

AN ENVIRONMENTAL AGENDA FOR THE NEW ICELANDIC GOVERNMENT

The formation of a new government provides an opportunity to finish off the large amount of unfinished business from its predecessor, and to undertake some vitally important new activities. This briefing note is written by a regular visitor and friend of Iceland who wishes to see even more progress in looking after the environment and encouraging greater understanding and enjoyment of it by Iceland's people and by the much greater than predicted increase in tourists.

Strategies

The renaming of the Ministry to include natural resources in 2012 brought the need for a new strategy covering all of its responsibilities, otherwise it will have no overarching guiding basis for new policies, mechanisms, legislation and action for its many agencies. The strategy should be comprehensive to cover all of the departmental responsibilities. The need for this strategy is heightened by the continued development of large and medium scale industrial plants (for example the new silicon processing plants) as natural resource exploitation to rebalance the economy and to use low carbon renewable energy sources continues unabated. Iceland needs a plan for natural resource management for all of the government's responsibilities. In the 1990s, the original ministry led on the sustainable development strategy for Iceland and it is noticeable that this remains the plan. Even at the time, the ministry failed to obtain the support of and agreement from other ministries. This time the strategy should be for the whole government with agreement from all departments, but especially from the Ministries of Industry & Innovation and Finance & Economic Affairs, as well as the Prime Minister's Office, and approved by the whole Cabinet.

Within this agreed framework in place, specific strategies and plans can be developed for key aspects, such as a much-needed plan for managing the consequences of the rapidly increasing number of visitors as discussed below.

Greenhouse gas reduction policies to address climate change

The Icelandic government signed the Paris Agreement on Climate Change in 2016. Now action is needed to reduce Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions. At present, according to the latest figures, the emissions levels remain static since declining after the financial crash. The main emitters of GHGs are industrial processes (44%), energy production (38%) and agriculture (18%). Action to reduce emissions from these sources is urgently required. Iceland cannot continue to argue that all of its energy comes from renewable sources if these processes and the industries they supply not only create emissions but are also not reducing emissions.

What action can and should be taken by the government working with the main producers of GHG sources of emission?

- i. Gain agreement within government to instruct Landsvirken and Reykjavik Energy (as state bodies) that a major programme of GHG emissions reduction should be undertaken immediately at all of their sites, and especially at the geothermal power station sites.
- ii. Gain agreement within government that there should be no further development of energy production facilities and plants, unless there is a net reduction in total GHG emissions. This means that the proposed electricity supply cables to the UK should not go ahead as they will require additional energy development predominantly from geothermal sources.

- iii. Negotiate binding GHG emissions reduction targets with all of the major industrial companies, particularly the aluminum and silica processing plants and their subsidiary plants.
- iv. Reinvigorate the work on developing hydrogen fuel for vehicles as the most energy efficient source.
- v. Instruct the Soil Conservation Service, the Forestry Service and the Regional Forestry Associations (and the proposed new agency Auðlindastofnun once established (see below)) to implement immediately an extensive vegetation planting programme to capture and store GHGs. There is already good research to prove how to do this and good examples of success. The rate of planting needs to be increased significantly and the effects monitored and reported.

Organisation: establishing Auðlindastofnun - Natural Resources Agency of Iceland

The case for merging the Soil Conservation Service, the Forestry Service, the National Park bodies and the Nature Conservation section of the Environment Agency is very strong. But it has been blocked by vested interests in some of those bodies and there has been a lack of political will to take matters forward. Now is the time to do this for the following reasons. First, the government widened the remit of the Environment Ministry a few years ago to include natural resources, so establishing an agency which can advise and can execute action across the ministry's whole remit makes good sense. Second, as the Ministry has not developed a natural resources strategy (see earlier section), a new agency with wide-ranging responsibilities would be ideally placed to take the lead in its development, in the hope of resolving some of the long-standing conflicts between economic proposals and protection of nature. Third, in a small country fewer agencies reduces confusion of advice and the execution of government action. Fourth, the mergers will increase resource efficiency by reducing costs. Fifth, the interaction within one organisation of different experts, having access to all of the knowledge needed for the wider ranging job would lead to a much more effective organisation. And sixth, the organisation will be able to work in an integrated and coherent way over all of the land surface providing advice and taking action.

