



**Address by  
the President of Iceland,  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson  
at the conference  
Nature in the Kingdom of Ends  
Selfoss  
11 June 2005**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It would be difficult to find a better setting than Iceland for a discussion of the relationship between man and nature, the interplay of thought and experience, and the question of how the absolute values inherent in the natural world can be reconciled with the relative values that man adopts in his activities within the natural framework.

As we are all aware, Iceland is one of the youngest countries in the world in geological terms. Here on the geographical boundary of Europe and America, the meeting of the tectonic plates actually runs through our country. Volcanoes, hot springs, earthquakes and recent lava flows remind us of the power restlessly at work beneath our feet every minute of the day.

For centuries, millennia, Iceland was uninhabited, waiting for the arrival of human settlers to give the land its name and clothe the naked landscape with language. They named the rivers and fjords, the mountains and valleys, the lakes and inlets – and went on to write their own history and that of the land in books of timeless value. In this way our language became closely associated with the discovery and settlement of the country, and our awareness of the natural environment became inseparably connected with the perception and exploits of our ancestors, the people who first gave it its name.

One of the gems of our old literature is *Landnámabók*, the “Book of Settlements”. It records how and where the first generations of our people settled in Iceland. If you travel round the country today with *Landnámabók* as your guide, and visit the sites of the great manor farms in each of the quarters of the country – east, north, south and west – you

can see in every stopping place how much aesthetic sense the early settlers had, how much they appreciated and understood their natural surroundings. Again and again, you will find that they chose the most beautiful sites for their farms, in special settings among the mountains or in places with open views to the sea. These places still make an unforgettable impression on us today.

In our old sagas, nature played a part in the individual's destiny. Every Icelander knows the decisive role it played in deciding the fate of Gunnar, one of the heroes of *Njáls saga*, a work that was chosen among the hundred greatest books of all time by the vote of thousands of writers and scholars in the year 2000.

Gunnar, the hero, has been outlawed and sentenced to leave Iceland. If he does not, his enemies will be lawfully entitled to kill him. On the way to the ship that will carry him into exile, his horse stumbles and he falls from the saddle. He looks up and sees the mountain slope, Fljótshlíð, above his farm. He finds the sight so beautiful that he decides it is better to stay in Iceland and face death rather than go into exile. He says: "Fair is the slope; never before has it looked so beautiful, with its pale cornfields and the hayfields newly mown."

Another saga, *Vatnsdæla saga*, tells how Ingimundur the Old led his clan in search of a place to settle down. They look for some time, but without finding a place that they are really content with until they arrive in the valley Vatnsdalur. "Then the party went up the valley and found land that was rich in grassland and woods. It was beautiful to see, and their spirits recovered."

Nature has always been very close to us in Iceland, an inseparable part of our image of ourselves, an unchanging mirror of memory and longing in the works of our poets and the ever-active playground of the forces of creation. Admittedly, it could often be a cruel master and taught our people many a harsh lesson in their struggles in past centuries, but it also spread a table of plenty before them in its more generous moods.

The natural environment in our country is such an integral part of our culture that it is difficult to separate the two. If it is possible to speak of an Icelandic national character, then one thing is certain: it bears the stamp of the natural world, with its changes in weather, its seasons, its ever-present contrasts, with the long nights of winter and the soft and mild tones of summer.

In many ways, nature is where our self-awareness as Icelanders is rooted. In the nineteenth century, when the campaign for national independence was a dominant issue, our poets wrote a great deal in

celebration of nature, and at the same time their poems were statements of the demand for broader political rights. Nature was personified as the *fjallkona*, the rugged woman of the mountains who stood guard over the fortunes of the nation. The elemental forces of nature were seen as a broom, sweeping away the old order and Danish influence and letting in the fresh air of a new age.

Romantic poets filled their vision of nature with passionate life. Everything was alive; there were spirits in every rock. Jónas Hallgrímsson lavished his verse on the tiny flowers that grace the earth with their friendly colours in spring, and presented geology in a special light in his poem about the mountain Skjaldbreiður. No one in Iceland has written nature poems with such complete engagement, and this is one reason why Jónas is regarded as the finest of our poets.

