

ICELANDIC HIGHLANDS

Hálandi Islands

The protection of the Icelandic highlands has been called the largest environmental movement Iceland has ever seen, both in terms of conservation policy and sheer land mass. Árni Finnsson, of the Iceland Nature Conservation Association, says it could not have happened without support from the WWF Arctic Programme.

STORY: ÁRNI FINNSSON PHOTO: GUNNAR ÞÓR NILSEN

Vatnajökull Glacier National Park was established in June 2008, covering roughly 15,000 square kilometers, or 13 percent of Iceland. It is already the largest national park in Europe, with plans to add the Langisjór Lake area to the park in conjunction with a government confirmed conservation and management plan for the park, which will be effective for the next 10 years. Another reserve, Skaftafell National Park, established in 1967 with financial assistance from WWF is also included in that plan.

This environmental success story began in 1997, when the Iceland Nature Conservation Association was established with the primary objective of conserving and protecting Iceland's wilderness. INCA's goal was to establish a national park in the highlands, encompassing



Árni Finnsson is the chairman of the Nature Conservation Association of Iceland.

some 40 per cent of Iceland's total land mass of about 100,000 square kilometers.


The idea of Vatnajökull Glacial Park had been introduced in a parliamentary resolution some years earlier in response to development plans for a huge hydropower plant north of the glacier. To begin with, the Park was only to include the glacier itself, but with WWF support, the demand for enlarging the Park with one of Iceland's most powerful glacial rivers and its tributaries gained support. WWF pressure was instrumental in convincing the Icelandic authorities that such a park would benefit local communities, the national economy and Iceland's image. In October 2002, a committee of MP's was appointed by the Minister for the Environment, delivering its proposal for the park in May 2004.

A new law on the Vatnajökull National Park was adopted unanimously by the Icelandic Parliament in 2007.

Since then, public support for conservation has grown considerably. An opinion poll conducted by Gallup Iceland in 2004 on behalf of INCA, showed that 69.7 percent of Icelanders were in support a new national park, north of the Vatnajökull Glacier, 11.5 percent were opposed and 18.8 percent undecided. Likewise, 66.6 percent were in favour of protecting Jökulsá á Fjöllum, the only glacial river left north of the glacier, previously slated for development, 14.7 percent were against and 18.7 percent undecided. This demonstrated a very strong public support for conservation and for a new national park north of the glacier.

This year, Althingi, the Icelandic Parliament, will adopt a resolution

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setting out a Master Plan for Hydro and Geothermal Energy Resources and Conservation. This Master Plan will call for the protection of large, valuable areas in the Highlands. Although some of the areas are still being contested, the scientific and economic assessment is clear and strong in favour of conservation. Thus, that primary objective of INCA, to protect the Icelandic Highlands, wasn't such a long shot.

STRONG PUBLIC SUPPORT

According to an opinion poll which Capacent Gallup conducted for an informal alliance of conservation NGOs in October 2011, 56% of the respondents were in favour of establishing a national park in the highlands, only 18% were opposed while 26% were undecided. 🌱

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ISSN 2298-1926



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