

Riding horses in protected areas – heritage and/or harm?

Professor Guðrún Helgadóttir, Department of Business & IT, University College of Southeast Norway & Department of Rural Tourism, Hólar University College Iceland Email: gudrun.helgadottir@usn.no

Assistant professor Ingibjörg Sigurðardóttir, Department of Rural Tourism, Hólar University College Iceland. Email: inga@holar.is

Key words: Iceland, equestrian tourism, protected areas, riding trails, natural and cultural heritage

Introduction

Is a trail a scar on the face of earth? Alternatively, is it a wrinkle formed by the experience of lives and land? The answer is in the eyes of the beholder. Riding, as other modes of travelling has impacts that various stakeholders interpret differently. To a rider the existence and condition of the trail signals whether the terrain is passable. A historian may see the trail as heritage; testimony of travel through the ages and an equestrian tourism operator may see it as an opportunity to offer an authentic experience of riding a traditional trail. On the other hand, a nature conservationist may see the trail as harm, as an open sore in the vegetation cover that can bleed soil in the wind and rain, contributing to further erosion. A park warden may see the trail as means of managing the land use of different recreationists in the conservation area.

This paper explores these and other positions through the case of horse riding in Icelandic national parks. The attitude and experiences of managers, horse owners, conservationists, other residents as well as domestic and international riders towards horse-tourism, natural and cultural heritage conservation and the different kinds of riding trails were investigated.

Horses and equestrian tourism in Iceland

The horse is not indigenous to Iceland, it was brought to this mid Atlantic, volcanic island just below the Arctic Circle in the 9th century AD. It was up until the 20th century essential for travel and transport in a rugged, roadless landscape and hence traditional trails across the highlands are still known, visible and valuable as archeological evidence of national history (Björnsson et al. 2004).

Riding is a popular sport in Iceland and the number of horses per person is higher than in most neighbouring countries (Sigurðardóttir & Helgadóttir, 2015b). Horse husbandry still includes the practice of raising foals in herds with the mares, which means that grazing horses are a prominent feature in the rural landscape, both in pasture at the farms and in some areas in the commons or highland pastures (Helgadóttir, in press).

As in many other leisure economies, Iceland has seen a rise in the horse population from a low point in the period after industrialization (Sigurðardóttir & Helgadóttir, 2015b). The increased popularity of equestrianism has led to increase in domestic tourism while the phenomenal growth of international arrivals leads to an increase in the number of horse trips taken by international tourists as well.

Horse tourism is a well-established tourism sector, 15%-20% of international tourists go on a riding tour during their stay in Iceland. Among domestic horse owners long riding in the highlands over the summer months, bringing all their horses along is a popular activity (Sigurðardóttir & Helgadóttir, 2015b). Horse tourism is a form of nature tourism (Hall & Boyd, 2005) which means that riders wish to visit areas of natural beauty, preferably far from the madding crowds. Staying away from the traffic of motorized vehicles is important and

riding on trails made over time by horses are important quality factors for equestrian tourists (Sigurðardóttir & Helgadóttir, 2015a).

Riding in natural settings and protected areas

Equestrian tourist preference for trails described above, puts pressure on the national parks and protected areas as these have limited vehicle traffic and are of particular aesthetic and experience value for visitors. Hence, it is important for the sustainability of equestrian tourism to investigate issues relating to this growth and to what extent it jeopardizes the traditional ways of travelling by horse in Iceland.

The use of land and environmental issues of horse keeping and riding has been a subject of considerable research in recent years in some parts of the world, particularly in Australia and America, where the horse is an introduced species. Examples of such research conducted elsewhere do therefore exist but such research is scarce in Iceland (Schmudde, 2015). Iceland is however a particularly interesting case as although the horse is introduced, the introduction happened much sooner than in the aforementioned cases, or about a 1000 years ago (Björnsson et al. 2004).

Research among guests in short and long riding tours in Iceland, indicated a considerable importance of riding trails on their experience. However guests were more concerned about the length than the safety of the trails (Sigurðardóttir & Helgadóttir, 2015a). Despite the above-mentioned research, considerable information is lacking on the experience and opinion of stakeholders regarding the existence and development of riding trails in natural settings including protected areas in Iceland.

Methodology

The research is longitudinal and mixed method. It draws on surveys of tourists, both international and domestic on the quality of the equestrian tourism experience and their attitudes toward riding in national parks and protected areas. Semi-structured interviews with equestrian tourism entrepreneurs, horse farmers and nature conservationists were used as well as participant observation on long riding tours with own horses. The participant observations are also auto-ethnographic in nature as the researchers are horse owners, who have long experience of travelling by horse in a group of peers.

Concluding remarks

Despite the high volume of horse traffic in Iceland compared to neighbouring countries, the environmental impact of horse riding in Iceland is under-researched. Even less research has been conducted on the social and cultural dynamics relating to horse tourism in national parks and protected areas.

This research addresses this knowledge gap by posing questions about how stakeholders interpret national parks and protected areas as sites for equestrian tourism, and to what extent this is a part of current leisure activities of local inhabitants and international guests and a venue for activities of businesses in equestrian tourism.

The delimitation of this study excludes an important stakeholder group that is other recreationists in the national parks and protected areas. A future research direction is focusses on land-use conflicts of different recreationists as riding trails are commonly used by practitioners of other kinds of recreational activities as hiking and biking.

References

- Björnsson, G.B., Sveinsson, H.J., Arnórsson, K., Sigurðardóttir, S. and Guðlaugsson, Þ. 2004. Íslenski hesturinn. Mál og menning.
- Hall, C.M. & Boyd, S. 2005. *Nature-based tourism in peripheral areas: development or disaster*. Clevedon: Channel View.
- Helgadóttir, G. In press. Herding livestock and managing people: The cultural sustainability of a harvest festival. In J. Mair (Ed). *Handbook of Festivals*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Schmudde, R. 2015. Equestrian tourism in national parks and protected areas in Iceland – An analysis of the environmental and social impacts. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 15(1-2), 91-104. Doi:10.1080/15022250.2014.1000713.
- Sigurðardóttir, I. & Helgadóttir, G. 2015a. Riding high: quality and customer satisfaction in equestrian tourism in Iceland. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 15(1-2), 105-121. Doi: 10.1080/15022250.2015.1015765.
- Sigurðardóttir, I. & Helgadóttir, G. 2015b. The new equine economy in Iceland. In C. Vial & R. Evans (eds.), *The new equine economy in the 21st century*, (pp. 225-236). EAAP publication no. 136. UK: Wageningen Academic Publishers. Doi:10.3920/978-90-8686-824-7_19.