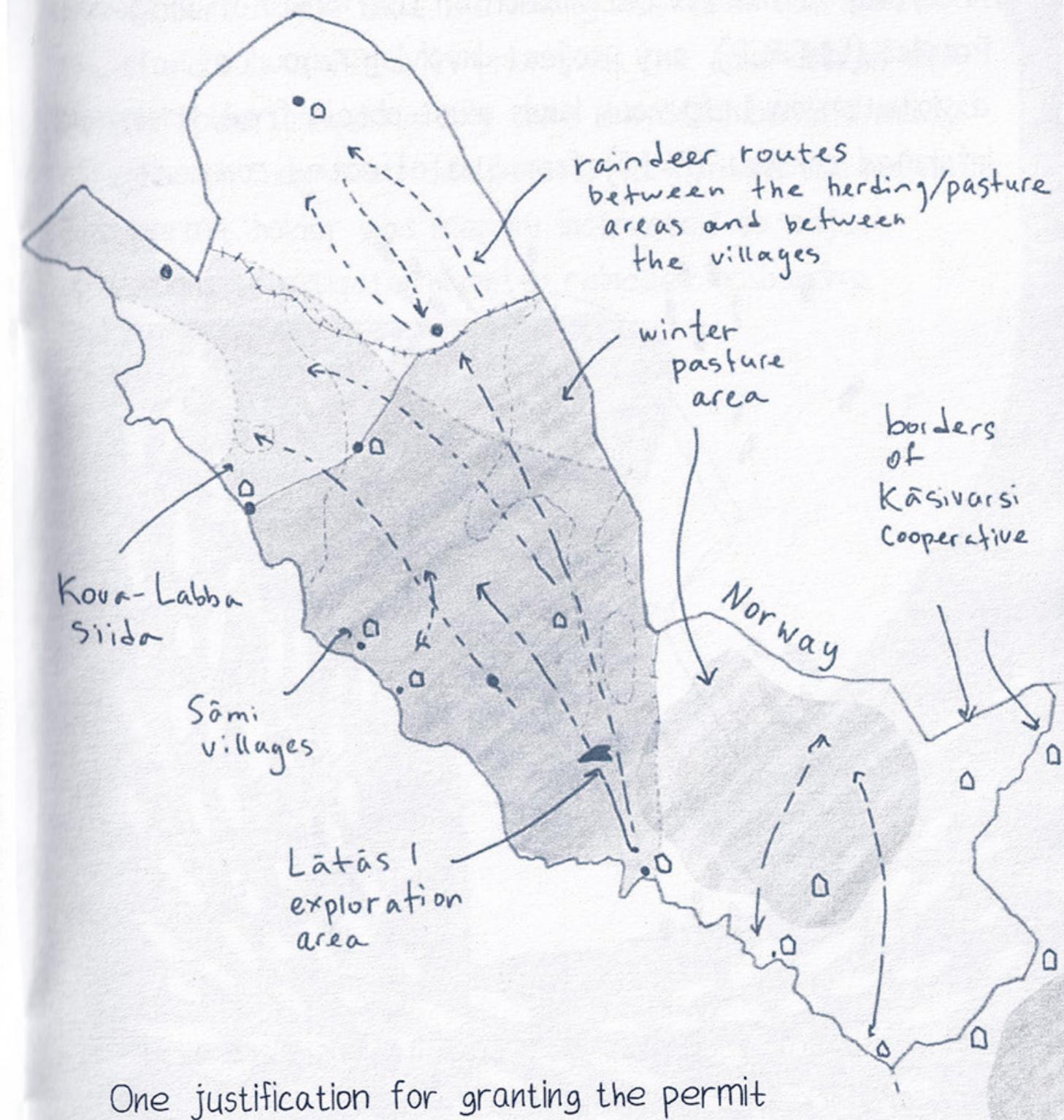
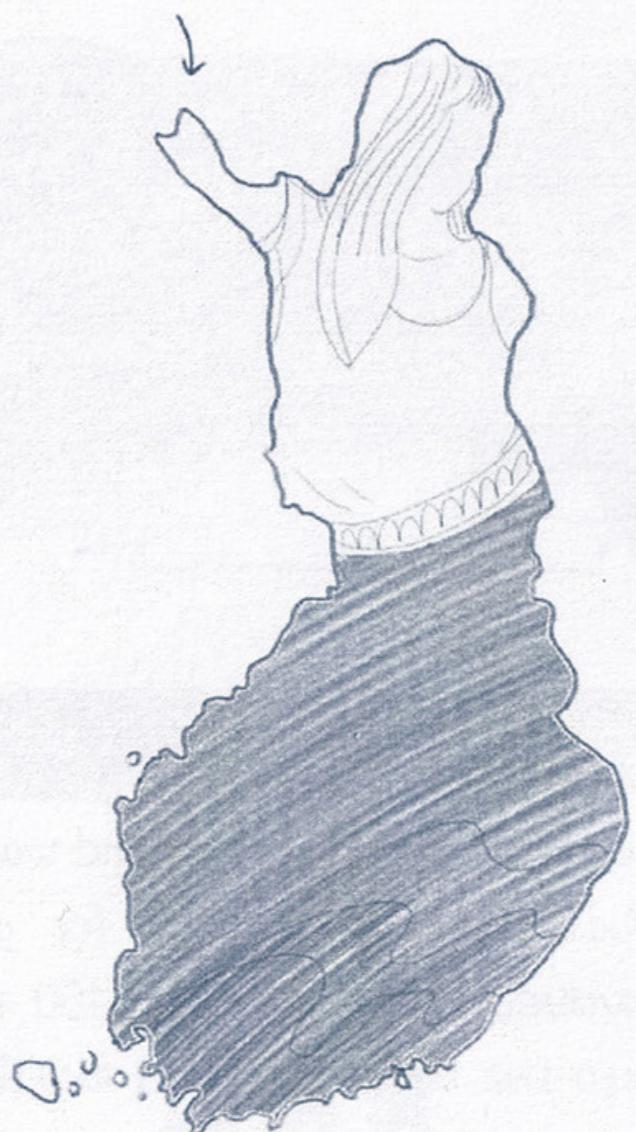
In 2022, three sisters from the Kova-Labba Siida - a community from Giehtaruhtas (Käsivarsi) filed a complaint with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child against the Finnish State, claiming that their rights as Indigenous Sámi children to culture and identity were violated.



