World Heritage Scanned Nomination

File Name: 1152.pdf **UNESCO Region:** EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA

SITE NAME: **Þingvellir National Park**

DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 7th July 2004

STATE PARTY: ICELAND

CRITERIA: C (iii) (vi) CL

DECISION OF THE WORLD HERITAGE COMMITTEE:
Excerpt from the Report of the 28th Session of the World Heritage Committee

Criterion (iii): The Althing and its hinterland, the Þingvellir National Park, represent, through the remains of the assembly ground, the booths for those who attended, and through landscape evidence of settlement extending back possibly to the time the assembly was established, a unique reflection of mediaeval Norse/Germanic culture and one that persisted in essence from its foundation in 980 AD until the 18th century.

Criterion (vi): Pride in the strong association of the Althing to mediaeval Germanic/Norse governance, known through the 12th century Icelandic sagas, and reinforced during the fight for independence in the 19th century, have, together with the powerful natural setting of the assembly grounds, given the site iconic status as a shrine for the national.

BRIEF DESCRIPTIONS
Þingvellir (Thingvellir) is the National Park where the Althing - an open-air assembly, which represented the whole of Iceland - was established in 930 and continued to meet until 1798. Over two weeks a year, the assembly set laws - seen as a covenant between free men - and settled disputes. The Althing has deep historical and symbolic associations for the people of Iceland. Located on an active volcanic site, the property includes the Þingvellir National Park and the remains of the Althing itself: fragments of around 50 booths built of turf and stone. Remains from the 10th century are thought to be buried underground. The site also includes remains of agricultural use from 18th and 19th centuries, the Thingvellir Church and adjacent farm, and the population of arctic char in Lake Thingvallavatn. The park shows evidence of the way the landscape was husbanded over 1,000 years.

1.b State, Province or Region: Bláskógabyggð municipality, district of Arnessysla

1.d Exact location: N64 15 13.7 W21 02 14.1

SIGNATURE ON BEHALF OF THE STATE PARTY

Signed on behalf of the State Party

Mr. Davíð Oddsson	Mr Björn Bjarnason
Prime Minister	Chairman of the Þingvellir Commission
Reykjavík, 28/1 2003	28 January 2003
Date	Date

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SIGNATURE ON BEHALF OF THE STATE PARTY I

CONTRIBUTORS..... II

1. IDENTIFICATION OF THE PROPERTY..... 2

1.a Country 2

1.b County 2

1.c Name of the Property 2

1.d-e Location and map of the nominated area showing the boundaries of the area proposed for inscription and of the buffer zones..... 3

1.f Area of the site proposed for inscription 4

2. JUSTIFICATION FOR INSCRIPTION..... 5

2.a Statement of significance..... 5

2.b Comparative analysis 8

2.c Authenticity / Integrity..... 10

2.d Criteria under which this inscription is proposed and justification for inscription under these criteria 11

3. DESCRIPTION 13

3.a Description of the Property 13

Topography 13
Nature 15
The cultural landscape 17
Archaeological Research 22

3.b History and development 28

The Viking Age 28
The Icelandic Commonwealth..... 32
Monarch and Parliament 35
Absolutism..... 36
Þingvellir as a National Centre..... 37
The Heritage of Þingvellir..... 37
Þingvellir: a hallowed site 39
Culture..... 41
Þingvellir and the Icelandic identity..... 45

3.c Form and date of most recent records of site..... 49

3.d Present state of conservation 50

3.e Policies and programmes related to the presentation and promotion of the property..... 51

4. MANAGEMENT 54

4.a Ownership..... 54

4.b Legal status 54

4.c Protective measures and means of implementing them 58

4.d Agencies with management authority..... 59

4.e Level at which management is exercised (e.g. on site, regionally) and name and address of responsible person for contact purpose..... 60

4.f Agreed plans related to property 60
4.g Sources and amounts of funds 62
4.h Sources of expertise and training in conservation and management techniques 62
4.i Visitor Facilities and Statistics 63
4.j Site management plan and statement of objectives 67
4.k Staffing levels 68
5. FACTORS AFFECTING THE PROPERTY 69
5.a Development pressures 69
5.b-c Environmental pressures, natural disasters and preparedness for them 71
5.d Pressures from tourism 72
5.e Number of inhabitants within Park lands 73
6. MONITORING 74
6.a Key indicators of conservation status 74
6.b Administrative roles in monitoring the premises 74
6.c Findings and consequences of previous reports 74
7. DOCUMENTATION 76
7.a. Photographs, slides and video 76
7.b. Management plans and maps 76
7.c. Bibliographies 76
APPENDIX I: MAPS 84
MAP 1. Þingvellir National Park: 1:50 000 84
MAP 2. Published Map of Þingvellir National Park 84
MAP 3. Satellite Image Map of Þingvellir Area 84
MAP 4. Administrative Boundaries 84
MAP 5. The Innermost Assembly Site 84
MAP 6. Recorded Archaeological Remains 84
MAP 7. Archaeological excavation sites 84
MAP 8. Archaelogical remains under pressure 84
MAP 9. Trailheads, parking and visitor flow 84
MAP 10. Index of pictures and view angles 84
MAP 11. Index of pictures and view angles 84
APPENDIX II: ATTACHMENTS 85
Appendix II.a. Authorization 85
Appendix II.b. Place names 85
Appendix II.c. Project plan 85

Appendix II.d. List of illustrations..... 85
Appendix II.e. List of photographs and slides..... 85
APPENDIX III: SLIDES..... 86
APPENDIX IV: CD ROMS, BROCHURES AND MAP..... 87

Application for Inclusion in the World Heritage List

Þingvellir National Park

Mount Skjaldbreiður (Broadshield)

Eastward, stony steeps are leaping
stalwartly from Raven Gorge;
westward, walls of rock are keeping
watch above our nation's forge.
Grímur Goatshoe, sage and clever,
grasped the promise of this place:
Almanna Gorge, on guard for ever,
girds the councils of my race.

A travel poem from Þingvellir by **Jónas Hallgrímsson** (1807-1845). The Icelandic Nobel Prize laureate **Halldór Laxness** (1902-1998) called Jónas Hallgrímsson the "poet of Icelandic consciousness".

1. IDENTIFICATION OF THE PROPERTY

1.a Country

Iceland.

1.b County

Bláskógabyggð municipality, district of Árnessýsla.

1.c Name of the Property

The nominated area is Þingvellir National Park. The name of the nominated area **Þingvellir means "assembly plains"**. The Icelandic letter "**þ - thorn**" is pronounced like the English "th" in "thing" and is sometimes transliterated as "**th**" in other languages. The Icelandic letter "**ð-eth**" can also be found in the application. It is pronounced like the English "th" in "this" and is sometimes transliterated as "**d**".

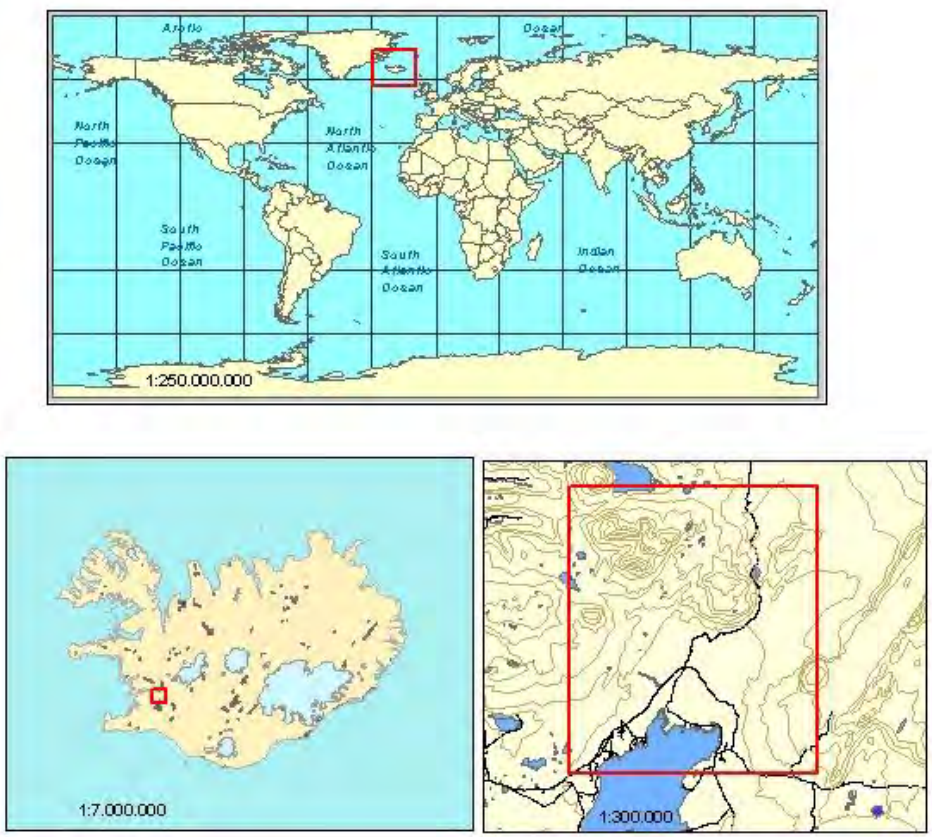

Figure 1.1. Location of Þingvellir National Park in Iceland.

1.d-e Location and map of the nominated area showing the boundaries of the area proposed for inscription and of the buffer zones

The **nominated area is the Þingvellir National Park**, located 49 km from Reykjavík, the capital of Iceland (Map 1 – for all references to maps, see Appendix 1). Park boundaries are shown on Map 1 and the coordinates of the National Park are shown on *Figure 1.2*. The **core area of the nominated area is the Innermost Assembly Site**, where the assembly representing the whole of Iceland, the Althing (Icelandic "Alþing", meaning "general assembly") was held from around 930 to 1798. The Innermost Assembly Site is shown on Maps 1 and 5.

Figure 1.2. Coordinates of the Þingvellir National Park boundaries.

No developments which could have an impact on the nominated area are anticipated in the zone adjacent to the National Park, so a special buffer zone is not considered necessary to protect the area. However, there is an official buffer zone around part of the nominated area shown on Map 4 in red (zone 1). The buffer zone is in the municipality of Bláskógabyggð, which has the planning authority. Nonetheless, the Þingvellir Commission has to grant permission for all developments within the National Park and the buffer zone according to the Act on the National Park (see further Chapter 4.b), before the planning authority can give its permission for development there. The Þingvellir Commission has committed itself to run the Park and the land in the buffer zone on sustainable principles according to its published planning strategy "Þingvellir – National Park and Environment" from 1988 (see further Chapters 4.b to 4.f).

