

# fire and ice

One man's passion sparks  
a national outcry over threats  
to Iceland's wilderness.

By Jon Swan



TWO SUMMERS AGO, ONE OF ICELAND'S FOREMOST NATURE WRITERS SET OFF ON A JOURNEY that was to prove both embarrassing to the government and illuminating to the public at large. On July 18, 1998, Guðmundur Páll Ólafsson bought a large Icelandic flag and a ten-foot flagpole, loaded them into his '91 Toyota Hilux, and drove east out of Reykjavík toward the remote and spectacular highlands of central Iceland. His destination was the Kaldakvísl (Cold River) Geothermal Area, an alluvial plateau pocked with hundreds of bubbling hot springs and flanked by a glacier and a recent lava field.

Ólafsson describes the geothermal area, as he first saw it in 1997, as "extraordinarily beautiful and also unique in Iceland," yet tricky to reach and virtually unvisited: "The glacial rivers can be dangerous, there aren't any bridges, and there are patches of quicksand you find out about only when it's too late." On that first visit, awestruck, he had sworn that he would find some way of protesting its impending destruction, for the Kaldakvísl Geothermal Area was to be drowned beneath a reservoir. Iceland's conservative government had launched an enormous dam-building project to generate hydroelectric energy cheap enough to attract

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heavy industry from abroad, and the Cold River was one of the first rivers on the hit list.

When Ólafsson arrived on his second visit, on the morning of July 19, the reservoir was already half full. He pulled on a rubber suit and ventured into the waist-high, 100-meter-wide river, toward a higher site where the hot springs still bubbled. There he planted the pole and tied the flag at half-mast, "in sign of mourning," as he puts it, "for the loss, for all time, of this unique and beautiful part of our country." By his reckoning, the flag would be submerged, but the top of the pole still visible, when the area had been drowned.

Ólafsson had conceived of this protest as a strictly private gesture of grief. With Icelandic reserve, he had kept it a secret even from his wife, Inga; crossing a glacial river is risky, and he didn't want her to worry. Only that evening, after he had spent the day photographing the plateau, did Ólafsson call up Inga and Kári Kristjánsson, a friend and fellow conservationist, to tell them what he had done. It was Kristjánsson who suggested something that would probably have occurred to any U.S. environmentalist weeks earlier: Why not get in touch with a few reporters?

As luck would have it, a television crew came up from Reykjavík the next day to film the flooding, just as Ólafsson was starting back to the capital. "I let them pass without saying a word," he says, "but then they saw the flag and learned through Kári that I was the guy who had planted it." Reserved or not, Ólafsson is not a man to pull punches when asked a direct question about a loss he feels deeply. "The TV people chased

remote area of their country and the price their government expected them to pay for making their famously pristine lands attractive to foreign industry. A high-powered PR campaign could hardly have succeeded so completely in riveting the nation's attention. The repercussions have been profound, and they may yet change the course of environmental policy in Iceland.

FIFTY-EIGHT YEARS OLD AND THE FATHER OF THREE daughters, Gudmundur Páll Ólafsson has a round face framed by a white, close-cropped chin-strap beard. One of the first things that struck me about Ólafsson when I first met him, nearly twenty years ago, was his reserve—a kind of wariness, as if he were taking my soundings. The wariness dropped away as it became clear that we had many interests in common, and over the years we became friends. Dead serious when it comes to protecting his country's natural heritage, he has a great sense of humor, which easily extends to laughing at himself.

A deliberate man, Ólafsson moves slowly, speaks slowly, and can't be hurried. At the same time, he is a risk-taker who, when researching his nature books, will set out alone into trackless wilderness areas, drive over mountain passes in blinding blizzards, spend the night on a seal island, and bang around on stormy fjords and highland lakes in his rubber boat, the *Puffin*. In his roving life, he has fished on trawlers; picked up a degree in animal science from Ohio State University; studied art at the Columbus College of Art and Design; taught biology at a high school in northern Iceland; restored

## Ólafsson's flag at half-mast alerted Icelanders

after me," he explains, with a trace of amusement, "and I didn't have much choice but to give the government hell." The story of Ólafsson's protest, complete with film footage of the half-mast flag fluttering over the murky waters of the reservoir, led newscasts on July 20 and received prominent coverage for days thereafter.

