



**New Year's Address
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
January 1, 1998**

Fellow Icelanders:

On the first day of this new year my family and I wish you all a prosperous and happy New Year and thank you for your warm feelings and gestures of friendship which we greatly appreciate.

At Christmas and the New Year, which are family celebrations, our minds turn back to the years of our youth with our parents and grandparents, and good wishes and hopes surround the children as they play. We enjoy being with our loved ones and delight in being able to welcome new times together.

Despite all the times of sorrows and difficulties that many people have certainly been through, the New Year sun bodes brightness and life, reveals to us the spectrum of nature and reminds us of the rich stock of experience which always strengthens our resolution to undertake new tasks.

We Icelanders still possess a rich spirit of community, a heritage which in the past was an integral part of accepted values regarding justice and duties. Each and every person was supposed to help others when danger approached or setbacks altered the course of people's lives. Collective responsibility and community spirit have characterised life in Iceland for centuries and still emerge today in times of trouble.

We have been proud of the peace and security which our community offers. Children and young people have been able to go wherever they like without fearing anything. Violence and drugs were so remote from Icelandic

reality that there hardly seemed to be any need in Iceland for the action against them which other nations considered necessary. Peaceful family life was in effect an image representing Icelandic society as a whole.

Unfortunately we now need to face up to the fact that the peace and safety of the community and individuals is threatened from many directions. Unfamiliar plagues put us to the test in new ways and may change the character of Icelandic society if preventive action is not stepped up in good time.

Research findings were recently published which show how rapidly drug-taking has been increasing among young people in recent years. Around one-third of 17-year-olds in Reykjavík have tried cannabis and half of those who did so at the age of 14 had, three years later, used amphetamine. Large-scale drug trafficking has clearly become a fact of life in Iceland and thousands of young people have taken the first steps towards the road to destruction which drugs can represent.

This threat has not descended upon us overnight. In the course of a few years it has grown to such an extent that we face a serious social malaise, a task which calls for solidarity among families, schools, the media, experts, organisations, and central and local government authorities.

Economic and industrial progress will be of little value if the structure of society itself collapses. The blessings of the market are of little value if young people lose their souls, lives or health.

A national awakening is needed. The silence surrounding this development must not hold back discussion any longer of a national campaign to save the thousands of people who are in danger of losing their footing. Their fate is a cry for our help.

“Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me”, is Christ’s teaching in the Holy Scriptures. Who can tell when this new threat knocks at the door of their own home, ruining the life and health of a loved one, a child or a relative?

Studies have shown that more intensive awareness campaigns and preventive action produce unquestionable results. Greater participation in sports and healthy leisure activities prevents many people from being led

astray. The more years that pass without a young person using tobacco or alcohol, the more likely he or she is to go through life without falling victim to drugs.

We must boost the contribution made by parents and schools, strengthen sports associations to increase participation by young people in public sports, extend a helping hand to organisations that strive to guide addicts and alcoholics back onto the path of a healthy life. Above all, cooperation needs to be increased among everyone who bears responsibility: you and me, friends and colleagues, the whole of society. To create here in Iceland, as has successfully been achieved in other countries, forums for cooperating on preventive action in schools, neighbourhoods and local communities.

It is sometimes forgotten that tobacco is also a drug, even though it cannot be compared to the more dangerous types. Recognition of the threat is more widespread as far as alcohol, cannabis, amphetamine, cocaine and ecstasy are concerned. Nonetheless, these are all branches of the same tree: patterns of consumption which in the course of time can destroy the health and happiness of individuals and families, cut lives short and lead many people astray onto the path of violence and crime.

The relationship between smoking, drinking and drug-taking among young people is a scientific truth which has repeatedly been proven, and recently published studies by the University of Iceland provide us with yet another reminder of it. All the same, we have a strong tendency to sweep scientific results aside when it comes to the conditions for bringing up young people and to our own health. We have always been more interested in research about the conservation of fish stocks than in studies involving human health.

Scientific findings by medical doctors and other experts show that smoking is one of the great plagues to health today, the main cause of heart attacks, cancer and other illnesses that cause the deaths of thousands of people in our small society and millions around the world.

Governments have therefore launched fierce campaigns against smoking in many parts of the world, both to save people's health and also to prevent massive expenditures in the health system. The European Union has recently passed a law which restricts tobacco marketing, especially to young people.

The same has been done in the United States of America and in Iceland there are widespread signs of a new attitude too. On the initiative of my wife Guðrún Katrín, the presidential residence here at Bessastadir has been smoke-free for more than a year now – and most people have approved.

We need collectively to build up attitudes which respect the findings of our leading scientists, however uncomfortable they may be. We need to change the priorities of the government, parliament, local governments and other influential bodies so as to make the campaign against drugs, against increased drinking and smoking by young people, and against unhealthy lifestyles among older generations, into Iceland's top priority.

Social dissolution is not the private concern of the unfortunate individuals and families who are affected in each instance. It really deserves to be on the agenda of everyone in a position of responsibility, with government institutions and organisations. We must not create the impression indefinitely that by discussing quota charges, hydropower plants and factories, the agenda for progress has been completed. Social responsibility should not rank lower than duties towards economic reform and prosperity.

Icelanders are richly endowed with a sense of community and readiness to help each other. My family here at Bessastadir has witnessed this noble national characteristic during Guðrún Katrín's illness. Your sympathy, encouragement and prayers have given us strength in a difficult battle and we shall always cherish this testimony to the warm feelings of everyone in this country.