The municipality of Bláskógabyggð also has authority over planning in the zone adjacent to the east and southeast boundaries of Þingvellir National Park, south of the "Highland Boundaries" (Map 4). Designated land use there is divided into the two following land-use zones according to the approved "Regional plan 1995 to

2015, for the two municipalities of Þingvellir and Grímsnes & Grafningur" from October 1996 (Þingvellir is now merged into Bláskógabyggð municipality):

- A zone which stands for the land use "mountain grazing for sheep", marked with violet on Map 4 (zone 2). No development is anticipated in this area so the land use within it will not have any significant impact on Þingvellir National Park. This area can thus be considered to act as a buffer zone.
- A zone which stands for the land use "forestry and farming", marked with yellow on Map 4 (zone 3). No developments are anticipated in this area that can be considered to have significant impact on Þingvellir National Park. This area can thus be considered to act as a buffer zone as well.

The land that lies adjacent to the east of the Þingvellir National Park boundaries and north of the Highland Boundaries, marked with green/grey on Map 4 (zone 4), has the designated land use "nature protection area" according to the "Regional Plan for the Central Highlands In Iceland to 2015", from May 1999. The planning authority in this zone is Grímsnes & Grafningur. There is, however, a planning committee, established by the Ministry for the Environment, with representatives from the associations of municipalities surrounding the Highlands, which effectively acts as a planning authority within the limits of the Highland Boundaries. There must be a cohesion between regional and municipial plans. Local municipalities must therefore follow designated land use according to the Regional Plan for the Central Highlands, within the Highland Boundaries. No developments are anticipated in this highland area so the land use within it will not have any significant impact on Þingvellir National Park and can thus be considered to act as a buffer zone.

The municipalities of Bláskógabyggð and Grímsnes & Grafningur are committed to preserve the pristine quality of Þingvellir National Park itself and have designated land use accordingly. The conclusion is that in the area outside that under the jurisdiction of the Þingvellir Commission (Map 4), land use according to officially approved regional – and municipial plans will not have any significant impact on Þingvellir National Park and can thus be considered a buffer zone.

1.f Area of the site proposed for inscription

The nominated area of Þingvellir National Park is 92.7 km^2 or 9,270 hectares (Map 1).

2. JUSTIFICATION FOR INSCRIPTION

2.a Statement of significance

Þingvellir is the most important cultural heritage site in Iceland, a national treasure and at the same time a major cultural treasure at global level. Its dramatic history from the establishment of the Althing around 930 gives insights into how a Viking Age pioneer community organized its society from scratch and evolved towards the modern world. Þingvellir also combines in a single place an assortment of natural phenomena which only a handful of places on Earth can boast.

To the Icelanders, Þingvellir is a symbol of national unity where the main strands of their history have been woven from the start of the settlement in the 9th century to the present day.

Iceland's general assembly, which was established to represent the whole country at Þingvellir in the year 930– The Althing – tells a unique story about legislative and judicial arrangements in the Age of the Commonwealth.

The pioneer society that established the Althing in around 930 is the only society to have such detailed records of its very earliest origins, along with remarkable archaeological remains to support them. History as preserved in this form sheds light on important elements in European constitutional development, all of which are linked directly or indirectly to the growth and ascendancy of the rule of law and can clarify our understanding of them. The oldest extant historical work in Icelandic, the Book of Icelanders (*Íslendingabók*) by Ari Þorgilsson the Wise, written 1120-1130, is the most important source of information about the settlement and the origin of Iceland's nation state and assembly at Þingvellir in the era commonly known as the Icelandic Commonwealth. The Commonwealth lasted from around 930 until 1262/64. As a single, general assembly for such a large country, which was later to develop into a nation state, the Althing was remarkable in its day. For the duration of the assembly Þingvellir effectively acted as the first capital of Iceland for two weeks every year.

What makes the Althing unique in legislative and judicial history is its particular emphases and detailed attention given to removing legal uncertainty and resolving disputes without a superior authority.

This is evident, for instance, in the important roles played by the Lawspeaker and Law Council. There are extensive and detailed sources on the organisation of the assembly and its working procedures. The fruit of this activity is the extensive legal collections of the Commonwealth known as *Grágás*, one of the most remarkable legal codices among the medieval Germanic peoples. One section of this codex is actually considered to be the first vernacular writing in Iceland, some two hundred years after the establishment of the Althing.

The Althing is unique since it has a longer, uninterrupted history than any other medieval assembly.

The Icelandic Althing has a longer, uninterrupted history than any other assembly established in the early Middle Ages with the possible exception of the Faroese legal assembly and the assembly on the Isle of Man, sources on the history of which are limited.

The Althing is unique insofar as the Commonwealth reflected an exceptionally clear view of early medieval notions of law and authority.

In shaping their new society, the Viking Age settlers of Iceland had to ponder more clearly the concepts underlying it, while those remaining in the places from which they emigrated could continue to adhere to ancient customs without paying any particular attention to them. One remarkable feature of Iceland is that the Viking Age left behind some of its perpetual milestones there, including the social structure, administrative procedures and political philosophy of the Icelandic Commonwealth. The Commonwealth established by the settlers of Iceland certainly preserved many traits of old European polities, but at the same time it has been considered by some authors as the first European state in the New World and a precursor of those that would later be instituted on the other side of the Atlantic.

The area of remains at Þingvellir on the site of the Althing is unparalleled in the world.

Þingvellir is remarkable as the only Germanic assembly site where remains of administrative structures such as *Lögberg* (Law Rock), *Lögrétta* (Law Council) and *Biskupabúðir* (Bishops' Booths) have been preserved. Remains of many manmade structures pertaining to the assembly and its functions dating from the 10th to 18th centuries can be found there. In its entirety, the area of remains at Þingvellir is also unique in that signs of a large part of the attendees' booths can still be seen on the surface and the overall layout of the assembly area can still be envisaged.

Þingvellir National Park contains well preserved remains of habitation in the 18th and 19th centuries which present an outstandingly comprehensive picture of the cultural landscape in the days before the mechanisation of agriculture.

The large number of remains of farms, tracks and grassfields found within the National Park form an interesting whole and give fascinating insights into agricultural practices and ecology in former centuries. Walls, turf and rock structures, and farm sites have been preserved from an age before mechanisation was introduced into agriculture.

A remarkable feature in the history of Þingvellir is that the inhabitants of a whole community changed their religion in a peaceful process at the Althing there in the year 1000.

The conversion of Iceland from heathendom to Christianity was approved by the Althing in 1000 and was remarkable for how peacefully this was achieved. It also shows how the administrative structure of the Althing functioned at this time, with unanimous approval needed in order for matters to be resolved.

Þingvellir and its surroundings are of outstanding value as a geological monument. It is unique from a geological perspective, as the most lucid example on Earth of tectonic plate boundaries on dry land.

The chief characteristic of the Þingvellir landscape is fissures, the largest of which, *Almannagjá* (Everyman's Gorge), forms a cliff wall and backdrop to the ancient assembly site. These fissures are part of the Þingvellir rift valley, formed on tectonic plate boundaries where two continental plates are moving apart. The Þingvellir rift valley can be particularly clearly seen on the surface and was cited as an example when the theory of plate tectonics was being formulated in the 1960s – the foundation for modern understanding of geological processes and land formation. The Þingvellir rift is the most lucid example on dry land where plate separation on a mid-ocean ridge can be sensed and understood. Þingvellir and the lake Þingvallavatn surroundings are thus of outstanding value as a geological monument, not only for Iceland but also globally.

Lake Þingvallavatn is the only habitat in which four separate morphs of Arctic charr have evolved, which is biologically unique.

Nowhere else in the world have four separate morphs of Artic charr evolved in the same lake in a span of less than 10,000 years. In addition, the lake hosts a distinctive stock of brown trout which is well known for its longevity and large size.

Þingvellir's unique nature, landscape and cultural remains create a setting for history like the walls of a natural temple.

With its cliff walls, fissures, slopes, lava fields and grassy plains, where the river *Öxará* still flows and its ruins recall ages gone by, Þingvellir creates a backdrop to all the great historic events that have taken place there. In this environment of dramatic contrasts one can sense the mystery of sacred things, at once awesome and enchanting, which attracts and repels at the same time, arousing strong and conflicting emotions. Þingvellir is where Icelanders go when major decisions are to be made. Icelandic Nobel Prize laureate Halldór Laxness sets many of the key scenes of his "*Bell of Iceland*" at Þingvellir where it was said that the bell of Iceland itself rang in days of old. In doing so he lends these episodes, and the words spoken by the characters, a symbolic depth which invokes the history of Iceland and its campaign for independence.

Þingvellir is a symbol of national unity and the embodiment of the national identity. In the 19th century, when Romantic notions of liberty, national identity and natural philosophy began to gain momentum, Þingvellir assumed a symbolic

meaning. As a token of its importance to the Icelandic people, Þingvellir National Park was founded in 1930, the first National Park in Iceland. It is beyond doubt and well arguable that to most Icelanders today, Þingvellir remains a sacred place, where the dormant national spirit dwells and calls the nation to come together at crucial points in time.

The interplay of history and nature's distinctive scenery makes Þingvellir unique.

2.b Comparative analysis

The Althing was founded at Þingvellir and held there from 930 to 1798, or more than 850 years. An outstanding feature of the Althing was that it was a general assembly representing the whole of a relatively large country. Good written accounts have been preserved about the Althing from its very earliest days. Since a new pioneer society needed to be set up based on the settlers' traditional ideas, the political structure of the Icelandic Commonwealth is uniquely suited to shed light on governmental notions among Northern European peoples at the end of the early Middle Ages and in the main medieval period.

The constitution of Iceland was unusual by medieval standards in that farmers had a legal right to choose which chieftain they followed. Thus Iceland preserved traces of old forms of political organisations which had disappeared in most of Europe with the emergence of feudalism and royal power.

