Tourism Industry Attitudes towards National Parks and Wilderness: A Case Study from the Icelandic Central Highlands

Anna Dóra Sæþórsdóttir *, Margrét Wendt and Rannveig Ólafsdóttir

Department of Geography and Tourism Studies, Institute of Life and Environmental Sciences, University of Iceland, 101 Reykjavík, Iceland

* Correspondence: annadora@hi.is

Abstract: National parks serve a dual purpose: they aim to protect pristine nature and they are intended to facilitate visitation and provide necessary services. However, as visitation increases, it becomes challenging to establish a balance between visitation and the preservation of nature. This paper aims to examine the attitudes of tourism service providers in Iceland towards a proposed national park in the Central Highlands of Iceland, where pristine nature and wilderness are the main attraction, as well as the grounds for conservation. A mixed methodological approach was applied with an online questionnaire survey among all day-tour operators and travel agencies in Iceland, along with 48 semi-structured interviews as follow-up for a deeper understanding. In total, 382 companies answered the online survey, representing a 40% response rate. The results demonstrate that there are mixed opinions on whether the establishment of a national park is the best way to maintain the qualities of the area, with various arguments for and against the national park. Nevertheless, most tourism service providers want to have a say in its governance. It is however important to remember that the tourism industry exploits nature as a market-driven commodity, as its voice must always be evaluated in light of this.

Keywords: national park; protected area; tourism industry; nature-based tourism; nature conservation; governance; Iceland; Central Highlands; Central Highlands national park

1. Introduction

Protected areas (PAs) play a fundamental role in nature conservation, with their primary aim of protecting nature from human exploitation. One exception of human interference is, however, generally accepted, namely the tourism industry [1–3]. During the past few decades, nature-based tourism in PAs has grown to be an important economic activity worldwide, and it currently makes up a large part of the international tourism industry. Pristine nature and wilderness are one of the most valuable resources for the tourism industry in PAs. Consequently, neoliberal economic reasons are increasingly being used as a justification for nature conservation and have become a critical factor in many PAs’ designation [3–8]. PAs have been divided into several categories, one of them being national parks (NPs). Traditionally, NPs have two main aims, i.e., to preserve fragile environments and simultaneously provide a venue for people to enjoy pristine nature and cultural heritage [3]. The first NPs were founded in the United States of America and Canada in the late 19th century, mainly in areas that were aesthetically pleasing with sublime landscapes [9]. These first NPs were also the first areas in the world in which large areas of wilderness were preserved [10].

Over time, NPs have grown to be popular areas for outdoor recreation and tourism and progressively have created an image of unique and special natural areas attracting more and more tourists [11–13]. Accordingly, the tourism industry uses NPs as a commodity and marketing tool for the purpose of increasing business. The increased popularity has on the other hand led to a decline in the qualities of wilderness and pristine nature in many NPs, as
tourists’ visitation has a wide range of negative environmental impacts, such as ecosystem degradation, water and air pollution, and wildlife disturbance [2]. In addition, tourists’ visitation affects land use in general as it demands various infrastructures. The question of whether or not to establish an NP and how to manage such a park is thus critical with respect to land use given the added challenge of achieving a recognized balance between the NP’s conflicting objectives of nature conservation and use of visitors [14–16].

However, due to the ever-increasing popularity of wilderness areas, they must inevitably be managed, despite the fact that wilderness areas are conventionally and by etymology uncontrolled [10]. It is likewise vital to manage and plan tourism development in NPs in order to sustain their wilderness quality.

This paper attempts to evaluate whether an NP is the best means for sustaining wilderness as a resource for the tourism industry. It focuses on the Icelandic Central Highlands, a large uninhabited area characterized by vast wilderness and remoteness. During the past few decades, tourism has become Iceland’s largest export sector [17], with pristine nature being the country’s main tourist attraction [18]. The Icelandic tourism industry is thus an important stakeholder in the utilization of the country’s wild and pristine nature, and likewise in its protection. Therefore, Iceland provides a valuable case for examining the symbiotic relationship between nature-based tourism and nature conservation. The general aims of this paper are to examine the attitudes of tourism service providers towards a proposed NP in the Central Highlands of Iceland, where pristine nature and wilderness are an important part of the area’s attraction, as well as for the grounds of conservation. Specific aims are to analyze conflicting views among tourism service providers regarding nature protection via NPs which comes with management and regulations, and thus restrictions for their businesses, but at the same time enhances protection of their main resource. Furthermore, this study aims to discuss these views in light of the ever-increasing coexistence of nature conservation and tourism. By focusing on the view of the tourism service providers which are significant users and important stakeholders with regard to wilderness management, this research adds important knowledge and understanding in the field of land use conflicts.

2. Management and Governance of Protected Areas

The IUCN definition of a protected area is “a clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values” [19]. This definition entails that PAs have diverse goals and as such should, e.g., protect significant landscape features and scenic areas, while also providing recreational and educational opportunities, as well as benefits to the local communities [19]. However, these multiple goals of PAs are often contradictory. Therefore, the establishment and management of PAs is a challenging and contested process, involving various stakeholders, many of which have diverse needs and preferences with regard to the area’s management (e.g., [14,20,21]).

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) [22], “governance comprises the complex mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, mediate their differences and exercise their legal rights and obligations”. As such, governance is fundamentally about power and decision-making. However, how decisions are taken, how stakeholders should have their say, and how decision-makers are held accountable are yet to be answered. In contrast, management refers to the actions and means used to achieve the desired outcome. Thus, management and governance are closely related concepts which according to Borrini-Feyerabend and Hill [23] are often used interchangeably, even though they are distinct phenomena.

