

HEART OF ICELAND NATIONAL PARK: SOME SUGGESTIONS

On the Central Highland National Park (CHNP for short) proposals, it seems to me that the key issues are:

1. To persuade the local communities and municipalities that they are not losing power but being invited into different ways of sharing power. The establishment of the Area Committees for the Vatnajökull NP was a very positive way forward and could be easily extended to the wider area of the new NP. Additionally, all of the main centres can act as a hub for the CHNP with staff located there and co-located with staff in the other government agencies who will be helping the CHNP authority to perform its functions. For example, Landgræðsla has offices around Iceland in appropriate places. There should not be a large HQ. It is unnecessary and the arguments over where it should be will really distract negotiations on sharing power. Certainly, the CHNP will need a small presence in Reykjavik, but I do not think it is a good idea to announce the HQ location at Gunnarsholt, which one of my interlocutors told me was likely to be the case.
2. Build public/private partnerships to make the NP development attractive to local and national businesses. The best way to do this is to use those who already have benefited. There is the classic case of the family at Hof who operate guided walks to the top of Hvannadalshnúkur and across the sandur to Ingólfhöfði. For example, at all of the obvious entry points to the CHNP, e.g. Flúðir, Hella, Hvolsvöllur, Vik etc, rather than build an expensive visitor centre separate from the community make a deal with the garage/petrol station and café owners. Surely N1, OS and Olís could be persuaded to be partners at their filling stations where all of the tourists stop to refuel their vehicles and themselves. As you know, I think that building three more huge and expensive visitor centres is both a waste of public money out of limited capital budgets and a waste of money in annual operating costs. Such developments distance the NP from the local community from business and social interaction perspectives. For example, having visited the site of the proposed visitor at Kirkjubæjarklaustur it is nonsensical to place in across the river from the village and building a very expensive bridge over one of Iceland's most high velocity flood rivers.
3. Ensuring the right leadership. The Director of the CHNP needs to be a leader and negotiator, who is good at getting things done and working with all of the communities of interest, locally and nationally. They do not have to be a national park or conservation expert provided that they have a top team that has the relevant expertise and experience. Appointing the current boss of Umhverfisstofnun, who I hear is looking for a new job, would be a total disaster for example given their total unwillingness to undertake the job Ministers have consistently asked of them!
4. Ensuring that the next steps on the Rammaáætlun process do not get in the way. I am not sure whether it is essential for you to get the Rammaáætlun 3 proposals approved by the Althingi as most of the issues are outside the proposed CHNP area. Many of my Icelandic friends told me during my visit that the Rammaáætlun process is dead. That would be a pity as it would allow the energy development lobby so much scope to argue for more developments. Surely any developments should be outside the CHNP area.
5. Ensure that the other government agencies have a positive role in providing advice and guidance to the CHNP authority, especially Landgræðsla, Skógrækt, Umhverfisstofnun, Natturfræðistofnun, through formal accords between the CHNP authority and those agencies approved by you as Minister.

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