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Don't Thank Icelanders For Iceland

Given the chance, we'd have made it into Murmansk

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Words by [Haukur S. Magnússon](#)

Dreamland is the result of collaboration between documentary filmmaker Þorfinnur Guðnason and author, playwright and poet Andri Snær Magnason. It is based on the latter's best selling, award winning 2006 non-fiction book, 'Dreamland: A self-help manual for a Frightened Nation' (available in English translation through Amazon.co.uk and at local bookstores). The book stirred a lot of controversy in Iceland, as it shed new light on some of the issues surrounding the conflict between environmental preservation and the build up of heavy industry in Iceland. It furthermore examined the government's hope to sell cheap energy from hydroelectric power plants in order to place Iceland among the world's biggest aluminium manufacturers – and why on Earth we'd aspire to that.

The film goes even further, using the full potential of the medium to conjure up a truly chilling vision of recent events. And it's effective. As we exited a screening of the film, my friend Geiri summarised the experience perfectly, saying: "Most of the time, I didn't know whether to laugh, cry or vomit in disgust." That somehow says it all. A scathing indictment of Iceland's recent "all in" industrial and environmental policies, Dreamland combines archival news footage, exquisite nature shots and select interviews to achieve its goal of waking Icelanders up to the very real, very serious consequences of selling off some of the last bits of pristine wilderness remaining in Europe.

We caught up with Andri Snær – whom many of you tourists might know from his heavily lauded children's book 'The Story of the Blue Planet', released in 20 some countries to this day – to learn more about Dreamland and its subject.

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“The movie is about a small nation that doesn’t recognise the advantages of its smallness. And overvalues its need to be “saved” by giant, instant solutions. A nation standing at crossroads. Why should people go see it? Because it is stirring to watch, it’s important to see it to realise why we are in the position we are today, so that history doesn’t repeat itself.

The book was rooted in worry, mostly. My worries about how I felt people harboured all these misconceptions about our society and economy, based on a dearth of information and a wrong approach to human nature. It remains. We could have made a much longer film. You could say that every two pages in the book could be fodder for forty minutes of film, putting it all together as a whole was quite the challenge.

We initially wanted to present viewers with a lot of the startling facts we’ve discovered in our research, to expose things that maybe haven’t gotten a lot of news coverage or none at all. But we soon realised that the biggest contribution we could make was the “emotional angle,” our artistic experience of the whole debacle. Of how the machine takes over as well as our own experiences of the whole frenzy surrounding the events.

We’re really projecting our emotions so that the viewer senses that this is what we felt reviewing all the footage; our awe when confronted with the majestic nature and our sense of despair when witnessing how those in authority treat unique, invaluable landmarks with such irreverence. Juxtaposing the two creates such an inner tension that you want to laugh and cry at the same time. In the end, we decided we simply had to convey our reactions to it all; we could have said that carbon dioxide emissions will go up by 50.000 tonnes, etc., but such numbers aren’t really comprehensible to normal people.

Direct Action

You seem very passionate about the subject. Have you yourself considered partaking in some direct guerrilla action, like chaining yourself to some heavy machinery, Saving Iceland-style?

Yes, well, I did want to do that. But circumstances didn’t allow for it. I fathered two children during that period, and was also making this movie. I have participated in such protests, but never taken the full step towards direct action. But there are places in this country that I would do that for. January’s Saucepan Revolution proved that it’s easy for authorities to ignore articles and letters to the editor; it isn’t until you get physical, by banging on the house of parliament or chaining yourself to building cranes that they’re forced to pay attention. The government showed no reaction at all to people’s arguments until they raised their voice.

And that’s probably what needs to be done in this case too. The Saving Iceland protests enraged a lot of people, I’d meet a lot of folks who’d espouse all these opinions on their clothing and hairstyles while ignoring their very vital point altogether. Based on their hair. Instead of looking into what these people were actually protesting against, they focused on their taste in clothes. All the while, respectable-looking, suit-wearing men were busy bankrupting our country.

Anyway, Landsvirkjun [the state power company] uses direct action to achieve their goals. They’ll start shovelling roads and blasting foundations for aluminium smelters before the factories are even sanctioned by municipal planning agencies. A bit of direct action from the other side is surely justifiable, to counter them.

What’s really striking is this structure, how the corporations integrate whole communities into their empire, by luring its chieftains to their sides. How communities that lead decent lives without this authority become dependent on it and start thanking it for saving their lives. Even though it’s really us that are saving the companies. It’s a colonial mindset; the nation can never be truly independent because it owes everything to the very master that it maintains just by existing. This is very much what’s happened in the east of Iceland. Alcoa are benefiting hugely from being there, but they never thank Reyðarfjörður [where they built their smelter]. Instead, Reyðarfjörður thanks Alcoa for its purported prosperity.

Apolitical, cynical no more

And that prosperity seems rather fickle, according to recent reports.