In the context of PAs, good governance is a prerequisite for the success of PAs [24,25]. Good governance assists managers in easing tensions between different stakeholder groups and balancing the multiple and at times incompatible goals of PAs [20]. To be successful, it is important that governance achieves a broad consensus in society through the inclusion
of various actors in the decision-making process. According to Eagles et al. [26], the fundamental differences with regard to the various management models for PAs are determined by three factors: (1) the ownership of the resource; (2) the management body; and (3) the income source for management which can be funded through taxes, user fees, and donations [26]. Overall, there is no universal management approach that suits all PAs, as they are embedded in different social, political, and legal structures [27]. Among the most common management models for PAs is the NP model, sometimes also referred to as the American model. It commonly entails that a wide range of stakeholders is involved, with a government agency being responsible for the management of the park [24]. In addition, Nyaupane et al. [20] point out that the development and enforcement of institutional rules are frequently more effective if the rules are built within communities. However, Hanna et al. [21] state that while it is mostly agreed upon that governance should include multiple stakeholders, some fear that such approaches derail the focus away from conservation goals and instead lead to unsustainable practices.

3. National Parks and the Tourism Industry

NPs inevitably affect local communities. On the one hand, they create costs, such as access restrictions or loss of land. On the other hand, they create benefits, including the conservation of fragile nature and wildlife and the creation of recreational opportunities, and they support regional development by creating revenues and jobs [7,8]. These effects, in turn, shape how the protected areas are perceived. According to Allendorf [28], local residents are generally positive towards protected areas. The support is often the strongest for parks that have existed for decades, are rather large, and do not have very strict rules. Lack of trust for NP managers is on the other hand the most consistent predictor of opposition towards neighboring NPs [29].

While there is considerable research on residents’ attitudes towards NPs, less focus has been placed on the attitude of the tourism industry. This is surprising, as the tourism industry is among the key stakeholders concerning the preservation and utilization of natural areas, due to the increasing popularity of nature-based tourism [16]. NPs in particular play an important role in attracting visitors and increasing tourism demand [11–13]. In Sweden, for example, the establishment of the Fulufjället NP in 2002 resulted in a 40% increase in visitation to the area [30]. Another study shows that the establishment of the Hainich NP in Germany contributed to the decision of 40% of visitors to visit the area [31]. Receiving the status of an NP thus serves as a marker and implies that the area is special and worth visiting. In that sense, NPs are “brands” which represent areas of high natural quality [11]. Furthermore, since tourism activities within NPs and in adjacent areas create revenues and jobs for locals, they also contribute to regional development. When deciding whether or not to establish an NP, economic impacts are thus becoming increasingly more important [3]. However, increased tourist visitation to natural areas is a double-edged sword. Tourism growth does not come without pressure on the environment, and if not managed, it threatens the natural quality. Thus, the establishment of NPs can lead to the degradation of the natural resource which should be protected by the park and upon which the tourism industry depends.

Still, there is a lack of research on the attitude of the tourism industry towards the governance and management of NPs. Evidence from two Norwegian studies suggests that the tourism industry would like to be included in the decision-making process concerning NPs [14,25]. Kaltenborn et al. [25] investigated how tourism operators perceived the local governance of an NP, whereas Haukeland [14] explored and compared tourism stakeholders’ perceptions of the management of two NPs in Norway. The participants from both studies criticized the NPs’ management for not involving the tourism industry in the decision-making process. Rather than engaging with tourism businesses and seeking their expertise on the local areas, the NP managers employed an undemocratic process and remained uninformed about developments within the areas. In addition, the tourism stakeholders voiced their concern about access restrictions imposed by the parks’ management and advocated for facilitating access, though only to the extent that the
natural quality of the area would not be threatened. Haukeland [14] furthermore showed that the tourism stakeholders were generally supportive of the idea that the areas should continue to be designated as NPs and believed that the NP status would function well as a brand and marketing tool for the area. However, his results also stress the importance of establishing trust and cooperation between tourism stakeholders and NP managers. Another study [14] compared local tourism interests with traditional rural user interests in Norway. Focusing on two NPs, the study found that both groups were supportive of the NPs’ status. In comparison to traditional rural users, tourism stakeholders were more critical of the parks’ management due to a lack of inclusion in the decision-making process. Tourism stakeholders were also in favor of developing more infrastructure within the park to better meet the needs of visitors, which traditional rural users were skeptical of, as it might change the experience of their environment.

NPs create revenues and jobs for the local community, both through the work associated with nature conservation within the park and through the activities of the tourism industry. When deciding whether or not to establish an NP, its economic impacts are thus also considered. In that context, the term conservation economy is often used and has gained popularity in the discussion about protected areas. The extent of the economic impacts of protected areas varies and depends, e.g., on what type of services are available within or near the NP. A study from Germany showed that tourists in German NPs spend on average less per day than other tourists in Germany since the availability of tourism services is higher in urban areas compared to rural ones [31]. However, a study on Snæfellsnes NP in Iceland revealed significant economic impacts, most of which were due to the increased visitation to the area, but others were related to the NP contributing to a diversification of jobs as well as strengthening the identity of locals [32].

4. Study Area
4.1. Iceland and its National Parks

Iceland is a volcanic island located in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean and has a land mass of about 103,000 km². About a quarter of the country lies below 200 m, and almost all settlement is scattered around the coastline below this altitude, leaving the interior highlands an uninhabited wilderness. The population of the country is about 376,000, of which 63% live in the capital area [33]. The rest live in small towns, in villages, and on farms scattered along the coast.

