



Snæfellsnes

10 YEARS AS AN
EARTHCHECK DESTINATION



INTRODUCTION FROM EARTHCHECK

Purpose of this document

In December 2015 Snæfellsnes Peninsula, a Gold Certified EarthCheck Destination, prepared an extensive ten year review of being an EarthCheck Destination. This review, published in Icelandic under the title “A Step in the Right Direction - What has been done for the environmental certification of the municipalities in Snæfellsnes?”, assesses the effectiveness of the certification program for the destination and highlights the main outcomes and benefits as well as the challenges encountered and the lessons learned.

In 2016, in an effort to create transparency and provide an opportunity for feedback, comments and input on the destination's sustainability certification, the report was shared with every household in Snæfellsnes Peninsula as well as all municipalities and relevant institutions in Iceland.

EarthCheck recognises the importance of exchanging experience and learnings amongst destinations that share a vision and passion for achieving improved sustainability outcomes. In this document, EarthCheck would like to share some translated extracts of this ten year review including the following sections:

- Why environmental certification?
- How effective is the certification project?
- What challenges were encountered?
- What have we learned?



ABOUT SNAEFELLSNES PENINSULA

SKREF Í RETTA ÁT

Snaefellsnes Peninsula, a 90 km long Peninsula in West Iceland made up of five municipalities, first joined EarthCheck in 2004. The peninsula is home to just under 4000 residents and is a pure wonder with a long mountain range that ends in Snaefellsjökull glacier (1442m), a glacier that served as a main focus in Jules Verne's novel 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth'. One of the special natural features on Snaefellsnes are the many different lave fields, basalt columns and the flora and fauna. Unsurprisingly, tourism plays a major role in Snaefellsnes Peninsula with about 80% of the businesses within the destination being defined as tourism businesses. In recent years, Iceland has seen the largest year-on-year increase in the number of foreign travellers on record. In light of the rapidly growing visitor numbers, sustainable destination management has become even more important. Snaefellsnes Peninsula has been at the forefront of sustainable destination development in Iceland and in fact, was the first destination in Europe to receive certification from EarthCheck in 2008. The destination management approach according to the EarthCheck Standard is managed by Náttúrustofa Vesturlands (NSV), the West Iceland Nature Research Center, which brings together the destination's five municipalities - Snaefellsbaer, Helgafellssveit, Grundarfjardarbaer, Stykkisholmsbaer and Eyja and Miklaholtshreppur.

Please note that following pages were maintained in its original wording. The full report (Icelandic only) can be accessed [here](#).

SUMMARY

Nature is the foundation of the well-being of humanity. Among other things, it provides us with food, medicine and material for industry and construction. However, the state of nature is deteriorating fast since humanity increasingly uses more of the earth's resources than it can tolerate. It is long overdue to reverse this evolution with concrete actions.

This is what the local communities in Snaefellsnes aspire to do, and the decisions of local communities can have a great impact on our environment, since it is the local communities which provide the inhabitants with important basic services as well as operating various institutions. This brings opportunity for improvement in environmental matters.

There are many advantages to granting local communities recognised certification for their environmental practices. Quality control is ensured with the exact registration of the use of resources and the yearly assessment of an independent certification will provide discipline and promote compliance. Thereby, the work will be more efficient and more credible.

The certification of local communities in Snaefellsnes covers the direct activities of local communities, including the operation of their institutions and facilities, waste disposal, water distribution, as well as safety and planning. The performance of local communities is monitored with numerical measurements of so-called sustainability markers that may include CO₂ emissions, use of drinking water, quantity of waste sent to landfill and use of products with environmental labelling. The certification does not cover the operations and activities of individuals or privately or publicly operated companies and institutions in the area.

The idea of this certification is not to state that perfection has been achieved, but rather that the activity meets at least the minimum requirements of the certification body and that you are constantly working towards improvements according to an implementation plan that has been agreed upon between local authorities and the certification body.

During the period 2003 – 2014, the direct cost regarding the certification program was in general almost 8 million ISK per year. Around 74% were paid as state grants but the rest, along with various indirect costs, was paid by the five local communities in Snaefellsnes in proportion with the number of inhabitants. During the last few years, the cost participation of local communities has increased significantly compared to the beginning of the project.