People attending assemblies put up houses or shelters known as booths or assembly booths. Clusters of booths are familiar characteristics of assembly sites and their design appears to have been quite standardised. Ruins of booths have been left behind at the assembly site of the Althing at Þingvellir (Maps 1 and 6) which are unique for being the best preserved specimens from an assembly with this historical background. The assembly booths in Iceland consisted of walls made of turf and stone, with a woollen cloth roof. At assemblies in other European countries, booths were in the form of tents or timber buildings which have not left behind such permanent evidence.

Ruins of other, local or regional, assembly booths are found elsewhere in Iceland, but not of the size or scope of those at Þingvellir, nor do they contain remains of administrative structures such as the Law Rock, Law Council and Bishops' Booths.

Virtually no visible ruins appear to have been preserved at assembly sites elsewhere in Europe apart from single assembly mounds in the Isle of Man, so although a number of assembly sites are known in Iceland and in other North European countries, Þingvellir is both historically and archaeologically the largest and most significant site of them all. Research conducted into the Þingvellir ruins suggests that, in addition to the visible remains, archaeological remains beneath the surface can shed new light on the site and its evolution – information that is unlikely to be obtained anywhere else. Compared with the district assemblies, the Althing was much larger and produced much more diverse remains. The crucial consideration in comparing assembly sites, however, is that the Althing performed a completely different role from the local or regional assemblies, and a much more important one. In these terms the Althing is certainly a unique site. Nowhere in Iceland or elsewhere have such extensive remains been found of a general assembly for a whole country dating back to the Viking Age.

Iceland's conversion to Christianity in 1000 is outstanding in several respects. The whole population of the country changed its faith in a peaceful process, which in a nutshell shows how the administrative structure of the Althing functioned at this time, with unanimous approval needed in order for matters to be resolved. Although methods of Christianisation of a similar kind are known elsewhere, this event is unusual and probably unique in Northern Europe.

The primary geological distinction of Þingvellir lies in the fact that Iceland is located on diverging plate boundaries, the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, where the Eurasian and North American continental plates are spreading apart. There are 55,000 km of diverging plate boundaries in the world and, along most of their length, they are a submarine feature. Only in Iceland and Djibouti are a few hundred km exposed subaerially. A branch of the diverging plate boundaries in Iceland extends into the rift valley at Þingvellir, where one of the clearest, if not the clearest examples, of diverging plate boundaries on dry land can be seen anywhere in the world. Continental rifts branch off from this spreading and form different geological setting and rock types. One of them is the Rift Valley system of East Africa. Iceland exists because it lies on the centre of its active spreading ridge combined with a mantle plume generated hot spot. There are other examples of interaction between a spreading centre and a hot spot on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, but the underlying mantle plume is more powerful in Iceland, causing the excess volcanic production and emergence of the huge land mass that is Iceland. Iceland is the largest island on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge and the only one where the actual ridge is visible. As the Þingvellir rift valley can particularly clearly be seen on the surface, it was cited as an example when the theory of plate tectonics was being formulated in the sixties – the foundation for modern understanding of geological process and land formation. In the days when Wegener's theory of continental drift was rejected by most scholars in the middle of the twentieth century, German and Danish geologists pointed to the Þingvellir fissures as clear proof that horizontal crustal extension was taking place and they identified the driving force in movements within the Earth's mantle. They could hardly have come closer to the truth. From the edge of Almannagjá a variety of basaltic volcanic edifices can seen, such as those formed in water and under glaciers as well as the more common subaerial craters and shields. Thus Þingvellir combines in a single place a diverse range of natural phenomena hardly paralleled anywhere in the world.

Unique geological and geomorphological processes of great international interest are taking place at Þingvellir. Lake Þingvallavatn is the only known instance of Arctic charr, having evolved into four different morphs in one and the same lake in a span of less than 10,000 years. The basis for this is the creation of new habitats through crustal spreading. The landscape at Þingvellir has beautiful and mystical forms created entirely by this process, by volcanism and glacial erosion, whereby the three fundamental elements which created Iceland are found in a single place.

As the effective capital of Iceland while it hosted the Althing for two weeks every year during the Commonwealth period, and the place where all important decisions regarding the fate of the entire Icelandic society were made, Þingvellir is an outstanding example of a place that has played a key role in the evolution of a nation. It served as a symbol of unification in the campaign for independence in the late 19th century. In all, 25 major meetings were held at Þingvellir from 1848

to 1907. They were attended by delegates from all over the country to decide policy on the process for independence from Denmark and the modernisation of the country, especially concerning economic and cultural issues. All the crucial decisions about the destiny of Iceland have been made and are still made at Þingvellir and it is a symbol of national unity and embodiment of the national identity. - Þingvellir also played a very powerful part in stimulating the great scholarly and literary work which was produced in Iceland over the centuries. Icelandic medieval literature is integrally linked to Þingvellir, especially as far as the Sagas of Icelanders and the Kings' Sagas are concerned. These works are regarded as among the most remarkable literary achievements of the Middle Ages and occupy a leading place in world literature. They shed light on the lives and mentalities of Northern peoples in the Middle Ages, not least during the Viking Age, when their influence was felt throughout Europe. At the same time they are an important source of information about all Germanic nations. Here one could mention especially the independence, individualism and responsibility of each man for his actions. Icelandic medieval literature has also played a major part in shaping the image of the Nordic countries and their people, both in their own eyes and those of the world. As long as they value this heritage and identity, they must regard Þingvellir as among the most remarkable of their historical sites.

Established in 1930 according to an act from 1928, the National Park at Þingvellir was the first to be designated in Iceland. It was established at a time when concepts such as "national park" and "conservation" were scarcely known in Iceland. In declaring Þingvellir a national park, the government of Iceland at that time displayed great vision, while the selection of Þingvellir shows its supreme role in the national consciousness. Þingvellir was also one of the first national parks to be formally established in Europe.

All nations have places where, so to speak, their history resides. The Acropolis for the Greeks, the Forum Romanum for the Italians, the Place de la Bastille for the French. Places visited by pilgrims to re-experience for an instant the great events that occurred there. Yet such places are continually on the defensive against the modern age, which threatens to swamp them with its encroaching activities: buildings are constructed, asphalt advances, motor traffic that grants no quarter. One of the characteristic features of Þingvellir is the very small impact that the modern age has had on it. A visitor stands in the same surroundings as generations past, these are the same cliff walls, mountains, water, sky and atmosphere as in days of yore.

2.c Authenticity / Integrity

The Þingvellir Commission is committed to protect the integrity and authenticity of the area on sustainable principles, to keep it for the enjoyment of generations to come. The manner in which this has been done since the National Park was established has to some extent depended on prevailing general attitudes at any given time.

The land within the National Park has changed little since Iceland was settled. However, habitation and the holding of the assembly have to some extent led to the destruction of the woodland that was once in the area. This applies not only to Þingvellir, but to Iceland as a whole. Soil erosion and subsequent vegetation and forest deterioration have been one of the most important environmental issues in

Iceland for centuries. Subsequently, soil reclamation and forestry have been seen as the most important mitigation measures in the country and as a gesture of respect towards Þingvellir, the first conifers to be planted in Iceland were planted there in 1899. At that time it was considered environmentally acceptable to plant any kind of tree, and priority was given to identifying types which could grow quickly. Planting of these conifers has therefore to some degree altered the original natural environment and such action is regarded with circumspection today, although it was considered to be environmental improvement 100 years ago when it was begun. The planting of foreign species was stopped in the 1960s and currently there are plans to cut down some of these conifers within the innermost assembly site. The majority will be left untouched as a testimony to nature protection in the last century (*see* Chapter 5.a).

Located on an active seismic zone, the land is subject to natural change. The floor of the valley has subsided by some 3-4 metres since the Althing was founded at Þingvellir and will continue to do so. Subsidence has caused the surface of Lake Þingvallatvatn to extend higher into the innermost assembly site and the level of river Öxará has consequently risen and buried part of it under sediment. The plains below Lögberg, where the delegates to the assembly ("Thingmen") had their booths, will therefore eventually be submerged by natural processes (see Chapter 5.b-c).

Some chalets were built within the National Park boundaries from 1930 to 1960, within specific zones. Such action reflected the thinking of a particular period and is not allowed anymore. No new chalets will be built within the park boundaries (*see* Chapter 5.a).

The major part of the land of the Þingvellir National Park is still pristine and management plans are currently in effect with the aim of protecting the integrity and authenticity of the area on sustainable principles, in an effort to ensure that it will afford coming generations the same delight that it instils today.

2.d Criteria under which this inscription is proposed and justification for inscription under these criteria

The nomination of Þingvellir National Park as a cultural landscape site should be discussed in view of criteria 24 (a) (iii) and (vi) of the UNESCO Operational Guidelines of July 2002.

Criteria 24 (a) (iii): The Althing at Þingvellir preserves the history of an assembly representing an entire country in the early Middle Ages and main medieval period, which sheds light on Viking Age notions of polity, law and authority, since the shaping of a new pioneer society and flourishing written culture went had in hand. These ideas were the common heritage of Germanic cultures and have played a major role in shaping systems of government in many European countries up to the present day.

The area of remains at Þingvellir is unique insofar as remains dating from the very beginning of the Althing can be found there. These are the only ruins that show the overall layout of an assembly site from this time, and the only assembly ruins so clearly visible at the surface.

Criteria 24 (a) (vi): Distinctive natural features and unique geological characteristics at a tectonic plate boundary have created a natural stage for an

extraordinary history, a setting almost unchanged from the time when the Althing was first established. The environment at Þingvellir and its natural heritage have played a powerful role in stimulating great scholarly, artistic and literary work, and been central in the making of the Icelandic nation.

3. DESCRIPTION

3.a Description of the Property

TOPOGRAPHY

The nominated area is Þingvellir National Park, founded in 1930 and Iceland's first national park. It is located 49 km from Reykjavík, the capital of Iceland (Map 1). The National Park covers an area of 93 km^2 and is located on an active volcanic zone. Its most famous natural phenomenon is the rift running through it, with the majestic fissures of *Almannagjá* (Everyman's Gorge) and *Hrafnagjá* (Raven Gorge) which create a beautiful cliff wall. The National Park is enclosed by a diverse belt of mountains on three sides, with grass-covered lava fields with marshland between them, and at its southern end lies Lake Þingvallavatn. This is the largest natural lake in Iceland, 83 km^2, at a surface elevation of 100 m a.s.l.