The number of international tourists visiting Iceland increased 7-fold from the turn of the century until the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world, or from about 300 thousand in the year 2000 to two million in 2019 [34], and the number is expected to reach 2.4 million in 2024 [35]. Accordingly, tourism has become the largest contributor to the Icelandic economy in terms of export earnings [17]. Iceland’s main attraction as a tourist destination is its natural landscape [18], where pristine nature and wilderness play a major role.

The first national park in the country, Þingvellir NP, was established in 1930, first and foremost because of the historical importance of the area, the home of the ancient parliament Alþingi. The next two NPs were Skaftafell in the southeast, founded in 1967, and Jökulsárgljúfur in the northeast, founded in 1973. In both cases, the aim was to protect unique landscapes and nature. The fourth one was Snæfellsnes NP, established in the west in 2001, around Snæfellsnesjökull Glacier, an active stratovolcano, and the neighboring lava fields. At the turn of the century, various ideas appeared around a new NP in the Central Highlands which will be discussed in the next section.

When the NPs in Iceland were established, expectations were that they would be adequately founded so that basic infrastructure development would follow and increase employment, e.g., for NP rangers, as well as that the NP label would attract tourists. Many were thus disappointed as the parks were left underfunded for decades [36]. At that time many of the rural communities in Iceland were experiencing outmigration mainly due to social changes and changed circumstances in the agricultural communities. The biggest
hope for a new economic alternative was seen in the tourism industry [36] which had by then started to increase, but still at a very slow speed.

4.2. The Central Highlands of Iceland

The Central Highlands of Iceland, here referred to as the Highlands, are, as the name suggests, located at the center of the country (Figure 1) covering approximately 40 thousand km², or around 40% of the country’s surface. The area is characterized by a diverse landscape shaped by various geological and geomorphological phenomena, including glaciers, rivers, volcanoes, and geothermal activity. The Highlands are uninhabited and have limited infrastructure, mostly gravel roads, mountain huts, and a few hydropower plants. Designated wilderness areas in Iceland are largely located within the Highlands [37]. During the last few decades, land-use conflicts have gradually increased, mainly between wilderness preservation, power production, sheep grazing, tourism development, and motorized traffic.

The first proposal for a large NP in the Icelandic Central Highlands dates back to 1993 when it was proposed that Vatnajökull glacier, the largest glacier in Iceland, would become an NP [38]. That resulted in the foundation of Vatnajökull NP in 2008 [39], which is largely located within the Central Highlands and covers nearly 15% of Iceland’s surface. Late in 2020, Iceland’s Minister of the Environment, Energy and Climate put forward a parliamentary proposal regarding the foundation of a Central Highlands National Park (CHNP), which would cover over 30% of the country’s surface area (Figure 1). The aim behind the foundation of the CHNP was to protect the area’s nature, including its landscape and wilderness, as well as to create an opportunity for people to get to know the area and enjoy traveling through it.

Figure 1. Border of the proposed Central Highlands National Park [40].
Since the discussion around the foundation of the CHNP, a few surveys regarding the public’s attitude towards the idea have been conducted. From 2011 to 2018, the support for an NP in the Highlands increased from 56% to 63%, and those in opposition decreased from 18% to 10% (Figure 2). After a parliamentary proposal regarding a CHNP was put forward in the Icelandic Parliament, the public’s support decreased and went down to 45% in favor at the beginning of 2021.

Figure 2. Attitudes of Icelanders towards the establishment of a Central Highlands National Park. Summary of surveys 2011–2021 [41–45].

4.3. Regional Planning in the Central Highlands

There are two administrative levels of government in Iceland, the state (central government) and the municipalities (local authorities). The political power of land use is mostly in the hands of the municipalities. The Central Highlands is not a single administrative unit with regard to physical planning but has many adjoining municipalities that have the power of land-use planning. Still, there are some guiding principles put forward in the so-called National Planning Strategy which came into effect in 2016 [46] and its predecessor, the Central Highlands Regional Plan from 1999 [47]. Even so, whether the planning authority of the Highlands should be transferred to the state has long been under dispute in the country.

The primary objective put forward in the National Planning Strategy is the following: “Protect the nature and landscape of the Highlands due to its nature conservation value and importance for outdoor recreation. The uniqueness of the Highlands must be taken into consideration when planning any infrastructure in the Highlands” [46]. Prominence is also given to the conservation of Iceland’s remaining wilderness: “The characteristics and quality of nature in the Highlands should be preserved and an emphasis placed on the protection of wilderness, landscape unities, important biotopes and vegetation, as well as valuable cultural heritage” [46]. Furthermore, it is stated in the National Planning Strategy that “main emphasis should be on the development of tourism infrastructure at the edge of the Highlands and at certain zones adjoined to the main roads crossing the Highlands”. However, in the National Planning Strategy, it also says that “it should be ensured that individuals travelling through the Highlands have access to proper infrastructures and services” [46]. These contrasting goals highlight some of the challenges and intricacies of managing tourism development in wilderness areas. In addition, it is declared in the National Planning Strategy that “maintenance and a further development of the transportation..."
network in the Highlands should aim at good access into the Highlands” [46]. Such an emphasis on accessibility is interesting due to the fact that wilderness characteristics can be preserved through access control and limitations.

Establishing the quantity and types of infrastructure and tourism services that are suitable for the Central Highlands presents further complications. To plan the development of “good facilities” for tourists, while having the objective “not to spoil their wilderness experience”, as declared in the National Planning Strategy [46], is a challenging dilemma.

5. Methods
5.1. Methodological Approach

To examine the tourism service providers’ attitudes towards the proposed CHNP, a mixed methodological approach was applied. A quantitative approach in the form of an online questionnaire survey provided a good overview of the tourism service providers’ views and permitted a generalization of the results. Questionnaire surveys are an important means of collecting quantitative data and have been used extensively in tourism research [48]. In addition, a qualitative approach in the form of semi-structured interviews gave a deeper exploration and understanding of opinions, meanings, and reasons held by the interviewees [49].