Legislation

(1) New soil legislation

New legislation for soil conservation and land restoration is long overdue, with the last Act being in 1965. Preparations have been made but there appears to be a lack of political commitment to take these to a conclusion of a new Act. The opportunity should be taken to have a comprehensive Act of Parliament covering soil conservation and land restoration, vegetation protection and restoration, habitat and ecosystem health. The responsibilities should be given to the proposed new agency Auðlindastofnun (see organisation section above). The components should include the following:

- i. power to regulate grazing on the Highland Commons because overgrazing still occurs and large areas should not be grazed at all according to scientific evidence on the non-sustainability of existing grazing levels by the Agricultural University;
- ii. power to fine land holders for poor husbandry resulting in the loss of vegetation and/or soil as there are continuing examples of the lack of stock management on ecologically fragile areas;

- iii. duty of stewardship on all owners and managers of land to care for the natural resources of vegetation, soil, water, flora, fauna, habitats and ecosystems because no formal responsibility currently exists and there remain many examples of poor stewardship; and
- iv. power to implement major restoration schemes because scaled-up projects are needed to enhance the restoration effort, to use resources more efficiently, and to provide greater chances of a step change in ecosystem health.

(2) New organisation legislation

A new Act of Parliament is needed to implement the proposals for **Auðlindastofnun**. A good model from international experience is the legislation establishing Scottish Natural Heritage, the Natural Heritage (Scotland) Act 1991; this has proved to be workable, flexible and to allow innovation in the light of changing opportunities and circumstances. The new organisation should have the following powers, in addition to those set out above on soil conservation and land restoration:

- i. to advise government on the establishment of protected areas for all aspects of nature and landscape conservation;
- ii. to manage the areas established for protection of nature and landscape;
- iii. to develop, and after government approval, implement programmes for the restoration and improvement of ecosystems and landscape;
- iv. to develop key indicators of the health of nature, to monitor performance and to make recommendations to government for action needed; and
- v. to operate effectively with local communities and private land owners in the discharge of its responsibilities.

Protected areas

Iceland has taken a gradualist approach to the protection of nature with few large areas, except the Vatnajökull National Park, and not ensuring protection of whole habitats and ecosystems to ensure their functional health. Some obvious extensions to existing protection have not been approved due to intransigence from the key agency, opposition from vested interests locally and lack of political will. Now is the time to change the position by taking action on two fronts.

(1) Completing outstanding tasks

Work has already been undertaken to complete designation but final decisions have never been made.

- i. Thjorsarver: implement the extension of the existing Ramsar site to protect the whole of the water catchment, including the whole of the wetland area and the valley of the Thjorsa to the entrance to the Sultartangalon reservoir.
- ii. Complete the protection of the whole of the Jökulsá a Fjöllum from where it emerges from the Dyngjufjökull to Öxarfjörður.
- iii. Complete the negotiations with the local communities to allow extension of the Vatnajökull National Park across the sandur plains to the coastline to the south of the ice cap on the grounds that including the communities will have a substantial benefit to the governance of the park and to their local economies.

(2) Developing new protected areas

- i. The Ministry should take the lead in developing the government's proposals for the *Heart of Iceland National Park*. International experience concludes that larger scale parks are better

able to withstand activities which diminish or destroy the natural functions. Fulfillment of this plan will result in Iceland gaining international prestige for conservation and management of its natural assets.

