

Analyses of overseas tourists in Vatnajökull National Park, Iceland 2010-2015

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The number of overseas tourists visiting Iceland has grown from 500.000 in the year 2010 to nearly 1.300.000 in the year 2015, which means a 160% growth in five years. In 2010 52% of the tourists came to Iceland in the three summer months (June, July, August) but 48% the other nine months of the year (off season). In 2015 only 41% came in the summer months but 59% outside the summer season.

Vatnajökull National Park – VNP was formally established in June 2008 and covered an area of 12.000 km². With recent additions it now covers 13.920 km² or approximately 13,5% of Iceland, making it Europe's second largest national park in terms of area after *Yugyd Va* in Russia. The most visited site within the park is Skaftafell in the south with Dettifoss waterfall in the north coming in second. Website: www.vatnajokulsthjodgardur.is/english

Icelandic Tourism Research & Consulting – ITRC (Icelandic name: Rannsóknir og ráðgjöf ferðaþjónustunnar) have implemented the *Dear Visitors* survey among departing overseas visitors at Leifur Eiriksson International airport since 1996, and constantly the whole year round since 2004 and up to the present (2016). In average 3.000-4.000 answers pr year. 97% of all tourists to Iceland come through that airport.

ITRC have been working for the *Vatnajökull National Park* since 2009, totally seven reports (one pr year), the last one covering the year 2015. The results have shown a rapid growth of overseas tourists to the park, especially after 2011, and an extraordinary growth in the south part of the park (Skaftafell and surroundings) in the darkest winter months (January, February, November, December). The results also show that the character of visitors to the park are significantly different from the visitors to Iceland, especially in the northern part of the park.

In the lecture the overseas tourist to Vatnajökull National Park and to the two most visited sites within the park (Skaftafell and Dettifoss waterfall) will be compared to all visitors to Iceland. The analyses will mainly focus on the following:

- age groups
- reasons for visiting Iceland
- first time in Iceland or repeated visit
- length of stay in Iceland
- mode of transportation (rental car, own car, tour bus, scheduled bus...)
- travelling arrangements (private travel, self-drive tour, group tour)
- travelling with (alone, spouse/partner, friends, children, colleagues)

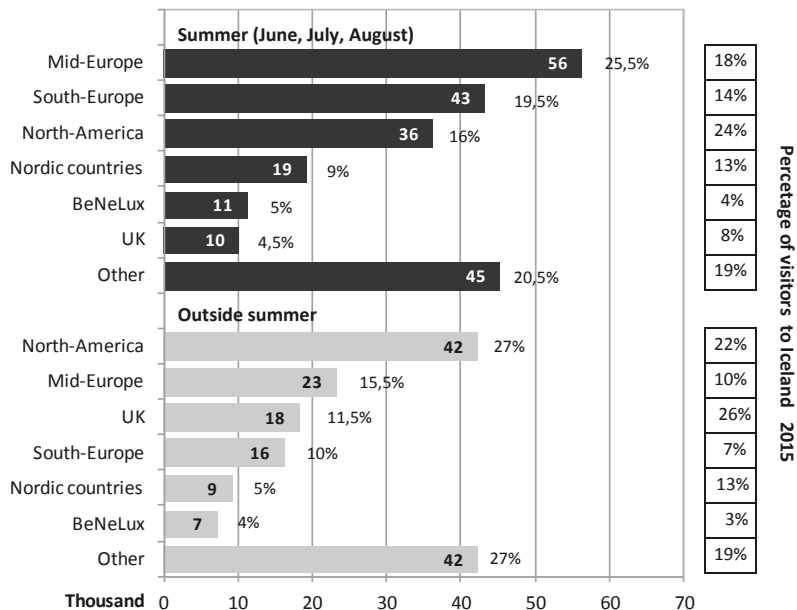


Figure 1. Estimated number and percentage of overseas visitors by market areas to Skaftafell in Vatnajökull National Park in 2015; in summer and outside of summer. Compared to the percentage of all visitors to Iceland by market areas. ¹

The lecture will try to answer the questions. What can explain this rapid growth of foreign visitors to Vatnajökull National Park in the last few years? Why has the growth been more extreme outside the summer season?

The importance of Vatnajökull National Park as the biggest protected area in Iceland will also be discussed and how the database/knowledge on overseas tourists in the park can be transferred to protected areas in other countries.

¹ Source: The Dear Visitors survey 2015. Icelandic Tourism Research and Consulting.