In his poem *Veturinn* (“Winter”), Bjarni Thorarensen wrote in praise of that season. This vigorous poem was a fighting call to the nation, urging it to rise above its circumstances and turn a deaf ear to talk of surrender and defeat. Bjarni also had a milder muse; he wrote about *Fljótshlíð*, which I mentioned before; he personified it as a woman.

In a well-known poem, Hannes Hafstein welcomed the storm which he saw as blowing away the old political order and opening the way for a new Iceland:

*Ég elska þig stormur, sem geisar um grund  
og gleðiþyt vekur í blaðstyrkum lund,  
en gráfeysknu kvistina bugar og brýtur  
og bjarkirnar treystir um leið og þú þýtur.*

“I love thee, O storm o’er the wold that dost sweep,  
And waken’st glad flutters in woodlands asleep;  
The gray, withered branches thou breakest and triest  
The birch-boles’ endurance, as by them thou fliest.”

(Translated by Skúli Johnson)

A new way of looking at nature came in with the revolution in poetic forms in the twentieth century. The older poets of this new wave, such as Snorri Hjartarson and Ólafur Jóhann Sigurðsson forged nature and society into a single entity: *land, þjóð og tunga, þrenning sönn og ein* - “land, people, language – trinity true and single.”

The younger poets were bolder in their imagery. Stefán Hörður Grímsson painted a picture of a cold winter day; the closing lines show us vividly how tiny man is in the vast panorama of the Icelandic wilderness:

*Á mjóum fótleggjum sínum  
koma mennirnir eftir hjarninu  
með fjöll á herðum sér.*

“On slender legs  
men come walking across the snowfield  
with mountains on their shoulders.”

In our own day, Sigurður Pálsson has given us a thought-provoking angle in this poem:

*Öræfin neita að láta af söng sínum  
(öræfin sem eru náttúrulega ekki  
bara úti í náttúrunni)  
Nei öræfin inni  
fullt eins og öræfin úti  
Þau neita að láta af söng sínum  
Með söng sínum afneita þau  
glerhörðum tvíbökum venjumálsins  
svonefndri orsök  
svonefndri afleiðingu  
svonefndum veruleika*

The wilderness refuses to stop singing  
(the wilderness is, of course, not  
only “out there”)  
No, the wilderness inside  
just like the wilderness out there  
It refuses to stop singing  
With its singing it rejects  
the rock-hard baker’s rusks of routine language  
so-called cause  
so-called effect  
so-called reality.

We could go on looking at poems in this way for days at a stretch: the treasure-house of poetry is endless, and our poets have given us so many rich visions of the natural world that it is difficult for us to say how much of what we see is nature, pure and simple, and how much is the colouring and interpretation that we borrow from the poets.

The poets were not alone, of course: Icelandic painters in the last century made their contribution too. Their interpretation of nature looms large in the history of Icelandic art. Kjarval, Ásgrímur Jónsson, Jón Stefánsson – the roll of honour is a long one, and their greatest works are

all devoted to colours and interpretations based in nature. Kjarval actually added to nature, populating it in his pictures with elves and fairies, horses and human heads, making art and life, fantasy and reality, into one. Younger painters have come forward with yet another interpretation of nature: the miniature beauty of Icelandic flowers in the works of Eggert Pétursson; mystery and depth in the fresh and revitalized views of mountain scenes in the paintings of Georg Guðni and the surging blue sea in the glass art of Jónas Bragi.

In our own day, Ólafur Eliásson has also trodden this path – though in a completely different way, making exhibitions out of arrangements of photographs that bring us a new message, blowing away our mental cobwebs, giving nature a rhythm different from what it had before.

This age definitely has a new rhythm, mainly because we now face the question of how far man should go in overturning the natural order, changing almost everything that was once thought to be eternal, and whose existence our forefathers took for granted.