In 2016, the Geological Survey of Finland was granted a permit to conduct mineral exploration for gold, copper, and iron. This involved drilling boreholes 100 to 300 metres deep into the bedrock at 20 locations within the traditional herding territory of the sisters' siida.

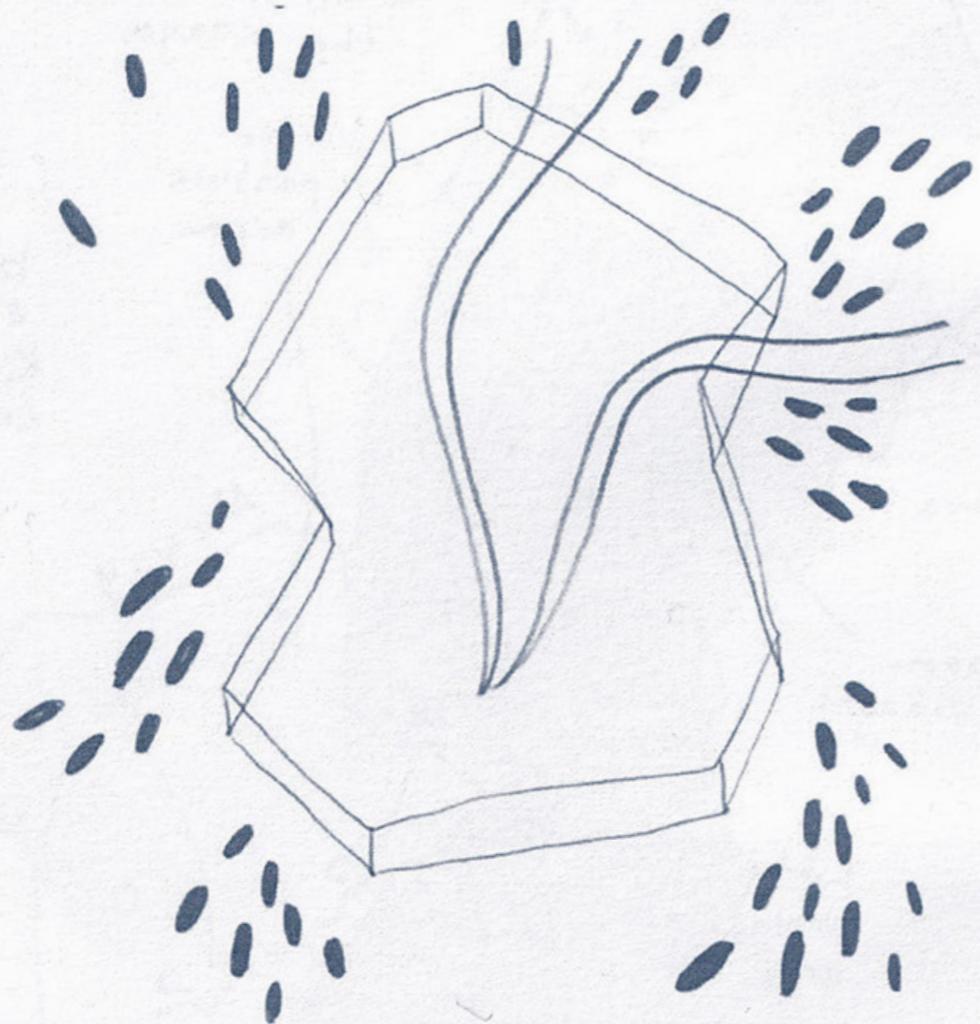
It was one of the first mineral exploration permits issued in traditional Sámi territory under the new Mining Act.

The area is located in Giehtaruhtas, Käsivarsi (Eng. "upper arm" – the arm of Suomen neito), the last region in Finland where traditional siida-based reindeer herding is still practiced.



One justification for granting the permit was that the exploration area was relatively small compared to the total land area of the Kova-Labba Siida cooperative.

According to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), any project involving resource exploitation on Indigenous lands must obtain free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) from the affected community.



