
WORLD HERITAGE NOMINATION - IUCN TECHNICAL EVALUATION

PINGVELLIR NATIONAL PARK (ICELAND) ID Nº 1152

The Þingvellir National Park has been nominated as a “Cultural Landscape”.

1. DOCUMENTATION

- i) **Literature consulted:** Daníelsson H., 2001, **Þingvellir** Edda Media and Publishing, Reykjavík; Jónasson P. M. (ed.), 1992, **Þingvallavatn** Oikos Press (this contains numerous scientific papers); Lugmayr H., 2002, **The Althing at Þingvellir** Edda Media and Publishing, Reykjavík; Þorsteinsson B., 1986, **Þingvellir – Iceland’s National Shrine** Örn og Örlygur Publishing House.
- ii) **Consultations:** 8 external reviewers. The mission also met with National Park Authorities, Representatives of the National Museum of Iceland, the Ministry of Environment, and the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, the Director of the Environment and Food Agency of Iceland, the Chairman of the Icelandic UNESCO Committee, The Chairman and members of the Þingvellir National Park Commission and a number of local Academics and Scientists.
- iii) **Field Visit:** Henry Cleere (ICOMOS) and Adrian Phillips (IUCN), August 2003

2. SUMMARY OF NATURAL VALUES

Þingvellir National Park (IUCN Management Category II) is strikingly situated on top of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, which arises from the splitting of the North American and European tectonic plates. The site is bounded to the south-east and the north-west by parallel lines of fissures. These occur where very recent lava fields have been faulted down as the underlying plates pull apart, creating a classic instance of a ‘graben’ or ‘trough fault’. This is still subsiding, with periodic earthquakes. To the north, volcanic mountains can be seen rising towards the permanent icecap of Langjökull.

Most drainage from the area to the north-east is subterranean, but the River Öxara flows through the historic centre of the park. It joins massive cold springs from the subterranean sources to drain into Lake Þingvallavatn to the south-west, Iceland’s largest lake. This lake system is also of considerable scientific interest, with four distinct forms of Arctic charr in existence that have developed since the end of the ice age, only 10,000 years ago.

Þingvellir’s physical setting helps to give the site its unusual and beautiful quality – as well as a distinct unity. These qualities take on an added significance in light of the central part played by Þingvellir in the history of Iceland for well over a thousand years, as the place where nearly all the great events in the country have taken place (see ICOMOS report).

Þingvellir’s importance to the people of Iceland was recognised by legislation to create Iceland’s first national park as early as 1928, making it one of the earliest parks in Europe. It formally came into being in 1930; the area was greatly enlarged in the 1950s and somewhat further extended in 1998. The present area of the park, 92.7 km², is the area nominated as a World Heritage site. It includes the north east corner of Lake Þingvallavatn.

Three points in particular should be noted about Þingvellir National Park:

- It shows very clearly a strong link between natural and cultural factors. Natural values are certainly higher at this site than in most other Cultural Landscapes on the World Heritage List;

- These natural values are very well documented: they relate not only to the area's history and archaeology, but also to its geology, drainage, fauna, flora and the lake system, which have been the subject of more than a hundred scientific papers; and
- The site has a unique cultural significance to the Icelandic people as in effect a national shrine, and this should be reflected in the very highest standards of management and design, though this also needs to be sensitive to the wishes of people to have access to the area.

3. COMPARISON WITH OTHER AREAS

The nomination claims that there is only one other place on earth where tectonic splitting can be seen at the surface: Djibouti in East Africa, (though of course there are many other spectacular examples of rifting to be seen).

4. INTEGRITY

4.1 Boundaries

Since the boundaries of the nominated site are those of the national park, the site is far larger than the historic core itself, which covers only a few hectares. This is appropriate for the following reasons:

- The nomination is not of a historic site alone but of a cultural landscape with high natural values;
- It respects the unity of the landscape created by the faulting on two sides, with mountains and a lake system on the third and fourth;
- It provides a sensible unit for management purposes; and
- There were functional connections between the historic core and the wider area around, which was the focus of a network of converging routes and important as grazing lands for the horses of those attending the ancient assembly at Þingvellir.

The buffer zone around the nominated site includes land protected against development by various local plans and – in some parts - arrangements that give the national park powers to veto unacceptable development. Given the long history of land degradation in Iceland, mainly consequent on the removal of natural vegetation and grazing pressure from sheep, such safeguards are important to guarantee protection of the watershed around Þingvellir. This is soon to be strengthened through a new national nature conservation strategy. These powers generally appear sufficient, especially as much of the watershed is virtually unusable for any economic purposes.

It is not clear that sufficient control exists to protect the quality of Lake Þingvallavatn. While only a small part of the lake is within the nominated site, it is of course a single ecological unit, and any problems arising elsewhere in the lake could therefore impact on the site's integrity (see also the section on Management Issues below). However, based on recommendations from the Advisory Bodies, the State Party agreed in a letter dated 15 March 2004, to include the rest of the lake in the buffer zone of the site.

