

## AUÐLINDASTOFNUN: A NEW APPROACH TO CARING FOR ICELAND'S ENVIRONMENT

The organisation of government agencies for the environment is a serious matter for any country. Iceland is no exception. It is a major omission that government plans for merging the Soil Conservation Service with the Nature Conservation Section of the Environment Agency have been derailed behind the scenes.

Why have this particular merger? The reasons are simple. It makes no sense for one agency to be responsible for regulation of environmental quality – a vitally important legal responsibility – and for caring for, managing and restoring nature – a vitally important advisory activity. These are not usually in the same organisations in other countries, such as Canada, UK and USA. So they should be separate.

In Iceland, there are a number of government agencies which have responsibility for repairing past damage by a combination of human activity and nature. The Soil Conservation Service has a hundred-year history of stabilising the soil, and reclaiming land from sand storms and floods and from poor stewardship. The equally old Forest Service is largely concerned with growing trees, using largely non-native species, and as a result improve the stability of the land surface and apparently to produce home grown timber. The Nature Conservation Section of the Environment Agency is responsible for advising the government on the protection of nature in special sites and areas. And the Natural History Institute is responsible for gathering and analysing data on the natural environment and advising government and other agencies. It is evident to anyone looking at the organisational arrangements that there is overlap and duplication, there is waste of resources in providing support services, there are contradictions in approach, and all too often contradictory advice to the government on priorities, action and resource needs.

Surely from a number of perspectives, it makes sense to form a new agency ***Auðlindastofnun: Natural Resources Agency of Iceland***. First, the government widened the remit of the Environment Ministry a few years ago to include natural resources: The Ministry of Environment and 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, 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.

What would be the main responsibilities of the new agency? Put simply, it would be a national adviser and a local deliverer. Specifically, it should advise on the development of a natural resource strategy, on the restoration of natural ecological functions, on the environmental services needed by people now and in the future, and develop a new resource accounting approach to replace the narrowly configured and misleading measurement of wealth using Gross Domestic Product. The agency would also play an action role on the ground around the whole country. It would be responsible for protecting the most special places to international standards, especially as these are at the heart of the attraction to visit Iceland. It would lead in the restoration of highly degraded areas and provide greater resilience to withstand natural and human activities. It would also seek to improve the natural productivity of the land, where appropriate, and to improve its ecological health and ecosystem function.

So, I hope that the Icelandic Government will seriously consider establishing ***Auðlindastofnun*** combining the duties and functions of the four organisations identified. It's natural common sense, good government and good for Iceland's people now and in the future.