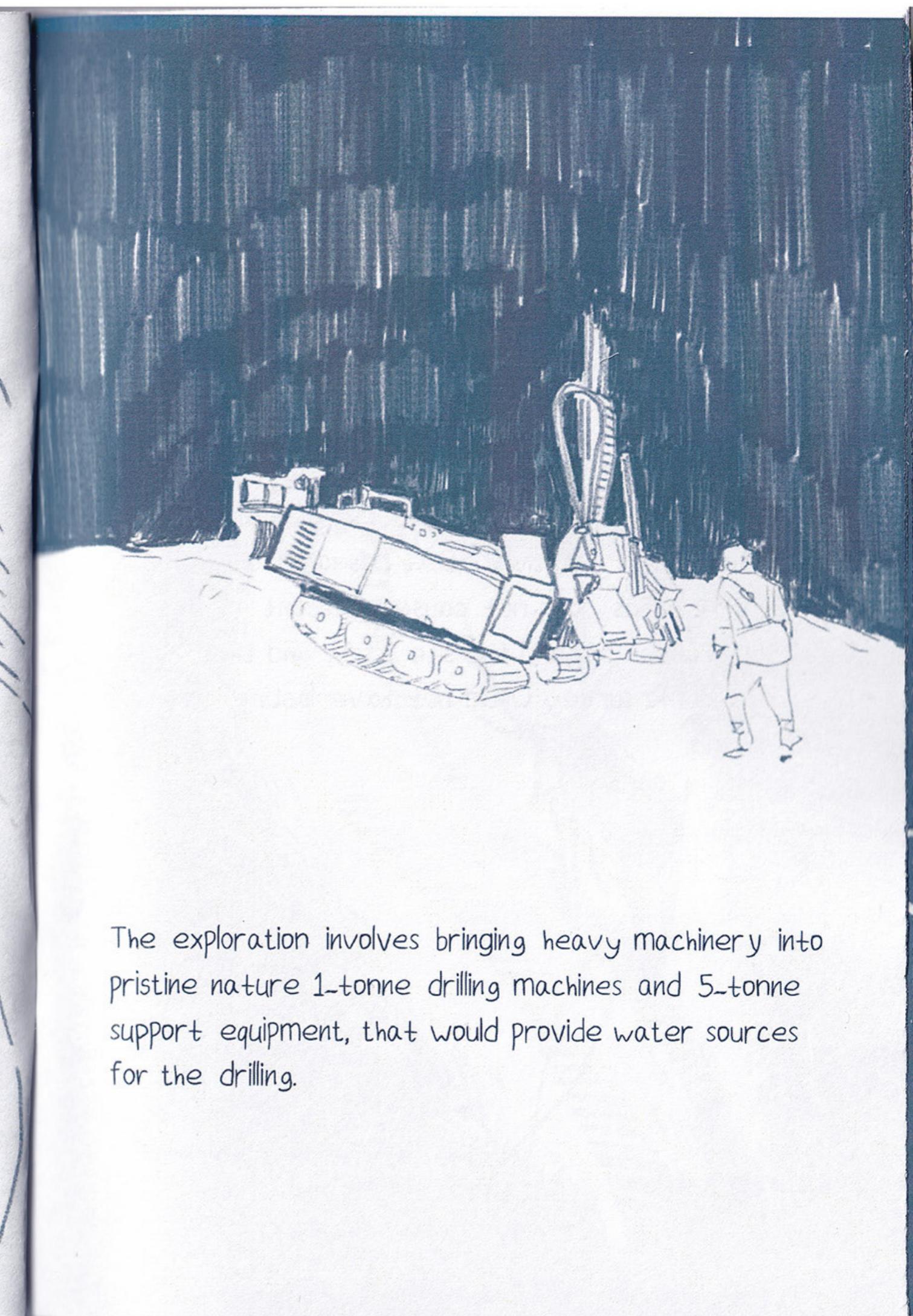
The Finnish State claimed that consultations were held in accordance with the Mining Act: legal landowners and cooperative members were invited to a meeting, and consensus was reached on protective measures—such as placing barriers to clear the area of reindeer and conducting drilling in winter, outside the calving season.

The Sisters argue that the Mining Act does not meet the standards of FPIC. It prioritizes the interests of the permit holder, requiring only that the Sámi be informed, after which they may decide how to manage the reindeer. The permit holder was merely instructed to adjust operations to mitigate harm to reindeer husbandry.

