

THE DEATH OF A VALLEY AND TARNISHING OF AN IMAGE: A NEW WAY FORWARD IS NEEDED

Iceland is renowned worldwide for its natural environment. Born of ice and fire the environment excites all of the emotional senses, is awesome in its power and not easily tamed by even the greatest of modern human ingenuity. The Jokulsa a Dal is one of these natural features: a magnificent river rising under the depths of the Bruarjokull, part of Europe's largest ice cap the Vatnajokull, and reaching the sea at Heradsandur near Egilsstadir in eastern Iceland. On its journey it runs wild over flat ground near the glacier, cascades through terraces left as remnants of past glacial and fluvial history, gouges through a magnificent canyon, and creates the centrepiece of an intensively farmed heidi and dalur. The river carries vast quantities of debris: everything from the finest rock flour to huge boulders, and including the ubiquitous black sand. These attack the river bed and valley sides to create unbelievable shapes and patterns. The debris forms terraces for habitation and for farming past and present, and is the basis for construction materials along the humanly settled part of its course. At its mouth, along with its sister river the Lagarflot, the debris produces both a fertile plain for farmers, wildlife and tourists to enjoy and creates a barrier against the natural incursions of the sea.

There are of course many other large rivers emanating from the northern side of the Vatnajokull: such as the Jokulsa a Fjollum and its tributary the Kreppa, and the Jokulsa i Fljotsdal. But each of them has different natural characteristics and different human interest. All are unique. Taking one away by seriously damaging its natural characteristics demeans all of them and devalues the whole of the great wild and wonderful natural area north of the Vatnajokull. But this is exactly what will happen with the construction of the dam and the creation of the Halslon lake at Karahnjukar on the Jokulsa a Dal and the diversion of water from the Jokulsa I Fljotsdal and the construction of two small reservoirs in that valley. The power is apparently needed to fuel a proposed aluminium smelter at Reydarfjordur in eastern Iceland to be constructed by Alcoa.

Let there be no doubt that diversifying Iceland's economy and seeking to rebalance the concentration of population from south west Iceland to the eastern fjords are laudable economic and social policy objectives of the government. But does it have to be so destructive of Iceland's and Europe's natural environment? I would have hoped not! Sadly, the project is now going ahead with blatant disregard to its environmental damage and ignoring the effect that the project will have on Iceland's image in the wider world.

Iceland has set itself the important goal of being a global model of sustainable development. I warmly applaud this leadership from the Environment Minister and the government. But as with all sustainable development goals, it is the manner in which they are achieved that determines whether they are truly sustainable or not environmentally, socially culturally and economically. Increasingly Iceland is promoting itself as a nation that cares for its wonderful natural environment: untouched nature in the raw. This is the basis for its appeal to tourists and therefore an important component of its economic diversification. Failure to recognise that the increasingly discerning visitor is looking for the unique natural experience will dent Iceland's image as a visitor destination and potentially undermine attempts to diversify its economic base in the tourism sector. Also, Iceland has a wider European and global responsibility for maintaining its unique natural assets of wild nature and

wilderness. Developing artificial lakes and wrecking the natural regime of unique rivers will certainly not achieve this.

We must also remember that Iceland is a country that prides itself on its independent spirit, as wonderfully portrayed in the great novel 'Independent People' by the Nobel Laureate, Halldor Laxness. It is, therefore, ironic that the development of the aluminium economy will remove that independence. Why is that? There is a plan to increase in production from the current level of 270,000 tonnes per year to a million tonnes a year by 2014. This requires the importation of the bulk raw alumina from across the globe. It means reliance on foreign processing companies to transform the raw material into a marketable commodity. And it means being at the vagary of the world market for aluminium. Added to this loss of independence, is the fact that to make the development of smelting attractive to private industry the power is being sold at a price much lower than in competitor countries in the developing world. This is both selling those poorer countries short and selling the natural assets below their real value. And, of course, it requires the despoliation of large untouched areas in the highlands to produce the electricity supply. When all of these factors are added together they do not appear to meet Iceland's own sustainable development goals and certainly do not make a contribution to the Millennium Development goals to reduce poverty.

The clock cannot be turned back on the Karahnjukarar project: the dam is taking shape. In two years time the land up stream will begin to be flooded up to a depth of hundreds of metres obliterating the unique natural features of the area: the unique river terraces and their environmental history, the red rocks along the river side, and the awesome waterfalls on the Kringisla river. Not many Icelanders have ever seen these features or enjoyed the wild unspoilt environment. I am a very fortunate individual who has experienced them from the air and from the ground. So before they disappear forever under water and later under the sediment which will pour into the reservoir, Landsvirkjun surely has a moral duty, on behalf of the people of Iceland, to take people to see these sites to marvel at the wild area that is to be destroyed. In addition, before the history of the area locked in the river terraces and moraines disappears, the government and the research funding agencies in Iceland have a responsibility to fund emergency research on the glacial and fluvial history of this area. I hope they will do so.

There is also a more fundamental issue. The time has come for Icelandic interests to rethink the economic future and to recognise that for a country with a high standard of living, great sophistication and independent spirit there are alternatives to large scale development which meet its own goals and will produce a much more beneficial outcome globally. Export of geothermal and hydro-electric technology, export of fruit and vegetables, much greater value added to natural resources such as sea fish before they are exported, and the development of environmentally sensitive tourism are part of the future. Also there is a need for education centres to be further developed around the country to maintain population and stimulate local economies. These approaches are the sustainable way for the future.