The project has been very effective. For example, waste sorting has increased greatly and waste in landfills has almost been reduced by half. The local communities have reduced use of both cleaning products and paper and now only use environmentally certified paper products and a great amount of cleaning products are also certified. The use of drinking water has also been reduced. The performance of Snaefellsnes with regard to greenhouse gas emission and energy use has been rated as excellent ever since measuring began and it has remained that way despite the increasing numbers of travellers. Ports have been electrified and the use of chlorine has been reduced in swimming pools. Various other environmental projects have also been developed and public education has been promoted with lectures, workshops, article writing, information signs and brochures. Improved efficiency benefits the environment and in some cases it brings financial profit to the local communities.

The environmental certification project of the local communities in Snaefellsnes is in constant development and new ways of improving the environmental work of the local communities are sought constantly. Its future depends on the cooperation of all the inhabitants in the area, because with increased sustainability in our community we will increase the chances of people treating natural resources with more respect, for the benefit of all.



WHY ENVIRONMENTAL CERTIFICATION?

Local communities that want to improve their performance on the environmental level can do this in various ways without seeking certification. Can receiving an environmental certification for your activity offer more advantages than other methods?

Local communities can reduce waste and pollution with several actions and achieve good results in certain domains without environmental certification. They can, for example, do this with active participation in projects such as Local Agenda 21 (Stadardagskrá 21), or simply on their own terms. Therefore, one could wonder whether seeking environmental certification offers more advantages than other methods.

A key element of an approved certification process includes for instance the evaluation and assessment of an independent entity regarding the efficiency of the certification seeking entity. This is a very important element and there are unequivocal advantages to building up more sustainable life and work habits with the certification of an independent third party:

- **Credibility** - Since measurable benefit is estimated by an independent entity and needs to meet defined standards and criteria, it is guaranteed that the benefit considered to be achieved is real and not only subjective.
- **Quality control** - Participating in a certification process guarantees an accurate record of the use of resources and increases information transparency. Thus, it improves work and paper processes and gives a better overview of the use of natural resources. It therefore promotes better quality control, which facilitates the monitoring of changes and reactions when improvements are needed.
- **Discipline and compliance** - A yearly evaluation made by the certification body guarantees discipline, compliance and concrete information regarding performance. Therefore, the system is more likely to deliver real steps towards sustainability.

This shows that seeking environmental certification can offer many more advantages than other methods. Furthermore, the environmental certification of an internationally approved certification body can clearly improve the image of the certified entity and bring new and varied opportunities in terms of presentation and marketing.



THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL CERTIFICATION PROJECT IN SNAEFELLSNES

Now that the environmental certification project of the local communities in Snaefellsnes has been running for over a decade, it is appropriate to look back and review what the local communities have been doing in terms of environmental matters. Has there been any progress? If this is the case, then what kind of progress? What has this project in fact delivered?

As indicated, the local communities have to keep a record of numerical measurements of selected sustainability markers within 12 key domains. These 12 key domains reflect the major categories of environmental problems faced by humanity today. A discussion regarding why these key domains were chosen and why it is important to take remedial measures for them can be found in the project's implementation plan on www.nesvottun.is. By reading it, a lot of knowledge can be gained regarding the subject matters of the environmental certification project. Every year, information is collected about the use of resources by the local communities in Snaefellsnes. Thus, it is easy to measure directly the effectiveness of local communities and whether changes have occurred between years.

This project is carried out in cooperation with environmental representatives, employees and inhabitants of local communities, and institutions with activities throughout the country. The information is processed and sent to EarthCheck in Australia who uses them to calculate the performance of local communities in comparison to the established criteria. Consequently, the certification body will publish a report regarding the results for each year (benchmarking report).

We will be reviewing effectiveness in the main key domains, with a single discussion for all connected key domains for simplification. A more thorough discussion regarding the value of sustainability markers within each key domain and regarding specific projects can be found in the project's implementation plan, annual reports and benchmarking reports on its website, www.nesvottun.is.