5.2. Online Survey

A draft of the online questionnaire survey used was tested for its validity by using a panel of experts from the Icelandic Ministry of the Environment, the Social Science Institute at the University of Iceland, and the Icelandic Travel Industry Association, and its reliability was assessed with a pilot test. Due to the complexity of what the tourism industry consists of and thus a lack of a complete list of the industry, the sample for this study was limited to licensed day-tour operators and travel agencies in Iceland. These stakeholders are also the most likely to be directly affected by decisions regarding the development of the Central Highlands. The Iceland Tourist Board, which grants the aforementioned licenses, provided contact information for the registered day-tour operators and travel agencies, a total of 984 companies. Of them, 32 were excluded from the study due to automatic replies, either stating that the company was no longer operating or that the e-mail could not be delivered, thus reducing the sample to 952. A total of 382 companies answered the survey, which is a response rate of 40.1%. That may be considered high, compared to most online surveys within the field of tourism that have a response rate between 10 and 30% [50]. Since the sample was limited to day-tour operators and travel agencies, the sample does not represent the Icelandic tourism industry as a whole. For instance, the views of employees working in the accommodation sector, in restaurants, or as guides are not reflected in the online survey.

The survey was conducted between 18 November and 17 December 2020. During that time period, two reminders were sent. The survey consisted of 28–34 questions. Participants were asked about the company they worked for, including how many employees the company has and how long it has been operating, and whether or not the company operated within the Central Highlands. Moreover, they were asked to describe the attraction of the Central Highlands and state their opinion on the proposed Central Highlands NP. In addition to a few open questions, the survey consisted mostly of multiple-choice or 5-point Likert scale questions. Statistical analysis was performed using a t-test with a 95% confidence interval.

Of the 382 tourism companies participating in this study, 65% are day-tour operators, 46% are travel agencies, and 9% said that their operation is based on other tourism activities (Table 1). The respondents could choose more than one answer, which explains why the percentages exceed 100%. Around half of the companies have their headquarters in the capital area, 18% in North Iceland, 16% in South Iceland, and the remaining ones in other parts of Iceland. More than half the companies have been operating for less than 10 years, and 30% have been operating for 15 years or longer. Most (74%) of the companies offer tours and services in South Iceland, and almost 60% used the Central Highlands for their
operation. Around half of those who currently do not offer tours in the Central Highlands believe that their company will do so in the future, as many of them also stated that the Central Highlands are attractive to their customers.

Table 1. Characteristics of the tourism companies which participated in the survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of business</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daytour operators</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel agencies</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location of company's headquarters</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capital area</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Iceland</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Iceland</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Iceland</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westfjords</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reykjanes</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Iceland</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of company's operation in years</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 5 years</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 9 years</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 to 14 years</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 to 24 years</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 years or longer</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of full time employees in August 2019</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 to 3</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 to 9</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 to 19</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 or more</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas used by the participating company's</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South Iceland</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Highlands</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Iceland</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Iceland</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital area</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reykjanes</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Iceland</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westfjords</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.3. Semi-Structured Interviews

In order to gain a deeper insight into the individual attitudes and reasonings of tour operators, a total of 48 semi-structured interviews were conducted. The sampling strategy was purposive [51,52], with the aim of interviewing diverse tour operators. As such, the sample includes tour operators from all around Iceland, offering various tours (e.g., horse, hiking, jeep, cycling tours). Moreover, it includes both tour operators which utilize the Central Highlands for their business as well as those who do not. This made it possible not only to gain insight into the current users’ attitudes, but also to shed light on the perceptions of potential future users. The aim was to investigate the interviewees’ individual beliefs, not their companies’ strategies. Most of the interviewees worked for day-tour operators or travel agencies located in the capital area, but the sample also included some accommodations in the Central Highlands or at the edge of the area, which were excluded from the quantitative part of the study.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face in either Icelandic or English. Most interviews lasted around 30 to 60 min. Among the topics covered during the interviews were the perceived attraction of the Central Highlands, their attitude towards tourism infrastructure
development, and their opinion on the proposed CHNP, with special attention being paid to the interviewees’ reasoning concerning their stance on the CHNP. The interviewees were also given the chance to speak freely about topics concerning the Central Highlands that were of importance to them. All of the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using the software Atlas.ti. The analysis was based on a grounded theory approach, using both open and axial coding [53,54].

6. Results

6.1. The Attraction of the Central Highlands

The respondents of the online questionnaire were asked to describe the attraction of the Icelandic Central Highlands for their businesses in an open question. The most common answer was that nature in general was the area’s attraction. Others mentioned the various qualities of nature, specifically the characteristics of the area’s wilderness such as being pristine, a place where one can experience solitude, peace, and freedom which contrasts with the stress associated with life in urban areas where most Western people live (Figure 3).

The findings from the interviews align with the results from the online survey since the interviewees also found nature to be the most important attraction of the Central Highlands. Often, the interviewees specifically mentioned the beauty and diversity of the landscape. Many also described the Central Highlands as a “magical” place due to its “wild and untamed character”. According to the interviewees, the “wilderness character” of the Central Highlands makes the area unique, not only in comparison to other parts of Iceland but also in comparison to natural areas worldwide. One of the interviewees, for example, said:

![Figure 3. The Icelandic Central Highlands’ attraction as evaluated by the tourism companies.](image-url)
[The Central Highlands], that’s the reason Iceland is so special. It’s because we have this untouched wilderness and this gem, the Highlands where you see no man-made structures. You can walk and hike for days, and there is only you and black sand, and you know, glacier rivers. And it’s rare and we should protect it.