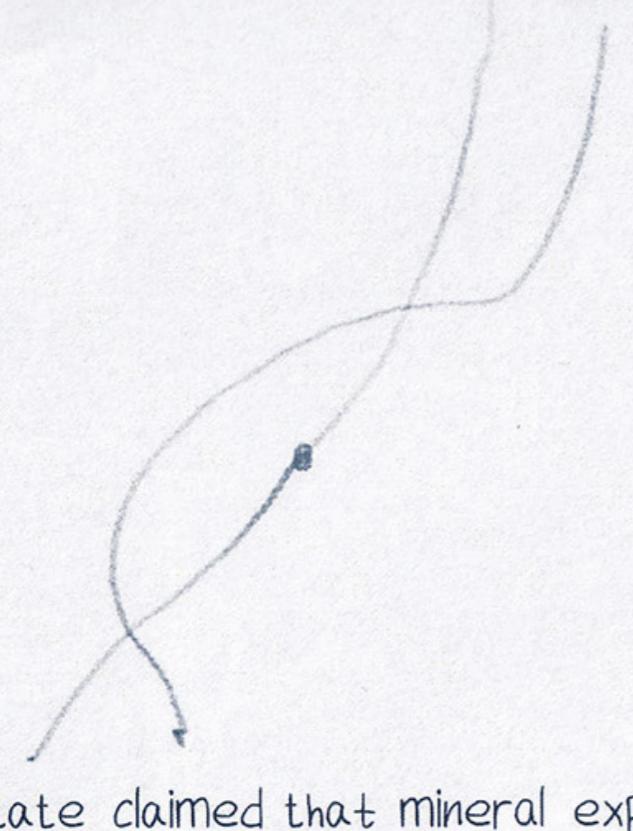




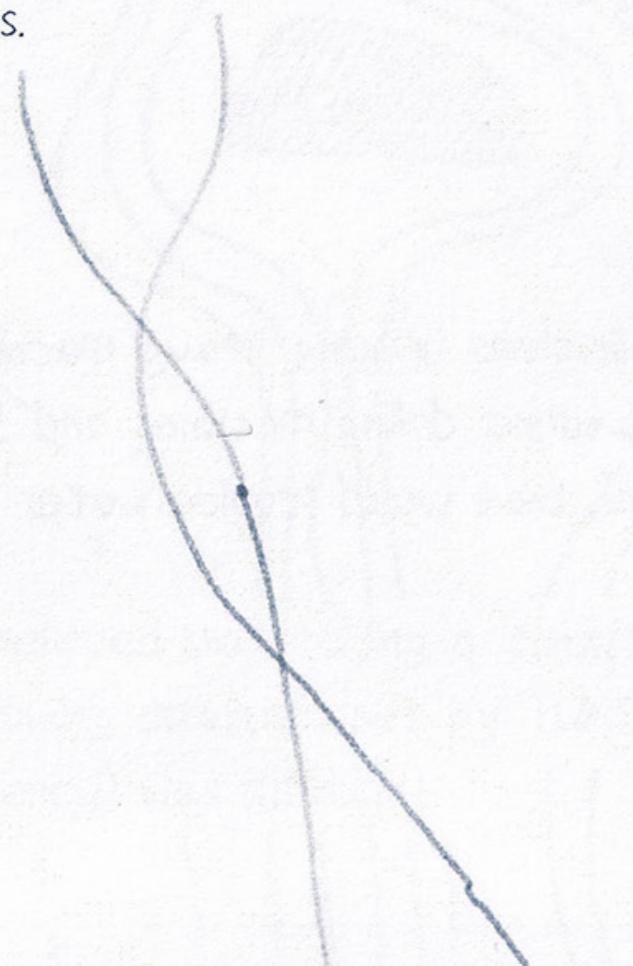
The State believed that holding a consultation event and then following conditions set by TUKES (Safety and Chemicals Agency) was sufficient.



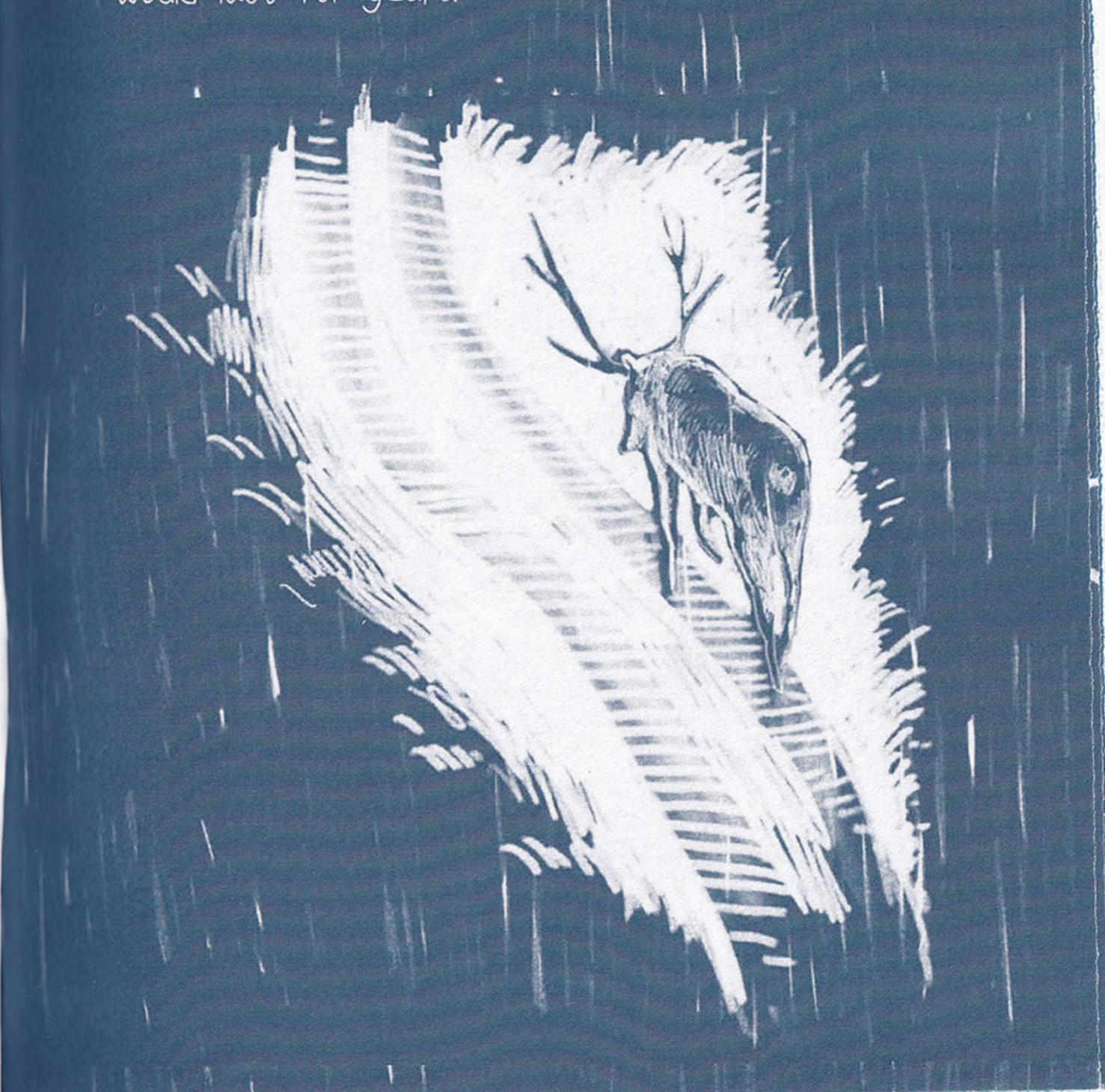
The exploration involves bringing heavy machinery into pristine nature 1-tonne drilling machines and 5-tonne support equipment, that would provide water sources for the drilling.



