

DEVELOPING NATURE-BASED TOURISM IN ICELAND: ADVICE TO PRESIDENT GRIMSSON

This note develops some ideas for the further development of nature-based tourism in Iceland. My advice is based on two premises. First, there are many opportunities for attracting residents and overseas tourists to visit the outstanding natural places of Iceland. Second, these opportunities will create economic benefits for the country without damaging the natural resources if the authorities have the will and the vision to ensure environmentally sustainable tourism.

Nature-based tourism is a fast developing part of the tourism market based on the natural visitor attractions of Iceland. It involves interpretation, education and enjoyment of nature, and should be managed to achieve ecologically sustainable use of nature and bring benefits to local communities and to visitors. It is perfectly right and proper that commercial interests should take the lead, but given competition from other destinations it is essential that government interests work more effectively together than at present.

Nature-based tourism opportunities have been evident on my many visits to Iceland and were brought home during my visit in July 2010. The opportunities afforded by the Eyjafjallajökull and Fimmvörðuhals eruptions were not used to maximum effect to inform visitors about the nature of Iceland and the effects it has on its people. The only interpretation was provided jointly by the transport department and the Soil Conservation Service at the Route 1/Þorsmörk road junction. There was no information to be found in Hvolsvöllur, none along the main road by the most affected farms, although many people were stopping to look and photograph, and not even any on the Fimmvörðuhals trail at either end or at the scoria craters, a new trail had been developed, but care had not been taken to provide a route over the craters to afford views and to avoid excessive damage. No brochures were available at key locations. At least the redoubtable Ari Trausti Guðmundsson, along with photographer Ragnar Th. Sigurðsson, has published an accessible account providing good insights into all aspects of the eruption and its effects.

Vision

Iceland should aspire to be a world leader in nature visiting to provide educational benefits to all visitors, local residents and from overseas, and to provide economic benefits to Iceland's people.

First visits are important, but return visits are more important as they prove that the whole experience package was successful. Encouraging Icelanders to visit their country and to enjoy and understand its nature is also vital.

The overarching vision should be based on the stewardship of the natural resources in the longer term. If it is based on rapid exploitation, the resources will be damaged and diminished and the life blood of nature-based tourism diminished to a point where it is no longer an asset. I propose that the vision should be along the following lines:

Iceland should care for, value and use its natural resources sustainably to benefit this and many future generations

I interpret the key words as follows:

Care: is an active pursuit, generally meaning to conserve, but to preserve where necessary,

Value: is the cultural and economic value placed on a nation's resources

Use: for jobs, for enjoyment, for exports, for food etc but within the natural carrying capacity

Benefit: socially, economically, culturally, and educationally, and long lasting: that is they are sustainable in the true and strict sense originally defined over 20 years ago.

Proposals for the development of nature-based tourism

Nature based tourism is a key ingredient in this approach. Many elements require to be developed in a coherent manner and delivered as a package if the approach is to be successful. The rest of this note provides advice from the perspective of a frequent visitor. The package needed comprises 8 elements.

1. A well defined product with a clear marketing message

One might be excused for thinking that Iceland's main tourist attractions were bathing in the hot pools of the Bláa lónið, or visiting Geysir and the Gullfoss waterfall. But there is much more to Iceland than these feature sites: the site of the world's first democratic parliament at Þingvellir, the areas where literally new land is being formed where the two largest tectonic plates in the world are slowly parting, the stark beauty of the interior wilderness areas, the amazing colours of the geothermal areas such as Kerlingarfjöll and Torfajökull area (neither of which most Icelanders have visited).

And there is the extensive fish cuisine, the smoked delicacies of meat and fish which are unique to Iceland and the discerning visitor wishes to experience. Also, cultural history, the poetry and other literature; and understanding how Icelanders managed to survive what nature threw at them on many occasions in the past are all parts of the unique package which is *Destination Iceland*.

The product needs also to focus on the other elements which visitors consider important: good quality accommodation, car hire, road quality and access, accessible visitor information about all aspects of the country.

The product needs to be defined in a more sophisticated manner to appeal to the discerning visitors who are looking for new experiences and for tailor-made packages.