4.2 Management and Resources

Þingvellir National Park is administered under its own legislation (all other parks in Iceland are run as part of the national park system) which provides for a three-man board of Parliamentarians to act as the governing commission. This reflects the importance of the site to the Icelandic nation. While cutting the park off to some extent from other protected areas in the country, it does ensure a high level of political interest and support, and priority for funding.

Day-to-day management is undertaken by the Park Director, supported by the Interpretive Manager. There is one other permanent staff member, but up to ten or a dozen people are

employed in the summer months as temporary wardens to assist in managing the large number of visitors. The staff appear highly professional, though they might benefit from closer contact with others working in the field, e.g. through the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA).

There is an annual government-funded operating budget of US\$800,000, on top of which funding for specific projects (e.g. the newly-opened visitor centre) has been secured from time to time. Some sponsorship has been obtained from the Iceland National Bank for interpretive provision for visitors. In general, the funding for the park appears adequate at present.

The arrangements for management planning are under development. A development plan was adopted for the park by the Þingvellir Commission in 1988. This covers the park and the buffer zone. With the help of consultants, work is now underway to prepare 1) a "Master Plan" (i.e. a statutorily required physical land use plan); and 2) a revised Management Plan to take account, *inter alia*, of hoped-for World Heritage status. It is intended that the Management Plan should be adopted by May 2004 at the latest, before the next World Heritage Committee meeting. It will be supported by a subsequent implementation plan or annual work plans. These arrangements, which include provision for stakeholder participation, appear appropriate, though there seems to be some confusion over plan terminology.

4.3 Threats

Though Iceland has a relatively low population and Þingvellir National Park occupies a relatively large area, there are some complex management issues nonetheless. Some of these arise from the focus of most visitation being concentrated in a small part of the National Park, that is the historic core of the innermost Assembly site, which requires very careful management. Others arise because of the extreme sensitivity of sub-Arctic ecosystems to pollution and other impacts. Others again result from the implications of the area's status as a National Park and possible World Heritage site.

4.3.1 Management issues related to visitation

Þingvellir National Park receives about 300,000 visitors a year, more than the population of the country. In fact, 68% of all foreign visitors to Iceland visit the site, as do many Icelandic nationals. They travel by car and coach, and there are three car parks for these vehicles at present: one overlooking the site at the visitor centre to the south west, one immediately east of the historic core, and a third about 400 metres to the north. In addition, there is more parking at the service centre (which includes shops, restaurant etc.) about 1.5 km to the north-east of the historic core. People are free to park elsewhere, e.g. along the lake shore, but do not appear to do so in large numbers.

In summer months, many hundreds of people may be on the site at the same time. A network of paths is in place for them to circulate around the site on foot, with platforms for viewpoints and board walks over sensitive ground. Most visitors come from the west, from Reykjavik, and the first point that they encounter is the visitor centre with an excellent interpretive presentation. From here, there is a superb view of the site below. The 'walk in' down a gorge of faulted lava blocks is truly spectacular.

Issues that need to be addressed include:

- The central parking place, immediately east of the historic core, is intrusive and unnecessary; it directly affects the integrity of the area, and should be removed. There are two other parking areas nearby and with imaginative use of park-and-ride services and limited access for people with disabilities, no loss of public access need occur.
- A bridge over the River Öxara on the pedestrian access route in the gorge is an eyesore, and quite inappropriate in such a beautiful setting of rather lurid historic importance (it overlooks a pool in which a number of women were drowned as a punishment in the Middle Ages). It is a heavy, over-engineered concrete legacy from the time that vehicles used the route. It should be replaced by a lighter structure.
- There is a national cemetery near the small church at Þingvellir; however only two people have been interred there, and none for many years. The feature is large and

somewhat insensitive in design. It seems that there is uncertainty as to what its future should be. This matter should be resolved in the management plan.

- At present, information is made available for visitors in the audio-visual presentation at the visitor centre and in leaflets, as well as through guided walks. There are plans for signs on site. Provided these are designed and positioned with sensitivity, this would be beneficial. The use of electronic 'wands' for self-guided tours is to be encouraged.

4.3.2 Management issues relating to pollution

The key concern here relates to threats to the quality of water in Lake Þingvallavatn. This ecosystem is very sensitive to the impact of any artificial inputs, especially nitrogen. It is therefore of concern that there are many summer houses around the lake, some with - it is reported - rather poor controls over effluent discharge. Urine in particular can raise nitrogen levels. Relatively few summer houses are found in the national park and these are subject to ten year leases which stipulate appropriate controls over use and waste discharge. However, it would be best if these leases were not renewed when they expire.

In addition, there are several hundred summer houses around the shores outside the park. As the lake is a shared system with part of the nominated site, it is essential to introduce and enforce strict controls over pollution from all the summer houses, not just those in the park. It should be added that the park goes to considerable lengths to avoid pollution from visitors at concentration points within the site (e.g. by pumping out sewage from lavatories at both the visitor and service centres).

