

Skrifstofa Alþingis, nefndarsvið

b.t. Umhverfis og samgöngunefndar

Reykjavík 31. janúar 2021

Sendandi: Michaël Bishop,

Þskj. 461-369 mál, frumvarp um Hálandisþjóðgarð

Dear committee members,

The Highland is very important to me as an outdoor enthusiast and as a guide, to the point that I dedicated my studies to the views of the public on the idea of a Highland National Park.

I have followed public discussion related to the bill by reading every comment submitted, most press articles published along with discussion on social media.

There are many sides to the current debate, but I would like to highlight that a large part of the opposition is related to fear of restrictions on outdoor recreation activities. While the bill in itself does not restrict these activities, it does provide tools to do so when making management and protection plans, enforcing them, or through regulations. Despite mentions of consultation and presence of recreational stakeholders in the governing structure of the park, recreational concerns are still in my opinion the first reason to oppose the bill. In my understanding, this is the product of unresolved conservation conflicts which undermined the trust between stakeholders and decision-makers. Even before the bill was introduced, the findings of my research were that reconciliation of recreational and conservation interests would be essential for a broader public support. **I therefore recommend addressing recreational concerns to increase public support for the bill.** This would be beneficial to increase trust and respect in nature conservation but would also for environmental issues in a broader context.

Obviously, there are other important aspects to discuss as well, such as the governance, land-use management (energy, tourism, grazing), or implementation. I will however focus on recreational concerns which I am most qualified to discuss in light of the research that I have been conducting.

I would also like to highlight that the Icelandic public is entitled to be consulted and respected when it comes to the management of the Highland. Nation-wide surveys are a valuable tool to probe the public opinion regarding the Highland. They provide consistent evidence that there is more support than opposition to the establishment of a National Park in the Highland, despite more opposition to the first version of the bill. Decision-makers therefore have a duty to be solution-oriented and work on the current bill to meet the expectations of the public, address the concerns of the opposition and secure a broader support.

The following changes to the bill appeared relevant to me:

Article 3. Markmið Hálendisþjóðgarðs

Ungir umhverfissinnar suggested to remove the 3rd goal on access, currently worded as:

“Auðvelda almenningi aðgengi að þjóðgarðinum eftir því sem unnt er án þess að náttúra hans spillist.”

and to replace it by the following (or use the following as a basis):

“Tryggja almannaréttin í takt við gildandi lög án þess að draga úr tækifærum til að geta upplifað óbyggðatilfinningu og notið einveru og ferðafrelsis”

Alternatively, Fjöregg suggested to replace the word “Auðvelda” by “Tryggja”

I agree with both suggestions, with a preference for the first one.

Justification:

“Auðvelda almenningi aðgengi” can be interpreted or used to justify building up access (and all related infrastructure) in the Highland, which is a threat to the experience of the area. There is a need for much more public consultation (at a nation-wide level) regarding access in the Highland.

The results from the 2018 nation-wide survey¹ show that the public opinion is very divided regarding whether roads should be built up in the Highland, and a large majority wants the number of visitors to be limited. Keeping roads as they are is the most natural and acceptable manner to limit the number of visitors to the Highland and preserve the quality of travel experiences.

More details:

1. *“Auðvelda almenningi aðgengi”* can be used to justify “building up roads” (and bridges), which can dramatically increase the number of visitors.
2. Increased visitor numbers would also increase the pressure on the area, the need for infrastructure, the demand for services and the feeling of crowding.
3. This would consequently alter the experience of wilderness which is based on naturalness, remoteness, primitiveness, and opportunities to experience solitude.
4. Once access is provided (with roads and bridges), it becomes very difficult to control in an acceptable way (as shown by discussion on visitor fees, nature pass, or quotas).
5. It is therefore preferable to engage in “passive conservation” and keep access conditions limited to maintain visitation within reasonable levels.

In the meantime, more research needs to be done to know more about the public opinion regarding development of access in the Highland, using nation-wide surveys, in-depth stakeholder interviews or other participatory approaches to make informed decisions.

Regarding this aspect, Félag húsbílaeigenda mentioned:

“Það þarf ekki að auðvelda almenningi aðgang að hálendinu. Eingöngu að halda vegum góðum yfir sumartímenn. Aðgangur er nú þegar auðveldur.”