Since the area was perceived as unique, the interviewees argued that the tourist experience was also one of a kind: One said: “It’s an adventure that is a little bit exclusive. It’s not mainstream. You’re getting something that not everyone can get.”

The majority of the respondents using the Central Highlands (85%) state the Central Highlands to be either rather or very important for their business (Figure 4). Nearly all (93%) are of the opinion that the Central Highlands are important or very important for the Icelandic tourism industry in general. This is supported by those who did not use the Central Highlands for their operation, as around 73% of them consider the Central Highlands to be important or very important for the industry as a whole. Given the perceived importance of the area for the tourism industry, it is unsurprising that the tour operators expressed the wish to participate in the planning and management of the Central Highlands in the future. However, participation was found more important by tour operators using the Central Highlands (81%) compared to those who do not use the area (51%).

![Figure 4](image-url) The importance of the Icelandic Central Highlands as evaluated by the tourism companies.

6.2. Attitudes towards the Central Highlands National Park

The respondents were asked about their attitude towards the proposed CHNP. The results from the online survey show that around 44% are negative towards the proposed CHNP, 40% positive, and 16% neither positive nor negative toward the proposal (Figure 5). A statistically significant difference is found between the attitudes of respondents from companies utilizing the Central Highlands and those of companies who do not (Table 2). Around 49% of the former have a negative opinion toward the proposed park while 34% are positive. The opposite is the case with the latter, with 35% being negative and 49% being positive toward the proposal. About 16% of the respondents state that they do not have any opinion on the park or are not familiar with its proposal.
Figure 5. Tourism industry attitudes towards the proposed Central Highlands National Park.

Table 2. Analysis of the attitudes towards the proposal of a Central Highlands National Park based on whether the tourism companies use the Central Highlands (CH) for their operations or not.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Avg.</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t-Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do not use CH</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>1.459</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use CH</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>1.523</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a follow-up open question in the online survey, the respondents were asked to give a reason for their attitude towards the proposed NP (Figure 6). Of those who were positive, the majority (67%) mentioned that an NP would contribute toward nature protection and give the opportunity to manage tourism better such as by distributing tourists more evenly across the area and thus reducing the pressure on the most popular destinations. Those who opposed an NP commonly linked it to their previous negative experience of other NPs in Iceland and transferred that experience to the CHNP. Some also said that they feared that the CHNP would lead to access restrictions and other management restrictions of such a park. At the same time, others consider that a positive outcome of a CHNP would be restrictions on tourism activities within the Highlands which they thought would benefit the industry in order to maintain the quality of the experience they are selling their customers.

The interviews gave a deeper understanding of these conflicting views. Access restrictions and the development of infrastructure were among the main factors which shaped many of the interviewees’ opinions. Overall, their attitudes were rather divergent, and it was evident that the interviewees had different ideas about how the park would affect the tourism industry. In part, this was due to their varying level of knowledge of the content of the bill: Some of the participants were familiar with the contents of the bill (e.g., after attending an open official meeting about the CHNP), while others were relying on their general experience with NPs in Iceland. Yet others insisted that there was not enough information available about the CHNP park and thus felt that they were unable to take a stance with the proposal.
Figure 6. Reasons for the tourism industry attitudes towards the Central Highlands National Park.

Those who were in favor of the CHNP stressed the need for nature conservation due to the Central Highlands’ pristine character and its importance for the tourism industry. According to them, the main threats to the Central Highlands stem from the development of various infrastructure, in particular power plants, which degrade the area’s wilderness. Giving the area the status of an NP would result in the creation of a holistic plan which would restrict and prioritize certain infrastructure development or as one of the interviewee said:

A national park has the advantage of raising a set of questions regarding what the suitable development for the entire area is, and that should be a public debate. It is also an opportunity to reflect on all the land uses that are in the area and try to address them in a more comprehensive using a more holistic approach. As of today, the Highlands is just sliced between municipalities who if they want to benefit from their backcountry, they will either want to have their own dam, their own accommodation or tourist attraction or fishing area or whatever. That they can retrieve some sort of financial income out of it. I think this kind of current situation is calling for everyone to look within their own area which part should be developed and which part should be preserved and as such that is kind of leading to a more developer approach of the Highlands, where you have this
project of building up the roads, the development of accommodations, footbridges and this kind of things. Whenever you start to group municipalities together and try to look at the more regional plan, there are more interesting approaches that start to emerge.

Reflected in the above quote is also the argument that the establishment of a CHNP would lead to a distribution of the planning power. Currently, it is only in the hands of the municipalities, and the supporters of the park feared that the municipalities would continue to prioritize economic growth (e.g., through the development of infrastructure) over nature protection. Moreover, the municipalities were said to lack the required knowledge and capabilities to manage the area sustainably. In addition to arguments concerning the governance of the proposed park, its supporters also claimed that the establishment of the CHNP would increase the attraction of Iceland as a tourism destination and thus benefit the tourism industry. At the same time, the CHNP’s establishment would also prompt a management plan with rules and a code of conduct, which would make it easier to control and enforce tourist behavior:

It’s a big area and it’s very difficult to protect it so we need strong regulations. We need to have tools to respond when people are driving off road or even when private ownership is doing something with land that will break up the scenery for very big area, you know. We need tools to do something about it. So, it [the CHNP] is a very good idea. Of course, all regulation needs to be implemented carefully and it needs to consider all sides. But it’s necessary in my opinion, yes.