- ii. Given the globally unique geology, Iceland has the opportunity to develop the case for a suite of World Heritage Sites and allied Geoparks. It is disappointing that a minimalist approach is being taken by proposing single sites rather than selecting a suite of sites representing all the forms and processes of an on land spreading centre. These would easily pass the test of Outstanding Universal Value.
- iii. At the same time, Iceland should take a more active approach in using the approaches embedded in the UNESCO Biosphere Reserves and Geoparks to develop improved forms of protecting nature and engagement with local communities and businesses.

Visitor infrastructure and management

Visitor numbers to Iceland have increased very rapidly, far beyond expectations and far beyond the capacity of the infrastructure to deal with them. Iceland has become a 'must go' destination especially for North American European travellers as a result of the highly successful hub operations of Icelandair and the advent of cheap airline fares by new operators. It will not be possible to halt the growth; no other country has achieved this. But, if availability of accommodation, overcrowding of key destinations and sites, escalation in prices due to shortages and profiteering, and lessening of the quality of the visitor experience occurs, numbers might decline or at least the increase arrested. Urgent action is needed with the government collectively showing leadership working with the tourism industry. The ministry should naturally take the lead with its responsibilities for the environment, nature protection, pollution control, outdoor recreation and planning. The action topics should include the following:

- i. an overall strategy for visitor management and infrastructure development is a priority as indicated above;
- ii. seek Cabinet agreement for a more coordinated approach between all departments and their relevant agencies to address the issues and agree practical solutions immediately;
- iii. creating visitor hubs around Iceland at existing settlements, for example Hekla, Kirkjubæjarklaustur, Reykjalíð, with expertise and capacity to manage visitors;
- iv. develop the tourism infrastructure by encouraging private sector provision or making provision where government owned, to provide facilities of high quality at or preferably near to key sites and locations (the precise location being determined by not damaging in any way the site itself and being reasonably accessible to visitors but not up isolated valleys!);
- v. implementing improved facility management at key sites where there is damage and confusion, especially Landmannalaugar;
- vi. developing tourist guide accreditation schemes so that standards are high and comparable with the best overseas competitor countries;
- vii. agreeing, implementing and enforcing codes of best environmental and visitor practice by private and public sector providers;
- viii. strategies for footpaths development and maintenance funded and implemented using the best international experience;
- ix. Managing visitors: education about environmental fragility and personal risk undertaken at entry points; and
- x. funding through tourism entry/departure tax, cf Ecuador & Costa Rica, with revenue ring fenced to support the development and management of facilities and visitors.

Energy development and environmental protection

The Rammaáætlun process has been globally unique and has resulted in a consultative process far in advance of the previous situation. However, there remains unfinished business and a continuing appetite by the governmental energy companies Landsvirken and Reykjavik Energy to develop new projects which, if approved, would further reduce the chances of achieving consensus and agreement and result in further damage to Iceland's environment and failure to reduce of GHGs. The Ministry should have the following agenda:

- i. argue effectively for the completion of the Rammaáætlun process by obtaining Cabinet and Althingi agreement to all areas recommended for protection,
- ii. seek approval for a revised industrial development policy of no new plants or expansion of existing plants using electricity from renewable sources,
- iii. obtain government agreement to critically review the development of all projects to export Icelandic electricity to the UK and Europe on the grounds that major new facilities for electricity production and for transmission will be required which will further increase the emission of GHG referred to earlier.

Conclusion

Iceland's environment is a major attraction to overseas visitors and its abundant sources of renewable energy are a potential for reducing GHG emissions. However, conflicts between environmental and development interests within the government and within civil society have meant that much physical and ecological damage has been done and the image of Iceland as a near natural environment has been tarnished. But, the new government and the important influence of the minority partners in the coalition, especially the appointment of the Environment Minister from the Bright Future party heralds a new era.

I hope that the analysis and suggestions provided in this paper are received in the spirit in which they are given: to help Iceland achieve its many ambitions without damaging its environment as this is a major resource for future generations.

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