Once the product is clearly defined, the marketing messages to different audiences in different parts of the world can be devised. The marketing message should be based more on the variety of experiences and the quality of the product rather than just on bathing in hot springs and driving around in large 4 x 4s. Marketing needs to focus on those clients most likely to be attracted to Iceland; it should be based on good quality market research.

A number of initiatives for spreading the knowledge about Iceland and the innovative learning experiences available should be encouraged. This can be achieved in two ways. International outreach centres could be established at key locations related to hot spots of intellectual excellence, as at Ohio State

University. Schools on routes served by Icelandair in North America and Europe could be targeted to encourage teachers to visit (e.g. 36 geography teachers from Scotland visited for one week in August 2009 will result in over 10,000 Scottish school students learning about Iceland) and also teacher-led student visits especially through targeted promotion to undergraduate and postgraduate courses in environmental sciences in the UK, Germany, USA and Canada.

2. Effective coordination among the key departments and agencies

For tourism to be promoted effectively, the visitor attractions to be developed, all of the facilities to be in good condition, and for the visitor to have the best possible experience, it is essential for effective joint working and coordination between all of the relevant government departments and their agencies. This is certainly not the case in Iceland with even different agencies of the Environment Ministry not working effectively together. For example, if good educational and interpretation materials are to be produced, collaborative working between environment and education specialists within government is essential.

Given the range of governmental interests in developing and promoting nature-based tourism, Cabinet level commitment should be obtained as given that environmental, tourism, transport, education and food are responsibilities of different Departments and Ministers. A special nature-based tourism task force or an Icelandic Nature Tourism Association, involving government environmental and tourism bodies, commercial tourism operators and economic development groups, should be established. Its remit would be to develop projects in different parts of Iceland and for the country as a whole. Specifically it should focus on promoting Iceland's environment and on how local people can gain jobs and income from tourism.

3. Good quality facilities at competitive and affordable prices

Visitors are persuaded to go to new destinations if the facilities are of good quality and are at affordable prices. Value for money is an essential component compared with alternative destinations in a highly competitive market where discounting and low season offers are the order of the day. The devaluation of the currency compared with the USA Dollar, the Euro and the Pound Sterling is helpful. Marketing to dispel the image of a high cost location is needed to the targeted groups.

4. Improving national and international recognition of outstanding places

Safeguarding the nations' special natural places in recognition of its global uniqueness on a terrestrial continental plate spreading zone and the largely unspoilt areas of the highlands and other locations throughout the country and those that are of international heritage significance is an important element. Unfortunately, the pace of national designation of special places for natural and cultural history is lamentably slow and there are many opposing forces. However, modern international tourism places a cache on nationally and internationally recognised places. Iceland hides its light under a bushel. I highlight two actions which I have raised on many occasions in the past.

(1) Consider the **establishment of national park for the whole of the highlands** which, from a natural heritage perspective is all special. This could be achieved through the completion of the designation of the Vatnajökull National Park by

adding all existing protected areas and expanding the area to stretch from the continental shelf margin off the Skeiðárarsandur in the south to the whole of Öxarfjörður in the north and adding the areas to the west, including Kerlingarfjöll, Þjorsarver and Langisjór. It will then be truly an internationally recognised asset.

(2) At present, Iceland has two World Heritage Sites – Surtsey and Þingvellir (the latter only for its cultural history). Iceland has taken a very limited view of its natural geological assets in terms of their world significance. **New World Heritage Sites** should be prepared and submitted by the Government of Iceland to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee as a serial application should be prepared seeking inscription of all of the key features of the spreading zone, such as moberg formations, hyaloclastic and palaganite rocks, strato and shield volcanoes, and fissure eruption cones. This could then form part of a wider series, including sites already inscribed, for example in the UK such as the Giant's Causeway and the St Kilda archipelago, representing the Outstanding Universal Value of the features associated with the opening of the North Atlantic Ocean.

5. Exemplary care for the natural assets

Once special places are recognised, effort is required to ensure their long-term protection to safeguard them from damage and to allow visitors to have an exemplary experience. Given the potential energy resource in some areas and the objective of the master plans for power schemes to develop these natural sources, those rivers and geothermal areas that are of outstanding value for conservation, education, research, and public appreciation should be protected immediately from development. This is a major opportunity under the new national energy plan which is currently before the Althingi.