We thought about showing that in the film. It would have been an emotional high point, talking about the 200 empty apartments in Reyðarfjörður, the blowing tumbleweed. And we thought it was a bit too much. We assumed people knew that already, that despite the smelter, the growth spurt in Reyðarfjörður is slowly but surely diminishing.

So you maintain that no good came of these developments?

Society will never reach the place where unemployment is eradicated. It's ironic that by undertaking the project, the government destroyed more long-term jobs than they created.

The peripheral effects of the damming and smelter projects are the ruination of so many jobs in the fishing industry and in various export sectors. Marel [Icelandic high-tech food system company] only grew outside of Iceland during the project, and many high-tech companies moved their operations abroad. Due to the inflation caused by the project, the ISK strengthened by 10-20 % and thus our companies weren't able to compete with their peers in neighbouring countries. Of course, now, post-collapse, we're back at the starting point and need to re-build these companies. But that takes time, and we've lost four years advantage. We're still talking about Össur, Marel and CCP as our high-tech exports, there hasn't been room for any new companies to grow.

What do you hope to accomplish with the film?

We hope that people start giving more thought to these matters, and maybe get a glimpse of the grand scale of the nonsense that's been going on. But we also wanted to make a movie that was a work of art in and of itself, one that people can watch and enjoy and gain something from. I have no great hopes that it'll change anything in the short run, or cause any sort of sea-change, but hopefully it'll be one of many steps in the right direction of showing people that these things matter a great deal, that they need to be thought about and dealt with. And we're actually seeing such results already, I was recently interviewed for a pop music station in Reykjavík, and its host was furious after seeing the movie. He realised that some regions that he held sacred and had assumed were protected were actually being developed for exploitation by the aluminium and power companies. He was in a state of shock.

And I believe that if the film reaches and touches some of the folks that have up until now allowed themselves the luxury of being apolitical and cynical – if it lights a spark within them that turns them away from being this neutral mass – then we've accomplished something.

Excellent salesmanship

Have the aluminium companies and Landsvirkjun responded to your criticism at all?

They'll give these standard PR answers where they draw out five points that are all pretty much irrelevant to the heart of the matter. The local president of Alcoa has even come out saying that I'm "doing a character," that this is my shtick to sell more books. And they'll give lectures and throw around references to carbon dioxide emissions, green energy and export revenues that have no basis in reality.

That's a pretty befty claim for you to make.

They've gone on record saying that their projects are creating 100 billion ISK in export revenue for Iceland. So I thought I'd verify their claims, and after making some basic calculations I saw that what's left when everything has been accounted for is around two to seven billion ISK in pure export revenues. So they were exaggerating that number tenfold to give people the impression that a lot was to be gained.

It's old-fashioned salesmanship, but at a much greater scale than we're used to. These companies are selling an entire nation the idea that it ought to become the biggest aluminium smelter in the world – a nation that had no pressing problems, really. They

surely deserve some sort of marketing award. Reviewing all the information and all the deals that have gone down, you get the same feeling as you will when your friend comes home from a presentation with a sackful of Herbalife products to re-sell. She had a good job, but wanted to make a little extra on the side. So she bought the idea that if she stocked up on these products she could sell them to her friends and make a nice profit, instead of them gathering dust in her basement.

The problem is that even if it's easy to sell you something, that does not make you a good salesman. Quite the contrary. For instance, we have been unable to secure adequate prices for the energy we're selling. We're not basing them on energy prices in other countries, or how much money we're ultimately saving companies like Alcoa. It's interesting to observe the local technocrats deal with these huge corporations, how naïve they seem. Like watching a team of your local amateur football dads compete against Juventus or Manchester United. They imagine they're on the same level, just because everyone's wearing a costume. But Juventus, like Alcoa, have played this game all over the world. For a long time. And they know how to win; they know how to get the upper hand.

You offer up some economic arguments, but less so than in the book.

We had to decide what to emphasise. We had a lot of economic arguments and calculations lined up, but ultimately you've got to consider the message you're sending out. Let's say that there were no empty apartments in Reyðarfjörður, and that our export profits would have exceeded 100 billion ISK, and the Kárahnjúkar-dam wasn't a losing venture. Would that have justified the whole scenario? We'd rather question the incentive behind these actions, and how Iceland as a nation got caught up in big corporations' plans.

Don't thank the Icelanders!

How do you view the local discourse on these matters thus far? In the media, etc?

You know, it's surprising. One would have thought that matters of such grave importance and consequence should merit a balanced and rational discussion. Instead of any of that, it was pretty much gold rush from day one; those who voiced dissent or doubt were often ridiculed or, more commonly, ignored. And no one questioned the motives behind it all either, no one stepped aside and said, "Look, do we really need this? Are we starving yet?"

