

**VATNAJOKULL NATIONAL PARK: BIGGER AND BETTER FOR ALL**  
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Proposals for the designation of a National Park for Europe's largest ice cap are being developed in Iceland. A committee of the Althingi is working on the area to the north of the ice cap and a committee of local representatives is working on the ice cap and the area to the south. The ideas are at a formative stage and as a frequent visitor to Iceland and as Chair of the European Region of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas I set out below suggestions for further consideration before final decisions are made by the government and the Althingi.

Overall, my advice is: 'Think big and the outcome will be better for all!'

Why big? There are a number of reasons in relation to benefits for nature and benefits for people.

The ice cap is only part of the natural system. The rivers and sandur plains, the canyons and deltas are all part of this system. So are the volcanic forms linked to the Grimsvotn hot spot, such as the Laki system. Thinking big in terms of natural systems and processes would make the Vatnajokull an exemplar of national parks globally.

So what does this mean in practice? Designating the ice cap itself will not really achieve anything except to allow management of the recreational and research activity on the ice cap itself. Although this is important in order to protect the landscape, to maintain visitors' enjoyment and to retain the scientific research potential, I am not aware of any practical issues at this stage which require stricter regulation and justify the designation of a Vatnajokull Ice Cap National Park.

The ice cap has important glaciers flowing from it. These range from tiny crevassed ones such as Falljokull to massive glacier tongues such as Skeidararjokull, as well as the lagoon and icebergs of Jokulsarlon. All of these are worthy of special recognition.

The ice cap is the source of major river systems, especially the Skafta, Fjollum, Fljotsdal and many smaller ones. Some of these are being modified for hydro-power generation for the proposed aluminium smelter in the eastern fjords of Iceland and others have been modified already. Although there is nothing in the internationally accepted guidance to demand exclusion of areas modified for power generation, those parts of the river systems which have been modified already or are in the process of being modified should not be included in the national park as the engineering works significantly affect the natural processes, wildlife and landscape values of the area. In addition, the inclusion of the Karahnjukar would be likely to cause grave concern amongst those in Iceland and elsewhere who remain opposed to it. This is a moral issue rather than an environmental one and should be given very careful consideration.

The major unmodified rivers should be a major component of the park. The largest of the unmodified rivers, Jokulsa a Fjollum with its stupendous canyons, remnants of high level valleys, magnificent waterfalls, exposures of the inner parts of volcanoes and lava formations and the delta in the shallow waters of Oxarfjordur is an essential addition to the Vatnajokull National Park. If it is included then it should be the whole of the catchment of the river, including all of the tributaries, both glacial and non-glacial rather than just the main channel of the river itself. And it should receive total protection for all time rather than being subject to development as a result of political or economic whims and fancies in the future.

Another feature of the Vatnajokull area is the presence of a magma chamber beneath its surface. Few people are able to visit the surface manifestation of this at Grimsvotn and Grimsfjall. However, there are significant volcanic landforms in the surrounding area of the ice cap, most notably Laki, Askja and the Odadahraun. All of these features should be part of the national park. It is particularly important that the Laki fissure volcano complex is included in the national park because it is part of the Grimsvotn hot plume system.

I warmly welcome the proposals of the Siv Fridleifsdottir, the Icelandic Environment Minister, in the draft Nature Conservation Strategy published in November 2003 for extending the Skaftafell National Park to include the Skeidararsandur and linking the 3 separate elements of the Jokulsargljufur National Park and its extension into Oxarfjordur. But they do not go far enough to recognise all of the natural elements of the Vatnajokull natural system of ice caps and outlet glaciers, river systems, and volcanic complexes. So my proposal is to go further and ensure that all of these separate elements are linked into one national park to recognise and celebrate the world's greatest glacial-volcanic system. I call this the Greater Vatnajokull Natural System Park (obviously this is rather technical term and a better name in Icelandic should be devised). That would be truly a Park of world significance and therefore hopefully be given the accolade of a World Heritage Site in time.

