

THJORSARVER: PROTECTING A UNIQUE ASSET IN PERPETUITY - ROGER CROFTS and Jack D. Ives

The people of Iceland face a great challenge. Thjorsarver poses a vital question: unique beauty and international renown or submergence beneath a fluctuating water surface for which there are alternate solutions?

In Iceland there is abundant water, and at times of jokulhlaups or unusually warm summers, far too much. In the world at large, without entrainment rivers damage crops, remove precious soil and create havoc with the roads and other infrastructure. Yet their flow also provides a natural renewable resource for the production of electricity for economic development and diversification, and for recreational use by the public. As friends of Iceland and frequent visitors, we hope that Icelanders are committed to manage their abundant water resources in an environmentally sensitive and culturally sound way and at the same time achieve economic and social benefits.

Unlike Iceland, many countries are faced with water crises and water resources are frequently the cause of conflict across national frontiers. Often, societies around the world have come to regard wetlands, a major segment of the hydrological cycle, as undesirable. They are sometimes perceived as a source of disease that can become endemic, as a sink for pollution, and as a barrier to the use of water resources for economic development. The result is that the proportion of the Earth's surface covered by naturally functioning wetlands has been reduced dramatically during the latter part of the twentieth century.

We have recently studied the plans for the development of hydro-electric power and visited some of the key sites - Thjorsarver and Karahnujar. We have been saddened by the polarization of the debate and the lack of widespread appreciation of the importance of wetlands and natural river systems in Iceland.

Iceland is a signatory of the Ramsar Convention, an international agreement "to develop and maintain an international network of wetlands which are important for the conservation of global diversity, and for sustaining human life through the ecological and hydrological functions they perform". There are three Ramsar sites in Iceland; Thjorsarver (37,500ha) is the largest and most critical. The proposals to develop hydro-electric schemes that will impact Thjorsarver have been discussed for many years. Two small schemes already exist, but current plans propose three reservoirs and diversion of water into the existing regulated drainage in the Kvislavatn. Admittedly, these current proposals are now on a much smaller scale than the original proposals and they have been supported by some environmental authorities. However, the plans do not take account of the effects on the internationally important site, in terms of the Ramsar agreement, of the cultural significance of the area, and of the natural system which exists in the upper Thjorsa.

Perhaps not many readers of Morgunblaðið have had the opportunity to stand on the Biskupshúfi, as have many Bishops in the past, and look with wonder at the scene. Imagine a unique array of ice caps and piedmont glaciers with the remnants of caldera walls standing proud, the heart-shaped form of Hjartafell moulded by the retreating glaciers, and the intricate pattern of rivers channels and sand banks; this is truly the "heart" of Iceland. It is easy to become carried away by the grandeur of the scene and it is a great pity that many Icelanders are unfamiliar with the area. But it is much more than just aesthetic appeal. The sediment carried down by the rivers from the Hofsjökull and its outlet glaciers is the very life blood of this wetland. To build dams and flood the area with reservoirs and cause an extensive redistribution of sediments would destroy this natural wonder and risk the disappearance of the largest area of natural vegetation in the Highlands of Iceland. Also the breeding grounds of some 10,000 pink-footed geese would be lost. Flooding would also badly affect the summer grazing land for farming communities further south. Not only is this area important for the sheep, but also for the farmers themselves, who take out the animals in the spring and bring them back in the autumn. It is a social activity enshrined in the local calendar, and an integral part of Icelandic culture.

So far the government seems intent on allowing the revised proposals to go ahead, but we hope that the Ministers and the Althingi will reconsider the plans. The area is deserving of a greater level of protection than it has today. The existing boundaries of the Ramsar site are artificial and do not follow the natural features in the landscape. In 2003, Umhverfisstofun recommended that a much larger area of Thjorsarver should be protected, including downstream the canyon and the waterfalls, such as the Dynkur. Unfortunately, this advice has not been heeded by the government. Now is the time to rethink plans for the whole area before it is too late and one of Iceland's natural wonders disappears. The natural, cultural and aesthetic features, as well as potential tourism, are in grave danger.

What is needed before any final decision is taken is a thorough, independent and objective assessment of the environmental, social, cultural, and aesthetic, as well as economic costs and benefits, of the proposals. This should embrace the natural system as a whole. In addition, the government should take up and implement the proposals from its statutory agency and designate a much larger area for special protection. We would advise that the whole of the Thjorsa system, from the watershed on the Hofsjokull crest to the point where the river leaves the canyon and spills into the Sultartangalon reservoir, be protected under the IUCN Category II classification. And a full investigation of its potential as a World Heritage Site should be carried out. These actions would recognize the global significance of the area, allow the natural system to continue to flourish, and provide numerous benefits and enjoyment of many Icelanders and international visitors.

There are, as the Master Plan for Development of Hydro and Geothermal Energy indicates, other options and opportunities further down the Thjorsa catchment and in other rivers in the south and west of Iceland, and for further expansion of geothermal energy. Implementing these plans would relieve the damaging effects on a globally important natural system. Thjorsarver awaits assessment as a wetland by the government of Iceland and its citizens. It is not too late to protect Thjorsarver in perpetuity.

