

## 91 Interpretation in Ásbyrgi: communicating with National Park visitors in Iceland

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The tourism industry in Iceland is of significant economic importance to the country and, until global travel restrictions in 2020, the number of visitors to natural areas was continuing to grow. Corresponding with this increase is the need to effectively manage tourists to ensure safe and responsible experiences that are as socially, economically and environmentally sustainable as possible. This management includes decisions about interpretation – what information to provide for tourists and the most effective way to deliver that information to them.

This presentation will report on part of a project conducted at Ásbyrgi, in the northern section of Iceland's Vatnajökull National Park. The park's managers are cognisant that "Tourism in national parks is essentially about providing memorable nature-based experiences for visitors" (Weiler et al., 2019) and want to provide those experiences without disturbing the plant and animal life in the park. To achieve this, they are keen to implement interpretation that "aims to stimulate interest, promote learning, guide visitors in appropriate behaviour for sustainable tourism and encourage enjoyment and satisfaction" (Moscardo et al. 2004).

Visitors to Ásbyrgi most commonly arrive by private car or by bus on an organised tour. Entry is free and although there is a visitor centre on the main road many do not stop at it. Camp sites are available at Ásbyrgi and the area contains many marked hiking trails that range in length from a few minutes of walking to several hours. The most popular of these is a short, forested, trail to a pond (Botnstjörn) with a viewing platform and abundant birdlife.

A mixed method approach was used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data in two stages during August 2018. Visitor behaviour was observed at three sites in the park during both stages. The sites included the visitor centre, the main trail entrance, and the pond. Interpretive signage about the natural and cultural features of the area exists in all these locations. During the second stage, 120 visitors were interviewed about their experience

in the park as they exited the trail and returned to the car park. In addition, park managers, rangers and tour guides (n=11) were interviewed about their opinions on the most effective ways to communicate with park visitors. Combined, the results reveal who visits Ásbyrgi and what activities they engage in whilst there, as well as the perspectives of a range of stakeholders on current and potential future interpretation strategies.

Observations of visitors at the three sites (n=92) revealed that the time spent viewing signs could depend on many factors, but the three most important were the presence of other visitors, the weather conditions and the time the visitor had available. If there was a perception of crowding at a sign, and people had to wait to view it, they were more likely to continue their walk without looking at the sign. If the weather was uncomfortable to stand around in, rain at that time of year in that location is common, then they were likely to spend less time reading the signs, even if there were no other people present. Visitors who arrived by private car and/or were camping nearby, usually had more time to spend at Ásbyrgi than those who were on a tour bus; thus, they were likely to devote more time to reading the signs.

Of the 120 visitors interviewed, approximately one quarter were from either Austria or Germany, just over half were from other countries in Europe. There were no visitors from Asia in this sample. This is reflective of the national statistics on visitor numbers, with Iceland receiving more visitors from Europe than anywhere else.

The most popular reason people gave for visiting the park was, as expected, due to the unique natural features of the area – particularly the geology. Some stated that they were there because they were following an itinerary suggested by a travel agent, or because they were on a bus tour and it was part of that itinerary. Many had learnt about the location from a guide book and/or online source. Wanting to visit somewhere that was a little 'off the beaten track', a location less known than many of the

more commonly visited sites in Iceland, was also a popular reason for being in Ásbyrgi.

Responses about what the visitors wanted from interpretation in the park was mixed. Although most were satisfied with the amount of signage and the content of the signs, some said they wanted more and a few said they would be happy with less. Inquiring about preferred other ways to receive information about the park, we prompted visitors to think about electronic methods of communication, such as a downloadable app. While some were receptive to the idea, most were not. Using precious data was a key reason not to favour interpretation available on a hand-held electronic device, but the perception of wanting to appreciate the nature without interference of technology was a further key factor for many.

Overall, most visitors were satisfied with the existing interpretation at Ásbyrgi. However, as

tourism pressure increases in the area a small number of signs that are difficult to read under adverse weather and crowding conditions might not be the best way to proceed. Managers and guides expressed concern that people do not always behave in appropriate ways in the park: signs requesting visitors to not use drones and to stay on designated paths, for example, were being ignored. As visitors spend more time at the pond than at the signs at the trail entrance, and were highly appreciative of information communicated verbally by guides, these could be options to explore for enhanced communication about both park features and desired visitor behaviour.

## References

Moscardo et al., 2004, In *Wildlife Tourism: impacts, management and planning*.