Þingvellir has a unique history and is a prime example of "cultural landscape" where natural remains, archaeological remains, history and outstanding scenery give the area unparalleled value. Þingvellir means "*assembly field*" and in 930 the Icelanders established a general assembly or parliament for the entire country there, the Althing (Alþingi), which lasted until 1798. The assembly was held at *Lögberg* (*Law Rock*) by Almannagjá and the people attending the Althing ("Thingmen") dwelt on the grassy plains below, just west of the site of the present Þingvellir farmhouse and church. As a single, general assembly for the whole country, the Althing was unique in its day. Tasks performed by the Althing were divided between its institutions: the Law Council, five courts and the Lawspeaker. The principal task of the Law Council, the assembly's most important forum, was to "frame the law" and "make new laws".

Figure 3.1. Lögberg in the innermost assembly site.

In a unique chronicle of the settlement of Iceland in the ninth and tenth centuries, the Book of Icelanders (*Íslendingabók*) which Ari Þorgilsson the Wise wrote in the 12th century, there is a description of the journey made by Grímur Goatshoe around Iceland in search of a suitable assembly site. As he explored the country

he was also sounding out enthusiasm for the idea of establishing an assembly for the whole country and mustering support for it. His choice of Þingvellir was a fortuitous one. It was conveniently located for the modes of travel available at that time, especially the mountain routes from west and north Iceland, although people from the east had to make a long journey to reach it (*see* Fig. 3.2). Also, it was near to the most populated parts of the country.

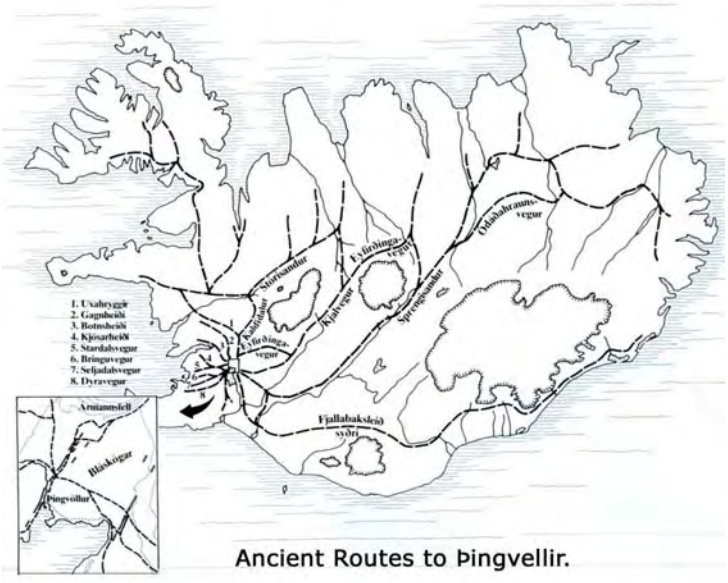

Figure 3.2. Ancient routes to Þingvellir.

Þingvellir is the only Germanic assembly site where remains of administrative structures such as the Law Rock and Law Council have been preserved. In its entirety, the area where the remains are is unique in that signs of a large part of the attendees' booths can still be seen on the surface and the overall layout of the assembly area can still be envisaged. Research conducted into the ruins suggests that, in addition to the visible remains, archaeological remains beneath the surface can greatly augment our knowledge of Þingvellir and its history.

In the midnight sun on a bright, quiet June night, the dramatic setting of the Althing at Þingvellir takes on a magical atmosphere. All around, placenames with clear, original meanings referring to the ancient gathering step forth to tell the history of Þingvellir. *Lögberg* (Law Rock), *Almannagjá* (Everyman's Gorge), *Fangabrekka* (Wrestling Slope), *Fógetabúð* (the Sheriff's Booth), *Prestakrókur* (Priests' Corner), *Klukkuhóll* (Bell Hill), *Drekkingarhylur* (Drowning Pool) and numerous others link the environment and its history with unbreakable bonds.

When Þingvellir National Park was established in 1930 there were three farms in the area. These have gradually been bought out and now there are no residents within the National Park boundaries.

Within the Park Þingvellir farmhouse and church are on the eastern bank of Öxará and a hotel on the west bank beneath the viewing point at *Hakið* (the Platform). Farther north is an Information and Service Centre, with a café and campsite. A Visitor Centre has been set up on Hakið, above Almannagjá, where multimedia presentations of history and nature of Þingvellir and underwater photographs from Lake Þingvallavatn are on display (Map 1).

NATURE

Iceland is geologically a young volcanic island, ranging 16 million years back in age. It straddles the diverging plate boundary of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, with spreading zones that are characterised by a high volcanic production as a result of the ongoing hot spot activity and crustal growth. The rifts are a corollary of this process. They are generally of low topographical expression due to lava flows that smooth them out at intervals, hence the rarity of fault-bounded lakes nested within them. Lake Þingvallavatn is an exception with a pronounced low in volcanic production. This has persisted since the last interglaciation (over 100,000 years) but at the same time dilatation and subsidence of the rift floor has proceeded at an undiminished rate. This is the reason that the fault escarpments are higher in its surroundings than anywhere else in the spreading zone of Iceland and actually proportional in height to the age of the various surface lavas.

Þingvellir plain is on the western slope of a large lava shield that was formed some 10,000 years ago, shortly after the Ice Age glacier melted, and has a surface area of 200 km². The lava flowed into Lake Þingvallavatn and blocked its outflow, but a sizeable stretch has gradually vanished into the lake as the rift has deepened. The surface of the Þingvellir lava is typical hummocky pahoehoe. On the walls of Almannagjá the internal structure can be seen, innumerable thin flow units which characterise all shield lavas.

Fig. 3.3 Aerial view of faults and fissures at Þingvellir National Park.

The faults and fissures of the Þingvellir rift have grown incrementally. Measurements over the past 40 years show a latent creep of about 3 mm/y extension and 1 mm vertical displacement of the rift zone. However, short rifting events involving extension and subsidence of a few metres also occur. One event is known from historical times. It occurred in spring 1789 and lasted for 10 days. The subsidence then measured 2.5 m in the middle of the rift.

Lake Þingvallavatn is the largest natural lake in Iceland with surface area of 83 km^2 The lake biosphere clearly testifies to the fact that it straddles the border between the continents of Europe and America. The great northern diver, and a bird native to North America, breeds around the lake and is an emblem typifying it. White-tailed eagles, which nested in the area in old times, are rarely seen now. Mink live by the lake, preying on small birds, and foxes make occasional appearances.

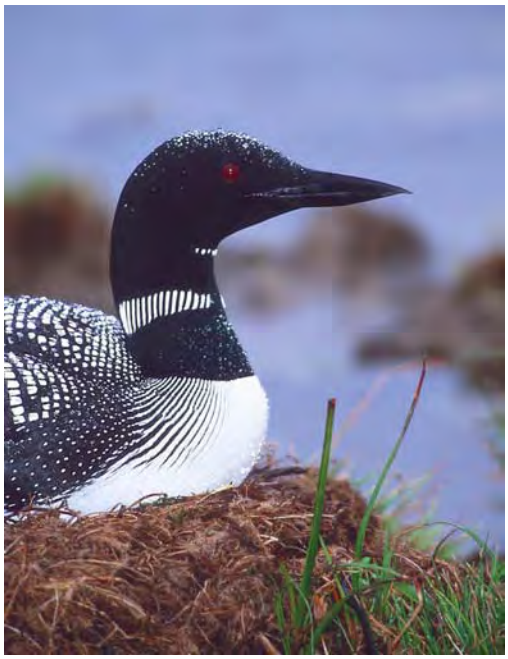

Fig. 3.4. The great northern diver, an emblem of Lake Þingvallavatn.

Lake Þingvallavatn is the largest angling lake in Iceland, with four separate morphs of Arctic charr that have evolved in it in a span of less than 10,000 years, which is a unique phenomenon. The lake is also home to a distinctive brown trout stock which became isolated there shortly after the Ice Age, well known for its longevity and size of up to 29 pounds. At **Vellankatla** the only known cave-dwelling animal in Northern Europe was recently discovered, a pale and blind amphipoda of American origin which apparently survived in shallow water in caves beneath the Ice Age glacial cover. This is the oldest extant freshwater animal species in Iceland. Thus the biological history of Lake Þingvallavatn has origins stretching back hundreds of thousands of years.

Vellankatla is a fine example of an Icelandic placename, which are generally transparent in meaning since the language has changed little since the early centuries of Icelandic history. *Vellankatla* (Bubbling Kettle) is a spring at the east of the lake, whose name appears in the Book of Icelanders. Another placename that reflects spectacular natural features of Þingvellir is *Bláskógar* (Blue Woods), mentioned in the Book of Icelanders and the Book of Settlements (*Landnámabók*); the name is applied to the lava field north, west and south of Þingvallavatn, with its low-growing trees. Among the gorges and fissures are: *Almannagjá* (Everyman's Gorge), *Brennugjá* (Burning/Stake Gorge), *Flosagjá* (Flosi's Gorge), *Nikulásargjá* (Nikulás's Gorge), *Peningagjá* (Money Gorge), *Hrafnagjá* (Raven Gorge), *Hvannagjá* (Angelica Gorge) and *Skötugjá* (Skate Gorge).

A list of placenames at Þingvellir which occur in medieval and later sources is given in Appendix II.b.

THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

"Cultural landscape" refers to a landscape on which man and history have left their mark by habitation or other kinds of activity.

A landscape with a history has sometimes been compared with a vellum manuscript which has continually been scraped clean to write on it again, so that each generation has left its mark on it. Þingvellir has a unique history and is a prime example of cultural landscape where natural remains, archaeological remains, history and outstanding scenery give the area unparalleled value.

For many centuries, turf and rock were used for virtually all manmade structures, regardless of whether farmhouses, outhouses, walls or booths were involved. Since turf is not a permanent building material, the structures needed to be regularly renovated. Material for them was probably taken locally or from even earlier ruins and later structures were often placed on older ruins. It is therefore not surprising to find historical remains of human habitation at Þingvellir showing that, in some locations, up to three or four layers of habitation have been built one on top of the other.

Numerous remains have been preserved at Þingvellir which are associated with habitation and daily toil, as well as archaeological ruins connected with the functions of the ancient assembly. Outhouses, sheep pens and ruins of abandoned farmhouses are still visible on the surface and spread across the area. Indeed, the Þingvellir National Park contains well preserved remains of habitation in the 18th and 19th centuries which present an outstandingly comprehensive picture of the cultural landscape in the days before the mechanisation of agriculture. The remains of farms, tracks and grassfields found within the National Park form an interesting whole and give fascinating insights into agricultural practices and ecology in former centuries. Walls, turf and rock structures, and farm sites have been preserved from an age before mechanisation was introduced into agriculture.

