

UNDER THE VOLCANO

Roger Crofts

Remember the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull? For the moment it has stopped, but the consequences for the land and the people living under the volcano certainly have not. But what about the longer term mental health of residents in the directly affected area and will the land return to productivity. These are the two critical issues for the local people and for the government agencies working in the area.

Two farmers had already left the area and did not intend to return such had been the trauma of the eruption and the vast amounts of ash covering their land and buildings. Another two farmers were seriously thinking of leaving. Those remaining were concerned that their livestock, which had been removed from the area to avoid ingestion of noxious fluoride on the vegetation and find new pastures, considered that there was insufficient action by government agencies and a great deal of buck passing. Berglind Bjarnadóttir and her husband Ármann Fannar Magnússon had seriously discussed whether to stay on their farm at Hrútafell. Berglind said “I took the children to my parents when the eruption began, but we soon returned. After a couple of days considering what to do, we decided that we wanted to stay. Our problem now is to persuade the government to help us buy a new flock of sheep. We removed our flock to my parent’s farm because the authorities could not decide what to do at the beginning. But now we cannot bring them back because of the disease control regulations.”

For many families coping with the potential of an eruption and memories of eruptions in the nearby Vestmann Islands were kept private, as were the normal tensions between people in the home. The eruption and its aftermath brought many of these problems to the surface. The Rev Axel Arnsson recalled that “People have been living in a box with their emotions kept private. But the ash has got into their box and forced them to become exposed to the realities of their lives. This is very uncomfortable for them”. Already two couples have divorced. And many had been treated for mental illness locally or in Reykjavik, almost 100 miles away. The attention of the media had caused a great deal of harm and little identifiable benefit. Journalists continually pestered families looking for stories and novel angles. Sveinn Rúnolfsson, Director of the Soil Conservation Service, expressed the commonly held view that “the media correspondents sometimes made up stories just to report something”. One has to question the morality of the media in these situations where getting a story is more important than those traumatised being allowed to cope with the situation. The Major of Hvollsvöllur, Isölfúr Gylfi Palmason, was clear that the support of many Icelanders was warmly welcomed and gave great comfort. “People from other parts of the country just turned up and said ‘what can we do to help’. They climbed onto the roofs of houses and farm buildings to clear away the ash. Businesses in the larger towns provided food and helped to provide lunches in the local community centres”.

Gylfi thought that the prolonged warm, bright weather had also heightened spirits. But he said that local people had real fears about the onset of the dark winter nights and the recurrence of the nightmares of the two eruptions. They were also concerned about mud

slides and ash blow from the large quantities on the ice cap and in the mountains. The concerns of the communities were not helped, many told me, by Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, the President of Iceland, suggesting on UK TV that much larger eruptions could occur. Whilst he acknowledged this point when I met him, he felt it necessary to warn other European countries of the need to prepare effective contingency plans. The memories of the darkness during the daytime, the overwhelming and constant noise of the eruption and the accompanying thunder and the brightness of the lightening during the night time severely disrupting sleep, were still real. Residents told me that conditions in the houses were difficult as the fine volcanic dust penetrated everywhere, despite double glazing, necessitating wearing of masks indoors and causing breathing difficulties and sinus problems.

On the ground, there are always longer standing effects. Massive amounts of ash were spread across Europe, but much has landed locally around Eyjafjallajökull and Fimmvörðuhals. The ice cap is black with the ash to a depth of almost a metre. The snow beyond the glacier is covered with ash giving beautiful circular patterns as the snow slowly melts. The highland grazing areas have largely disappeared under the ash and above 600m there are virtually no signs of growth. Below that the grass is beginning to show through following a long warm spell. But there is a very significant reduction in the area of land for sheep to graze and alternative sources of feed have had to be found. Sveinn Rúnolfsson told me “it is very difficult to reseed these areas because they are not accessible for machinery so the traditional pattern of taking the sheep to the highlands in June and gathering them in September is diminished”. He went on to describe the efforts being undertaken by the government’s Soil Conservation Service. “We need to clear the rivers of as much ash as possible so that when the heavy autumn rains carry more ash down from the glacier and the mountain there is less chance of flooding of farmland, houses and the roads”. He added, “we are providing seed and fertiliser for the lower ground to get the farms back to normal”. Fortunately, the fodder crops on the lower ground are growing, but initially with a reduced production. The milk from the cattle has, to everyone’s relief, been passed as fit for human consumption.

Should you visit Iceland to see for yourself? Yes, of course. It is a wonderful country with warm hearted people, fine meat and fish cuisine, and absolutely amazing scenery. And it is quite cheap compared with the past following the fifty percent devaluation of the krónur against the pound.

Photos:

Eyjafjallajökull the caldera before and after

Fimmvörðuhals the new eruption cones and the hot rock

Ash over the snow patterns

Grass growing through the ash above Skogar

Ash over the farmlands

Olafur of Thorvaldseyri

Thorvaldseyri before and after