

My contribution to the proposed Highland National Park (extension to existing park/s)

My wife and I first experienced Iceland back in 1999, we came as tourists but mainly to watch Rally Reykjavik. It was a stunning experience that was to set our destiny later in life. We then came every year as competitors to that same event, spending our money and experiencing the freedom of the Highland area, where some stages were held.

We made strong friends and when I retired from lecturing in Hospitality and Tourism we decided to retire to Iceland, not many people retire to Iceland, certainly not from the UK.

Why Iceland?

The vast open freedom afforded to us and locals in the highland area, is a major part of the answer. No need for off road driving, just so many tracks and roads. We only ever drove on map identified well used routes. The experience is out of this world.

With our joint 100+ years of hospitality experience it was an easy choice to offer our home to family, friends, friends of friends then tourists. We did this as an official registered business paying out taxes and contributing to the country, in a small way. Then 3 years later I was offered a dream job and one my entire life had, unknowingly, prepared me for, that of a Driver Guide. We now offer this to our own guests, again with registered vehicles and paying our taxes.

Now we may be rare in being retired, sorry semi retired incomers but the concept of what we offer is duplicated many many time over throughout Iceland, by locals and other younger incomers. What makes these small businesses viable as a family business, paying for the family to live, enjoy a quality of live and contribute to society? The answer is free access to the nature of Iceland. Yes in some cases a local fee is paid, taxes are paid, licence fees are paid but we have the ability to offer our Freedom of the Highlands Experience to guests.

Now I have to share some of the sentiment behind the idea of control to the highlands and other areas. I consider myself to be a safe, careful, conscientious driver. At 70+, unlike many of my age, I decided to re-sit my bus and truck driving licenses just ago, to prove to myself and my guests that I was still capable. I compete in 4x4 rallies in the UK and Europe and I have organised such events in Iceland and the UK. I ran a cross country event of 100 miles, yes across the open land, for 12 years in Scotland. I could not have continued to do that if I had no care for the environment. Land owners, DEFRA, SEPA, Forestry Commission and other agencies all scrutinising every dent in the land and splash in the water. (I stopped because I moved to Iceland).

The point of the last paragraph is to show that two apparent opposites can coexist, but there needs to be a base guide, an understanding and a willingness, from both parties, to make it succeed.

I do believe, from my Google Translate, of what is being proposed, is tantamount to a 20 kilo hammer used to open a hazel nut. Yes it will open it, but destroy everything you wished to access. It is impossible to wield the hammer to crack the shell and stop before the nut is damaged.

So it will be to throw the hammer of a full on closed off national park without destroying the very thing that invites tourists to come to Iceland. Many just feel or sense the freedom they have read and heard about, but may not actually step foot into the National park's proposed area. But the sense of our freedom is in their mind. Not every tourist, no matter how many luxury hotels you grant

or 'Special Visas' you offer will be of the category, that rich and discerning. So let us be realistic and accept a whole range of other demographics and social groups will return as tourists.

We are in the situation, which rightly you wish to avoid being added to, of some nature areas having been damaged, but that was brought about by just two factors, both of which lie at the doorstep of politicians.

1. Greed; both by government for that so called tourist dollar and their friends in big business to exploit at any cost, the tourist dollar revenue.
2. Ostrich factor; what problem! Remember at the start, I even wrote an article forewarning of the experience to come, that tourists used nature as a bathroom? What was an official answer from one? "They can use the shops, schools, cafes and homes". Did she open her home?

The point was the country, had allowed uncontrolled numbers to do what they liked, then you worried. Too late. Yes some infrastructure was started and grants offered to local authorities, but on a strange percentage bases and just way too many grants passed out. Consequently their buying value, even with the local authority added part, was never going to solve any one of the problems.

Toilets that sit under power lines but not heated so not useable, or even built then it is discovered the waste system is not correct. Pathways were put into sensitive, heavily trafficked areas. What a great and proper idea. Sadly too little funds and or lack of knowledge. The earth was scrapped away, a plastic mesh laid on a membrane then filled with fine gravel. Sounds good? No No, where is the water soaking away to? The path has no foundation or drainage. I know the Romans never came to Iceland, pity as they knew how to build pathways. The Icelandic version is absolutely treacherous when the frosts come, the water in the path freezes, remember it cannot escape, then the whole track is one long slide. Consequence, well humans do have a good self-preservation system, so they walk up either side of the path.

