

Thinking Skills Resource: Perspectives on Sustainability in Iceland

Interpret, analyse and evaluate contemporary Icelandic issues



What have been the benefits of increased tourism in Iceland **for locals and visitors?**

ARI TRAUSTI GUÐMUNDSSON – Member and former presidential candidate of Icelandic Parliament

Tourism is already the largest sector in the Icelandic economy. In general, the income has helped the Icelanders to get back on their feet after the very serious economic crash in 2008. In many regions, tourism has strengthened the local economy and spurred innovation.

ASDIS DOGG OMARSDOTTIR – Guide and Co-founder of Asgard Beyond, an Icelandic trekking and nature adventure company

One of the benefits of increased tourism in Iceland on a professional level is that more visitors who are interested in the products offered by Asgard are visiting Iceland. And that allows us to work on something we are extremely passionate about, namely travelling and mountain sports. It's amazing to be able to share with our guests what we love to do, and the nature and environment we love.

Another benefit of increased tourism, on a broader scale, is that it forces the tourism industry in Iceland to develop. But I think it is necessary that, as the number of visitors grows, we continue to develop better standards around businesses, and live up to international standards. And it seems to be happening now, slowly but rather steadily.

On a personal level if we use central Reykjavík as an example, there are now more restaurants and bars of all shapes and sizes. Icelandic designers hold a better chance of selling their products in beautiful speciality shops. The crowd on the streets is more diverse, new interesting museums and exhibitions pop up and the number of concerts and festivals rises every year. And in the countryside the same thing is happening, though it's happening more slowly and on a smaller scale. Infrastructure is being developed and that opens up more opportunities of visiting places which have been left out, helping guests who are interested, to discover a more wholistic view of Iceland.

INGA HLIN PALSDOTTIR – Director, Visit Iceland

Tourism has played a major role in Iceland's economic recovery and growth in recent years, building a foreign trade surplus and creating new businesses and jobs throughout the country.

The total number of people working in activities related to tourism was around 25,000 in 2016, which is about 14% of the Icelandic workforce. The social benefits are a little more difficult to quantify, but the growing number of visitors has strengthened various local services and cultural activities around the country, to the benefit of residents and visitors alike. New restaurants, more options for entertainment and new or newly refurbished buildings, these are all examples of indirect benefits of tourism.

NICK TAYLOR – Geography Teacher and School Group Tour Leader to Iceland

Increased tourism in Iceland has seen for me, the development of many new attractions and opportunities to explore, such as glasshouse horticulture, geothermal power stations, dairy farms with onsite ice cream and skyr production etc. Also with greater tourist numbers, there has been an increase in the number of places to stay and eat.

One of the most important consequences of increased tourism is better health and safety warning and provision at popular sites. A good example of this is at Gullfoss where signage and barriers give greater protection in poor weather conditions.

ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1:

Use the sources above to list as many benefits of increased tourism in Iceland as you can?

ACTIVITY 2:

Why do these people see different benefits?

Extension: Categorise which benefits you expect will be short term gains and which will be long term gains.

What problems has increased tourism caused **for locals and visitors?**

ARI TRAUSTI GUÐMUNDSSON – Member and former presidential candidate of Icelandic Parliament

The increase in the annual number of tourists, in total and in the summer season, has been too fast. Iceland is no longer a country based on two or three industries and many are employed in various new industries. The nation is very small, just 340,000 people. The infrastructure has been based on a moderate number of visitors (500,000 in 2010) however in 2017 we've had to accommodate approximately 2.5 million visitors. This not only puts a lot of very high pressure on the environment but also raises food and housing costs. There is also a strain on the road system, health care and law enforcement to manage this influx of people. Finally, there is also pressure on re-organising the official network, income and legislation for tourism.

NICK TAYLOR – Geography Teacher and School Group Tour Leader to Iceland

Increased tourism has seen greater numbers of people concentrated at the 'honeypot' attractions and car parks are often near full to capacity. Groups have to be led carefully to be kept together to maximise the benefits of the experience and ensure personal safety at places such as Seljalandsfoss. I have found that greater thought is required to deliver a school trip itinerary that ensures the same quality of experience.