The State claimed that mineral exploration is a temporary activity, that research at individual sites does not cause significant disturbances beyond the site itself, and that a one-time survey would not have lasting effects.



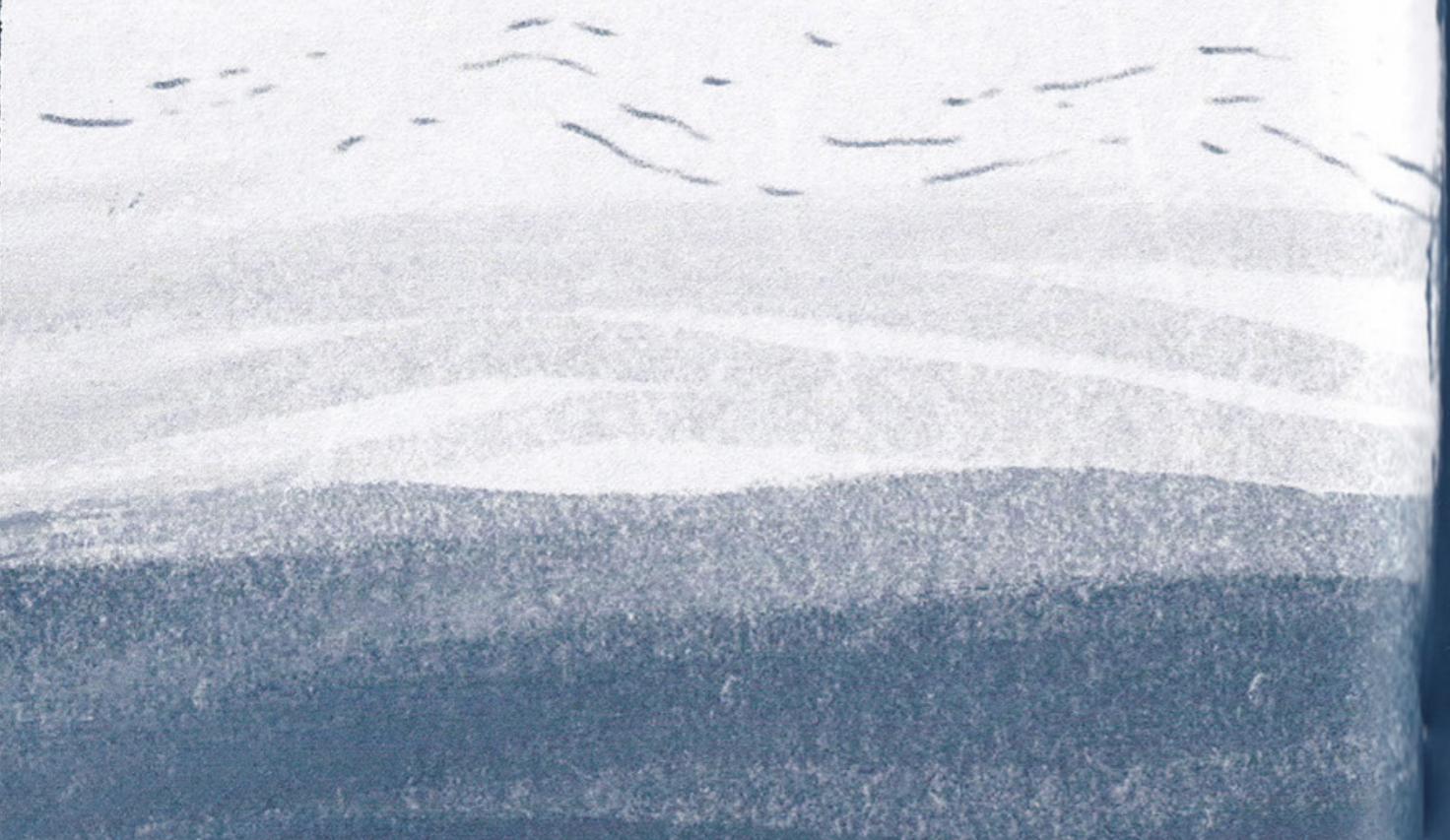
The Sisters countered that winter is the most critical season for reindeer survival, as they must dig through thick snow to reach ground lichen. Tracks left by machinery and workers can mislead reindeer into areas without food, causing weight loss, death, and fewer calves. The impact of the exploration would last for years.