Compared to the supporters, those who are opposed to the CHNP believed that establishing an NP would not be the best way forward, mainly because it would deprive local municipalities of the planning power and instead manifest the power of “governmental” people in Reykjavík. One interviewee, who was not only a tour operator but also a landowner, said in this regard:

We have taken care of our nature and try to bring it to the next generation as the best we can. Now, the situation in Iceland is that 80 percent of the people that live in Iceland are living in the south west corner [...] Now suddenly these people that are living there [...] they do not trust me anymore to take care of my land [...] My grandfather he took care of this land here. I am born in this land here and I die in this land. [...] These park things are taking it from the people who have taken care of it all their lives, all the generations. Generation, after generation, after generation. Now it’s not good enough what we have done and some agency in Reykjavík or whatever should tell me what is best.

It became evident that the landowners perceived that the establishment of an NP meant that they had been doing something wrong. However, the opponents of the park argued that the locals are best qualified for managing the area due to their familiarity with and knowledge of the area. If the planning power was revoked from the municipalities, they feared that local interests would not be well represented. In light of their experience with other NPs in Iceland, the opponents of the park also said that it would be both complicated and expensive to run an NP this size. They argued that a centrally managed NP would also lead to more bureaucracy, making it for example difficult and time-consuming to receive permission for the development of needed infrastructure:

Let’s say a bridge needs to be built because the river changes its path or someone needs to build a cabin or fix something, to fix a trail, to create a new trail, just to react to the everchanging nature. I’m scared that if all the power is away from the locals and in Reykjavík and the locals can’t change where the bridge is or change something, that it would be just like a mammoth that can’t move, like a big, big ship and you can’t turn it because it’s so big.

If the decision-making power would be concentrated in Reykjavík, the participants also feared that it would lead to—in their mind—unjust and pointless restrictions on tourism activities. Here again, their recent experience with Vatnajökull NP plays a key role. Around the time that the bill on the CHNP was introduced, Vatnajökull NP introduced a
quota system for tourism companies wanting to access the park’s ice caves which sparked substantial criticism. Prior to that, the closure of a mountain passage called Vonarskarð for motorized vehicles created a heated debate. These examples were often mentioned during the interviews to illustrate rules and regulations which would negatively impact the tourism industry. Rather than limiting access, the opponents stressed the importance of maintaining access and freedom of travel within the Central Highlands. They also criticized rules which would restrict the activities of particular groups of tourists (e.g., motorized traffic), while allowing other activities (e.g., hiking) to continue uninterrupted despite their economic impact. Lastly, the opponents also feared that the CHNP would attract more visitors than are currently coming to see the CHNP, which in turn would put more pressure on the natural environment and would not benefit the protection of the Highlands.

6.3. Perceived Impacts of the Establishment of the Central Highlands National Park

In an open question, in the online survey, the respondents were asked to describe the impact they believed that the Central Highlands NP would have on the Icelandic tourism industry. Around 28% claimed that the impacts would be generally positive, 15% said they would be generally negative, and 4% were of the opinion that the park would have no or minimal impact (Figure 7). Others described the impacts in more detail. For instance, around 15% believed that the Central Highlands NP would increase the area’s attraction, of which 11% considered this positive, 1% negative, and 3% neither positive nor negative for the Icelandic tourism industry. Nearly 11% said that more rules and regulations would be implemented alongside the establishment of the park, most of which considered this to be negative for the local tourism industry. Limited access was mentioned by 8%, which was also found negative by most of the respondents. Yet, 4% believed that access would increase, which was mostly found positive. Around 8% said that the NP’s impacts would depend on its management. Lastly, around 5% claimed that the park would promote nature protection, 5% said it would facilitate the development of more infrastructure and services, and 4% believed that it would ease the management and distribution of tourists, all of which were perceived by most as positive impacts.

6.4. Preferences for the Governance of Central Highlands National Park

Most respondents (79%) believed that the management of the Central Highlands NP should be in the hands of various stakeholder representatives (Figure 8). Around 9% preferred the state to manage the NP, and 6% preferred that municipalities would be in charge of the park’s management. Other forms of governing, e.g., through the cooperation of the state and municipalities, were pointed out by 6%.

Furthermore, the respondents were asked to state their opinion on several statements concerning NPs in general (Figure 9). Most (66%) believed that NPs generally attract tourists. Around 60% also agreed with the statements that public investment in NPs is positive for the tourism industry and for nature. In addition, more than half of the respondents supported the statement that NPs generally have positive effects on local communities. With regard to the first two statements, there was a statistically significant difference between the representatives of companies which use the Central Highlands and of those which do not (Table 3).
Figure 7. The tourism companies’ evaluation of the impacts of establishing the Central Highlands National Park on the tourism industry.

Figure 8. Stakeholders who should manage the Central Highlands National Park according to the tourism companies.
Figure 9. Tourism companies’ attitudes towards statements about national parks’ utility.

Table 3. Analysis of tourism companies’ statements about national parks’ utility based on whether the companies use the Central Highlands (CH) for their operations or not.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Avg.</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t-test</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National parks attract tourists</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>1.127</td>
<td>t = 3.041</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the Central Highlands</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>1.353</td>
<td>p = 0.003</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public investment in national parks is positive for the tourism industry</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>1.136</td>
<td>t = 2.029</td>
<td>0.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the Central Highlands</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>1.305</td>
<td>p = 0.043</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public investment in national parks is positive for nature</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>1.224</td>
<td>t = 0.917</td>
<td>0.360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the Central Highlands</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>1.269</td>
<td>p = 0.360</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National parks have positive effects on local communities</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>1.258</td>
<td>t = 1.632</td>
<td>0.104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the Central Highlands</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>1.302</td>
<td>p = 0.104</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Discussion and Conclusions