Fig. 3.5 The abandoned farm site Skógarkot.

Placenames constitute part of the living cultural heritage. Some of the placenames in which Þingvellir abounds reflect the cohabitation of man and nature. There are placenames, for instance, that indicate that natural features

were used as landmarks to tell the time from the position of the sun (e.g. from the farmhouse of Þingvellir): *Miðaftansdrangur* (miðaftan=approx. 6 pm, drangur=rock pillar), and *Dagmáladalur* (dagmál=approx 9 am, dalur=dale). Other placenames are formed from personal names, such as *Þorleifshaugur* (Þorleifur's Barrow), while a number are directly derived from the animal husbandry practised in the area, *Sauðahellir* (Sheep Cave) and *Kúatorfa* (Cow Turf) being examples. References to natural resources utilised at Þingvellir include *Ólafsdráttur* (Ólafur's Fishing Place), *Kolgrafarhóll* (Charcoal Pit Hill) *Sláttubrekkur* (Haymaking Slopes) and *Einiberjahæðir* (Juniper Berry Hill).

The placenames of Þingvellir are evidence, above all, of the highly varied activities which have taken place there through the ages, as Iceland's centre of government: legislative and judicial assemblies – including executions, religious rites and not least animal husbandry, as well as the everyday life of the inhabitants for more than a thousand years.

HABITATION AT ÞINGVELLIR

It is not known when Þingvellir was first settled. Placenames tell us nothing about the farms in the *Bláskógar* (Blue Woods) area prior to the days of the Althing, but after its foundation the estate was known as *Þingvöllur* (Assembly Plain, singular), according to the Book of Icelanders.

Þingvellir farm has probably always been located on a similar site to the present-day farmhouse. The oldest description of the farm dates from 1678. Old drawings show that the farm's front gables faced south with its front side in line with the south gate of the cemetery. The farm buildings were made from turf and rock until 1880, when the turf buildings were gradually replaced by timbered ones.

Figure 3.6. Þingvellir farmhouse and church. The farmhouse is built in the traditional Icelandic gabled style, which was common in the early 19th century.

A new concreted building was constructed with three gablets on the old farmhouse in 1928, to be ready in time for the Althing celebrations in 1930. It was designed by Guðjón Samúelsson, the State Architect, and illustrates how the distinctive Icelandic gabled farmhouse style could be adapted to the new building material of concrete. An extension of two gablets was added before the 1974 Festival marking the 1,100th anniversary of the settlement of Iceland.

The first **church at Þingvellir** was built soon after the adoption. In his *Heimskringla* (History of the Kings of Norway), Snorri Sturluson describes how King Olaf Haraldsson, who assumed the crown in 1015, sent timber to Iceland and a church was then built at Þingvellir. There has been a church at Þingvellir ever since. It is thought that the churches at Þingvellir were always made from timber. The present church at Þingvellir was built in 1858-59 and in 1907 a new tower was built. It seats only just over 40 and is not lavishly adorned.

Several placenames refer to the church and clergy: *Kirkjutún* (Church Field), *Klukkuhóll* (Bell Hillock), *Klukkustígur* (Bell Path), *Prestakrókur* (Priests' Corner), *Prestateigur* (Priests' Meadow), *Presthólmi* (Priests' Islet), *Biskupshólar* (Bishops' Hillocks).

Within the bounds of the National Park are the sites of various **farms, now abandoned** (*see* Map 1). In many cases extensive ruins may be seen of farmhouses, outhouses and homefields.

Figure 3.7. An Aerial photograph of Hrauntún, an abandoned farm site.

Arnarfell, leased from the estate of Þingvellir. Arnarfell was inhabited only intermittently. In the first half of the 20th century, reindeer from east Iceland were brought to Arnarfell, but this experiment in reindeer husbandry was short-lived.

Fornasel is the northern end of the Arnarfell hill. In olden times, Fornasel was a shieling or summer pasturage for livestock from the Þingvellir estate.

Böðvarshóll is a rock east of the Gjábakkastígur path. A farm of this name is believed to have stood there. To the south of the rock are remnants of a sheepshed.

Grímsstaðir, ruins of an abandoned farmhouse. The farm was first mentioned in the Harðar saga og Hólmverja (Saga of Hord and the People of Holm), which recounts events that took place in the 10th century.

Hrafnabjörg is said to have been a minor church or a chapel.

Hrauntún. In 1830 a farmhouse was built on an old foundation, said to have been a croft from the days of the Black Death in the early 15th century. The farm was inhabited until 1930. At Litla-Hrauntún (Little Hrauntún), farther into the lava field, indistinct remains of buildings may be seen.

Skógarkot is an abandoned farm site below Sjónarhóll hill in the lava field east of

the Þingvellir farmhouse. Regarded as a good sheep farm, Skógarkot was in use until 1936.

Vatnskot, abandoned farm site by the lake. Land resources were limited, but fishing in the lake was an important peripheral resource. In 1912 a couple settled there, to remain for more than half a century. They were the last farmers in the National Park.

Þórhallsstaðir, southeast of Skógarkot beneath the Ölkofrahóll hill. Ruins with a well and grass field. Þórhallsstaðir was the home of Þórhallur ölkofri (*öl* = ale), who brewed ale for consumption at the Althing.

REMAINS OF THE ASSEMBLY

Although few manmade structures remain intact at Þingvellir, numerous remains testify to human activities connected with the assembly. **Remnants of** at least 50 **booths** and other manmade structures are found in the area.

The "Thingmen" attending the Althing stayed in booths. Various services were provided in other booths by tanners, brewers and cooks. Booths had walls of turf and rock with a timber frame over them and a canopy of homespun twill.

According to *Grágás*, the old Law code, assembly participants were to bring enough twill with them to cover the width of the booth. Remains of booths are characteristic for assembly sites. Þingvellir is the largest and most significant site of them all.

Like other buildings made from turf and rock, the booths needed to be regularly renovated. As later booths were often placed on older ruins low mounds of ruins developed in the most popular areas at the assembly site where most of the Thingmen stayed. This accumulation of ruins means that Þingvellir is today one of the main and most extensive sites of remains in Iceland. The overwhelming majority of surface ruins of booths that can now be seen at Þingvellir therefore date from the 17th and 18th centuries.

Fig.3.8.: Ruins of Snorrabúð (Snorri's Booth).

The remains do not give an entirely correct picture of the scope of the assembly or the number of people attending it, because many lower ranking attendees did

not build booths, but stayed in tents during their time at the assembly, leaving little trace of their presence.

Placenames which refer directly to the Althing and its proceedings, and are known from old sources, are *Þingvöllur* (Assembly Plain) and *Lögberg* (Law Rock), *Almannagjá* (Everyman's Gorge) and *Fangabrekka* (Wrestling Slope). Placenames which are known from later sources, but may still have source value with regard to older times are: *Drekkingarhylur* (Drowning Pool), *Gálgi* (Gallows), *Kagahólmi* (Whipping-post Islet) *Klukkuhóll* (Bell Hill). The names of several booths, used during the Althing assembly, are also known: *Njálsbúð* (Njáll's Booth), *Snorrabúð* (Snorri's Booth), *Byrgisbúð* (Shelter's Booth), *Mosfellingabúð* (the Mosfell People's Booth), *Lögmannsbúð* (the Law Man's Booth), *Amtmannsbúð* (the Regional Governor's Booth), *Stiftamtmannsbúð* (the Governor's Booth), *Fógetabúð* (the Sheriff's Booth), *Biskupabúð* (the Bishops' Booth).

The principal archaeological remains are in the area where the Althing assembled, which may be seen on Map 6 showing catalogued archaeological remains within the innermost assembly site. Archaeological remains are also found in various other places; these are ruins of deserted farms within the National Park.

The most important sites are at the old assembly site, within the area marked on Maps 1 and 5. They may be divided into five areas. A field survey of the surface of this area has revealed the remains of some 50 relics.

- The largest collection of archaeological remains is on the plain beneath *Hallurinn* (the Slope), where many ruins of booths may be seen, arranged in rows and in some cases in clusters, in an area of about 100 m wide and 350 m long. The most recent ruins are uppermost and clearest, while remnants of three or four layers of older ruins may be seen projecting from them. Among them are ruins of *Lögrétta* (the Law Council).
- At the top of the slope is a manmade platform. This is believed to be the remains of the old *Lögberg* (Law Rock). Close by is the booth named after the chieftain Snorri.
- The third collection of ruins consists of booths in the *Almannagjá* (Everyman's Gorge), most of them from the latter centuries of the Althing.
- On the other side of the river, adjacent to the churchyard, are extensive ruins of booths that belonged to leading ecclesiastical figures, known as *Biskupabúðir* (the Bishops' Booths).
- At some distance are old manmade structures on *Spöngin* (the Neck), a narrow strip of land between two water-filled fissures. The old Lögberg is believed to have been located there to begin with.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Much archaeological research has been carried out at Þingvellir. Researchers have considered the locations of places and events in saga literature, surveyed old sites, made maps, and published their findings. The oldest description of historical remains at Þingvellir dates from 1700; it describes the site of the Law Council and 18 booths. Later in the 18th century more descriptions of the assembly site were published, including the locations of the booths of leading officials at that time. In addition to these descriptions, three maps of Þingvellir are extant from the 18th century and one from the 19th. The oldest dates from about 1781-2.

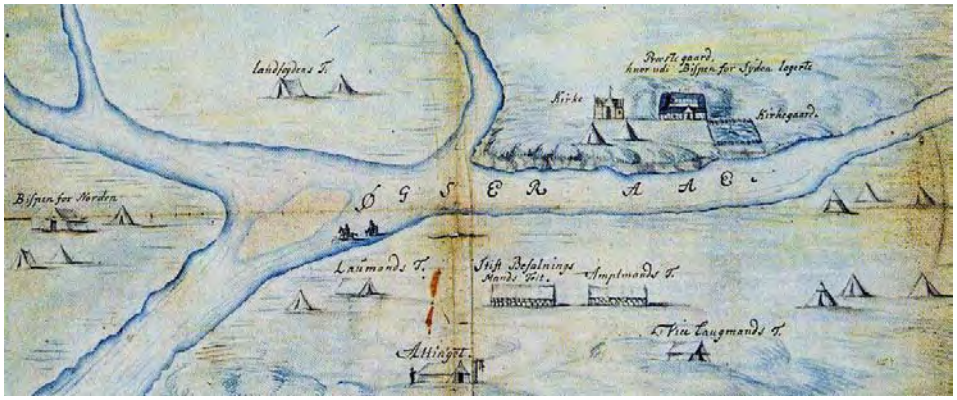

Figure 3.9. Drawing of the assembly site, propably from 1781-72.