The State argued that the sisters' complaint was premature, as the alleged violations were hypothetical — the Geological Survey had not yet taken any practical measures following the permit, and the sisters had not been personally affected.

The UN Committees rejected this argument, stating that issuing the permit without FPIC already constituted a violation of the sisters' rights. The Committees emphasized that the intergenerational transmission of Sámi culture is deeply tied to land and traditional practices, and that disruption begins long before culture disappears entirely.

The State claimed that Sámi culture is protected through linguistic and cultural self-governance in their native region, which safeguards traditional livelihoods like reindeer herding.



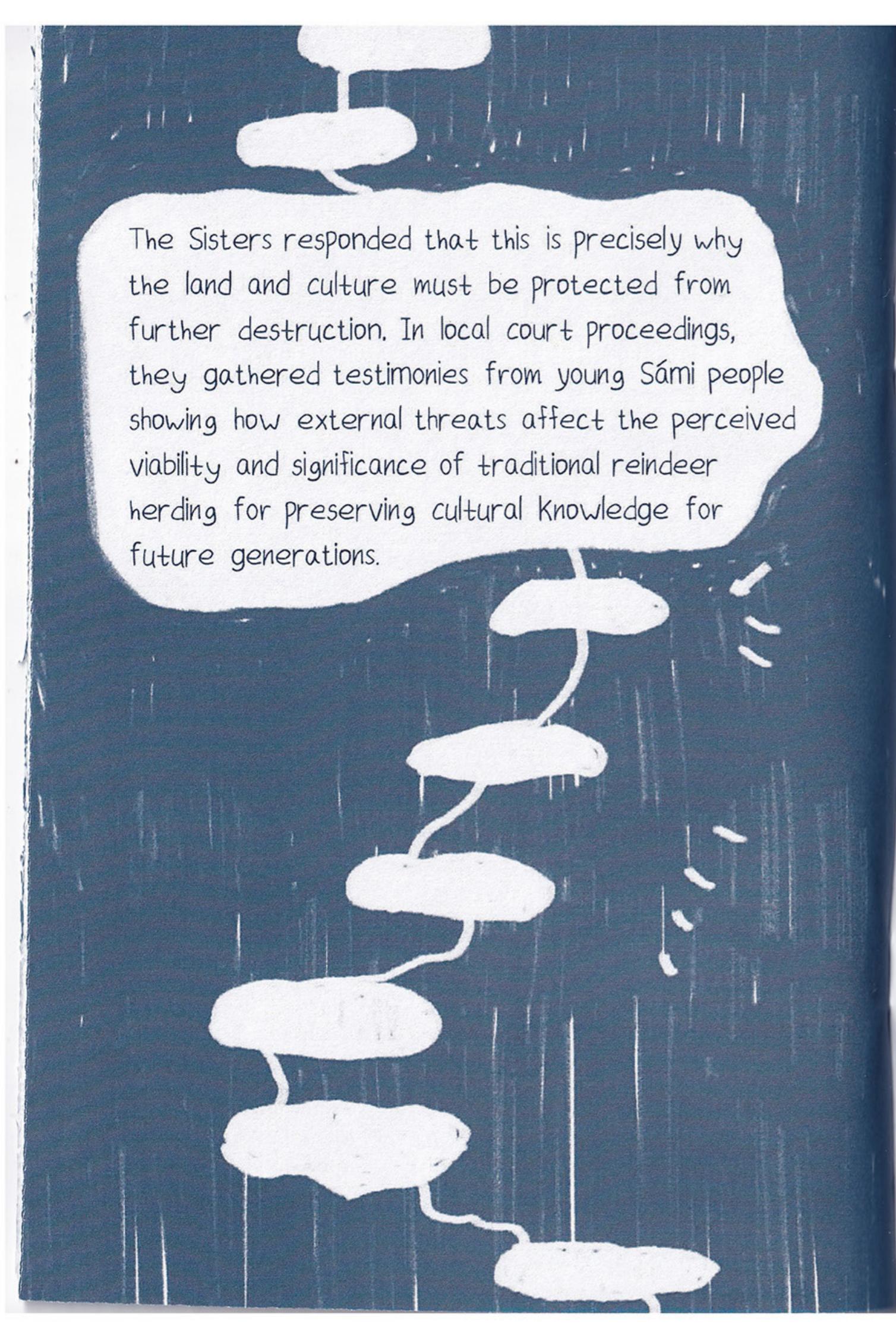
The Sisters argued the opposite: that the vocabulary of Northern Sámi, traditional crafts, and singing styles are deeply rooted in nature and reindeer herding.



