

Environmental perception of long distance runners in the Icelandic highlands: a comparative study between 2007 and 2018

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Long distance running has become increasingly popular over the course of the past decade. Today a significant number of people regularly travel around the world to take part in running events in new and exotic locations. The Laugavegur Ultra Marathon, which takes place in the southern Icelandic Highlands, is one such event and one of Iceland's oldest mountain marathon events, dating back to 1997 (Sæþórsdóttir & Lund, 2008). The route is 55 km long (Figure 1). It starts in the Fjallabak nature reserve, passing through a varied landscape characterised by wilderness, volcanos, hot springs, lava fields, canyons, basalt desert, glacial moraines and glacial rivers, ending in the birch woodland of Þórsmörk, which is surrounded by three ice caps. The marathon is both demanding and an exotic experience for the majority of the runners. The number of participants that finish the race increased by nearly 800% between 1997 and 2017, or from 49 participants in 1997 to 430 in 2017 (*cf.* hlaup.is). The number of registered participants is however much higher than these figures suggest. In 2017 a total of 724 participants started the race (*cf.* www.hlaup.is). The increased pressure placed on the Laugavegur hiking trail, its ecosystems and facilities during the ultra-marathon event increases environmental impact along the trail. Subsequently, demand for improved infrastructure and services increases, which in turn is likely to impact both the hikers' and the runners' overall experience of the environment. This study aims to investigate environmental issues concerning trail runners in the Laugavegur Ultra Marathon by: i) assessing runners' perception of environmental and social issues during their run; ii) identifying and examining what environmental values are held by trail runners as a group, and investigating whether these values have changed since 2007.

The study is based on a quantitative approach. In 2007 a questionnaire was distributed among all participants in the Laugavegur Ultra Marathon that finished the race. A total of 73 fully completed questionnaires were submitted, corresponding to 56.2% of potential respondents. The results of this questionnaire indicate that participants' major motivation for participating in this run was the Icelandic nature, the diverse landscape, along with personal goals (Sæþórsdóttir & Lund, 2008). Nearly all participants consider untouched wilderness to be a significant factor in the trail's attractiveness. It is notable that nature scored highest as regards the runners' satisfaction, and much more highly than physical capacity. Most participants did not notice any damage to vegetation or soil erosion, and nor did they notice litter along the trail. In order to identify what environmental values are held by trail runners today and to compare potential changes over the course of the past ten years, an identical questionnaire will be distributed to all participants registered to run in the Laugavegur Ultra Marathon taking place on the 14th of July 2018. This new question will include additional value statements focusing on specific issues so as to better be able to examine runners' environmental values and how these values potentially affect their perception.

The results of this study will provide a basis for the assessment of potential impacts and the formulation of proactive measures to manage and mitigate impacts that are likely to arise and increase as a result of the running of the ultra-marathon. As such this study will provide a better understanding of the environmental challenges facing the organisers of the race as well

as the administration of the Fjallabak Nature Reserve in terms of how to encourage sustainable use of wilderness and protected natural areas. The initial results of this study will be presented at the conference.



Figure 1. The Laugavegur hiking trail, the venue of the Laugavegur Ultra Marathon. The trail stretches over 55 km from Landmannalaugar in the north to Þórsmörk in the south.

References

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