Six archaeological excavations have been carried out at Þingvellir since 1880 (Map 7). They are:

1. An archaeological dig by antiquarian **Sigurður Vigfússon** in 1880 was the first in the area. A pioneer of Icelandic archaeology, he went to Þingvellir specifically to excavate the ancient parliamentary site. He spent nearly four weeks on the site, carrying out excavations and various other investigations of old structures.
2. Another excavation took place in 1920, when general director of National Museum of Iceland, **Matthías Þórðarson** excavated *Þorleifshaugur* (Þorleifur's Barrow) in connection with an extensive study of the assembly site.
3. A small excavation was made in 1957, when a double-crook crosier dating from the 11th century was unearthed in a grassfield near the Þingvellir farmhouse when an electrical cable was being laid to Hotel Valhöll.
4. In 1986-1992 an archaeological field survey was made at Þingvellir under the auspices of the National Museum of Iceland. All remains visible on the surface were surveyed and plans drawn to a scale of 1:100, and the area was surveyed using a total station. These surveys were the basis of the planning map prepared for the Þingvellir Commission around 1990 (*see* Map 6).
5. In 1998 the Institute of Archaeology and the National Museum of Iceland excavated the area adjacent to the church.
6. In 2002 excavation was carried out at Njálsbúð, Biskupabúðir and the trench where the crosier was unearthed. The Institute of Archaeology has made a research schedule for the area until 2006 and has received a grant for this purpose.

SIGURÐUR VIGFÚSSON'S EXCAVATIONS 1880

Sigurður Vigfússon's excavations were important and quite extensive, witness the fact that he made excavations in six of the area's best-known relics:

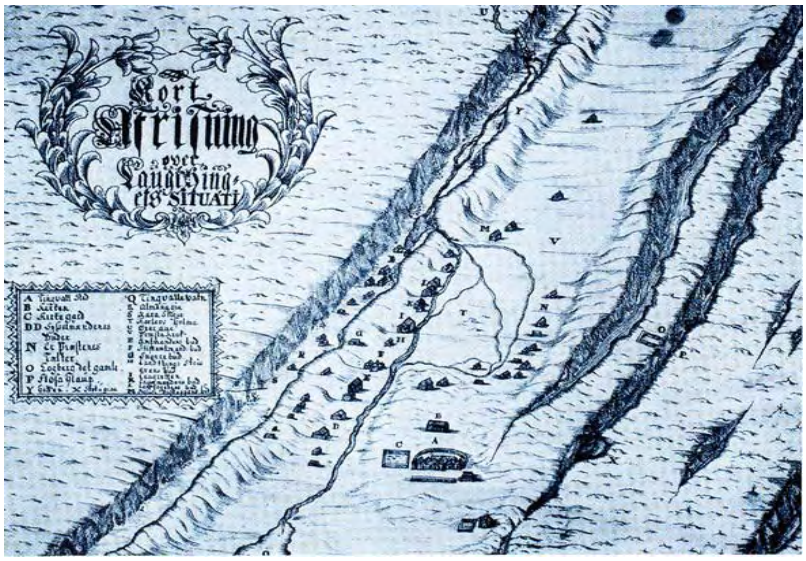

Figure 3.10. Map of the Law Council in the 18th century, *propably by Sæmund Hólm, 1789.*

1: Circular structure on Spöngin: Sigurður Vigfússon surveyed an oval structure on Spöngin, which measured just under 17 x 20 m. Within are ruins of a rectangular structure, measuring just under 10 x 7 m. The entrance to this building, in the middle of the longitudinal wall, faced the church at Þingvellir.

Sigurður Vigfússon's report on his excavation is interesting. He concludes that the site is not that of any booth of great age, nor of any very large building, as the structure was not built of stone. He believed that traces of several structures, and of two or three concentric circular wall structures, were visible in the trench. He also discerned a black layer of ash and charcoal. The circles and an enclosure in the centre of them are beneath this layer, while the ruins visible on the surface are above it. Hence the structures are clearly from different periods. A short distance north of the circle is a small hill, which he believed was *Lögsögumannahóll* (Lawspeakers' Hillock).

2: Turf wall at the west of Spöngin: Sigurður Vigfússon had an excavation made by a turf wall structure he came across at the western side, *Lögbergssporðurinn* (Law Rock Tail), which was probably adjacent to what is now known as *Peningagjá* (Money Gorge), where visitors throw small coins into the water and make a wish. He unearthed traces of an indistinct turf wall structure, and steps below it. Ashy soil was revealed, and he concluded that this was a fireplace, but found no other traces of a building.

3: Ruins in the grassfield at Þingvellir farm: The ruins of the booth are, according to Sigurður Vigfússon, west of the livestock pens in the grassfield at Þingvellir farm. The ruins were very large, about 33 m long and a little over 7 m wide. The doorway was on the west side, near the northern end, while on the eastern side wall, and the northern end, there was a connected building. The ruin was that of the *Biskupabúð* (Bishop's Booth), identified with Bishops Gyrðir Ívarsson and Ögmundur Pálsson of Skálholt. Sigurður Vigfússon was of the view that this was a

large booth fur use during the Althing, and indeed the site had been identified with bishops for centuries. However, from the description, it is just as likely that he had excavated an ancient longhouse, which may even have predated the bishops, dating from the 10th or 11th century.

It must be acknowledged that we do not know with any certainty what the assembly booths of the Saga Age looked like – whether they resembled the houses of the time, like the ruins excavated here, or whether they were of simpler structure, as was the case in later centuries.

4: Njálsbúð: Sigurður Vigfússon's excavation of *Njálsbúð* (Njáll's Booth) involved digging down alongside the end walls, both inside and outside. This revealed fairly clear turf walls, although somewhat distorted. It also transpired that the northern end wall had later been moved a little farther into the structure. The ruins measured about 29 x 8 m. Sigurður Vigfússon discovered an entrance on the eastern longitudinal wall facing the river, near the northern end.

5: Snorrabúð: *Snorrabúð* (Snorri's Booth) is in the centre of *Hamraskarð* (Crag Cleft), a short distance west of *Lögberg* (Law Rock). Sigurður Vigfússon had excavations made by the end walls, in order to examine both ends of the ruins. He concluded that there were three sets of rock walls, each inside and above the next and that the original side walls had vanished. Snorrabúð was about 23 m long, and 10 m across at its widest point. From under the end wall of Snorrabúð, Sigurður Vigfússon observed what appeared to be a wall which had collapsed down the rock. The lower part of this wall was 8 m long, and he concluded that these were remnants of a bulwark which led from the booth, and that Snorrabúð was the same structure as was termed *Virkisbúð* (Bulwark Booth) in Njáll's Saga.

6: Lögberg: Last but not least, Sigurður Vigfússon made excavations of the structure on *Hallurinn* (the Slope), which is now generally believed to be the site of *Lögberg* (the Law Rock). In his interesting account of the study, he states that the raised area on Hallurinn is about 20 m across from the edge of the gorge and toward the slope, and 21 m in length. He had a trench dug, about 1.5 metres wide, across the structure, from the edge of the gorge and down to the rock beneath.

One of the most interesting aspects of Sigurður Vigfússon's excavations at Lögberg is that, at the southern part of the trench, he found traces of ash, which became a considerable layer of ash down at rock level, where there was also a large cleft or hollow, full of ash. Sigurður Vigfússon concluded that this had probably been a fireplace. This could indicate that, up on Hallurinn, there was an ash-heap connected with activities carried out there before the manmade structure was built up.

When we consider Sigurður Vigfússon's work today, we must of course take into account that he could only practise the archaeology of his own time. Nonetheless his work is of great importance; it has revealed much which leads one to ask questions which may have interesting answers. For instance, what was the purpose of the circular structure on Spöngin, and does it indeed comprise several structures from different periods? There is no doubt that specialised archaeological research using modern methods could provide answers to many of the questions about Þingvellir which have long been a mystery.

MATTHÍAS ÞÓRÐARSON'S RESEARCH AT ÞINGVELLIR 1920-1945

In the period 1920-1945 **Matthías Þórðarson**, general director of the National Museum of Iceland, undertook an extensive study of Þingvellir. He wrote a number of papers and published a book on his findings, together with a map of the parliamentary site and booths.

Figure 3.11. Map of the ancient assembly site from an article by Matthías Þórðarson, 1922.

He excavated a structure known as *Þorleifshaugur* (Þorleifur's Barrow) in 1920. According to oral tradition, it was the burial place of *Þorleifur jarlaskáld* (Þorleifur Poet of Earls), who was slain at Þingvellir and buried "north of the Law Council". Matthías Þórðarson concluded that the contents of the barrow had been disturbed – hence it had been dug up before. The barrow appeared to be a manmade structure of considerable age. It contained a large amount of rock. He found slight traces of ash and charcoal. Small fragments of bone, iron and nails were also unearthed, along with a small silver coin in poor condition. The coin, which resembled those of the 12th-century King Sverrir of Norway, disintegrated before it could be studied further.

The rock pile within the structure was about 5.5 m long and nearly 4 m across, comprising a higher central section with piles on either side, to east and west. It is impossible to say with any certainty whether the structure was a barrow or some other manmade structure.

RESEARCH IN CONNECTION WITH THE DISCOVERY OF A TAU CROSIER IN 1957

An unexpected object was discovered when an electrical cable was being laid across the grassfield at the Þingvellir in 1957. It was identified by **Kristján Eldjárn**, general director of the National Museum of Iceland and later President of Iceland, "as a tau cross or tau crosier. It consists of socket in which the top end of a staff of cornel wood is still preserved – with two symmetrically placed crooks, all cast of bronze in one piece. The metal is now oxidized to a dark green and there are no traces of gilding. On both sides of the socket there are engraved lines running through loops of the well known Ringerike or rune stone kind. The crooks are terminated by animal heads typical of the Urnes style, with an elongated

pointed eye filling almost all the open space of the head, long twisted lip-lappets and degenerate head-lappets. The object must certainly be grouped with the monuments and the Urnes style and consequently it should very likely be dated to the third quarter of the eleventh century, a period roughly coinciding with the term of office of the first bishop of Iceland."