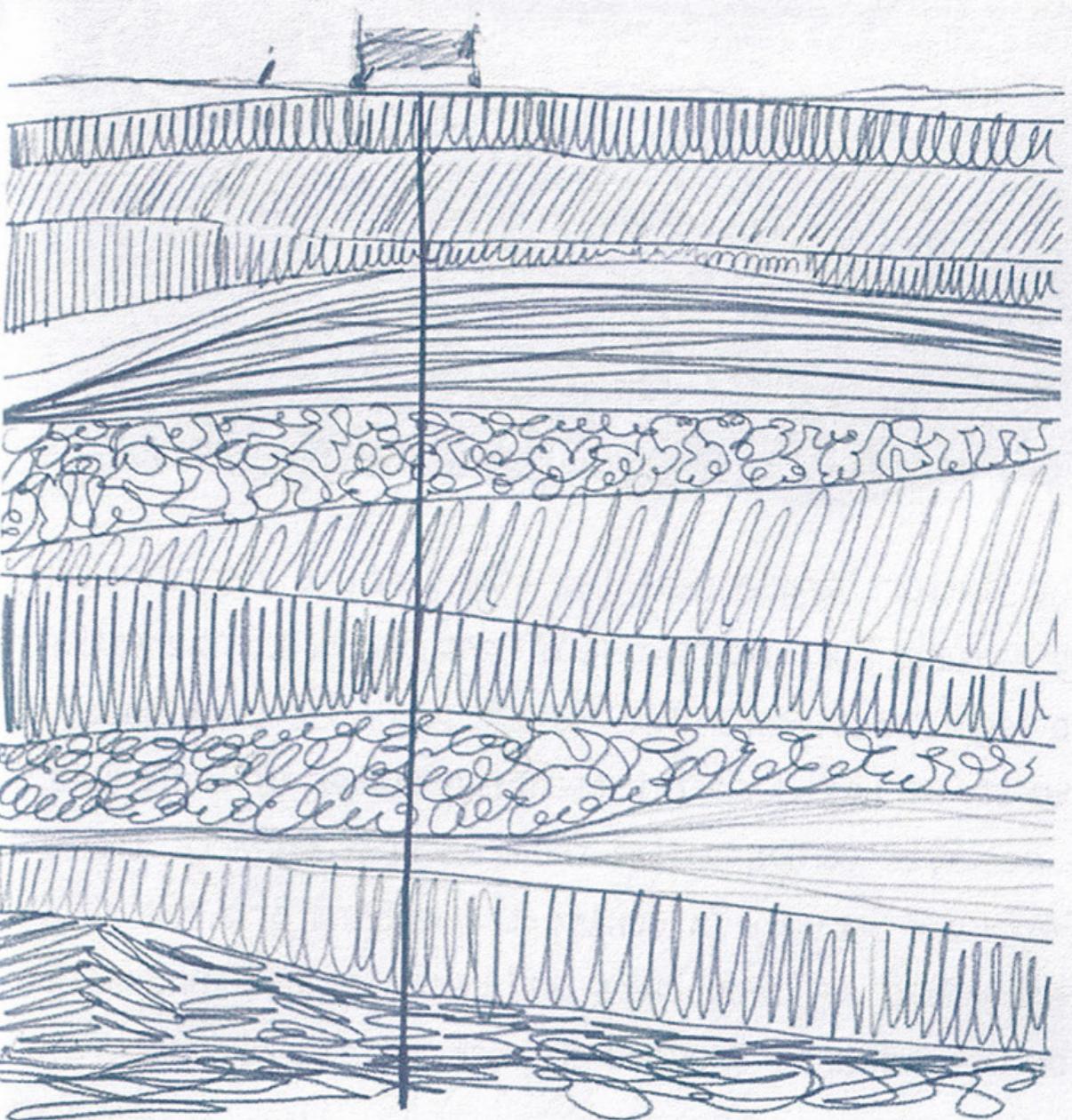
Without space for traditional reindeer herding, the language itself has no future.

They also pointed out that external threats to their ancestral territories and cultural transmission are already severe ~ climate change, wind farms, tourism, and a rapidly changing environment. As a result, they've been forced to provide supplementary food to reindeer, making the practice resemble farming or cattle breeding.

The state acknowledged the importance of passing down traditional reindeer herding and its relevance to the Sámi language. However, it added that teaching Sámi culture to children is increasingly difficult, as 70% of Sami children live outside the Sámi homeland.



The Sisters responded that this is precisely why the land and culture must be protected from further destruction. In local court proceedings, they gathered testimonies from young Sámi people showing how external threats affect the perceived viability and significance of traditional reindeer herding for preserving cultural knowledge for future generations.



The State emphasized that the exploration area is small compared to the land of the Kova-Labba Siida cooperative.

