

REPORT OF VISIT TO ICELAND BY ROGER CROFTS JULY 2010 TO SVANDÍS SVAVARSD, MINISTER OF ENVIRONMENT, GOVERNMENT OF ICELAND

New legislation

I met some members of the committee reviewing nature conservation legislation (Aagot Óskarsdóttir, Katrin Theodórsdóttir and Jón Gunnar Ottósson. Also Steinunn Fjóra Sigurðardóttir attended. Members wished to get advice from my experience of developing and implementing legislation in Scotland. My message to them and to you Minister is that legislation should not be prepared or reviewed in isolation. There needs to be a **clear policy framework and strategy**, as we discussed last year, based on sustainable development and its component parts, including biodiversity (but that should not be the only element of policy as geodiversity, communities, culture and environmentally sustainable development are equally important). Legislation should also consider the **implementation mechanisms**:

- i. organisational structures in government and its agencies (see below for further comments on this);
- ii. enforcement regimes: the jurisdiction for the bodies which undertake the enforcement of the law on behalf of government and the clear signals from government of the extent of enforcement;
- iii. the deterrents in the form of penalties for breaches of law and practice, such as the types and levels of fines and whether to include custodial sentences as we do in Scotland for certain wildlife crimes of certain severity;
- iv. positive incentives to stimulate good practice, such as the management schemes for the management of different habitats we have used in Scotland; and
- v. a clear statement of the government's intentions in revising the legislation and what it wishes to achieve from new approaches.

If all of these aspects are covered in the proposals being prepared they will constitute a package which is capable of effective implementation, rather than concentrating only on a few legal provisions. This is not just a matter for lawyers: the Minister and her colleagues and policy advisers are key to taking this forward as I recall from my work on this subject in Scotland. There is no solution which can be taken wholesale from another country, but experience in other countries is helpful in not making mistakes and learning from best practice.

Organisational issues

One of the key stumbling blocks in the efficient and effective administration and delivery of action and advice on the environment are the organisational structures. I returned home more concerned than ever before by arguments between some of your agencies and their staff in a very public manner. This just provides fuel to other interests who continue to undermine your efforts and gain approval for further development at whatever cost to the environment. I also heard of blocking of progress on issues you have requested to be pursued, most particularly on the development of the proposals for protection of Þjórsárver. I am even more of the view that the merger of the key related agencies is essential and urgent. I understand that there is a view that this should await restructuring of government ministries, but this

may take a long time and all of the agencies concerned are under your control. Bringing Landgræðsla ríkisins and Skógrækt ríkisins together along with the regional forestry bodies is logical. But to leave the nature elements of Umhverfisstofnun and Náttúrufræðistofnun Íslands as they are seems to be a most ineffective way of implementing your plans. I strongly advocate bringing all of these agencies into one body by the end of this year with a clear mandate from you, new leadership, and a new culture of cooperation.

The plan for the Highlands and the new Energy Master Plan

I understand that you have, jointly with your Permanent Secretary, requested that Umhverfisstofnun prepare detailed plans for extending the area of protection in Þjórsárver. I also understand that there is top level resistance in that agency to extending the protected areas to the size you have requested. That is a matter for you to determine on the assumption that what the Minister requests her agencies should deliver. My only comment is that there is unanimity amongst those knowledgeable about the area and its conservation needs on the need for protection of a larger area to safeguard the ecosystem functions of the wetlands and water systems. I do hope that you can have this pursued urgently and a larger area designated to end the 40 plus years of requests for this to happen. That would be a real achievement for you.

Following discussions with those engaged in two of the work groups developing the technical input to the framework plan, and also from staff in your agencies, I am concerned that the new plan will represent a trading document between the all-powerful energy interests in government and commerce and the weak and fragmented views of the environmental interests. This will be a very difficult decision for you I realise, but trading pristine nature for more electricity which is not needed to meet Iceland's needs seems to be an unfortunate course for Icelandic policy. What is needed is a new overall policy on natural resources. It is also unfortunate that the assessment of the geothermal areas by geologists from Náttúrufræðistofnun Íslands was overlooked in the analysis by two of the working groups.

Having paid a return visit to Kerlingarfjöll after 11 years absence (with a group of Icelanders most of whom had never been there), I was reminded yet again of the importance of this area as a scenic icon for Iceland. There are widespread concerns that energy companies have their eyes set on the geothermal system stretching from Flúðir to Kerlingarfjöll. Add to this the important water and nature areas further east, particularly Langisjór, and there is a strong case for protecting a much greater area of the highlands than is presently the case. I do hope that this will be considered.