Although her illness came as a great shock to us, a shock which has been transformed into optimism by the prospects for recovery and the success of Icelandic doctors and nurses, we know that thousands of people in Iceland are no less in need of help or comfort. Let us consider the tribulations of those who helplessly watch their loved ones or young people, relatives or friends fall prey to violence, drugs, alcoholism and other self-induced illnesses.

We ought to cultivate the sense of community which has served the Icelanders well in the course of the centuries and forged for the nation a single soul, a single will, when dangers loom and much is at stake.

We need to adopt the habits of looking to the future, lifting ourselves above routine clashes of interests, and measuring values and qualities against the span of lifetimes and decades rather than passing moments.

We must show the courage to look directly at ourselves, our actions and their consequences, and not through a veil of deception and avoidance. Not only in the area of our society and lifestyles, but also in our attitudes to natural resources and environmental conservation, in the way we treat our country and safeguard our reputation in the community of nations.

For a long time it was an accepted belief that Icelanders were world leaders in protecting the land and conserving natural resources. Travellers visited us to admire our country's beauty.

Now, however, most countries appear to be surpassing us and Iceland is slipping to the rear in attempts to save mankind's conditions for life.

The dialogue in Iceland about the risks of climate change, and the negotiations in Kyoto, all too frequently forgot to mention what is at stake for us in Iceland – not in the form of exemptions from a new international agreement, but rather in the threat posed to conditions for life in our country if mankind fails to adopt effective action.

A team of the world's leading scientists, formally selected national representatives, has presented its findings about temperature change, the increase in the sea level, and disruptions to ocean currents, vegetation and conditions for life on earth. If the present pattern continues, the global increase in temperature could turn areas of vegetation into desert, while cooling elsewhere could approach the scale of an Ice Age. Changes in the saline content of the sea would stop the mechanism which has propelled ocean currents, and the water which has warmed Iceland's shores from the south would cease to be carried here.

Iceland's geographical position and the key role of the Gulf Stream in our region mean that the impact of atmospheric change would be felt most severely by us in Iceland and make our country almost uninhabitable for our children and their descendants.

A glacial cap would cover the entire country, the fish stocks which have kept our nation alive for centuries would disappear from the ocean around it,

part of the present populated regions would be submerged by the rising sea level.

This description is not a doomsday prophecy or the plot of a science-fiction horror story, but rather the essence of scientific findings by the experts who comprise the formal international advisory team, findings which depict what might begin to happen in the lifetime of Icelanders who are presently schoolchildren.

Indeed, Iceland has been singled out as an example in this scientific discussion of the terrible consequences of atmospheric change. A respected expert scientist at Columbia University in the USA recently said in an interview with one of the world's major newspapers: "Iceland would have glaciation right down to sea level. People would have to abandon it." – Our beloved country would then be a true "Ice Land."

We Icelanders ought to play a leading role in international demands for immediate radical action to save the world from atmospheric change. We should welcome the willingness to cooperate which the nations of the world now show, launch in league with others a programme to alter fuel consumption by ships and cars and employ new technology to facilitate atmosphere-friendly methods of production. We should rejoice at the opportunities which the age of environmental conservation can present to us, if we ourselves have the good sense and willingness to take advantage of our country's benefits.

It is quite peculiar, how little success we have had in demonstrating in practice our loyalty to the conservation of the environment, biosphere and natural resources. We have allowed our mother country to erode, and destroyed its vegetation by excessive grazing of horses and sheep to such an extent, that Iceland is now the greatest desert in our part of the world.

Satellite technology and international cartographic programmes have given us a precise picture of the state of vegetation and erosion in each district of Iceland. We are therefore better equipped than ever to launch organised and successful land reclamation. We cannot be guilty of handing our country down to new generations in such a poor state that its soil erosion would rank with the highest levels anywhere in the world outside the desert regions, and that ecological institutions around the world would cite our country as an example of a peril to be avoided.

The global community has decided that the year which is now beginning will be dedicated to the ocean, its properties, resources and importance for all mankind. That decision presents us in Iceland with a wide variety of opportunities. Few nations have as colourful a history of triumphs in turning the ocean to man's service, even though it has admittedly also demanded its sacrifices.

During 1998 – the year of the ocean – we can demonstrate to others how the resolution, resourcefulness and solidarity of a small nation can produce results, how knowhow and skills can create high living standards and prosperity by harvesting the sea. The ocean and its resources have shaped the fate of Icelanders ever since the first days of the settlement, given inspiration to poets and struck chords within the hearts of us all. Together with the land, it has nurtured us well.

We enhance our identity through the impressions made by the expanses of the ocean and the spectrum of Icelandic nature, the turbulent waves tossed by the storm and the calmness which plays around the majesty of mountains and the beauty of the morning.

“The ocean shines like a heavenly sight,
vanishes in the sky's embrace.
Beneath the clear day's brow of light
are the glade and meadow's smiling face.”

In many respects we are a fortunate nation. Our society has given the impression of a compatible family in which each member lends a helping hand to the others.

On the horizon a new age awaits us, a time of upheavals. It will be important then that we preserve and strengthen the values which make us into a nation.

I wish you all a prosperous New Year and hope that it will bring all Icelanders near and far good fortune and happiness.