But this naturally 'bigger' Park is only part of the story. It is equally important to capture the enthusiasm and support of local interests and to develop a park which will really benefit local communities socially, culturally and financially. That way it will be better for them as well as for nature. That is why the park needs to be big enough to include the local communities. In the south, this means including the communities along the coastal strip from Kirkjubaejarklaustur to Hofn. Their dependence on agriculture is diminishing all of the time and incomes from farming cannot be sustained. However, their dependence on tourism is growing and the further opportunities to provide services to visitors are high. To the north of the ice cap there are few opportunities for income generation other than tourism based on the natural and cultural assets of the area. Obvious activities are provision of accommodation and places to eat. For example, in the interior parts to the north and east of the ice cap there are few facilities and with increased promotion more will be needed. In addition, there are opportunities for wildlife tourism on the glaciers and ice caps, the volcanic areas and the rivers which have not been exploited and should be without endangering the wildlife or the wildness of the area. At present ecotourism companies, generally based

in the south west of Iceland, take the lead and gather all of the benefits with little accruing to the local communities. More encouragement and support should be given to local businesses rather than rely on those from outside the area to gain all of the business benefits. Also the existing national parks, nature reserves and national monuments are often staffed by people from outside the area. More opportunities need to be provided for local people to train for and compete for these roles with positive support from the government and the park authority.

On farmland much of the wildlife interest has been reduced and the wetland habitats drained. With the decline in income from farming there should be more positive financial stimulation from the Ministries of Agriculture and Environment and their agencies to restore natural habitats and to bring back wildlife. In addition, there are many cultural sites and artefacts on farms and these are of interest to the increasingly sophisticated visitors to the area. Local farmers and other local residents have an affinity to and much knowledge of these areas and could become ecotourism and cultural tourism guides. They may need some training and help in establishing small enterprises but this would be very worthwhile. Certainly the evidence from tourists experiencing guided trips in the area provided by local farmers is very positive.

It should be clear that the bigger, and therefore better, the Greater Vatnajökull Natural System Park is not just about nature protection but is also about achieving benefits for local communities and improving the experience of visitors. This means that a uniform approach to conservation over the whole area recommended for the park is not needed. A much more subtle approach to developing different aims for different parts of the area should be devised. This can be based on the internationally accepted guidelines on the management of protected areas developed by IUCN-The World Conservation Union. Contrary to the commonly-held view, national parks are not 'no-go areas' or areas set aside for conservationists. Rather they are part of the national cultural and natural assets and should be a source of pride and a source of benefit to the nation and to all of its people. So the larger national park which I am suggesting should not be classified under the IUCN Guidelines as a Category 2 'National Park' defined purely as 'a protected area managed mainly for ecosystem protection and recreation' with the implication that people should not live in it and that certain activities needed to manage species and habitats are not permitted. If a Category 2 approach is adopted therefore it will fail to recognise the variety of nature protection and other objectives to be achieved by the park and will place unnecessary constraints on activities in the park that are beneficial to nature and to people.

For the Greater Vatnajökull Natural System Park management zones should be defined to distinguish the different needs and opportunities within the area: fragility and vulnerability of nature to damage and disturbance, opportunities for low intensity public recreation and enjoyment, opportunities for more intensive but environmentally sensitive activities, and opportunities for restoring species and habitats and for making them of interest to visitors and locals, opportunities for reclaiming land and conserving soil where the degradation of the past is intrusive to nature, and opportunities for raising awareness about the global significance of the area. In practice, this means

that the 7 categories in the IUCN system can provide guidance on the best form of management for different parts of the area.

Category 1: strictly protected areas where the focus is on wilderness protection and scientific activity. These objectives could fit the management needs of the ice cap itself, and particular features of scientific interest such as Grimsvotn, rocks exposed by the rivers, and the snouts of the glaciers. But I do not consider it necessary to have such a restrictive approach when the present and foreseen levels of activity are likely to be within the ecological and perceptual carrying capacity of the ice cap itself and the other areas I have suggested should be included within the park area.

