

LANDSVIRIRKJUN AND VATNAJOKULL NATIONAL PARK

I welcome the letter by Johannes Geir Sigurgeirsson of Landsvirkjun (Morgunbladid 11 December 2003) responding to my article (Morganbladid 8 December 2003). I respond on 5 points.

First, he fails to respond to my suggestions on financial contributions to the Vatnajokull National Park. When I asked both Landsvirkjun and Alcoa to put forward 2,000 million kroner over 20 years and an up front payment of 50 million kroner, I expected at least a considered response. The response by Landsvirkjun talked about small scale funding of local facilities and ignored the larger challenge. Alcoa could not even be bothered to respond. It is vital that both companies are pressed to do so, otherwise they are shirking their corporate social responsibilities to the people of Iceland.

Second, to state that the development now being constructed minimises damage to the environment is ridiculous. Anyone who knows even a little about river systems knows that to build a very large dam across one river and to divert another river into the reservoir will fundamentally and irretrievably change the environment downstream in both valleys. The report of the World Commission on Dams makes this abundantly clear, so please Landsvirkjun do not patronise the public as being ignorant in the face of such expert opinion worldwide.

Third, he fails to recognise that the public – local, national and international – have a legitimate role in scrutinising development proposals and they must expect the highest standards of environmental care to be achieved. It is not just being, as Mr Sigurgeirsson puts it, a good citizen with the local communities, but also a good citizen with the wider communities of interest – national and international. Companies are notoriously short term in their horizons and frequently fail to understand that the sustainability of a project does not just mean paying back the loan charges but actually paying back to society all of the costs of the damage and disruption caused and making financial arrangements for restoration.

Fourth, it is time to agree that the one untouched river flowing from the Vatnajokull - Jokulsa a Fjollum - should remain so. The Landsvirkjun position is feeble: 'at present there is no intention of harnessing the Jokulsa a Fjollum'. Far from accusing the environmental lobby that they are playing a propaganda trick, this is a typical company trick and the people are being misled. Landsvirkjun should join many others, including politicians, in stating unambiguously that the Jokulsa a Fjollum should remain in its natural state in perpetuity.

Finally, the letter gives the impression to readers that Landsvirkjun have carefully considered the international advice on the project, including experts on protected areas. This is not the case in terms the expertise within IUCN - The World Conservation Union. I invite Mr Sigurgeirsson and his colleagues formally to seek our advice.

Roger Crofts