Finally, on the 24th, the authorities responded, in the least media-savvy way possible: a policeman was dispatched to remove the flag. Since camera crews were on hand to film the event, the flag's confiscation provided a perfect news peg for further coverage of Ólafsson's protest. Ólafsson himself was in Reykjavík, buying supplies for another trip to the highlands to research his next book, when he heard by car phone of the police response. He immediately bought 273 paper flags, one for each thousand of Iceland's inhabitants, and headed off again for the Cold River. The following day, with Kristjánsson and a group of sympathetic sight-seers from Reykjavík who had come to witness the flooding, he planted the flags along the rim of the rapidly filling reservoir. Once again, TV cameras were on the scene.

In this unscripted, unrehearsed, and yet thoroughly theatrical way, Icelanders learned about the beauty of a

old houses; studied marine biology at the University of Stockholm; and made two video documentaries, one about seal hunting, the other about traditional ways of living off the land and the sea that have all but vanished from Iceland.

In 1985, Ólafsson set to work researching, writing, photographing, and designing his first big book, *The Birds of Iceland*. This was followed, in 1990, by *Iceland the Enchanted*, which focuses on the country's geology and formation. (Iceland exploded out of the North Atlantic Ridge some 20 million years ago and is still volcanically very much alive.) Though the books are classic coffee table books, full of large-scale, full-color reproductions of Ólafsson's nature photos, they are also highly regarded as works of natural history. *The Coast of Iceland*, published in 1995, received first prize for science writing from the country's scientific and educational writers' union. All of his books, Ólafsson says, "are an expression of my love for this country. And my aim is always the same: to encourage the people who live here, especially our young people, to know their country, to appreciate its beauty, its fragility, its uniqueness, and to treat our great natural inheritance with respect."



## to their government's dam-building program.

It was in order to research his fourth book, *The Highlands of Iceland*, that Ólafsson entered the remote central regions that he, like most Icelanders, had never beheld. One of these is, or rather was, the Cold River Geothermal Area. But the highlands harbor a number of other ecologically significant features. To the east, issuing from the giant glacier known as Vatnajökull, there are two great north-flowing rivers—the Jökulsa á Fjöllum, whose Dettifoss Falls pour forth more water than any other falls in Europe, and the Jökulsa á Brú, whose headwaters meander through vast tracts of tundra grazed by wild reindeer before flowing on through the deepest canyons in Iceland. Then, farther east, there are the Eyjabakkar wetlands, the molting grounds of the pink-footed goose. To the west of the Cold River, at the center of the highlands near the smaller glacier Hofsjökull, are the Thjorsárver wetlands, breeding grounds of more than 60 percent of the entire pink-footed goose population.

All of these places will be forever altered if the government pursues its ambitious development plans. As those plans now stand, National Power, the predominantly state-owned national utility, will dam or channel

all the rivers north of Vatnajökull. The taming of the rivers and flooding of the land would have continental, even global, significance: the Icelandic highlands are the largest remaining wilderness in Western Europe. Further, the foreign industry Iceland's government hopes to attract by sacrificing this wilderness is aluminum smelting, which produces potent greenhouse gases that may remain in the atmosphere for thousands of years. According to a 1997 study by the Danish Environmental Protection Agency, the industry is also "well known as a source of dioxin formation and emission."

