

THJORSARVER: PROTECTING A UNIQUE ASSET IN PERPETUITY – ROGER CROFTS

For many generations societies around the world have regarded wetlands as a nuisance. The following are widely held perceptions. They are the source of disease that can become endemic. They are a sink for pollution. And they are a barrier to the use of water resources for economic development and social advancement. As a result the proportion of the Earth's surface covered by naturally functioning wetlands has reduced dramatically during the later twentieth century. Now many countries are faced with water crises and there are water wars between adjacent nation states.

What has this got to do with Iceland? There is abundant water, and at times of jokalaups far too much. Without entrainment rivers damage crops, remove the precious soil and create havoc with the roads. And they provide a natural renewable resource for the production of electricity for economic development and diversification and for the use of the public. Well the issue to me, as a friend of Iceland and a frequent visitor, is to hope that Icelanders manage their natural water resources in an environmentally sensitive and culturally sound way and still gain economic and social benefits. Iceland has a responsibility to present and future generations in the country and as a respected member of the international community to show by example how this can be achieved.

Looking at the plans for the development of hydro-electric power and visiting some of the key sites recently – Thjorsarver and Karahnujar – I have been saddened by the polarisation of the debate and the lack of appreciation of the importance of wetlands in Iceland.

Iceland is a signatory of the Ramsar Conservation, an international agreement “to develop and maintain an international network of wetlands which are important for the conservation of global diversity, and for sustaining human life through the ecological and hydrological functions they perform”. There are 3 Ramsar sites in Iceland: Grunnafjordur (1,470ha), Myvatn-Laxa (20,000ha) and Thjorsarver (37,500ha). There has been debate on the proposals to develop hydro-electric schemes in Thjorsarver for many years. Two small schemes already exist, but current plans propose 3 reservoirs and diversion of water into the existing regulation schemes in the Kvislavatn. Admittedly, these current proposals are much smaller than the earlier schemes and have been supported by some environmental authorities. However, the proposals do not take account of the effects on the internationally important site, or the cultural significance of the area, or the superb natural system which exists in the upper Thjorsa.

Perhaps not many readers have stood on the Biskupathufa, like many Bishops have in the past, and looked with wonder at the scene. Image a unique array of ice caps and piedmont glaciers with the remnants of caldera walls standing proud of the surface, the heart-shaped pattern on Hjartafell left by the retreating glaciers, and the intricate pattern of rivers channels and sand banks. Yes it is easy to get carried away by the grandeur of the scene and it is a great pity that more Icelanders do not know the area. I do hope that more will visit it and share the privilege that I have had. But the area is more than just aesthetic, the sediment carried down by the rivers from the depths of the Hofsjokull and its outlet glaciers is the very life blood of this wetland. Building dams and flooding the area with water in reservoirs will wreck this natural wonder and result in the largest area of natural vegetation in the Highlands of Iceland disappearing, and the breeding population of some 10,000 pink-footed geese being lost. And it will also badly affect the summer grazing land for communities further south. Not only is this important for the sheep, but also taking out

the animals in the spring and bringing them back in the autumn is a cultural activity enshrined in the local calendar.

So far the government seems intent on allowing the revised proposals to go ahead. I hope that the Ministers and the Althingii will have another look at the proposals. The area is deserving of a greater level of protection than it currently has. The boundaries of the Ramsar site are artificial and do not follow the natural features in the landscape. Umhverfisstofun recommended in 2003 that a much larger area of Thjorsarar should be protected including the canyon and the waterfalls like the Dynkur. Unfortunately to date this advice has been ignored by the government. Now is the time to rethink before it is too late and another one of Iceland's natural wonders is submerged under water and the natural, cultural and aesthetic, and potential tourism lost.

What is needed is a thorough independent and objective assessment of the environmental, social, cultural, aesthetic as well as economic costs and benefits of the proposals and of the natural system as a whole. In addition, the government should take up and implement the proposals from its statutory agency and designate a much larger area as specially protected. I would advice that the whole of the Thjorsa system from the watershed on the Hofsjokull to the point where the river leaves the canyon and spills into the Sultartangalon reservoir be protected under the IUCN Category II classification in recognition of its significance globally and to allow the natural system to continue to flourish and for it to be discovered and enjoyed by many Icelanders. Also government authorities should assess Thjorsarar as a potential World Heritage Site against the criteria agreed by UNESCO.

As the Master Plan for Development of Hydro and Geothermal Energy indicates, there are other options and opportunities for hydro electricity development further down the Thjorsa catchment and in other rivers in the south and west of Iceland. Developing these is unlikely to have such a damaging effect on a globally important natural system still waiting to be valued as a wetland by Icelanders and by its elected government. It is not too late to protect Thjorsarar in perpetuity and also develop further power generation elsewhere.