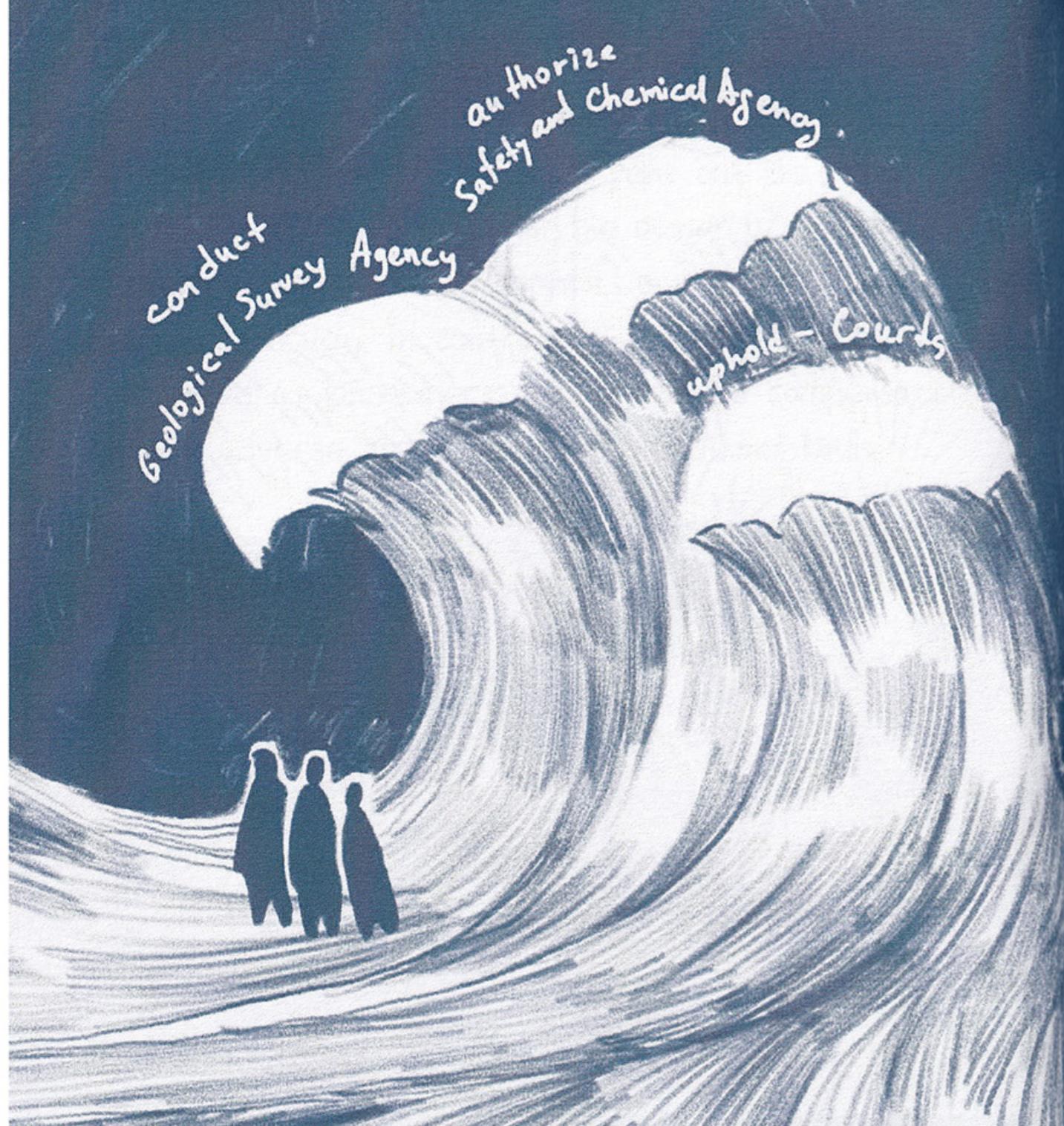
It stated that the Geological Survey of Finland conducts geological exploration for research purposes, serving business and societal needs. It does not conduct mining, only data collection. The state claimed that the sisters' complaint had been sufficiently addressed in local courts and that all permit procedures complied with the Mining Act.

The authors argue that the Mining Act is discriminatory by nature. For example, it offers annual compensation to legal landowners. The Sisters point out that since the state has declared itself the owner of Sami land, it receives compensation from its own agency—the Geological Survey. In contrast, the Sámi are not recognized as landowners and receive no compensation for the adverse impacts on their traditional lands.



The State responded that the Mining Act is not discriminatory, as it applies equally to both Sámi and Finnish landowners. It added that the sisters cannot expect compensation, as they are not legal owners of the land.

The sisters argue that their rights as Sámi children to their traditional lands are being denied, subjecting them to substantial and indirect discrimination through the unilateral power of the state to conduct mineral exploration (via the Geological Survey), authorize it (via the Safety and Chemicals Agency), and uphold it (via the courts).



The UN Committees emphasized that Indigenous peoples' cultural survival is closely tied to their traditional lands.

The proceedings in the sisters' case concluded that the consultation process was insufficient and lacked genuine consent. The Committees recommended halting exploration operations, revising laws to require proper impact assessments, and taking measures to prevent similar violations.

Since then, a permit for a much larger exploration area on Kova-Labba Siida's lands has been applied for.

Natalia Batrakova

This zine is part of the academic project  
"Pluriversal waters: Tracing hydro-ontologies  
across colonial-extractivist assemblages"  
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