The answer is a little local knowledge and some easy collected data. What is urgent and has the traffic flow. Spend the money to buy and build a proper solution.

Let me upset a few Icelanders, those that drive in the highlands but seem not to know how to drive. Perhaps because in Iceland you don't drive Off-Road, the underlining knowledge and understand about traction and grip, use of gears, has not been gained by all. From observation the answer always appears to be 'pedal to the metal'. Which may be fun for the driver but actually not for the tourist thrown about and who is also fully aware of the environmental damage. Every time that vehicle lifts body weight the wheels loose traction and spin out the ground, just a 300HP rotavator.

EXCLUSIVE! That is not a new phenonium. 20 years ago I could identify the problem and many tracks OFF the track where visible then, so don't blame it all on the tourist or the new tour drivers. Some so called experts where already attacking the country.

Which brings me back to the Ostrich factor, it was ignored nothing was done and so subliminally it was condoned.

So what would I propose?

Lessons can be learned from other countries with similar tourist numbers and footfall problems. But let us be pragmatic and not live in fantasy land.

Locking off the Highlands for nobody but an elite few with a badge or a horse is not sharing the freedom, that tourists wish for and Icelanders have come to expect. Other countries do not lock off their wilderness against all.

Some trails should have footfall numbers controlled, but make it possible. The lone one or two walkers are free to walk. Groups whether tourist and guide or local walking groups need to book. Like trails in New Zealand and North England. On the trails in Canada, if you wish to camp you must bag out what you take in, that includes your excrement (shit). Heavens above people pick up their dog's poo in bag. It can be done, I have. And sadly not mine, but a necessity around Búðakirkja and Svínafellsjökull.

Not everyone is going to drive to a camp site, it is a fact. Even if they do, the campsite is not safe with power cables everywhere and pitches too close together, no wonder they wish to be away. So allow campers to park overnight at more car parks, they can pay a 2 day fee. BUT only a proper camper is allowed, one with a toilet. Not a small van with their feet out the door. Where is their toilet? So the law is changed and these small van companies have to comply, either with poo bags or a port-a-loo. Let's clean up the country and set a standard.

Was it any wonder that tourist remarked in a survey, Icelanders don't care about their country?

Any company that wishes to take a guest (tourist) into the National park area, must use drivers that have a passed a course on;

- Environmental Car control technique
- Care for the Icelandic environment
- Weather forecasting - weather alternative routes
- Pre Route planning and logging them into a database
- Customer care
- Winter driving

This is NOT to be an exclusive club, only for the big companies or prohibitively expensive. It should be affordable and on-going with CPC, like the C and D license holders. They carry a card and a database should exist.

I think a set number of such permits can exist, some research into past tours would help provide numbers. There should be a quota for each area around the country so the Reykjavik based companies don't own them all. Perhaps even a limit of such licences per company. Thus they are shared out among the individual small business and solo guides.

Every solo guide can apply but they must have a business Kennitella or reference one.

This does not apply to private family trips. In reality not that many Icelandic residents have such a vehicles.

Some routes could be classed for only certain types of vehicles and or the above certified drivers.

Winter driving with paying guests follow the above rules.

How to administer and control

Of course the Police have overriding authority.

Any other agency, ranger, warden or what you wish to call them, CAN NOT automatically issue a fine, ban presence (unless it is felt the driver and the occupants will be in danger), or knowledge of a route issue.

They may photograph the area where they stop the vehicle, take a GPS reference, then photograph the vehicle without identifying the people, record the vehicle number and ask for the driver's Kennitala. Make a short report which is sent into a central website.

Any Utility Agency, power water communications etc, that need to access the Park area must comply with the same requirement as 'tour drivers and vehicles'.

This also applies to all horse or house owners that need to drive into the park area. Too often in other countries it has been found that these groups of people believe it is their right and I don't need this. Sorry yes you do, life changes.

I would wish this to be gradual and acceptable not what is being proposed, as Wham Bang done, and not even a thank you.

With my style of approach, the size of the national park is not so important.

It remains accessible, with some rules and conditions.

Yes this is over simplified but would you have read a full on regulation document running to hundred pages?

Regards to all with this task.

Ian R Sykes,