When Ólafsson talks about the damage his government intends to inflict on the country, he speaks with a kind of restrained fury mingled with almost a lover's pain at the thought of so much beauty, so much wildlife and biological variety, squandered and lost. Only think, he says, about just one seemingly small casualty, an "elves' waterfall" he has visited on a brook near the headwaters of the Jökulsa á Fjöllum. "You can hear the elves singing when you walk along the base of a cliff," Ólafsson says. "It's a natural phenomenon. The hissing sound of the waterfall penetrates the cracked cliffs and separates into single or multiple voices, which resonate



as in a sounding box. So what you hear are these voices, sometimes a baritone, sometimes a soprano, or a duet, or a whole chorus of voices, singing the most beautiful chorale I ever heard." The planned diversion of the Jökulsá á Fjöllum could silence the choir forever.

Ólafsson's guide on many of his treks into the uninhabited highland wilderness is his friend Kári Kristjánsson, a mountaineer whose nickname is Mountain Kári. In 1997, Ólafsson, Kristjánsson, and a handful of others who, in Ólafsson's words, "felt strongly that the highlands must be saved from destruction," founded the Iceland Nature Conservation Association. The group now has a staff of one: Árni Finnsson, an expert in conservation politics who has worked with Greenpeace in Sweden and Iceland. For the first year, his office was a room in his own home. Now, thanks to the World Wide Fund for Nature (whose U.S. branch is the World Wildlife Fund), Finnsson has a cubbyhole office in downtown Reykjavík and even gets a small salary. Meanwhile, the association's membership has grown from its original dozen to 400. More important, Ólafsson and his fellow activists have made the fate of Iceland's wetlands and rivers the subject of a passionate national debate.

IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE FLAG-PLANTING, both the print and broadcast media began to explore the government's dams-for-industry program, covering it regularly for the first time. Throughout September, Iceland's main newspaper, *Morgunblaðið*, ran articles about the highlands and the dams. That same month,

**The government of Iceland plans to dam rivers and flood wetlands throughout Iceland's central glacial highlands—the largest wilderness remaining in Western Europe.**

the state-owned television network aired a three-part documentary that took a close look at Norway's disappointing experience with big dams. The damming of that country's Alta River by Norsk Hydro Electric—the same company that is cooperating with National Power and the Icelandic government on the hydroelectric project—was supposed to bring jobs and prosperity to nearby rural communities; but after the dam was built and the river landscape sacrificed, the promised benefits never materialized. The documentary included a television interview with Ólafsson after his second protest action at the Cold River reservoir, the newly planted small paper flags fluttering in the background.

Because the hydroelectric program had never before been publicly debated—the plans had been largely drawn up by National Power—and because of the remoteness of the areas involved and the lack of media coverage, the ambitious agenda for harnessing the wilderness rivers came as a surprise to most Icelanders. As the plans were scrutinized in the media for the first time, people got angry. Politicians who had previously been boosters of the program started to get worried. And the climate of opinion began to change.

When the Althing (Parliament) reopened in October 1998, members of parliament got a sermon from the chaplain about the need for humans to take care of Mother Earth. On November 28, an action meeting on

"Saving the Highlands," held in the university's largest auditorium, drew a standing-room-only audience. Ólafsson, as keynote speaker, delivered a hellfire address: "The authorities mislead and deceive us.... Every time the country's ecosystem is disturbed and the atmosphere is polluted, the quality of life declines. These green sacrifices are never discussed. Authorities deliberately deceive and then speak of consensus." He received a standing ovation.

On January 2, 1999, former president Vigdís Finnbogadóttir declared her opposition to building dams and reservoirs. On January 18, newspapers reported that 66 percent of those polled opposed the flooding of the Eyjabakkar wetlands. In early March, the Althing enacted a bill to declare Vatnajökull a national park, potentially giving environmentalists another argument against the damming of rivers that issue from the glacier. Also in March, the minister of industry announced the formation of a five-member commission to assess which of the country's rivers should be harnessed for electricity; this commission was supposed to have been created in 1996 and to have finished its assessment this year, but it took the groundswell of public protest to move the government to action even on a measure it had already pledged. And on Earth Day, April 23, Ólafsson became the first recipient of the Award of Nongovernmental Organizations for Environment and Nature Protection. Iceland's president, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, made his own position clear by personally presenting the award. (In Iceland, the office of president is not a political one.)

