

Tourism as a Tool for Nature Conservation?

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Nature consistently has the highest score when international tourists are asked which factor was most influential when deciding to travel to Iceland. When asked further, references are most often made to wanting to experience wilderness, and what is perceived as unspoiled and pristine nature (Maskína, 2016). The image of Iceland as a destination filled with natural wonders, breathtaking landscapes and untouched nature is also commonly used by those marketing the country as a tourist destination (Karlsdóttir, 2013). Domestically, the importance of pristine nature for international tourism has been used by nature conservationists when opposing specific energy projects, especially in the highlands. Results from a number of surveys, however, indicate that international tourists tend to be more tolerant towards human structures in the highlands than Icelanders themselves (Stefánsson, Sæþórsdóttir & Hall, 2017). The questions planners and policy makers are faced with is if nature based tourism and the development of the energy sector can co-exist in the Icelandic highlands, or if the presence of one sector negatively affects the other.

Since beautiful nature, healthy wildlife and authentic culture are all considered important features to attract tourists to a destination, tourism is often used as a justification for why nature conservation may be a more attractive option than extractive industries from a sustainable development perspective (Leung et al, 2018). Thus, nature conservationists often argue that tourism gives the opportunity for economic gains without the negative environmental impacts often associate with large scale industrial projects. Underlying this argument is the assumption that tourism can generate income for local communities without much social strain or negative environmental impact. Furthermore, those using tourism as an argument for why an area will be economically more valuable in the future if nature conservation is prioritized over large scale industrial projects are assuming that tourism and industrial development cannot co-exist and that one needs to choose between either extractive industries or nature based tourism.

Either/or – or both?

The aim of this research is to explore the tension and conflicting interests between nature conservation, tourism and energy projects in Icelandic wilderness areas. Public discourses about new energy projects will be examined, using critical discourse analysis to tease out dominant ideas and underlying assumptions about the relationship between tourism, nature conservation and energy projects. This analysis will then be compared with results from a several recent surveys focusing on how tourists experience nature both in places where no energy structures are in sight and in places close to hydropower or geothermal plants and associated infrastructure.

Preliminary results indicate that although the dominant discourse assumes that new energy projects in Icelandic wilderness areas will decrease the economic value of nature for tourism this is not always the reality. Results from surveys among tourists in places where no industrial development has taken place to indeed indicate that human structures related to energy projects would negatively impact their experiences. Results from similar surveys done in two sites in North Iceland where energy structures already exist, however, paint a different

picture. Although the tourists at those sites are equally interested in experiencing wilderness and untouched nature as the tourists surveyed at the sites where no industrial development has taken place, their satisfaction with the nature of the region was no less than of those traveling in areas without power plants in sight. Furthermore, tourism has been rapidly increasing at one of the sites (Krafla) and the power plant seems to be part of the attraction of the area, rather than diminishing its value for tourism. Another research in the southern part of Iceland, however, where different methodology was used for data collection, showed that when tourists were shown photos of the areas they were visiting with and without the energy structures, the photos without the manmade structures were more appealing to them.



Figure 2: Krafla, a geothermal power plant in North Iceland and also a popular tourist site. Photo: Auður H Ingólfssdóttir

These conflicting results demonstrate that the relationship between nature conservation, energy projects and tourism is more complex than what is assumed in the dominant discourse where the emphasis is on the choice between “either” using natural resources directly by harnessing energy “or” protecting nature so it will be valuable for tourism. Thus, emphasizing the economic value of untouched nature for tourism may be a risky strategy if nature conservation is the primary goal.

References

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