It is also worth noting, that whilst there are busier spots we need to keep some perspective. Iceland is no where near as busy as other major tourist destinations, such as the Lake District! However, other tourist destinations, which have been established for longer have better infrastructure to manage the footfall. With care and timing the congestion can be partly avoided.

INGA HLIN PALSDOTTIR - Director, Visit Iceland

The issues are not so much caused by the volume of tourists, rather the rate in which tourism has grown, especially in concentrated areas. This has inevitably meant we have had to adapt our infrastructure and policy in competition with time. However, there are signs that tourism growth is starting to slow down, meaning we will be in a better position to adapt to change. The increased strain is most evident in the southwestern part of the country due to the location of Keflavik International Airport and the fact that many popular natural attractions are located here. Research indicates growing negativity towards overcrowding at specific sites at specific times during high season. However, according to surveys, tourist satisfaction in general remains very high and locals' attitudes towards tourism also remain positive.

Examples of other recent issues affected by the growth in tourism are the appreciation of our currency, the Icelandic Króna (ISK), which has made Iceland a more expensive destination to visit. Also thanks to the rise of the sharing economy with services like Airbnb, there is an increased pressure on the housing market.

ASDIS DOGG OMARSDOTTIR – Guide and Co-founder of Asgard Beyond, an Icelandic trekking and nature adventure company

Firstly, the Icelandic nature is very delicate. And even though I would say it is still mostly almost untouched and well, there are certain popular "hot spots" that suffer. Fortunately, awareness has been raised in the last few years, so precautions are being made to stop, and even reverse the process. The beautiful and wild Icelandic Nature is one of Asgard's biggest assets, so we are highly concerned.

And on a more personal note, Icelanders are getting a bit lost in the number of foreign visitors. Some guests tell us that we are the first Icelanders they meet during their stay, and some have been here for a few days when the comment comes. We are a small nation, and it really tests our character to all of a sudden live amongst so many guests, so that really is a challenge! We need to be careful of not looking at the negative side of this, but harvest it in our advantage. It's common knowledge that, in general, people fear change, but luckily, Icelanders are very proud of our origins and are happy to represent our home country to our diverse guests.

ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1:

Using the sources above, list as many negative impacts of tourism in Iceland as you can.

ACTIVITY 2:

Which do you think is the most negative impact and which is the least negative? Justify your decisions.

Extension: Choose one of the people above and think of one way you would try and prevent or resolve these negative impacts.

What are you doing to minimise the environmental impact of tourists in Iceland?

ARI TRAUSTI GUÐMUNDSSON – Member and former presidential candidate of Icelandic Parliament

Besides dealing with the sheer number of visitors, at many localities, in whole regions or, as a result, the total number that is possible to serve in Iceland, a detailed future sustainability plan is needed. It has to take the size of the island into account, its partly unique Arctic environment as well as people available to work in the industry, into account. Furthermore, we have to find ways to open up new areas to tourists and decide a fairer distribution of the income from tourism.

INGA HLIN PALSDOTTIR – Director, Visit Iceland

The main challenge going forward is to maximize the gains from tourism for the population while protecting the natural and cultural assets it builds upon. Iceland has a 'Road Map for Tourism in Iceland 2015-2020' which identifies seven priority areas that reflect the main challenges for tourism in Iceland including promoting nature conservation and furthering the distribution of tourists around the country to take pressure off the 'hot spots' which are suffering the most. Following the publication of the Road Map, a temporary Tourism Task Force was established to put the 'Road Map' into action. This task force includes Ministers responsible for tourism, finance, environment and transport as well as representatives from the travel industry and local authorities. Several actions in the 'Road Map' have already been implemented, including the Route Development Fund designed to encourage direct international flights to airports in North and East Iceland to encourage visitors to the less frequently visited side of the island. Other important initiatives are in the making such as a 12-year National Infrastructure Plan which will, together with the already existing and boosted Tourist Site Protection Fund, make infrastructure development at major tourist sites more efficient.

Marketing is furthermore an important management tool to support the overall goals for the tourism sector. Inspired by Iceland has already increased tourism in the winter months which will help reduce seasonality for the economy and take some pressure off the peak season. Marketing is also used to educate visitors on Iceland's fragile nature and how to travel responsibly. The most recent example is the A-Ö of Iceland campaign, which is designed to showcase the individuality of each of Iceland's seven regions and to explore the diversity and breadth of the country.