The object was unearthed in a low-lying, uneven patch of grassy ground a short distance north of the eastern end of the bridge across the Öxará river. Curator **Gísli Gestsson** visited the site and excavated there.

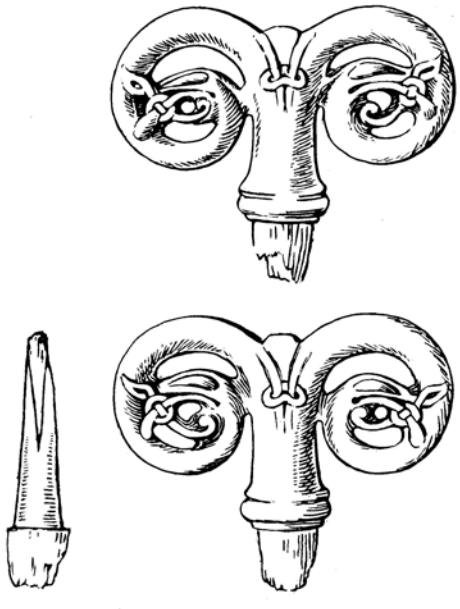

Figure 3.12. Illustration of the tau crosier by Kristján Eldjárn, 1970.

CATALOGING OF VISIBLE REMAINS AT ÞINGVELLIR 1986-1992

In the summer of 1986 the Þingvellir Commission assigned the National Museum of Iceland to undertake the cataloguing of archaeological remains of human habitation at Þingvellir. Visible manmade structures in the assembly area were registered. A precise system of coordinates was mapped in the area of the ruins and a map of the area made for use in planning work, including contours and the surveyed ruins (Map 6).

The area is delimited to the south by *Hestagjá* (Horse Gorge) , to the north by *Stekkjagjá* (Sheep Fold Gorge), to the west by *Almannagjá* (Everymans's Gorge) and to the east by *Nikulásargjá* (Nikulás's Gorge). The ruins were mapped and plans drawn to a scale of 1:100. This survey was not expected to reveal much that was new, as the area had previously been mapped and surveyed. In fact, however, this method of cataloguing yielded a far more accurate, and also far more disparate, picture of the area of the ruins than had been possible before. The ruins could be classified as belonging to older and more recent periods of construction. In some locations up to three or four layers of habitation are built one on top of the other.

In addition to remains in Almannagjá and on Hallurinn and the plain beneath,

Biskupabúðir, structures on Spöngin and Stekkjagjá were catalogued.

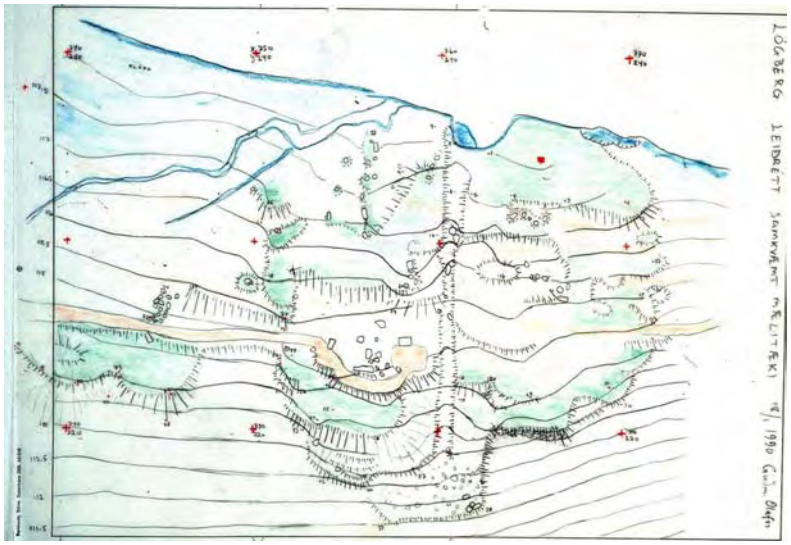

Figure 3.13. Manmade platform on Lögberg rock at the top of Hallurinn. The trench and research area excavated in 1880 can be seen in the middle.

The following documents exist from this cataloguing of archaeological remains at Þingvellir: 33 plans on A3 paper to a scale of 1:100, 3 plans on A4 paper to a scale of 1:100, records of data and coordinates from computer readings, a considerable number of computer printouts of contour maps on various scales, 4 A4 sheets of seven drill-core readings to a scale of 1:10, two soil samples from drill cores, many photographs taken of the area, both slides and black-and-white photos, and copies of outline and planning maps of ruins and archaeological sites on various scales.

All visible ruins have been surveyed and plans made, and they have been plotted on maps. The archaeological remains are far more extensive and complex than had previously been realised. They date from various periods and are often superimposed on older buildings. Sections of older walls project in many cases from under more recent wall structures. The cataloguing of the area revealed the remnants of at least 50 booths and other manmade structures in all.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH SINCE 1998

In **1998** the Institute of Archaeology commenced preparation and gathering of sources for an archaeological excavation on the area around Þingvellir Church. The excavation took place in 1999. A trench was dug, ten metres long and two metres deep, from the northwest corner of the present church. Finds included the foundation of a 16th-century church and traces of its structure, and an assembly booth nearby. The results indicate that a farm was not established at Þingvellir until after it had become an assembly site. Georadar readings were also taken at several locations.

Among the finds made during the excavation was an intact silver coin which turned out to be Norwegian and dating from the period 1065-80. It is an imitation of a coin from the reign of Ethelred II or Canute the Mighty which were minted in England around the millennium (997-1003). As far as is known, no identical coin, i.e. minted using the same cast, has been previously found. Only one other 11th-

century Norwegian coin has been found in Iceland, at Bessastaðir in 1996.

In **2002** test trenches were dug in Njálsbúð, Biskupabúðir and the trench where the crosier was found. This research was most promising; it indicates that further investigation could add much to our knowledge of the site. In all cases archaeological remains were found, dating from various periods. Previously unknown remains were also discovered, which are deteriorating due to encroachment by the Öxará river. Adjacent to Biskupabúðir a cluster of structures, dating back as far as the 10th century, was uncovered.

The study of archaeological remains at Þingvellir will continue until 2006. The Institute of Archaeology is carrying out this research on behalf of the Þingvellir Commission. The objective of the study is to gather more information on the history of Þingvellir. During the period of the archaeological study, the National Park will keep visitors to the National Park informed about the project, by means of guided walks and presentations, and will present information on the National Park's website.

Fig. 3. 14 Archeological research at Þingvellir 2002.

3.b History and development

THE VIKING AGE

The Viking Age was an eventful period in the history of Nordic peoples – and has even been linked with Nordic folk migrations. Its beginning is generally dated from a raid made by Vikings on the monastery at Lindisfarne in northern England in the year 793, and its conclusion is marked by the battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066. During the intervening period great numbers of people left their homes to seek new places to live, in areas spreading from the banks of the Volga River to the east coast of North America, and from the Mediterranean to the Arctic Ocean. Never before or since have Nordic peoples had as much influence on other nations.

Vikings are widely imagined as brutal raiders, but we must not forget that many

others were peace-loving farmers who sought new places for themselves to live – and not least merchants who promoted trade between different countries and cultures.

Vikings settled in many areas of Europe and established colonies, but these were small in population and were soon assimilated by the previous residents, with the result that their influence was only indirect. The expansion of the Vikings westward to the islands of the North Atlantic was quite another story. These territories were unsettled, and here the Nordic settlers could build up societies completely on their own premises, societies which lasted for several centuries.

Nordic societies of this period were governed, on the one hand, by an assembly of free and armed men and, on the other hand, by a leader generally referred to as a king. This was the same arrangement as prevailed among other Germanic peoples. Laws were adopted at the assemblies, judgements passed and other issues in the society settled. The king would take the lead in times of war, but had little power in other respects.

THE SETTLEMENT OF ICELAND AND BEGINNINGS OF STATEHOOD

Iceland was among those islands settled when Nordic peoples set out across the North Atlantic, as referred to earlier. Settlement of the country began around 870 and Iceland is considered to have been fully settled by around 930. This period is called the Age of Settlement.

Like any other colonist community, this society had to be organised from the ground up, with settlers of many different origins. They came in particular from Norway, many from Scotland, Ireland and the northern islands of the British Isles, but also a few from Sweden and Denmark. The migration clearly destabilised the legal structure which was rooted in ancient customs and an established system. Here traditional attitudes could not serve as a reference, but instead a new structure had to be found for the nascent society. This tested especially the mettle of those persons entrusted with the leadership, in resolving disputes, controlling the setting of legislation and enforcing the same. It had to influence the role and structure of the society's institutions.

In the manner of other Nordic and Germanic peoples, the Vikings established assemblies in the new islands they settled, but neither in the Faroe Islands, nor in Iceland or Greenland, were national leaders established. The most probable explanation is that the waters of the Atlantic offered protection against invasion by large armies – and the Norwegians and island dwellers dominated this ocean area in any case.

In Iceland, an assembly for the entire country was established around 930 and called the Althing (General Assembly). It was located on the field of Þingvellir. The establishment of the General Assembly marks the beginning of an organised society in Iceland generally referred to as the Icelandic Commonwealth. It would last until 1262-64.

The settlement of Iceland is remarkable in three different senses. Firstly, as far as is known, seafarers sailed in relative certainty across the North Atlantic, heading for a definite place. It is not known that this had been done before, and these were apparently the first organised sailings on the open seas for which reliable records have been preserved. Secondly, this mass migration headed north, which must be considered fairly unusual, since by far the most common practice was for

northern peoples to head south from their barren and harsh lands to more fertile ones. Thirdly, the settlement of Iceland and other outlying islands in the north can be seen as the first steps by Europeans towards the New World.