7.1. Conflicting Views among Tourism Service Providers Regarding National Parks

During the past decades, nature-based tourism has been expanding worldwide, and there are many indications that this growth will continue. NPs have unique nature at their disposal, and one of their major goals is to provide a venue so that people can enjoy that nature. They have therefore become a very desirable playground for the tourism industry. However, as the number of tourists grows, so do their environmental impacts, including pressure on pristine nature and wilderness. This dual role of NPs, to protect nature but at the same time welcome tourists to enjoy the very same nature they protect, thus clearly creates a breeding ground for conflicts. As an example of a classic conflict between nature conservation and the tourism industry, Frost and Hall [55] mention the demand of the industry for improved accessibility to newly founded NPs in the USA at the beginning of this century. The industry furthermore demands the development of resorts and services with the aim to increase their business [55]. In this respect, part of the tourism industry finds remoteness and primitiveness, which are the main identifiers of wilderness quality, to be obstacles for the tourism business since they only allow for a few customers. Nowadays, the tourism industry serves a highly diverse group of clients, as some operators cater to purists who seek a primitive experience, while others target urbanists who favor hotel accommodation in the “wild” [56–58]. Furthermore, improving facilities undoubtedly leads to an increased number of visitors and, thus, less solitude to sell [59,60]. NPs have nonetheless become a valuable label for the tourism industry. By those means, neoliberalism has transformed nature into a commodity for the tourism industry [11–13,61]. Whether or not establishing NPs is the best means to preserve pristine nature and wilderness and sustain them as a resource for the tourism industry is therefore debatable.
The results from this study demonstrate that the Icelandic Central Highlands are a valuable resource for the tourism industry. The area’s value exists both directly, as its wild appearance and pristine nature serve as a major attraction for the companies’ customers, and indirectly, through its contribution to Iceland’s image as a “wild” and unspoiled destination. These results imply that the area has a certain environmental quality, which sets it apart from other parts of Iceland, while being completely different from the day-to-day environment of most visitors. This is a quality that is important for tourism in an increasingly human-made world.

The results of this study also demonstrate that there exist different opinions among tourism service providers regarding how to preserve these environmental qualities and whether the foundation of a CHNP is the best approach. Many of those who support the idea of a CHNP use neoliberal arguments and link them to economic considerations [3–8] such as that it would attract more visitors and therefore be good for their business and contribute to regional development with the creation of jobs and revenues. This is in line with numerous studies stressing that when an area is constituted as an NP it creates a certain impression, as well as a symbolic meaning that one can find something special and worth visiting (e.g., [12,30,31,62]). However, these neoliberal arguments for nature conservation do not always keep up with expectations regarding regional development [63].

Others, on the other hand, dread that the CHNP would draw the attention of the masses toward the Highlands, which would lead to greater visitation resulting in the loss of the area’s pristine attraction and uniqueness. This has been the case elsewhere, such as in the Fulufjället NP in Sweden [30] and the Hainich NP in Germany [31] where the number of visits in both areas increased by up to 40% following the establishment of a national park. In the semi-structured interviews, it was pointed out that an increased number of tourists in the Icelandic Central Highlands would cause damage to the area’s delicate nature, which would decrease the experience of the tourists that visit the area to seek solitude and tranquility [64–67]. Moreover, a drastic increase in tourist numbers calls for further construction of infrastructure, which would be favored by some operators. Within this context, it is important to consider that an increase in infrastructure alters the nature of the area so that it becomes more anthropogenic. Such an alteration has an impact on which type of tourism is conducted in the area and consequently also on the composition of the tourists wanting to visit the Central Highlands [58–60,66–68]. Certain groups seek to experience pristine nature and wilderness and therefore want as little infrastructure as possible. Meanwhile, others are less bothered by infrastructure as they prefer comfort and services. Research indicates that tourists who currently travel around the Central Highlands are in general not in favor of infrastructure, regardless of whether it is power plant infrastructure, hotels, restaurants, or other tourism-related infrastructure, with the exception of mountain huts [64,65]. Thus, with drastic changes in the Central Highlands in the form of either the construction of much infrastructure or a significant increase in the number of tourists, it is likely that the tourists who have high standards when it comes to environmental quality will seek other destinations [58,67], in accordance with the aforementioned natural resource paradox. It is noteworthy that many of the tourism service providers interviewed in this study consider the most desirable type of tourist in the region to be a small but in their mind valuable market group, a group that seeks unique and off-the-beaten-track sites, away from mass tourism. This emphasizes the industry’s awareness of the country’s wilderness. Furthermore, for those tourism operators who specialize in that market, the area’s value is thus derived from the solitude still to be found there and the lack of infrastructure, which gives tourists a strong sense of isolation, primitiveness, and wilderness [69].

7.2. Governance of National Parks and Wilderness Areas

In the last twenty years, attitudes towards the governance of PAs and NPs have changed considerably. At the turn of this century, Phillips [70] pointed out that there had already been huge conceptual advances in thinking about PAs, and he called for the need
to look at them from a broader perspective, such as by including more diverse actors among those who initiate as well as manage PAs, by working on a far broader scale, and by broadening the understanding of the range of possibilities inherent in the definition of PAs. Dearden and Bennet [71] agree and point out that the major trend in the management of PAs since the turn of the century is to use participatory approaches involving a greater number of stakeholders in the decision-making process. The different views of the Icelandic tourism operators regarding the proposed CHNP emphasize the importance of their participation in the area’s governance so that it is possible to reach an acceptable decision about the land use of the area for tourism, and no less to avoid land-use conflicts, which will not benefit anyone. The tourism operators in Iceland seem to be aware of this as they have long requested more involvement in the development of the land-use policy in general, while also requesting that the interests of their industry are taken into account when decisions regarding the utilization of the country’s landscapes and natural resources are made [59,72].

