



# “I love Iceland – please keep it conserved”



Carrying out the visitor survey in Eldhraun parking “Pocket” 2017

ELDHAUN  
SKAFTÁRHREPPUR  
ICELAND

## What can we learn from visitors’ experience – and can we use that information for policymaking and planning of a tourist site?

*Eldhraun (Fire Lava, 565 km<sup>2</sup>), the vast lava field in the south of the Icelandic highlands, was created in one of the greatest eruptions in historical times and on earth. The lava came up in an eruption that lasted from 1783 to 1784 and is known as Skaftáreldar. This was a cataclysmic event and effected a great share of Europe – it led to disease and famine in Iceland, caused the “Sand summer” in Great Britain, and may even have contributed to the French revolution.*

Besides its historical and geological significance, Eldhraun is unique for its characteristic moss and thickness. Therefore, a great part of Eldhraun is a natural monument due to geological formation and vegetation, protected by the Icelandic Nature Conservation Act. It is also part of Katla UNESCO Geopark, and part of the lava is also within Vatnajökull National Park.

Tourism in Eldhraun mainly evolves around the Icelandic South coast main road. In some ways it’s like a drive through with few stops and parkings for the majority of foreign tourists heading for Skaftafell and Jökullsárlón glacier lagoon, 70 – 120 km further

east. The most popular stop is known as the “Pocket” parking and viewpoint, which has been the focus point of the ASCENT project in Iceland. It is difficult to estimate visit numbers there but like tourism in Iceland in general the numbers have been increasing drastically. For example, a very close by Fjaðrarárgljúfur canyon (a very popular tourist site) had close to 300 thousand visitors per year 2017, growing 75% between years.

The Eldhraun “Pocket” site is in need of policy and planning. SCSi developed and trialed a visitor survey in cooperation with Skaftárhreppur. The objective was to see if the method

could give a deeper understanding of the visitors’ experience, emphasizing on footpaths and infrastructure in the vast lava field of Eldhraun. The purpose was to find ideas for further development of a local policy for infrastructure – mainly footpaths. Participants were given a simple A4 handout with questions either in Icelandic or English, based on whether Icelandic or foreign visitors were involved, with predefined options to be filled out. The questions included background information, questions regarding experience of the site, general knowledge on the history of the site, preferable sites and experiences visitors were seeking.

# Outcome

Although the survey only reached 154 participants, the majority of them being foreign tourists, over a short period of time, in one single place, the interpretation of results however gives some conclusive evidence that could be useful for policymaking and planning.

Generally, visitors were pleased with their overall experience of the site and the quality of the nature, though roughly half of them noticed degradation of land and vegetation. Most visitors seemed pleased with the paths and the infrastructure and liked the gravel or rock surface layer. A quarter of participants wanted the paths to be untouched, which is interesting considering how difficult it can be walking in lava, but few mentioned asphalt or timber boardwalks. Hardly any mentioned plastic or grids. Regarding infrastructure, few comments were made about the

lack of toilets and information.

When asked about architecture of infrastructure on natural sites, interestingly visitors prefer "environmental" or "traditional" style of architecture. In a comparable survey at Úlfarsfell Mountain (the other Icelandic ASCENT site), where 90% of participants were Icelanders, the results were different, only 56% choosing natural/environmentally friendly architecture. Though architecture was not the main topic of the survey, the results to the question give a clue that tourists do not come to Iceland to see modern architecture, but traditional and environmental. This should call for further research, the survey was far from adequate so the results should not be taken too seriously, but it should be food for thought for policymaking.

## The characteristic and endless moss of Eldhraun

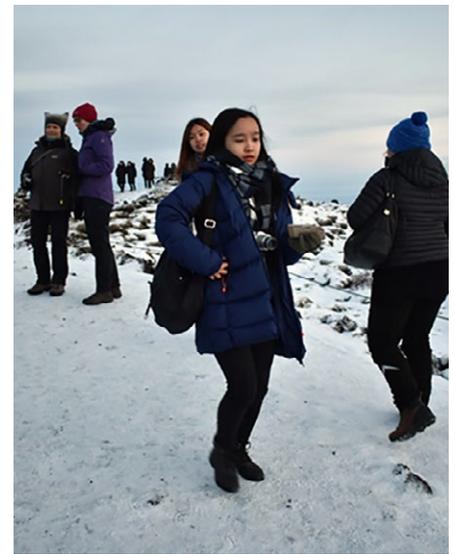


### FURTHER INFORMATION

Contact details: Davíð Arnar Stefánsson  
Project Manager  
Soil Conservation Service of Iceland (SCSI)

e-mail: david@land.is  
mobile +354 488 3083

[www.ascent-project.eu](http://www.ascent-project.eu)



## Key Findings & Learning Points

A simple visitor survey can produce important information for planning and designing of footpaths and infrastructure. However, it is important to exercise standard rules and practices that are customary for such surveys.

The questions, their presentation, sampling and location, must be carefully thought of and executed for them to be of significance. Any flaws can result in them being written off by stakeholders.

What also must be taken into account is that foreign visitors and local visitors may produce very different information. The nature of the places – natural/landscape and land use vice – is also a variable which can affect the results. Therefore, visitors surveys must be site specific.