In this respect too, Iceland is the ideal setting for a discussion of the future. I have often said that if anyone doubts the urgency of the need to analyse and react to climate change, then they should take a journey to the North; because such a journey will provide a healthy warning, a wake-up call not available anywhere else in the world.

People in the Northern regions are being more noticeably affected by climate change than people in most other places. Climate change is taking place faster in the Arctic. The melting of the ice, the transformation of the tundra, the retreat of the glaciers and the enhanced force of the rivers – these things are affecting our lifestyles and future prospects in a dramatic way.

The trouble with the debate on climate change is that, for most people, it is highly abstract. It consists of predictions, assessments of uncertainties, conflicting presentations of scientific data, claims and counter-claims which become worked up in the media into a familiar but largely incomprehensible background noise.

The debate is made even more complex when political leaders and candidates running for office take diametrically opposing stands and vested interests of various types then exploit this confusion in order to strengthen their position, both within our economic systems and in our governmental structures.

A journey within Iceland and in the circumpolar regions enables us all to study in detail how climate change is affecting the North, to

examine the remarkable report which was submitted last November to the ministerial meeting of the Arctic Council, an international organisation founded a decade ago and embracing the United States, Canada, Russia and the five Nordic countries.

The evidence from the Arctic is indeed convincing and the consequences of the changes taking place in the Northern regions will affect the entire world, mainly through rising sea levels all over the globe and dramatic changes in the conveyor belt of ocean currents which stretches from the North Atlantic to the Indian Ocean and onwards into the Pacific.

The report to the Arctic Council is the most comprehensive analysis of what is happening in the Arctic regions. It was prepared by a large gathering of scientists and representatives of research institutions from the eight member countries, and cites mounting evidence, backed up by accounts from people who live in the far North, those who see the effects of climatic change on their daily life.

A journey throughout the North shows us dramatic evidence:

- The melting of glaciers throughout the Arctic and sub-Arctic.
- The melting of the Greenland ice sheet, which has recently been taking place faster than ever before.
- The diminishing of lake and river ice, which has reduced the ice season by up to a month, leading to severe economic consequences for both the oil and the gas industries and for the mining of diamonds and various metals.
- The growing flow of fresh water from the arctic rivers into the Atlantic Ocean, thus affecting the balance of salt level which drives the global conveyor belt of ocean currents throughout the world. The implications of this for global and regional climates, and for living conditions in Africa, Asia and other parts of the world, are indeed dramatic.

Rising sea levels would have disastrous consequences for people in distant regions, consequences akin to the destruction of communities in the wake of the recent tsunami. The giant wave can thus be seen as a forewarning of our future fate if mankind fails to unite in common action, fails to join in the creation of a global programme dedicated to the elimination of the climatic threat.

The abstract nature of the debate on climate change has been a stumbling-block to the arousal of enhanced public awareness; therefore

the concreteness of the changes happening in the North could be a fundamental pillar of an improved understanding.

When presenting the findings of the Arctic Council to the Delhi Sustainable Development Summit last February, I invited any leader who doubted the wisdom of the warnings on climate change to join me on a journey through the Arctic and the northern regions and to engage in a dialogue with the indigenous people who feel the emerging threat more strongly than any others.

Man and nature: Who is the master? For centuries the history of our country gave a clear answer to this question. Catastrophes and famines kept our people in an iron grip. The very existence of the nation was threatened at times, and there was no net growth in the population for a thousand years.

Now times have changed. Other questions have arisen. Can we stop man from interfering with nature? Has technology put dominion into our hands – dominion that the Scriptures tell us is reserved for God alone? Can the wisdom of ages past serve as our guiding light in our present situation? Have the philosophers of earlier times anything to offer us – or do we stand alone, completely alone, at this new crossroads, and are we forced to think the whole question out from scratch?

We are not in an enviable position in having to answer these questions – but there is no shying away from them.

I hope your discussions will help us to find our way in the future.