

# Seltún and its vicinity on Reykjanes peninsula in Iceland

A visual reflection on land condition and necessary improvements

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The geothermal area around Seltún is a beautiful geyser area in Krýsuvík. In the hills above, hiking paths from Seltún lead to equally fascinating places that have been transformed by geothermal activity. This area has become one of the cornerstones of local tourism, especially for short-term visitors. It is estimated that 250.000 tourists visited Seltún in 2016.

On Sunday May 22nd 2016, I went for a walk around this area and reviewed the state of the land, geothermal areas and hiking paths. It is evident that the effort already put into protecting the geothermal areas in recent years is insufficient to preserve the land against increasing strain caused by the ever-growing number of tourists

As evident by the following pictures, many urgent tasks are pending to minimize the dramatic environmental degradation taking place at Seltún and its vicinity. The

land is currently unable to withstand the multitudes of guests visiting the area, and it is urgent that increased funding is allocated to preserving the land and improving visitor access. There is much in stake, both with regards to environmental preservation, and also the interests of the tourist industry.

The condition of Seltún and its vicinity is a clear example of the great damage being inflicted on many beautiful places around the country due to growing pressure from tourism. It also highlights the importance of protecting both soil and vegetation, as destruction of paths can cause extensive soil erosion. Effort has to be made in making improvements, but it is also important to strengthen specialist knowledge in developing such infrastructures, from the planning and design phases to carrying out these projects in harmony with the natural environment.



There is very little on-site guidance discouraging people from venturing off marked paths, and if so only in relation to danger from hot springs or geysers. Due to the extreme vulnerability of the area, it is important that people be explicitly forbidden to stray from the paths. Explanation is needed, showing visual examples of damage due to walking outside the paths.



The facilities are in no way satisfactory for the large number of tourists that visit Seltún. For instance there are only two toilets, and they are closed during winter. The buildings are too close to the geothermal area itself, distracting from the visual whole of the area.

There are underutilised possibilities for providing information. For instance a large map of Hafnarfjörður city hangs on the toilet wall, but there is no outline map of the geothermal area itself, nor are there clear words of warning on the importance of nature preservation.



It seems to be a natural law in Iceland that cars should be parked almost on top of the natural wonders themselves. This sort of conduct destroys the visual beauty of the sites and creates unnecessary disturbance. The inner part of the car parking area should be closed. The car parking areas are being enlarged with a new parking area being constructed nearby. Should the toilets perhaps be moved to this new parking area?



Here in Iceland board walkways seem to be the trendy option. Could the path to the geothermal area be better adjusted to the surroundings? How about the selection of colours and materials? The beginning of the hiking path does not seem natural enough.



The hiking paths are weakly demarcated. Borders of access often lie too close to the hot springs themselves and open spaces seem to indicate that it is OK to venture off the path.



The result is extreme damage. The entire area, from the first hot springs and up to the hills, is deteriorating. There is a lot of damage due to walking outside the paths, which diminishes the pristine beauty of this colourful area.



In the space of a few year, the number of those walking to the upper geyser-areas has multiplied, diminishing the beauty of the areas and forming an ever increasing number of trails. Little has been done to protect these areas. Actions to improve the situation underline the vital importance of increasing scientific and practical knowledge on how to construct paths, from the design stage to construction.



In this location, the gravel is too coarse for easy walking. In addition, the path is demarcated with rocks on both sides. This is a mistake, as it turns the path into a waterway during rainfall.



Here the path-building has gone awry. In this case, the main culprit is not strain from hikers, but water erosion and lack of maintenance.



Without efficient action to divert waterflow from paths, the durability of steps and other structures to ease access and protect the soil is severely diminished. Additionally this multiplies maintenance cost.



These pictures are in many ways typical for the consequences of the financial straits and disorganization that threatens many natural wonders in Iceland. Parts of the geyser area have been destroyed, large areas have been trodden down and ropes used for path demarcation are much too close to the eyes of the geysers.



Where to walk?



This, or worse, will be the fate of a large part of the pathway system if necessary action is not taken. Deep channels are being eroded by water and there is a danger of new paths being formed alongside the current ones. The first step is to divert all water from the pathways. All such measures will become increasingly expensive as damage proceeds.



The higher you get inside the geothermal area, the more notable the damage becomes. Downtrodden areas and an out-of-control formation of paths cause damage to an ever-increasing area.





The geothermal areas need to be fenced off from the pathways. These areas are immensely sensitive and already downtrodden and extensively damaged. All traffic into the sensitive areas needs to be prevented. Protecting such areas should be a fundamental prerequisite, before increased traffic is directed at them by constructing paths.



The higher one ventures, the damage due to overload diminishes somewhat. However the damage becomes more evident every year. The fringes are being downtrodden, the geothermal crust is crumbling and the damage areas are growing. Foot-trails can be seen into some sensitive areas, tempting others to follow. Walking paths are forming randomly down to the boreholes at Krýsuvík. Demarcations or words of warning are nowhere to be seen.



The highest geothermal areas within walking distance of the main area at Seltún are an icon of the pristine beauty that was typical for the area before it was damaged by increased foot traffic. The wide range of colours flourishes and changes with the light. However, nothing is being done to protect this remnant beauty. How accessible should such areas really be made?



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