

Managing Vatnajökull National Park

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Vatnajökull National Park is the largest and most recent national park in Iceland, established in June 2008. Its establishment marked a sea-change in nature conservation in Iceland in several important ways. First, partly because of its large size (ca. 13.200 km²), inhabitants of the communities that border on the park were given much more influence over the park's governance than has previously been the case. The park is thus divided into four semi-autonomous regions, each with its own regional council which is mainly comprised of local inhabitants (i.e. members of municipal councils and NGOs). The chairmen of the regional councils also have a seat on the park's Board of Directors. Second, the park seeks to reconcile nature conservation and traditional land use to a much greater extent than previous national parks in Iceland, it thus has a "tri-partite" classification with regard to IUCN protected area categories, including substantial portions that are classified as a Category VI PA. Traditional landuse (including hunting, fishing and sheep grazing) is allowed – if kept within sustainable limits – in most parts of the park and some areas within the park remain in private ownership. Third, the park's recently accepted Management Plan (2011) places considerable emphasis on the park's role in sustainable rural development, i.e. the park's "third role" in addition to the traditional roles of protecting nature and facilitating outdoor recreation of tourists.

The process of establishing Vatnajökull National Park took more than a decade from the time the first ideas about the park were put forth in the Icelandic Parliament until the final acceptance of the park's management plan. During this period the establishment of the park was discussed by four successive committees which each put forth different ideas about e.g. the park's boundaries, management goals and governance structure. The recommendations of the last committee in this line, mainly comprised of representatives of communities adjacent to the proposed borders of the national park, were then by and large adopted by the Ministry of Environment and became the foundation of Act nr. 60/2007 on Vatnajökull National Park. These recommendations placed considerable emphasis on the park's potential role in greatly increasing visitation of foreign tourists to Iceland, leading to economic benefits both for its neighboring communities and for the nation as a whole. The recommendations also briefly mentioned the possibility that such increased economic benefits from tourism in the national park could in turn reinvigorate development in the surrounding rural communities, which had been suffering from stagnation and depopulation for several decades. The latter considerations were not reflected in the abovementioned Act but did, however, find their way into the Regulation on the national park, issued in June 2008.

Regulation nr. 608/2008 on Vatnajökull National Park stipulated, amongst other things, the parameters of how the park's Management Plan should be drawn up. The

Management Plan should thus be in accordance with international agreements on nature conservation and follow the established guidelines and classifications of international organizations such as IUCN. The Management Plan should furthermore be drawn up in consultation with land owners, local authorities and other relevant stakeholders. Each regional council was given the responsibility of creating a draft Management Plan for their region, these were then to be combined into one document for the whole park by the Board of Directors. The total timeframe allowed for this process was 2 years, which was way too short given the both the size and novelty of the task (at least in Icelandic circumstances) and the complexities involved, e.g. in terms of coordination. During the final stages of drawing up the Management Plan, attempts were also made to define the "third role" of the national park, i.e. its relationship to sustainable rural development.

After completion in September 2009, the Management Plan was submitted to open public consultation, as part of a Strategic Environmental Assessment process. The plan received considerable criticism, mainly from various recreational associations whose primary complaints concerned issues of road accessibility in the highland wilderness areas in the middle of the park, as well as limits set on the hunting period of reindeer and pink-footed geese in its Eastern region. Some criticisms were also received from nature conservationists, e.g. concerning the use of multiple IUCN protected area categories in the park. The Management Plan was finally approved, with changes, by the Minister of the Environment in February 2010. The following summer, large-scale demonstrations were staged by recreationist groups (mainly large SUV owners) protesting the closing of a number of jeep tracks in the Central Highland. Attempts have since been made to reach a consensus about the most highly debated routes but the outcome of these is still not known.

In addition to these problems facing the park in relation to its Management Plan, there have also been a number of external factors that have influenced its development, including the financial crisis in 2009 which amongst other things led to major cuts in the park's budget, which in turn have led to delayed (and/or reduced) infra-structure build-up. These have also had negative effects on the park's capacity to develop "third role" initiatives, e.g. in cooperation with local tourism businesses, which to date remain largely unexplored.

The Hornafjörður Regional Research Centre launched a research program in early 2007, shortly after the establishment of the national park had been decided, which purpose was to monitor the effects of the park on its local communities and also to investigate potential changes in visitors' attitudes and behaviors over time. In 2007, interviews were conducted with local stakeholders in different regions, focusing on their views and expectations towards the park,

and in 2008 a fairly large-scale questionnaire was distributed among the park's visitors. In 2008-2009, attempts were also made to design a framework for the evaluation of the park's socio-economic effects on its neighboring communities. These studies were intended to be repeated at 3-5 year intervals but this has not yet proved possible because of much reduced research funding. Important baseline data was, however, collected that will hopefully be augmented in the near future.