After the eruptions

I spent some time in the south visiting farms and talking to local representatives about the aftermath of the two eruptions. I also walked over the Fimmvörðuháls trail from Skógar to Þórsmörk and visited the sites in the Markarfljót. The effort of the Landgræðsla ríkisins to clear the rivers of sediment to allow for more ash and to be carried downstream and to improve and restore vegetation with fertilizer and seed to reduce the ash blow was very much appreciated by the farmers in the areas close to the volcano. The concerns of the people in the area are significant, particularly the possibility of new eruptions, more ash, and more floods is preying on their minds, especially with the onset of winter. Care and counselling services are needed to help

those who have been affected and who remain quietly concerned for their future and that of their families.

I was very surprised to see virtually no information provided about the eruption and its consequences in the area. Apart from the sign boards developed by Landgræðsla and erected by Vegagerðin, there was nothing to inform the public what had happened and what was being done. It would be really valuable to have some simple interpretation boards at key points to inform visitors what they are looking at and what action is being taken; otherwise they will remain ignorant or misinformed. At the scoria craters at Fimmvörðuháls a new trail had been created. However, there is already a great deal of damage to the sensitive rocks on the craters as there is no signposted route onto the tops and this needs to be attended to urgently. In Þórsmörk the only signs relate to what to do if there is an eruption of Katla. Although these are necessary, they bear no relationship to what has already happened in the valley on the last few months. Ari Trausti Guðmundsson has produced an excellent photographic book with Ragnar Th. Sigurðsson, but I have not seen any other literature that is readily available and cheap for the visitor to buy. I hope that some information can be provided to visitors to the area at the key viewing points and also in Hvolsvöllur.

Off the road driving

This is an issue where I hope that progress can be made. The situation has got progressively worse in recent years with more people disregarding the long standing rule of no off roading on non snow covered ground. Andrés Arnalds has done a great job in getting it recognised. I hope that the working party chaired and lead by Umhverfisstofnun works in an objective and unbiased manner, without this there will be an unbalanced and unsatisfactory result.

I understand that, according to the legislation article 17: “Motorised vehicles may not be driven off-road. Such vehicles may, however, be driven on glaciers, as well as off-road on snow outside of urban areas, provided that the grounds are frozen and covered by snow.” The latter part of this article is too open. I have noticed damage where motorized vehicles have been driven across snow covered vegetated land. The legislation should be changed to halt or ban all off-road driving, snow covered or not in protected areas, except for legitimate research and rescue services.

Vatnajökull National Park Management Plan

I met Anna Kristín Ólafsdóttir and the two consultants working on the management plan. As far as I can see, (the report being only in Icelandic, although Anna Kristín has asked for it to be translated) the consultants have done a workmanlike job covering most of the points. Following consultation, they recognise that some of the references to sustainable use and the way the IUCN protected area management categories are used on this issue need to be revised, especially for hunting, grazing and vehicular access. Restricting hunting around Snæfell is probably necessary to halt conflict with other users. There is no grass for grazing on the western flanks of the national park and the grazing rights will need to be negotiated away with the Skafta communities over time. Vehicular access to key nunatak areas should be restricted to scientific work to protect the areas newly emergent from under the ice cap.

The consultants seemed concerned about expanding the national park as they claimed it would mean the municipalities losing their powers to the park authority. I advised

that this need not be the case and was not be the best practice. The extension of the park into the settled areas in the south, for example, would result in greater coherence of management, greater engagement by the communities, whilst maintaining the full powers of the municipalities.

World Heritage Sites

The consultants working on the Vatnajökull National Park talked about a World Heritage Site bid for Skaftafell and the Skeiðarársandur. I explained the importance of a multi site approach of all key features of the tectonic plate spreading centre. This seems to be work that you could instigate using the expertise of the geologists in Náttúrufræðistofnun Íslands and enlist the support of the Minister for Education, Science and Culture and the Icelandic World Heritage Committee. Such an application would be a major achievement for Iceland and would have wide support amongst the natural heritage advisers to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.

Carbon Management Training

I explored with Andrés Arnalds and Guðmundur Halldórsson, Landgræðsla possibilities for collaboration between Icelandic interests and the Crichton Carbon Centre in Scotland (I am a Board Director). We identified options on behaviour change education and research, awareness raising with the land owners and farmers, and links with the UN Land Restoration training programme. Guðmundur will interact with other Icelandic agencies with interests on this topic to scope possibilities for joint activity.

Landmannalaugar

At the end of a two day walk along the Hellismannaleið trail, I arrived at Landmannalaugar with a group of Icelandic friends, including Tryggvi Felixson. The site was overwhelmed and the facilities were quite inadequate to cope with the volume. We all considered that the site needs to be better organised, with buildings more in keeping with the area and its magnificent landscape (such as the older building at Landmannahellir), with the removal of the buses which are totally out of place, and the provision of improved interpretation. Presumably this is a task you could ask the experts in Umhverfisstofnun to address and report to you. I only mention it as it is one of the key visitor sites in Iceland and should be a credit to the country.

Roger Crofts

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roger@dodin.idps.co.uk

++44 131 661 7858

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