Many studies, e.g., [28,73], stress that stakeholder support is vital for the success of NPs. Along with the increase in the number of tourists in NPs, the tourism industry is a critical stakeholder in the governance of NPs, and also an excellent example of a stakeholder whose interests are well reflected in the double mandate of NPs. This reflects the diverse needs of the tourism industry and thus the different preferences with regard to the management of pristine nature (e.g., [14,20,21]). Accordingly, some stakeholders prioritize nature conservation, while others focus on its potential to promote tourism or on their contribution to regional development. To address potential opposition and solve land-use conflicts within PAs, many PAs have increasingly adopted new management and governance approaches which are characterized by decentralization and stakeholder participation [3,74]. The growing awareness that complex environmental issues cannot be solved by governments alone, coupled with advocacy for including society in the decision-making process, has led to an abandonment of the traditional top-down approaches [3,26,27,75]. As a result, new governance models have emerged, including collaborative management, which involves various stakeholders (e.g., local communities, NGOs, and the private sector), many of which possess valuable local knowledge of the area [27,76]. Eagles et al. [26] further point out that the inclusion of the private sector in governance also reflects neoliberal trends of transferring responsibilities from the government to private actors.

Part of the operators’ negative attitudes towards the proposed CHNP seen in this study is reflected in the three factors pointed out by Eagles et al. [26], i.e., the ownership of the resource; the management body; and the income source for management which can be funded through taxes, user fees, and donations. There are furthermore divergent opinions regarding the proposed CHNP as an NP would reduce the political power of the local municipalities, and the local municipalities fear that their role in the management of the NP would not be sufficient. Others are positive and see many opportunities in an NP for the municipalities when it comes to tourism development and environmental protection [40].

Tourism is indeed increasingly used as both economic and political justifications for the establishment of NPs and the protection of natural areas [76]. This is in line with the rhetoric phrased by neoliberal conservation which indicates economic benefits for local communities but not without necessarily always standing up to their expectations [63].

It is important that managers of NPs have sustainable development as their guiding principle when formulating policies on land use and developing economic activities within NPs. A fundamental element of sustainable development is that all stakeholders participate in the formulation of such policies from the beginning and have a voice in all decision-making [77,78]. This leads to the creation of mutual trust between those working in nature preservation and those in tourism, and thus also mutual benefits. Hence, when organizing tourism in NPs, a holistic overview is essential, along with an awareness of all influencing factors, while also understanding the causality between the different influencing factors, both in time and in space [59,72]. It is equally important to understand the attitudes of the different stakeholders [14]. The results of this study support this, demonstrating the
opposing views with respect to land use in the Icelandic Central Highlands. In terms of sustainability, it is important to reduce conflicts of interest in land use.

7.3. Coexistence between Nature-Based Tourism and Nature Conservation

The results of this study highlight the importance of NPs for the growing industry of nature-based tourism. The results further highlight that most tourism service providers think first about their business and then about the natural resource underpinning their business. It is therefore critical to bear in mind that the tourism industry exploits nature with the aim to increase its profit just like any other form of market-driven economic activity [79–81]. What is more, the tourism industry is often the only form of economic activity allowed to utilize many protected areas. This is stressed by Williams and Ponsford [82]:

Like most other industries, tourism stresses natural environments through a range of infrastructure development, resource consumption and waste generation processes. In contrast to many other industries, these processes occur in some of the most ecologically fragile locations on the planet. In addition, tourism is often the only industry in locations where other kinds of operations and industries would never be permitted

Accordingly, the debate around NPs and tourism is often characterized by what Sutter [83] refers to as historical development; i.e., land use is characterized by the wide-ranging development of the production economy towards a consumer economy and consumer culture. Thus, the question regarding the coexistence of nature conservation and the tourism industry must be approached with that in mind. All in all, the most efficient way to govern the use of wild and pristine nature and whether to use it as a resource for the tourism industry or argue for its protection for its own sake depends on people’s different ethical approaches towards nature and its limits of use.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, methodology, data collection, writing—original draft preparation, A.D.S. and M.W.; writing—review and editing, A.D.S., M.W. and R.O.; supervision, project administration, and funding acquisition, A.D.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the Icelandic Ministry for the Environment and Natural Resources.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: We thank the Icelandic Ministry for the Environment and Natural Resources (Reykjavík, Iceland) for financing the data gathering for this research. We also thank Steinar Kaldal at the Ministry and Bjarnheiður Hallsdóttir Chairman at the Board of the Icelandic Travel Industry Association (Akureyri, Iceland) for their valuable advice. We also thank Edita Tverijonaite for administrating the online survey and for conducting some of the interviews. Finally, we thank David Ostman for cartography work.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

References


35. Icelandic Tourist Board. *Fyrstu spár um meginstærðir ferdaljónus* [First Predictions on Main Tourism Indicators]; Icelandic Tourist Board: Reykjavik, Iceland, 2022.
72. Nkhata, B.A.; McCool, S.F. Coupling Protected Area Governance and Management through Planning. J. Environmental Policy Plan. 2012, 14, 394–410. [CrossRef]
73. Nastran, M. Why does nobody ask us? Impacts on local perception of a protected area in designation, Slovenia. Land Use Policy 2015, 46, 38–49. [CrossRef]
78. Olafsdóttir, R. The role of public participation for determining sustainability indicators for Arctic tourism. Sustainability 2021, 13, 295. [CrossRef]
82. Williams, P.; Ponsford, I. Confronting tourism’s environmental paradox: Transitioning for sustainable tourism. Futures 2009, 41, 396–404. [CrossRef]