

CELEBRATING A CENTENARY OF SOILS CONSERVATION

Iceland should be proud of its leading role globally in soil conservation and land restoration. Since its formation in 1907, the Icelandic Soil Conservation Service has sought to stabilise the land surface, restore soil, and create useable grazing another farmland.

As all Icelanders know well nature can wreck great devastation very rapidly with ash falls covering the surface and killing the vegetation, lava flows covering and burning everything in their path, and jokalaups sweeping away vegetation and soils as well as roads.

And Icelanders own activities since The Settlement have also had damaging effects – cutting down the trees and removing other vegetation, having too many grazing mouths and damaging hooves of sheep and horses.

So Iceland's century old effort to tame the worst effects of nature and to undo the harmful effects of over a millennium of human activity is a cause for celebration.

Vast areas have been stabilised and are producing nutritious food for grazing animals. Roads are less easily blocked by sand storms due to the planting of lupin and lime grass. The march of the sand dunes has been reduced so important sites like Dimmubougir survive.

Not everything has gone well. Too often in the past century, farmers were seen as the problem rather than part of the solution. Sheep numbers were allowed to grow uninhibited, despite Icelanders passion for eating lamb. Aircraft were used to sow seed rather than asking the local farmers and communities to do the job. And use of non-native species, such as the Alaska lupin, have created problems of unforeseen spread and caused dissention among experts.

But the success has far outweighed the problems. Why? As with any success, there is no one factor, but a whole menu of ingredients. The Icelandic government has consistently supported the Soil Conservation Service, even when the economy was in poor shape. The organisation has progressively worked with the major stakeholders – farmers, local communities, and school children, and business interests –so that they are part of the action force to 'Heal the land'. Assessments of the spread and intensity of soil erosion for the whole country by experts at RALA have allowed a more geographically focussed approach to soil stabilisation. New scientific techniques have been developed in the laboratory and demonstrated in the fields at Gunnarsholt by top-class scientists. These have ensured that seed germination and plant growth have been increasingly successful. New hardware for harvesting seeds and for sowing the potent combination of seeds and fertiliser has been developed also at Gunnarsholt. And throughout the century, soil conservation has been blessed with four great leaders – the Directors of the Soil Conservation Service: Gunnlaugur Kristmundsson 1908 – 1946, Runólfur Sveinsson

1947-1954, his brother Páll Sveinsson 1954-1972, and Runolfur's son Sveinn since 1972.

And so soil conservation has been a success through this winning combination of rigorous analysis and assessment, laboratory and field experiments, hardware development and most definitely the winning combination of people, especially the Sveinsson father, brother and son (Sveinn Runólfsson the current Director), and the Arnalds dynasty of Andres, his brother Oli and Oli's wife Asa.

As a friend of Iceland, I hope that all Icelanders are proud of your country's international profile on the national success of soil conservation. Eighty experts from around the world are here to celebrate that success with at a meeting in Selfoss.

I also hope that the Icelandic government and the people of Iceland will continue to support soil conservation and land restoration. New horizons beckon, particularly the contribution that Iceland can make to ameliorating global climate change by capturing and storing carbon in its soils and building increased resilience in the land to withstand the devastating events of nature. And you can play your part in communities throughout Iceland by planting trees and scrubs and so help the land to be restored and make your contribution to solving one of the world's greatest problems of climate change.

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