¹Bishop, M., (2020). Public Views on the Central Highland National Park - conditions for a consensus among recreational users. Master's thesis, Faculty of Life and Environmental Sciences, University of Iceland, pp. 124. <https://skemman.is/handle/1946/35926>

In his comment, Freyr Þórsson also mentions:

“Megnið af hálendinu verndar sig sjálft í dag þar sem aðgengi er misgott og almennt ekki verið að ota viðkvæmum svæðum að ferðamönnum í miklu magni.”

“Hálendið er víðast hvar fáfarið, fámennt og eins og tíðrætt er um, ósnortin víðerni.

Það að bæta samgöngur og byggja þjónustumiðstöðvar og gestastofur til að draga að aukin fjölda ferðamanna dregur úr óbyggðaupplifuninni og er á vissan hátt láglandsvæðing.

Ég óttast að fáfarin og falleg svæði sem í dag bera nær engin merki um mannfólk önnur en stöku slóða og einn og einn fjallakofa verði meira í líkingu við staði á borð við Landmannalaugar og Skaftafell svo dæmi séu nefnd um staði þar sem vart er þverfótað vegna umferðar og mannfjölda.

Ekki fleiri umferðarmiðstöðvar, uppbyggða vegi, brýr eða önnur stærri mannvirki takk fyrir.

[...] sé ég þetta svo að verið sé að skerða þau gæði sem hálendið er Íslendingum [...].”

The comment from F4x4 is also relevant in this respect:

“Ef náttúran á að fá að njóta vafans þá er það betur gert með því að leyfa hálendinu að vera afskekkt, torsótt og fáfarið, á þann hátt fengist raunhæf öræfakýrrð.”

“Ferðklúbburinn 4x4 leggst almennt gegn uppbyggðum hálendisvegum sem jafnan eru fylgifiskur virkjanaframkvæmda. Það er hins vegar bent á að stækkun eldri virkjana og afmarkaðar framkvæmdir þurfa ekki að leiða til frekari veguppbyggingar og minnkun svæða sem teljast óbyggð víðerni.”

Last, but not least, I would like to quote the mission statement from the Hálendið campaign, which was signed by over 20 recreational and environmental groups:

“Réttur almennings til útivistar og náttúrufræðslu innan þjóðgarðsins skal vera tryggður. Einnig þarf að taka fullt tillit til áratuga sögulegrar nýtingar útivistarfélaga á miðhálendinu og allar nauðsynlegar breytingar sem kunna að eiga sér stað skulu teknar í samráði við fulltrúa þessara hagsmunahópa”

Article 14. Stjórnunar- og verndaráætlun.

An interesting basis to frame to the management of outdoor recreation in the Highland can be the suggestion made by Landvernd to add to the following to the Article 14:

“Reglur um umferðarrétt almennings og aðgengi að svæðinu skulu því aðeinsvíkja frá þeim almennu reglum sem gilda um almannarétt skv. IV. kafli náttúruverndarlaga almannaréttur, útivist og umgengni ef ríkir verndarhagsmunir krefjast þess.”

In connection with my comment on the Article 3, this suggestion by Fjöregg seemed relevant to me to include the protection of travel experience to the Article 14 as shown in bold:

*“Þar skal fjallað um umferðarrétt almennings, aðgengi að svæðinu, **verndun upplifunar**, not þess og takmarkanir sem gilda á einstökum svæðum.”*

Article 18. *Dvöl, umgengni og umferð í Hálendisþjóðgarði.*

The following introduction as suggested by Landvernd seemed relevant to me.

“Almenningi er heimil för um Hálendisþjóðgarð og dvöl þar í lögmætum tilgangi í samræmi við megin reglur almannréttar eins og þær eru skilgreindar í IV. kafla náttúruverndarlaga.”

I found the comment of Landvernd relevant in this respect to give more framing for the regulations:

“Einhverjar af þeim reglugerðum sem fyrirhugað er að ráðherra setji mætti færa til ákvörðunar hjá stjórn þjóðgarðsins, viðkomandi sveitafélagi, umhverfisstofnun eða náttúrufræðistofnun. Ef ákvarðanir eru teknar á lægra stjórnarsýslustigi verða þær kærarlegar til ráðherra.”