4.3.3 Management issues relating to the National Park and potential World Heritage status

Bearing in mind (i) the importance of integrity issues in a potential World Heritage site, (ii) the importance of sustaining or restoring natural systems in Category II protected areas like Þingvellir National Park, and (iii) the general good practice standards associated with protected areas, there are two areas of concern:

The existence of some plantations of exotic coniferous planting

Wherever possible, these should be removed (there is one area of memorial planting that should be respected). Native trees, such as rowan, birch and Arctic willow, should be encouraged in their place. Such an eradication programme is underway now and should continue, despite some public concern. Continued education about the importance of natural systems is needed to ensure better public understanding. Also the watershed should be protected against any such planting which has been shown to increase nitrogen run-off and acidification of water systems.

Plans to upgrade a road through part of the nominated site

The existing Road 365 through the eastern part of the National Park is planned to be 'improved' to become a fast highway, constructed for traffic at 90 kph. Three alternative routes are currently under consideration: two would involve about 3-5 km of new or upgraded road (roughly half of this in the park itself, and half in land to the east). At their western limit, the alternatives would connect to the existing cross-park Road 36 at Gjabakki, where a 50 kph speed limit is in force. A third option was proposed by the State Party by letter to ICOMOS dated 2 February 2004, whereby a 1 km section of the road would run through the south corner of the nominated area. ICOMOS proposed removing that southern corner from the nomination but at the time of writing this report IUCN is not aware of a final decision by the State Party on this issue.

Various reasons are given to create a new fast, all-weather road in place of the existing 'summer' road. These are (i) to provide a better route for tourist traffic going to and from the popular sites of Gullfoss and Geysir to the east, (ii) to reduce the journey time to Reykjavik for summer house users in land to the east side of the park, (iii) to improve communications within the new municipality of Bláskógabyggð, and (iv) to improve access to the capital for vegetable farmers to the east of the park area.

The proposal to build what is in effect a new road in part of the park and nominated site is troubling; especially since the scheme was due to begin in spring 2004, before the World

Heritage Committee considers the nomination. This appears to be the case even though an environmental impact assessment (available only in Icelandic) has been prepared and is presently under consideration. The benefits of a new road in terms of improved access are clear, but good practice these days would favour alternatives that avoid such a sensitive area altogether. If it is built, it is inevitable that more traffic will pass through the park, though avoiding the most sensitive historic core. The proposed new Road 365 will be in principle out of place in a World Heritage site, cut across the eastern (European plate) fissures, and cause some increased pollution discharge; it may also lead to increased pressure to upgrade Road 36, and raise the speed limit on it.

Ideally, the road should not be proceeded with and alternative routes around the park explored. However, if the decision is taken to build it, then there should be (i) a speed limit imposed of 50 kph on all parts of it within the park, (ii) a complete ban on the use of the road by any vehicle carrying hazardous materials, (iii) no upgrading of Road 36. In other words, if the road has to be built, its design and management should respect the special qualities of the site.

5. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Pingvellir National Park was not nominated under natural criteria. The question whether it should be was raised during the evaluation and also by some reviewers. It seems that the Icelandic authorities would like to nominate Pingvellir as a natural site in due course. Without prejudice to the evaluation of any such future nomination, the case may be made stronger if Pingvellir were part of a serial nomination that illustrated the significance of the Mid-Atlantic ridge as a whole – a global feature that occurs in several islands or island groups, other than Iceland.

6. IUCN SUMMARY

Pingvellir National Park has been nominated as a Cultural Landscape. The area has impressive natural qualities that are an integral part of the site's values. In particular:

- The nominated site shows inter-continental rifting in a spectacular and readily understandable manner;
- The site is of great natural beauty, with an impressive variety of landforms;
- There is a close interaction between natural and cultural/historical aspects of the site; and
- Lake Þingvallavatn is of great limnological interest.

Moreover, with some exceptions, the site is well managed and at present broadly maintains its integrity. IUCN would recommend, nonetheless, that the State Party be requested to address the following issues in relation to the management of the site:

- the central parking place, immediately east of the historic core, should be closed;
- the concrete bridge over the River Öxara should be replaced with a lighter structure;
- the Management Plan should provide clarity about the future of the national cemetery;
- care should be taken in the design and positioning of information signs on the site;
- there should be strict controls to avert possible pollution discharges from all summerhouses around Lake Þingvallavatn;
- consideration should be given to not renewing the leases over those summerhouses that are within the national park;
- the programme for removal of exotic conifers should continue; and
- proposals for the upgraded Road 365 should be reconsidered. If that is impossible, then a speed limit of 50 kph should be imposed on all traffic using it throughout the National Park, along with safeguards over the transport of hazardous goods and an agreement not to carry out improvements to Road 36.

7. CONCLUSION

IUCN has advised ICOMOS that, based on its assessment of the natural values of Þingvellir National Park, this site merits inscription on the World Heritage List as a cultural landscape.