CHALLENGES

Everyone who has worked within the field of environmental matters knows that, even though such work can often be rewarding, it can also be demanding and full of challenges. Sometimes it can even be difficult not to lose hope. Then it is important to remember that we are borrowing the earth from our descendants and that we want to leave it in at least as good a state as it was in when we received it. The local communities in Snaefellsnes have decided to promote this and have achieved important progress in the last decade. Which have been the biggest challenges of the project until now?

Seeking environmental certification for an activity is a challenge in itself and the path towards a more environmentally friendly community is full of obstacles. Some challenges can be resolved permanently in an easy way, but others are always present since they change as fast as they are tackled.

The fact that five local communities and a national park have jointly sought environmental certification increases the challenge even more. The level of complication is increased with the number of independent entities that each have their own board, finances, etc., as well as different opinions on different matters. This may delay the handling process and sometimes it is necessary to make compromises in order to achieve things. Large areas, widely spread inhabitants and a great number of entities and institutions directly participating in the project can also cause problems, for example because there is not always time for regular, personal communication between managers and employees of the project or between general employees and inhabitants of local communities. However, Snaefellsnes is a significant landscape character area and working with such a large area greatly strengthens the project. The sharing of expertise and work processes clearly brings strength to the project as well. Furthermore, the marketing is much easier for tourism, for example, when it comes to a well limited area that is so rich with nature. The cooperation has generally been a success and everything indicates that this will continue.

Money is a motive power and most projects that promote environmental progress are based on the contribution of work and funding. It has been possible to keep the environmental certification project going continuously since 2003 but sometimes this has been tight due to limited funds. For the same reason, progress has been slower in certain fields than the entities in charge of the project would have wanted, since there is a clear causal relationship between the budget for the environmental certification project and the quantity of projects that can be carried out or how fast they can be carried out. Also, funding has not been guaranteed every year, which has made making and following long-term plans more difficult. The operational basis of the project would need to be insured in the long term.

The biggest challenge regarding the implementation of the project, which is in fact an international subject matter within the field of environmental protection, has been to mobilise as many people as possible to cooperate with the project. This applies for instance to managers and employees of local communities who have, for the most part, generally been positive towards the project but who could invest themselves more in it. Generally, it is easier to reach and to have a dialogue with those who are already interested in the policy area, but how about all the others who don't seem to care? And how is it possible to have an objective discussion with those who don't think there is any need for improvement with regards to environmental issues, without such efforts taking up all the time and energy for the project? This is an ongoing problem that calls for constant development and testing. Different methods are needed to reach different age groups and it is not sure that the masses can be reached with methods that were suitable 10, 20 or 30 years ago. It also needs to be evaluated how much of the activities of the environmental certification project needs to be directed inwards, in order to improve registration or other factors within the activities of the local communities, and how much should be directed outwards, for presentation and education for inhabitants and others.

CHALLENGES

Each part is dependent on the other but it is clear that if the basic work has not been done there will be no material available for presentation. Until now, the budget of the project has been so tight that it has been necessary to use the available funds sparingly and to put almost all the emphasis on the core business, at the expense of the visibility of the project for the public. The risk is, however, that the lack of dialogue with the inhabitants might with time decrease the interest in the project and in environmental progress at the same time. Therefore, it is important to cultivate this factor, which is the aim of this publication.

It is important to integrate the ideology of sustainable development more profoundly into all factors of the community and the operations of the local communities should set the example in this respect. Sustainability is a complex concept and often subject to misunderstanding. Therefore, it is important to maintain the real signification and meaning of sustainable development and to try to promote the use of the ideology in all areas of the community. This task is, nevertheless, more demanding than one could imagine to begin with. Old habits and resistance to change are the main bottle necks and the main reason why the ideology of sustainable development has not become more established in modern western societies. In the coming months, instructions and an operations plan will be developed and later implemented, aimed towards better integration of the ideology of sustainability into all factors of the operations of the local communities in Snaefellsnes.