Landssamband hestamannafélaga also made an interesting comment as it emphasizes the need to consult impacted stakeholders:

“Gert er ráð fyrir að ráðherra muni setja reglur um m.a. umferð ríðandi vegfarenda um Hálendisþjóðgarðinn. Mikilvægt er að fyrir liggi drög að slíkri reglugerð svo vitað sé hvers konar reglna sé að vænta um umferð innan þjóðgarðsins. Heimild ráðherra til að setja reglugerð um dvöl, umgengni og umferð um þjóðgarðinn virðist galopin og tryggja þarf aðkomu hagsmunahópa að undirbúningsvinnu fyrir slíka reglugerð”

And when it comes to the justifications for closure, I would like to quote Freyr Þórsson:

“Þó ég vilji halda hverjum einasta vegslóða opnum sýni ég því skilning að á einhverjum stöðum þurfi e.t.v. að takmarka umferð, en það skyldi þá gera á mjög afmörkuðum svæðum/leiðum og með haldbærum rökum um ástæður lokunar.”

Note:

Motivations for closures or restrictions can either be to protect natural elements (landscape, geology, ecosystem, habitats); or the experience of travelers (prevent so-called “inter-personal conflicts”). These reasons need to be clearly explained and whenever possible, using guidelines or code of conduct can be better accepted and increase trust or respect. Naturally, most visited places need clear rules, identical for everyone.

Suggestions:

I suggest including to the article 18 the possibility for people to apply for a recreational permit, free of charge, for any situation which would deviate from the rules in place. This trust-based approach would enable a more tailor-made arrangement of the rules while allowing to provide the applicant with certain conditions, information, or advice for places where the enforcement of the rules would usually be impossible. This could for example be used for driving on tracks with limited traffic or camping outside of designated areas in places where this would otherwise not be allowed.

This is an idea that came to my mind following the presentation of the draft for the management plan for Fjallabak Nature Reserve, suggesting very strict rules for remote areas, where hiking outside of trails would be subjected to permit.

Ungir umhverfissinnar also suggested to include a right to appeal closures in the articles 24 and 28 which might be interesting to consider as well.

Article 32. Gjaldtaka.

I am personally reluctant to the use of services fees for parking, toilets, or accommodation, as it implies that the traveler becomes a customer and is entitled to make demands or complains rather than being humble and grateful. I also believe that it reduces the quality of travel experiences when you need to pay wherever you go, especially in an expensive destination such as Iceland.

I have mixed feelings when it comes to fees on bus rides or guided tours (bus and hikes), as it makes it cheaper to be with a rental car and on your own. A daily fee on rental cars would be more appropriate to provide additional funding for tourism infrastructure, information, and roads in the whole country.

However, for certain activities which are very difficult to do without specific services, I am more favorable to the use of such fees. This includes site-specific activities provided by operators such as diving, visiting ice-caves, ice tunnels, lava tubes, and possibly snowmobiling, ATVs or horseback-riding tours. When an activity is operated on a daily basis, the use of such fees might be relevant.

Félag húsbílaeigenda wrote the following on the matter:

Þessi kafli er opinn í alla enda. Þessi kafli er eiginlega ávísun á að þjóðin geti ekki snúið sér við án þess að borga fyrir það. Ég geri mjög alvarlegar athugasemdir við þennan kafla um gjaldtöku. Fólki þykir alveg nóg um að geta ekki ekið inn á bílastæði án þess að það sé búið að gjaldfæra á það háar upphæðir og geta ekki farið á salerni án þess að vera með greiðslukortið á lofti þó ekki komi til rúkkun fyrir draga andann og horfa á jökul. Gætum að okkur og stígum varlega til jarðar. Þetta er EKKI það sem við viljum. Íslendingar borga sína skatta og gjöld og eiga ekki að þurfa greiða skatta margfaldlega gegnum afnotagjöld þjóðgarða.

Comment:

Regarding the financing and funding of the Highland National Park, I would prefer that this would not require the use of fees. There is evidence of the significant contribution of tourism (pre-covid) to the budget of the state with tax revenues. I disagree with the narrative that protected areas “generate” revenues, as only a fraction of the visitation is due to the designation itself or the branding. However, the study in question² showed that protection only represents a fraction of the revenues generated by visitors’ expenditure. Despite a lack of data on this, I would also assume that outdoor recreation is a substantial provider of state revenues (including tax revenues from purchase of outdoor gear, vehicles, fishing equipment etc.).

Last, I would like to add that the designation of the Highland National Park, becoming the largest in Europe can temporarily put Iceland under the spotlights and remind the world of our presence. Such exposure can be beneficial in terms of marketing but would not fundamentally add much to the name of “Iceland” which is already a brand by itself. As such, it is unlikely to lead to a steep increase of tourism visitation in the Highland in my opinion.

² https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/02-Rit--skyrslur-og-skrar/Ahrif_fridlystra_svaeda_5.pdf