Category 2: applies to those areas where there is a desire to protect the whole natural system from damaging development but to allow informal public enjoyment and recreation. For the Vatnajokull area this category would mean not allowing physical exploitation of nature, such as power and energy schemes, and would allow walking and climbing to the tops of the high peaks and other features, and exploring the rivers and glaciers, without the construction of buildings and mechanical devices. It is therefore suitable for the whole of the ice cap and glaciers and the peaks not covered by ice, as well as for the more isolated parts of the land to the north of the ice cap and for the main river systems, most especially the Jokulsa a Fjollum. It would not result in access restrictions on the existing tracks but would prohibit off track use.

Category 3: is for the protection of special natural features or natural monuments. This would be appropriate for Laki, Askja, Jokulsarlon, the Homatungur gorge, Dettifoss and similar features which people would visit but with restrictions to ensure that the features are not damaged. The focus of attention would be on opportunities for building public understanding, awareness and appreciation of key natural features, such as the glacier and sandurs around the ice cap margins, the Laki fissure belt, the Askja/Herdubreid volcanic sequence, and the features on the sandur plains of the Skeidararsandur from previous jokulhlaups.

Category 4: this category is for areas where there is a need for management intervention. In most cases management means active intervention to improve the quality of the wildlife and of the natural processes, or where the natural processes are creating difficulties for other important natural features. In the Vatnajokull area Category 4 would be appropriate for the vegetated valley areas such as Hvannalindir and Herdubreidarlindir where there is a need to ensure that they are not overwhelmed by blown sand or river sediment, and for the brackish water areas along the south coast, such as Leirur. It would be appropriate for the areas where there was a need to stabilise sand to stop it overwhelming fragile areas and for impeding traditional access routes. It would also be appropriate for those areas where one native species is endangering another scarcer one through predation, such as foxes preying on birds eggs and chicks. Visitors would be able to go there provided that they did not cause damage to the wildlife and to natural processes.

Category 5: ensuring that the broad-scale landscape and seascape of the area is maintained and managed to benefit public enjoyment in perpetuity. This category would probably cover the largest area, and is especially suitable for the Odadahraun to the north of the ice cap and for the settled areas along the south coast.

Category 6: where the natural resources can be used in an environmentally sustainable way to benefit owners of the land, communities and visitors. This is an especially important category for the Vatnajökull area. It would be most appropriate for the farmland around the southern margin of the ice cap and also the traditional summer grazing areas in the Highlands.

In addition, attention needs to be given to the management of particular species within the area: foxes, reindeer and mink especially. The pastime of hunting in protected areas is an area of great contention between hunters and nature conservationists. This should not be so for Vatnajökull. First, the term 'hunting' is best dropped from the debate, as it is often the single greatest source of contention. Second, an objective view needs to be taken on the biological viability of the individual species and the factors which are likely to undermine this. I do not advocate the need for major research studies but rather the application of well tried and tested methodology on population viability of key species such as the various protected birds, foxes and reindeer. For all of these species, it is perfectly legitimate in a protected area to reduce their numbers if the population as a whole is in a biologically viable state, or if one of the species is having a deleterious effect on a more scarce and endangered one, such as the fox on ground nesting birds. In addition, it is necessary to kill mink throughout the area because of their damaging effect on native species and also on domestic animals such as hens. It will also be reasonable to kill foxes where they are having a damaging effect on domesticated animals provided that it does not result in their decline into a biologically unviable state in the park area as a whole.

A management plan should be developed setting out all of these possibilities. Its compilation should be the basis for agreement between the various communities of interest (environmental, farming, tourism, local and those from further afield) in deciding precisely how to take forward the proposals for the park. Given the scale of the area proposed and its national and international significance, it might be appropriate for the management plan to be approved by the Althingi.

This brings me to the very important issue of who should have a stake in deciding on the scale and the purpose of the park and who should have a stake in its running and management.

I commend the consultative approach which has been used so far in developing the proposals for the park. The establishment of a committee of the Althingi with MPs representing the local area and those representing national interests is exactly the right way to go. So has been the consultation with local and national interests formally, and especially informally during the committee's tour of the northern part of the area. And I also commend the approach taken by the Committee considering the southern part of the area. It is vitally important that all of the input from these stakeholders is fully taken

into account in drawing up the final proposals for the park to be put before the Althingi for decision.

