

# Wild thoughts – exploring the meaning(s) of wilderness among Icelandic outdoor recreationists

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Wilderness protection in Iceland dates back to the Nature Conservation Act of 1999 (Jóhannsdóttir, 2016). However, to date no areas in Iceland have been formally protected as wilderness *per se*, partly because the identification of such areas has so far been very rudimentary. Wilderness areas in Iceland have thus up until now mainly enjoyed protection if present within the boundaries of national parks or other protected areas, in particular within Vatnajökull National Park which covers an area of 13,500 km<sup>2</sup>, mostly in the Central Highland. According to the working criteria adopted by government agencies, the largest potential wilderness areas in Iceland are located in the Central Highland, an uninhabited region in the middle of the island which covers roughly 40,000 km<sup>2</sup> or 40% of its total land area.

The naturalness dimension of wilderness in Iceland is arguably quite distinct from wilderness as traditionally conceived in a North American or, more recently, European context (Thórhallsdóttir, 2002). The largest difference concerns the almost complete lack of megafauna on the island, where the Arctic Fox is the only indigenous mammal species. The Central Highland is, furthermore, very sparsely vegetated – it is, by and large, a desert. Wilderness protection in the Central Highland can thus, in general, not be based on the presence of wildlife, the preservation of biodiversity or on other ecological considerations. Instead, it is more properly seen as a “perceptual” or “aesthetic” wilderness, whose qualities – as wilderness – are largely derived from diverse and unusual landscapes and abundant geodiversity, coupled with the effects that these have on human beings.

Due to the remoteness and inaccessibility of the Central Highland, it has until recently remained relatively undeveloped. Recent decades, however, have seen increasing pressure from two main sources: hydro- and geothermal power plant development and foreign tourism. Various anthropogenic changes, in particular the proliferation of jeep tracks, can also be linked to the increasing use of the Central Highland by domestic outdoor recreationists, following technology advances both in SUVs and navigation systems (Huijbens and Benediktsson, 2007). Following the establishment of Vatnajökull National Park in 2008, a new and quite heated debate emerged between park managers and environmental conservationists, on the one hand, and a number of outdoor recreationist groups, on the other. This debate centered on the park’s Management Plan where certain restrictions were e.g. placed on motorized travel within the boundaries of the park, restrictions which in turn were primarily based on wilderness considerations.

Research on wilderness as such has so far been very limited in Iceland. Most research projects to date have concerned the attitudes of tourists, mainly of foreign origin (but including some domestic travellers), who have been questioned about certain aspects of their wilderness experiences in Iceland, in particular the effects

of anthropogenic structures and influences (Sæþórsdóttir, Hall and Saarinen, 2011). This paper presents the results of a project directed toward important domestic stakeholder groups who have been effected by recent changes in the legal and managerial dimensions of nature/wilderness conversation in Iceland. It is the first part of a larger project, which will later involve other stakeholder groups as well as the general public, intended to provide more detailed knowledge about the qualities and values at stake in wilderness protection in Iceland, as perceived by the country's inhabitants. Another part of this project involves the development of an improved wilderness map, for planning, conservation and public consultation purposes.

The present study (carried out in the first half of 2016) involved semi-structured interviews taken with members of the four outdoor recreation groups in Iceland who most prone to undertake their activities in the Central Highland; SUV enthusiasts, mountain bikers, long-distance hikers and equestrians. A total of 12 interviews were taken (seven male and five female respondents) with three participants from each group, each interview lasting between 60-90 minutes. The interviews were based on a number of previously defined key topics, such as why participants chose to visit the Central Highland for their recreational activities, what they considered to be the area's defining characteristics and values, and whether they perceived it (or some specific part of it) as a wilderness. Participants were encouraged to add new topics for discussion that they themselves considered relevant either for outdoor recreation, nature conservation or the Central Highland.

The preliminary results of the study indicate a strong consensus amongst participants concerning the value of the Central Highland and the importance of its continued existence as a largely undeveloped area. The values of the Central Highland, of wilderness and of outdoor recreation were found to be highly intertwined and interdependent. Although most participants were knowledgeable about the legal definition of "wilderness" in Iceland, they used this term with a broader meaning, referring to the Central Highland in general and, indeed, to some areas outside the highland boundary. The most important values related to outdoor recreation in the region concerned sociality (travelling with a group of likeminded individuals), psychological rejuvenation, and physical health, the development of skills and prowess, and increased knowledge. The psychological benefits of outdoor recreation in the Central Highland were primarily related to opportunities for solitude and quietness. The most often mentioned characteristics of the Central Highland per se were natural beauty, landscapes, diversity, openness and pristineness. The value of wilderness in the Central Highland was primarily seen as its uniqueness as being a large, pristine area, its importance as a resource for tourism and its heritage value for the Icelandic people.

The participants had larger differences of opinion concerning the conservation of the values and qualities of the Central Highland. Members of certain groups (SUV drivers and bikers) voiced opposition to the current Management Plan of Vatnajökull National Park and complained about the lack of proper consultation procedures during the development phase of this plan. A core concern here is government-imposed restrictions on "travel freedom", in particular via motorized transport. Most participants were, however, in favour of establishing clearer guidelines for tourism

and outdoor recreation in the Central Highland. These guidelines should then be developed through an open and democratic consultation process.



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