NICK TAYLOR – Geography Teacher and School Group Tour Leader to Iceland

Personally, I am passionate about reducing the environmental impact of visitors to Iceland. Timing of visits to particular sites can reduce congestion and the potential for damage. A late or early stop at some sites helps to enhance the experience for the visitor but also reduces the concentration of footfall. Being vigilant about litter, particularly at windy picnic sites helps to reduce environmental impact. Careful group control is needed, to ensure sticking tightly to footpaths in the many wild locations and is essential to reduce erosion and despoliation.

ASDIS DOGG OMARSDOTTIR – Guide and Co-founder of Asgard Beyond, an Icelandic trekking and nature adventure company

Asgard only offers small group departures. It means that our guides can very well manage our guests, and help them travel in the most responsible way on our tours. Small groups have less impact on the environment than bigger ones and also means we're in a position to have educational dialog with our guests about responsible travelling. One of our hot topics is bottled water, we ask visitors to bring a bottle they can fill up again and again. The tap water here is much better than the bottled water that tastes like plastic.

Our vehicles are all as small as possible, and as fuel economic as possible. In our office we recycle, minimize printing and use environmentally friendly products as much as we can. We buy local products where possible and try only to use companies we trust to also be environmentally friendly in their operation. It's a challenging task, but somehow it is in our Icelandic DNA to respect the environment, so it comes quite naturally.

ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1:

Using the sources above outline the ways that the government, visitors and local workers are able to mitigate risks to the environment.

ACTIVITY 2:

Starting from the day of departure, how could a school trip of students cause a negative environmental impact on Iceland's environment?

Extension: Two of the speakers mention infrastructure. What elements will be included in 'infrastructure'? Make a table of pros and cons to developing Icelandic infrastructure. Use this to evaluate the balance of pros and cons.

Can you identify **who said what?**

It is evident that nature is the major attraction in Iceland plus the large, open, not too frequented spaces, so characteristic of Iceland. It is a tricky balance to both use and preserve nature. Facing the fact that the resources (natural, social and economic) in Iceland are limited, the main challenges are to determine an annually revised growth limit for the industry (local and over-all) and determine various ways to implement control. This is in fact what the policy of sustainable tourism means. Several Icelandic governments have put that forward as the base for tourism.

The unique tectonic setting and geography of Iceland is what essentially attracts tourists. While the nightlife of Reykjavík may draw many, it is the hostile impact of the geological forces that ravage this landscape and shape the character of the people, who cling to this rock for existence in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. The lucky visitor at the appropriate time of year, will see four seasons over a couple of hours and the landscape beautifully enhanced. Who cannot believe in the unstoppable tectonic strain experienced by Iceland when visiting Thingvellir. Europe and the wider world saw Eyjafjallajökull making her presence felt. Frequent visitors to Iceland are the lucky ones, for they see a dynamic landscape in operation. No two visits are ever the same, Iceland always has something new to show.

Ari Trausti Guðmundsson
Member and former presidential candidate
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Most tourists by far (around 80%) visit Iceland because of its natural attractions. Seasonality remains high in other parts of the country; thus another focus area is on raising awareness of the wider regional destinations on offer, in order to stimulate growth in rural areas. The most recent example is the A-Ö of Iceland campaign, which is designed to showcase the individuality of each of Iceland's seven regions and to explore the diversity and breadth of the country.

In my mind, the volcanism which produces lava fields, black sand beaches and vast wilderness is the reason Iceland is such a popular destination. It produces immensely beautiful landscape which is on display without any interruption, due to the absence of trees. Not to mention occasional volcanic eruption which puts us in the media spotlight of international media. This is an exciting environment, but a great challenge at the same time. Now for instance, 5 of Iceland's biggest volcanoes have been reminding us they are still awake, shaking the earth around them (minor earthquakes) as magma might be rising in their magma chambers. It does not affect our daily lives with anything else than excitement, but unforeseen events can occur and would affect our business.

Extension: Which two speakers have the most conflicting views? Explain why you picked them. Plan for one idea that could solve conflict between the two perspectives.