It is also vital that the management body for the park is truly representative of all of the stakeholders. It must not be in the pocket of the Environment Ministry nor of the Food and Environment Agency, or of the Tourism or other parts of government. Local and national representatives should be appointed through a democratic process which is and is seen to be transparent. The legislation to establish the park should be quite explicit on the role and composition of the managing authority and its reporting lines ultimately to the Althingi. There should be a balance of interests of local representatives and national representatives. It is particularly important that there is significant representation of national environmental interests.

There has been some discussion about the establishing a separate agency for national parks reporting straight to the Ministry of the Environment. I do not consider this to be either necessary or the best use of public resources. The nature conservation part of Umhverfisstofnun plays this role already and I am not aware of any criticism of its inadequacy in this respect. Indeed, maintaining the link between the nature conservation agency and the management of protected areas is a model used in most other countries in Europe very effectively. In addition, there is already great fragmentation of administrative structures in the nature field between Umhverfisstofnun and Natturufraedistofnun and to add a third agency, when one integrated one would be more administratively efficient and effective in a small country with limited resources would make more sense.

The timescale for establish of the park is important. It would be a pity if it were so quick that the ideas for a larger park were sacrificed for a smaller one or separate ones along the lines of the Minister's proposals last autumn. It would be preferable to give time for the results of the two working parties to be digested and discussed nationally and locally so that a consensus on the way forward in terms of area, management, organisational structures and funding could be agreed. International experience suggests that step-by-step increase in the scale of a protected area loses many of the advantages of the larger and more integrated approach and has the potential for losing consensus and that seeking a slower route to the bigger and more inclusive and all-embracing scheme is likely to prove easier.

And, finally, a few words about funding. It is clear from my visits and discussions that the current national parks in Iceland are under funded for the broad purposes for which they have been established. This is often the case in many countries. There is usually a demand for more state funding and this is reasonable for a National Park. If the government agrees to the establishment of the larger park which I am advocating then it should provide sufficient finance for its staffing and management and for the provision of visitors facilities and for visitor management, and for helping the local people engage effectively and create opportunities for them. In addition, there is a major opportunity in the Vatnajokull area to gain resources from other sources: Landsvirkjun and Alcoa. I know that many environmentalists will not welcome this suggestion, but Karahnjukar is a done deal and the smelter will presumably follow. Regardless of my or anyone else's views on the business

sense or environmental credibility of this development, there is surely a payment to be made by both of the companies in recognition of their corporate social responsibilities to Iceland to put something back as some form of mitigation for the environmental damage caused by the developments. Both companies should be formally requested to place financial bonds for the sole purpose of the establishment and effective management of the Greater Vatnajokull System Natural Park. These funds should be administered by a trust independent of both the developers and the government with the specific tasks of achieving the approved purposes of the park. I understand that an independent valuation has put the environmental cost of the power scheme and the smelter at 2,000,000,000 kroner. So the two companies should be asked to contribute this amount over a 20-year period. An up front payment of 50 million Icelandic kroner from each of the companies would be appropriate. I hope they will respond positively to this suggestion.

The Greater Vatnajokull System Natural Park will be better for environmental and community interests and therefore for Icelandic interests if it covers the whole of the undeveloped catchment of the ice cap watershed. Iceland is carefully watched by others who have its interests at heart and are sometimes dismayed by some of the decisions made. Irrespective of whether these views are misinformed or not, if Iceland is to achieve the ambition it has set itself to be a model of sustainable development and to develop its environmental tourism market then the bigger and better park will be an excellent way of making progress. Join all of the current pieces of protected areas together, add those proposed in the Environment Minister's Nature Conservation Strategy, and add all of the rest of the area to benefit the natural environment and the national and local community.

If the Greater Vatnajokull Natural System Park is developed then I firmly believe that it will give four wins: a win for the environment, a win for the local communities, a win for Iceland and its image, and a win for the world's special places.