Also in designating new areas, the Environment Ministry and its agencies should ensure that there are adequate financial and human resources and the knowledge and experience to manage these areas for the benefit of nature and people.

6. Reasonable regulation

In places there is conflict between traditional grazing and hunting rights, and more recently with off road driving. A delicate balance needs to be negotiated between the key interests to ensure that traditional rights are exercised in a manner that is sustainable for the species and the land and water resources which they depend on. This has not always been the case, as with over grazing on some highland commons and over exploitation of totemic species like the ptarmigan.

Off road driving is an increasing issue. There is an increasing view that suggests use of GPS and its translation into computer data bases allows residents and visitors to drive wherever they wish. This is, of course, contrary to the long accepted code against off-road driving. The physical damage caused to fragile soils and vegetation lasts for decades from just one pass and the sight of tracks where they should not be is offensive to those seeking a natural experience. Agreement between the different interests to recognise the problem and to stop damage to land and to visitors experience is urgently required. The working party established to undertake this task needs to be chaired independently of any of the interests.

7. Accessible information

There should be more information available about the key areas to visit, stating why they are important, what experiences can be gained from visiting there, and how they are looked after to benefit visitors and the resource itself. There are plenty of brochures about different parts of Iceland, but very limited information about the key sites. Umhverfisstofnun produces good brochures about nature sites, but these are not generally available in tourist offices. There are good commercial guides to the geology and plants, but most of the best books are heavy expensive and heavy. More commercial sponsorship is needed to encourage other authors to produce shorter guides on key places and features. Experience in other countries could usefully be reviewed, for example, Scottish Natural Heritage's *Landscape fashioned by geology*, *Naturally Scottish*, and *Scotland's Living Landscapes* series.

There are a few good interpretation centres in Iceland but most are of poor quality, in the wrong place, are inadequately resourced, have the material in only Icelandic and frequently fail to get over the key messages to visitors. There also seems to be an obsession with large buildings costing many millions of Icelandic kroner. The most recent example is the newly constructed visitor centre near Skriðuklaustur in Fljótisdalur, some 40 kilometres upstream from Egilsstaðir. Its capital costs were more than one year of operating budget of the Vatnajökull National Park, and its operating costs are high. To make matters worse another three are planned. This is the wrong approach – an obsession with concrete taking no account of the role which local communities and local experts can play. A far more effective approach to interest and educate locals and visitors, and at vastly less cost, is to use existing facilities in key settlements. For the Vatnajökull National Park the obvious points are at Kirkjubæjarklaustur, Höfn, Egilsstaðir and Reykjahlíð along with the existing, excellent centre at Skaftafell. In each of these settlements, local business should be funded to provide advertising and informative material in cafes, garages and shops, and locals employed as ambassadors of the park to be available throughout the tourist season to guide visitors, help them to have an informative time, stay longer in the area and spend more money.

The same approach should be taken at key locations around Route 1, at the main points where people stop to rest and refuel their vehicles around the country, and at key sites. Simple sign boards giving up to date information are a key ingredient. The key agencies undertaking restoration and protection work, for example Landgræðsla ríkisins, the national and regional forestry, and the natural park and nature reserve organisations should be encouraged to develop further their work on informing visitors through small brochures and up to date information boards. A major centre planned for Gunnarsholt (less than 9km from Route 1) should also be supported.

8. Instigating accreditation for all guides and tourism businesses

Iceland has accredited guides, but there are many other opportunities for those with up to date knowledge and natural communication abilities. Recent graduates in all aspects of culture and environment are ideal candidates for further training in and accreditation as guides for inquiring tourists. Training centres for guides could be set up at regional educational centres around the country. An accreditation system should be developed based on the best practice in other countries., For example; , develop proper training for eco-tourism guides with a

certification process which allows them to operate officially and to market their qualifications. There are very successful schemes operating in other countries, such as Australia and Cuba.

Agreement of the relevant Government Ministry and the Icelandic Tourist Association for 'approved' eco-tourism operators who subscribe to a Code of Practice should also be developed.

Guidelines have been published by IUCN The International Union for the Conservation of Nature, World Commission on Protected Areas on best practice in all aspects of nature-based tourism. [www.iucn](http://www.iucn.org).

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