Wilderness tourism in Iceland – land use and conflicts with power production

Anna Dóra Sæþórsdóttir
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Candidate’s statement

I certify that the research in this thesis entitled ‘Wilderness tourism in Iceland – land use and conflicts with power production’ has not been previously submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements to any university or institution other than the University of Oulu. I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and that it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been appropriately acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

____________________________________

Anna Dóra Saþórsdóttir
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Abstract

Wilderness tourism in Iceland – land use and conflicts with power production

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Keywords: tourism, wilderness, wilderness tourism, nature-based tourism, Highlands, power plants, impact assessment, natural resources, planning, land-use, hydropower, geothermal power, Iceland.

During the last century interest in nature-based and wilderness tourism has increased and attitudes towards wilderness areas changed significantly. Landscapes with mountains and wilderness have become playgrounds for adventure seeking tourists and an important resource for the tourism industry. Visitors travel into the wilderness to experience naturalness, primitiveness and solitude, and it is important to maintain these qualities. This is often difficult when wilderness areas become known as tourist destinations as crowding and environmental damage can reduce these qualities.

Tourism in Iceland has grown rapidly in recent decades and nature and wilderness is the main attraction. But as well as being an important resource for the tourist industry, wilderness and natural areas are also very valuable for hydro-electric and geothermal power production. During the latter half of the last century several glacier-fed rivers in the Highlands have been dammed and hydropower plants built. Now there are plans for further exploitation at many of the major glacial rivers in the Highlands, as well as for more power plants at several of the biggest geothermal areas. However, both power plant development and increased tourism reduces the naturalness of a place and to maintain nature-based and wilderness tourism alongside other developments requires that the development sites be carefully chosen.

The purpose of this thesis is to improve understanding of nature-based and wilderness tourism experience in Iceland and analyse the conflicts that could occur between tourism and the power production industry in natural areas. The thesis introduces a methodological framework to evaluate the effect of proposed power plants on nature-based tourism which was developed in a project called Master plan for geothermal and hydropower development and was carried out for the Icelandic government. Mixed methods were used in the thesis with empirical case studies that combine questionnaire surveys, semi-structured interviews and diaries as well as a system approach, the Delphi method and the Analytic Hierarchy Process.

The results show that in general nature tourists are satisfied with their nature experience in Iceland. However, some warning signals are emerging with respect to visitor satisfaction. For example over 20% of the visitors, in Landmannalaugar, which is the most popular Highland destination and in Skátafell national park experiencing crowding. Nevertheless, the majority of tourists in the uninhabited Highlands in the centre of Iceland are very satisfied with the primitive conditions there and want less development and service
than guests in the lowlands. They also prefer to travel in as natural an environment as possible. In the minds of tourists, the Highlands are wilderness and even though human influence there has been considerable, most of the visitors still experience the area as unspoilt wilderness. This demonstrates that the visitors in the Highlands see what they want to see and they create and maintain in their minds an image of the Highlands as a wilderness destination. This social construction of the wilderness in Iceland reflects how wilderness is arguably now more a subjective idea than an empirical reality. It is an idea sustained by the tourist industry, as well as by the tourists themselves.

This thesis demonstrates that any power plant developments in the Highlands will have profound implications for the wilderness experience and its social construction with potentially profound implications for the future of nature-based and wilderness tourism in Iceland. The construction of power plants reduces the main qualities of wilderness, primitiveness, naturalness, and remoteness. The effects of power plants reach much further than to the actual construction region of the power plant as improved roads are unavoidable for their construction. Accessibility has a major effects on what kind of tourism develops, what kind of tourists visit the area and to what extent the area is visited. When accessibility increases highly sensitive wilderness areas can become mass tourism destinations. Due to the importance of the Highlands for wilderness tourism, it is desirable to limit power plant constructions there – and limited accessibility is a simple way of preventing crowding and overuse of the resource. The research presented in this thesis on wilderness tourism should, give the tourism industry an important input to the discussions about a long-term sustainable use of land in the Highlands of Iceland.
Ferðamennska á víðurnum Íslands – landnýting og hagsmunaárekstrar við orkuvinnslu