But the current government shows no sign of making any real concession to public opinion. On the contrary, the government holds fast to its belief that Iceland can maintain its clean image while attracting heavy industry. For instance, the website of the government's Invest in Iceland Bureau features "Environment" and "Energy" pages pitching Iceland as a squeaky-clean country that offers nonpolluting power sources at prices far below those of any other European country. The documents—which were withdrawn from domestic circulation a couple of years ago following protests from members of parliament and conservation groups—suggest that foreign industries "twin Iceland's clean ecological image with their own." And there is an additional lure: "An operating license is usually granted with a minimum of red tape. Environmental policy does not serve to deter development." Rather, the text continues smoothly, in Iceland the aim of environmental policy is "to harmonize [development] along progressive and imaginative lines."

Indeed, the government seems to believe that its policy will actually enhance the country's appeal to wilderness hikers. Fridrik Sophusson, director of the National Power Company, believes that "harnessing hydroelec-

## WEBSITES

**Mál og menning** (the publisher of Ólafsson's books, including *English editions of Iceland the Enchanted* and *The Coast of Iceland*):

[www.mm.is](http://www.mm.is)

**Iceland Review** (news and links):

[www.icenews.is](http://www.icenews.is)

**Invest in Iceland Bureau:**

[www.invest.is/us](http://www.invest.is/us)

**WWF's Arctic Bulletin:**

[www.ngo.grida.no/wwfap/publications](http://www.ngo.grida.no/wwfap/publications)

tric power and tourism can go hand in hand." As he told an Icelandic interviewer recently, "A well-placed reservoir can become an attractive part of the landscape."

As Ólafsson sees it, the current government believes not only that bringing industry to Iceland will ensure a high standard of living, but also that providing clean energy for industries that elsewhere must rely on coal or nuclear power will contribute to reducing air pollution globally. Convinced of the rightness of this policy, the government has no

patience for environmental criticism. This past spring, Iceland went so far as to refuse to sign the international Kyoto Protocol on curbing global warming—the only Western country to do so—despite having been granted the most generous reduction target of all the industrialized nations. Matters have gotten so bad between the government and environmentalists that, says Ólafsson, "it regards us as a serious threat: we are the enemy." In fact, in June Iceland played host to armed forces from four other NATO nations (including the United States) in a military exercise designed to deal with an attack by enemies whom the government chose to designate as "an extremist eco-terrorist group."

AND SO THE CONTROVERSY RAGES ON. The first dam planned for the area north of Vatnajökull is the one at Eyjabakkar, where work is scheduled to begin next spring—without benefit, Ólafsson points out, of an environmental impact assessment. But in August, the conservationists gained an unexpected and powerful ally. Bishop Karl Sigurbjörnsson, who replaced his predecessor as leader of the National Church of Iceland two years ago, toured the Eyjabakkar region and was struck by its beauty. During an interview with reporters afterward he observed, calmly, as if the statement were not political dynamite, that large tracts of Eyjabakkar belonged to the church. The government would have to consult with the church about any future development there, he said, and the environmental impact of such a large project would have to be assessed carefully before any work could begin. People all across Iceland who listened to the evening news heard the bishop say, "My heart tells me that this land must not be destroyed."

The battle of the highlands is becoming a national rallying cry, and all because one man planted a flag at half-mast as a personal symbol of mourning. Former president Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, musing on Ólafsson's part in rousing the country, says, "He has played a very important role through his extraordinary books and by giving himself, his heart, to this struggle. Whether people agree with him or not, they must respect this. I wish the sunshine to follow him."