

## Overtourism in Iceland: Myth or reality?

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Large influxes of tourist arrivals have become a major challenge in recent years for many nature-based destinations. Seasonality, uneven spatial distribution and imbalance between supply and demand are commonly pointed out as part of the problem. In recent years the concept of overtourism has emerged in that context in the media and increasingly in academia as a way of describing this situation, although the issues behind the term have been a component of visitor and tourism research for many years. Iceland is one of the destinations which has been most associated with the concept of overtourism – at least in the international media discourse. This is a reflection of the enormous increase in international tourist arrivals the country has received in the last decade. In 2010 the number of international visitors to Iceland was about 460,000, by 2018 it had reached approximately 2.3 million, representing an annual average increase of about 22%. Iceland is the most sparsely populated country in Europe, with about 370,000 inhabitants on an island little over one hundred thousand square kilometers. Iceland's main tourist attraction is nature, with its perceived wilderness landscape. There are a few tourist hotspots on the island, which up to half of all international tourists visit. This has resulted in crowding at the most popular destinations which in turn has led to a decrease in the quality of the tourist experience, overloaded infrastructure, damage at nature destinations and shifts in the perceived nature of the Icelandic landscape.

This presentation provides an overview of the different ways in which overtourism has revealed itself at a national level in Iceland. It is both based on a primary and secondary data analysis strategy. Furthermore, it is based on longitudinal research conducted on tourists' experience of overcrowding at various nature destinations in Iceland over 20 years. During this time span, over 43,000 questionnaires were completed and in-depth interviews were conducted with several hundred tourists. This allows for a detailed empirical assessment to be made of changes in visitor

attitudes, experiences, perceptions and satisfaction with specific locations in Iceland and the development of a broader understanding of Iceland as a nature-based tourism destination over time. The latter includes changes in the make-up of tourist attributes and shifts in the management challenges nature-based destinations are facing from tourism. Finally, Iceland's various responses to its success as a major nature tourist destination will be discussed. Early 2020, there were speculations if the party was over as the number of international tourist arrivals in Iceland had decreased more than 15% from the previous year. While this degrowth was highly appreciated by some, it worried others, not least the tourism industry. For them questions arose, including whether this meant that Iceland was not on the "bucket list" anymore? Did the island become too renowned or fashionable? Coincidentally, with the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic overtourism in Iceland was truly over, at least for a while. The summer of 2021 looks promising, and the tourism industry has high hopes for bouncing back quickly. While it is unclear whether this means that the country is on its way to becoming plagued by overtourism (again), the example of Iceland underlines the importance of long-term visitor research through longitudinal studies. It stresses the relevance of addressing the questions of how we can understand the nature of change in destinations and how research should be best communicated at a time when nature and wilderness are facing more challenges than ever from tourism and environmental change.