This confirms that Iceland owes its majestic and unspoilt beauty not to us, its inhabitants, but to the fact that we haven't been able to gather the money and manpower to lay waste to it properly. But we've been saving up. Don't imagine that Icelanders as a nation have anything to do with the enchanting country they inhabit. That's just confusion. That's like thinking that someone's an artist just because he lives nearby the Louvre. Don't confuse the country with its people; the two aren't necessarily connected. If it were up to us, we'd probably be living in Murmansk. Just look at our suburbs. We're maybe not what you think we are.

They are already planning more dams and smelters, up north in Húsavík and a series of geothermal plants to power a proposed smelting plant in Helgúvík. The problem with that is that the energy is not renewable. Many areas are harnessed too aggressively, and they will cool down and be useless for energy production in the future. You can call them energy mines.

All of the energy, all the rivers in the north and east of the country, they want to sell them to Alcoa. Save for Jökulsá á Fjöllum, which is located in Jökulsárgljúfur National Park. Which is sponsored by Alcoa. So now Alcoa can publish pictures of Skaftafell in their press materials saying, "we saved the north of Iceland, the east of Iceland – and helped them preserve this majestic landscape." This is how dignified us Icelanders are today. Our jobs, as well as our rivers, are "given to us" by Alcoa.

Let them eat bakery!

One of the criticisms Dreamland has gotten is that it's dismissive and disrespectful of Icelanders

outside of Reykjavík, from the East coast and the North. That the film portrays them in a negative light – as naïve villagers – and disregards their towns' need for growth, the townspeople's need for work.

The fact is that people – both in and outside of Reykjavík – have acted in an irresponsible manner towards our nature and our interests, welcoming people and corporations to “save them.” They invite and welcome huge entities that they haven't done any proper research on, that they haven't even googled. Celebrating projects that practically demand violations of basic human rights, and that huge, unspoilt parts of nature be destroyed – both here and in the third world nations that supply the plants with bauxite – and our whole economy driven into the ground. Even if a community is on the defensive, there are limits to what its members can demand from the world in terms of being “saved.”

And we aren't working on the assumption that there is a divide between Reykjavík and the rest of Iceland – we're all Icelanders, and we're all responsible. We have this image of the noble small-town dweller that is always right, and much more grounded and connected to reality than the latté-sipping hordes of the city. Yet if he needs a job, nothing less than a hydroelectric plant that could power the entire city of Copenhagen will do. These are some hefty demands we are making of our country: “If I am to be able to live in this country, I will need to exploit it relentlessly. I want Iceland to provide me with a pleasant, well-paid factory job for the rest of my life.”

You could try and shift the blame on politicians, and they are to blame for a lot of this. But we are all voters in a democratic state, and as such we are all responsible and we can and should be held responsible for what we've allowed to happen. The people we show celebrating so vulgarly in Reyðarfjörður when they announced the dam, they aren't the ones taking the loans to build it, they aren't the ones sacrificing their nature and they aren't the ones that will suffer the consequences. We all are. All of Iceland is. And the world.

In the end, no one bled worse from this than our fishing industry that used to employ people in small towns all over Iceland. When the Kárahnjúkar dam project commenced, 2,000 jobs were lost. We just didn't notice because we were in the midst of our self-created inflation bubble.

Of course you have sympathy for these people who feel their communities are dying, that they need prospects and projects and construction. But when the help lies in a factory that employs 400 people and requires amounts of energy that could power a city of millions, that's going overboard. That's not a loaf of bread to quell the hunger; it's the entire bakery, bread, cakes, pastries and all.

The aim was not to portray anyone in a negative light or demean them. We were merely trying to accurately portray the atmosphere in Reyðarfjörður at the time, an atmosphere that seemed manic and tense to us at the time, and our footage seems to support that.

...and all you can do is laugh

Do you imagine that the industrialisation of Iceland will move on at full speed now that the economy has collapsed, in the name of “rebuilding Iceland”? Or do you expect our new government to put a halt to these developments?

Well, the Independence Party's campaign promised unfettered progress and projects, if they had won the election and regained power this would have been the case. It's worse with the Social Democrat Alliance, they pretend as if they're not working with those ideas, they play environmentalists and lead a lot of well meaning people on when all of their action thus far gives evidence to the contrary.

It's farcical. Now they're saying that the industrialization process is coming to an end. We only need to build those little smelting plants in Helgúvík and Húsavík. But when you peer into the numbers, you learn that when they finish those they will have doubled what we have now. And they're talking about it as if it's a final measure of no consequence – while it's really a whole new chapter in the destruction of Iceland.

For the record, there's no such thing as a “small aluminium smelter.” An aluminium

smelter has to be at least 360.000 tonnes, the technology requires it. Century Aluminium, for instance, is a very dishonest company. They were campaigning to build a 200.000 tonne plant. Which is comparable to building a three-legged chair. It doesn't add up. And lo and behold, three days after the crash, they offered to expand their plans to a 360.000 tonne plant. Out of their good nature, to help us out. These companies, if they manage to cram one foot in the doorway, soon enough they'll be moving in with you.

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