The last challenge mentioned here, but nevertheless the most important one in order to increase sustainability, is to achieve real progress regarding moderate use of resources, i.e. to protect air, land and sea from negative environmental effects due to human activity. This is the vision of the local communities in Snaefellsnes that consider the environmental certification project to be a good way to achieve this goal. In some cases, a great achievement has already been reached but in other cases we need to work better towards improvement. The first steps have been taken, which is very important. It is also important to bear in mind that everyone can have a positive impact. So can we!

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WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

The participation in the certification project of the local communities in Snaefellsnes was highly instructive. The presentation of this summary introduced a few imposing but justified questions about the project and its implementation: Has the progress in environmental matters been greater than if there had not been any certification? What is the cost of the project, who has paid for it and is it worth it? Would it have been possible to better support certain factors of the project and if so, which ones? What has proven to be difficult and what went well? What is the major achievement of the project so far and what knowledge have we gained? This has been partly answered above but it is a good idea to summarise the answers in a few words.

It is difficult to quantify the progress made in Snaefellsnes in the last decade to estimate whether they are more important than if this project had not taken place. However, several factors can be pointed out since Snaefellsnes now clearly shows better results than most or all other local communities in Iceland. The establishment of this project has, for example, made accessible and comparable information available with regard to the use of resources, which is a fundamental feature in order to estimate achievement in this field just like in other fields.

During the preparation of this summary, receiving numbers from other areas was anticipated in order to compare them with the performance of Snaefellsnes, but despite enquiries very little information was found, except very slightly regarding waste disposal. It states that in 2012 each inhabitant disposed on average of 513 kg of waste that was not sorted and therefore went to landfill. In the whole western part of the country, excluding Snaefellsnes, this figure was even higher for 2013 at 735 kg per each inhabitant. However, in Snaefellsnes the number was 350 kg, which is about one third lower than the national average. This difference is due to the enormous progress made in waste management in Snaefellsnes in the last decade. The section regarding the effectiveness of the environmental certification project in Snaefellsnes roughly reviews the major progress local communities have made with regard to environmental matters since the environmental certification was established.

The benefits of the project are multiple, but five elements are specifically emphasised here:

- An environmental management system has been established.
- Promoting less use of resources which brings more benefits for the environment.
- Promoting an increased environmental awareness among the inhabitants of Snaefellsnes, where a great change of attitude has taken place following the establishment of the project.
- The area has a good image when it comes to environmental matters and this can be useful, for example when it comes to tourism.
- A useful base has been built for the future.

It is safe to say that many of the projects detailed in the section about the effectiveness of the project would not have taken place without the pressure put on the local communities by the requirements and yearly evaluation of the certification body. This publication delivers the information regarding the benefits of the project, so that each person can form their own opinion.

The section regarding finances states, among other things, that the registered total expenditure for the project in the years 2003-2014 was approximately 95 million ISK, calculated according to rates from 2014, or almost 8 million ISK per year on average. To begin with, the state paid most of the direct cost but the cost participation of local communities has, however, increased in the last few years. It is difficult and complicated to estimate directly in financial terms whether it was worth putting the funds into the project, since the benefits are partly virtual and the benefits for the environment and the community cannot be estimated financially, at least not yet. When estimating the value of what has been achieved with this funding, the entities in charge of the environmental certification project are of the opinion that it was worthwhile. However, different individuals have different opinions on value and it is possible that not everyone would agree. At least a clear picture has now been drawn of the financial aspect of the project and an informed discussion can therefore take place regarding this factor.



WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

The main challenges are mentioned above in an attempt to shed light on factors that could have been handled better and that still require solution. Looking back, it seems that some matters might have been solved in a better way, although that can never be completely clear. It is important to learn from experience, go over the current status and concentrate on the future.

The environmental certification project of the local communities in Snaefellsnes is in constant development.

Its future vision is that local communities will continue to cooperate in the field of environmental matters. Infrastructures and work processes will continue to be improved. The ideology of sustainable development will be integrated more clearly into the decision making processes, operation and implementation processes of local communities and decisions will be made based on the long-term interests of nature and of the community. Hopefully, this will lead to rapid progress in environmental matters, saving of resources and benefits for nature and environment, for the benefit of future generations.

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Skref í rétta át