

Outdoor recreation and protection of Iceland's Central Highland: conditions for a consensus among domestic users

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The Icelandic Central Highland cover about 40% of the country, gathering a wide range of landscapes combining large glaciers, vast black sand desert, powerful geothermal areas and rivers, rough lava fields and important wetlands. As a result from such a diversity, the area as a whole consist of an outstanding venue for nature-based tourism and outdoor recreation. Other natural resources are also found in the area, as it has been used since historical times for hunting, fishing or as summer pasture or more recently to produce electricity from renewable sources. Similar to any other use of the natural resource, perspectives of development of the area for nature-based activities are raising serious issues as such highly sensitive environments may be irreversibly impacted by human activities. The establishment of protected areas is presented by various stakeholders as a potential solution to address the issues induced by the exponential growth of tourism. This study aimed to approach the attitudes of outdoor recreationist to the Central Highland and land-use management issues related to its protection. While there seems to be a certain consensus regarding the need to address issues related to the development of tourism in the Central Highland, views gets very polarized when it comes to the idea of a National Park, with a striking gap between opinions expressed by users of motorized and non-motorized activities.

Methodology

As there seems to be a gap in the Icelandic tourism research on domestic users, a main goal was to focus on them, through an online survey which was sent to relevant outdoor recreation groups. The frame of the survey was organized as follow and aimed to collect quantitative data to overcome difficulties related to the language. A first set of questions aimed to collect some data for standard statistical analysis (age/origin/gender/nationality) followed by basic questions about the study area, their relation to it and the outdoor activities they pursue. A second part focused on the identification of values and threats to the Central Highlands, as well as a general perception of advantages/disadvantages of protection. A third part was oriented on the position of the respondent on specific statement through the use of a 5 point Likert scale (disagree – rather disagree – neither disagree nor agree – rather agree – agree). Some comments were also collected through the survey as well as email addresses for those interested to take other surveys related to land use issues in the Central Highland.

Results

The study led to the collection of about 1350 responses, 375 email addresses and 150 comments, showing a high interest in the issue area for the respondent. The vast majority of them had a great knowledge or experience of the study area, opening great

perspective for further research. The analysis of the results permitted to highlight three major outcomes:

1. Tourism and energy sectors are both seen as major sources of threats to the Central Highland, but they appear to be difficult to actually compare in terms of scale (importance of the impact) and urgency (probability of occurrence).
2. While there seems to be a consensus regarding the need to protect the area as a whole, there is a significant polarization of the results as soon as the concept of a National Park is used, with a striking difference between the attitudes of user of motorized and non-motorized activities.
3. The lack of control on the diffusion of the survey on social networks is unevenly reaching specific groups of outdoor recreationist, diminishing the representativeness of the sample as a whole, but increasing the interest in the study of “polarized segments” of users.

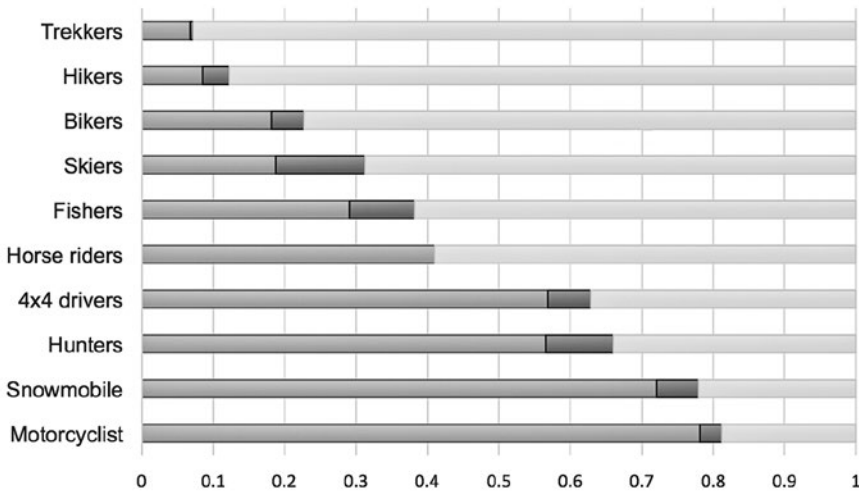


Figure 1. Attitudes of the different types of outdoor recreationist to the project of National Park in the Central Highland, by predominant activity carried out (red: negative attitude / yellow: neutral attitude / green: positive attitude)

Discussion

The issues approached through this survey had to be relatively broad as it is the first time this method was used in Iceland and it had to be accessible for a large number of users of the study area. Strategic choices had to be made concerning the selection of issues, and there are limits to the interpretation of the results, but the high interest and the knowledge of respondents in the study area opens many opportunities for further research. This first study permitted to set the general context of the research by providing relevant information on the views of domestic users on the protection of the Icelandic Central Highland.

Concerning the sample, it is strategic to approach all types of outdoor recreation within this study, and it might be particularly interesting to extend the sample

to more organization gathering outdoor recreationist (caving, kayaking, flying, bird watching), and a specific effort should be done to reach more users from underrepresented groups (horse riders, fishermen). The collection of qualitative data might be particularly relevant to complete the present research, and further research can focus on other types of stakeholders of the study area (driver, guides, ranger, warden and farmer).

In regard to management issues, as it appears that the concept of “National Park” is rather polarizing, another option could be to approach the topic without specifically being focused on the National Park project, in order to find the common ground among these stakeholders regarding the protection of the Icelandic Central Highland.

The identification of threats to the study area can also in the future be approached at a much higher resolution, and being dedicated to specific projects or areas, as the sample got an excellent knowledge of the study area and often refer to those projects or areas in comments.

It could be relevant to give the respondent the opportunity to submit a question they would like to answer in a similar survey, permitting therefore to integrate them in a proactive manner in the research, since there is a high interest in the topic.