Sæþórsdóttir, Anna Dóra, Landafraðideild, Háskólinn í Oulu, 2011

Lykilorð: ferðamennska, víðurni, náttúruferðamennska, hálendi, orkuver, umhverfismat, náttúruauðlindir, skipulag, landnýting, vatnsorka, jarðvarmaorka, Ísland

Undanfarna áratugi hefur náttúruferðamennska og ferðamennska á víðurnum aukist og viðhorf til slikra svæða breyst mikið. Ferðamenn á víðurnum sækjast eftir viðfrumstæðar aðstæður, ásamt því að ferðast einir eða í góðra manna höpi. Viðurni hafa breyst í leikvöll ferðamanna sem þyrstir í ævintýri og eru þar með orðin að mikilvægri auðlind fyrir ferðabjönumstuna sem yfir að að varðveita eiginleika þeirra. Það getur hins vegar reynst eftirt þegar viðurni verða vinsælir ferðarnastaðir því mannegörg og röskun á umhverfinu geta dreifoð úr þessum eiginleikum.

Ferðabjönumsta á Íslandi hefur vaxið hratt á undanförnum áratugum og helstu auðlindir hennar eru fjölbreytt náttúra og viðurni. En viðurnin og náttúran eru ekki einungis mikilvæg auðlind ferðabjönumstunnar, heldur geta þau nýst til orkuframleiðanda. Á seinni hluta síðustu aldar voru nokkrar jöklur á hálendinu víkjaðar og nú eru uppi hugmyndir um að virka fleiri jöklur auk jarðvarmavirkjanir á helstu jarðhitasvæðum hálendisins. Hvort tveggja, orkuvinnsla og aukin ferðabjönumsta, dregur hins vegar úr náttúrulegum eginleikum svæðis þannig að ef nýta skal hálendið áfram fyrir náttúruferðamennsku, sem gerir miklar kröfur um lítt raskað umhverfi, þarf að velja framkvæmdasvæði af kostgæfni.

Í þessari ritgerð eru kynntar niðurstöður rannsóknna á náttúruferðamennsku og ferðamennsku á hálendi Íslands og greindir þeir árekstrar sem upp geta komið milli ferðamennska og orkuvinnslu á þeim snortnum náttúrusvæðum. Kynnt er aðferð sem búa til í Rammaáætlun um vernd og nýtingu náttúrsvæða með áherslu á vatnsafl og jarðhitasvæði og metur áhrit fyrirhugdru orkuvera á náttúruferðamennsku. Í rannsóknunum er bót margi konar aðferðir, svo sem spurningalistum, þeirfjölda viðöldum og dagbókarfærslum, auk þess sem notað er við kerfisgreiningu, Delphi- aðferðina og AHP-prepargreiningu.

Niðurstöður rannsóknanna leiða í ljós að ferðamenn eru ánægðir með upplifun sínar af náttúru Íslands. Ýmsar blikur eru hins vegar á lofti. Til dæmis upplifa 20% ferðamanna í Landamannalaugum, vinsælsta áfangastað ferðamanna á hálendinu, og í þjóðgarðinum Skáftafelli, að ferðamenn þar séu of margir. Prátt fyrir það er mikil meirihlutur ferðamanna á hálendinu ánægður með þær frumstæðu aðstæður sem þar eru og kýs minni uppbyggingu og þjónustu en ferðamenn á láglendinu. Ferðamenn á hálendinu kjósa einnig að ferðast um eins náttúrulegt umhverfi og kostur er. Í hugum ferðamanna er hálendið viðurni og
Þrátt fyrir að mannshöndin hafi komið þar viða við upplifa flestir gestanna svæðið sem viðerni. Þetta sýnir að gestir hálendisins sjá það sem þeir vilja sjá og búa til og viðhalda í hugum sér ímyndinni um hálendið sem viðerni. Þessi félagslega smíð um öbyggðir Íslands endurspeglar hvormig viðerið eru að mórgu leyti huglæg nálgun en ekki hlutlægur raunveruleiki. Þetta er hugmynd sem ferðajónustan viðheldur ásamt ferðamönnum sjálfum.

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List of publications

This thesis is based on the following five articles:


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