BACKGROUND TO AND ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ALTHING

Assemblies were set up in Iceland before the country was completely settled. Old sources mention assemblies at Þórsnes (Snæfellsnes, west Iceland) and Kjalarnes (southwest Iceland). The establishment of a single assembly in Iceland was an ambitious move, since it would possibly have seemed more natural to divide the country into smaller ones. There could have been a number of reasons. Iceland lacked the stability of the settlers' old society, partly because the family and clan structure had been disrupted since the settlers had their roots in various places and families of noble descent had spread around the country. Blood ties therefore did not tie the local communities together. Families sided with each other on important issues, and the natural place to achieve such solidarity was an assembly representing the whole country. The fact that Iceland was settled by people from different geographical areas and with diverse backgrounds and to some extent disparate customs and concepts concerning the law also contributed to the establishment of institutions to tackle the challenge of introducing a single body of law for a very diverse group – and an assembly for the whole country was the only suitable solution. Finally, overland communications were fairly good in Iceland in comparison to Norway, which made it easier for people to gather at meetings.

DISTRICT ASSEMBLIES

The two aforementioned district assemblies, at Kjalarnes in the southwest and Þórsnes, on Snæfellsnes, west Iceland, were founded around the year 900. Other assemblies may have been established at the same time although none are mentioned in historical records. After the establishment of the Althing, which was an assembly for the whole country, the spring district assemblies became more permanent institutions. They were divided into two sessions, the "prosecution assembly" and the "debt assembly", and gathered for 4-7 days in May for the settlement of debts and disputes. The midsummer or autumn assemblies usually took place when people were returning from the Althing and lasted for one or two days at the end of July or August. The acts of the Althing were promulgated and discussed there, but no judicial actions were taken.

Around 965 Iceland was divided into quarters and the number of spring assemblies increased to 13. It was decided that in each quarter there should be three district assemblies, except for the Northern quarter, where four were established. The district assemblies were as follows:

- West Quarter: 1. Þverárþing, 2. Þórsnesþing, 3. Þorskafjarðarþing
- North Quarter: 1. Húnaþing, 2. Hegranesþing, 3. Vaðlaþing, 4. Þingeyjarþing
- East Quarter: 1. Sunnudalsþing, 2. Krakalækjarþing, 3. Múlaþing
- South Quarter: 1. Rangárþing, 2. Árnesþing, 3. Kjalarnesþing

Most of these assembly sites were located and surveyed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Rough maps of most sites have been made. The drawings below, from the end of the 19th century, shows an assembly site in south Iceland (figures 3.15 and 3.16).

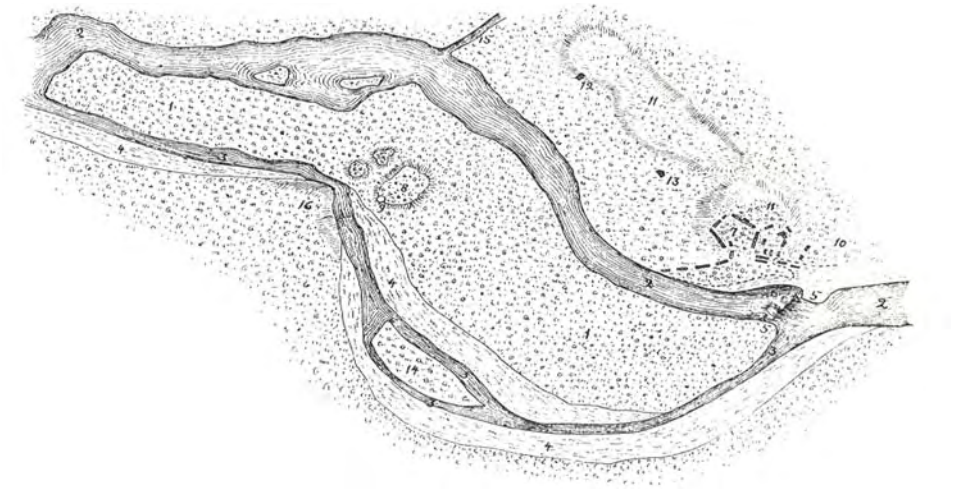

Figure 3.15. Árnes and the assembly site: 1. Árnes. 2-2. River Þjórsá. 3-3-3. River Árneskvísl. 4-4-4. Old course of the river Þjórsá. 5-5. Búði. 6. Búðaberg. 7. Búðatóttirnar (booth ruins). 8. Þinghóll (assembly mound). 9. Dómhringurinn (Judgement Circle). 10. Hofsheiði. 11-11. Hofsholt. 12. Stóra-Hof. 13. Minna-Hof. 14. Lækjarey. 15. Outflow of the river Kálfá. 16. Akbrautarholt. Drawing by Brynjólfur Jónsson, Yearbook of the Archaeological Society, 1883.

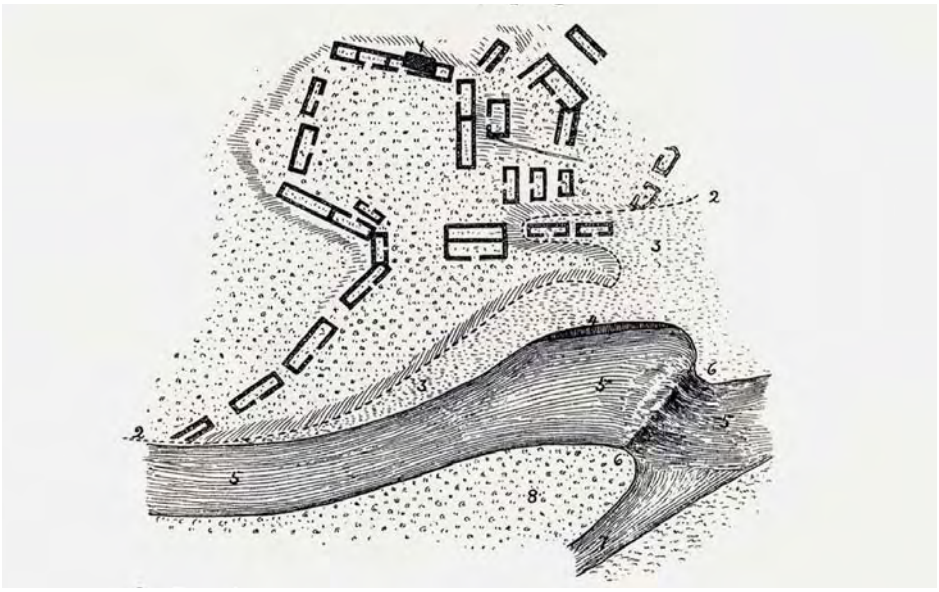

Figure 3.16. Booth ruins at the Árnes assembly site. 1. Later booth. 2-2. Eroded riverbank. 3-3. Wind-eroded gravel bank. 4. Búðaberg. 5-5-5. River Þjórsá. 6-6. Búði. 7. River Árneskvísl. 8. Árnes. Drawing by Brynjólfur Jónsson, Yearbook of the Archaeological Society, 1883.

THE OLD ASSEMBLY SITE

The Althing lasted for roughly two weeks a year. At the time of its foundation, all Germanic societies held their assemblies outdoors. This was also the case at the Althing, a custom that prevailed until the mid 18th century. Since it only lasted for a fortnight (and even shorter after 1271), there was no need to make much effort on buildings there. The main development made there was to divert *Öxará* (Axe River) through the assembly site (Map 5). The oldest authority about this dates from the 13th century and describes a journey made by the settler Ketilbjörn the

Old and his band of men:

> *"When they had gone a short way from there, they reached a frozen river where they cut a hole in the ice and dropped their axe into it, and therefore named it Öxará. This river was later diverted into Almannagjá and now runs through Þingvellir."*

The purpose in diverting the river was to provide water for the assembly, meaning that this was the first known major water diversion scheme in Iceland.

The assembly was held in the area marked "assembly site" on Maps 1 and 5. Assembly duties were mainly confined to two places, **Lögberg** (Law Rock) and **Lögrétta** (Law Council). Sources from the 13th century imply that Lögberg was on the eastern edge of Almannagjá, although it is impossible to locate Lögberg categorically at the start of the Commonwealth. Together with the Law Council, Lögberg was the centre of the assembly proceedings. The laws were recited at either of these places, or in the church if the weather was bad. Members of the Law Council and panels proceeded from Lögberg to perform their duties, and it was there that the assembly was inaugurated and closed. Announcements of all kinds were made at Lögberg, summonses were made there and anything else that should be made public, people made speeches, presented ideas and submitted proposals. The Lawspeaker (*lögsögumaður*) was based at Lögberg, where a special space was allocated to him. Sources from the 13th century imply that the Law Council sat on the field in front of Lögberg, possibly north or east of the Öxará river. However, there is much to indicate that it was originally located elsewhere. It should be borne in mind that the land between Almannagjá and Hrafnagjá has subsided since the time of the settlement, so that the landscape now is not in its original form. Originally the land would have been higher, the current in Öxará stronger and Lake Þingvallavatn farther away. The assembly fields themselves after which Þingvellir is named would therefore have been drier than they are today. For this reason it is not possible to locate precisely the site of the Law Council during the Commonwealth. It functioned outdoors throughout the Commonwealth and for a long while afterwards.

THE ICELANDIC COMMONWEALTH

Tasks performed by the Icelandic Althing were divided between its institutions: a Law Council, five courts and the Lawspeaker.

The Assembly's most important forum was the Law Council, the organisation of which was finalised about 1000. It was comprised of 48 of the country's leading chieftains (**goðar**, sing. **goði**), each with two advisors, plus the country's two bishops. Each goði was supported by a group of followers from among the farmers. Their connection was based on mutual trust and could be terminated by either party.

The principal task of the Law Council was to "frame the law" and "make new laws". The former involved ruling on what law applied when dispute arose as to the substance of a legal provision. In interpreting the term "frame the law", special attention should be paid to medieval ideas on the origin and nature of law. According to these ideas, the laws pre-existed in human minds and appeared in traditional practices. They were not the creation of any individual, but rather part of the human condition, past and present; laws were the tried and true inheritance of past generations and were to be respected. Rules were not

conceived and adopted consciously and purposefully, they were brought to light.

As previously mentioned, legal customs and traditions were destabilised during the settlement of Iceland. Because of this, the resulting uncertainty often had to be eliminated. Disputes would have been common while the political structure of Iceland was being formulated, and these could be referred to the Law Council. When legal disputes arose – or people "argued on legal questions", as it is worded in the earliest Icelandic law codex Grágás, containing the laws of the Commonwealth – the goðar who sat on the Council's mid-platform were to rule on them in accordance with specific procedure. This involved in effect bearing witness to what was considered to be applicable law, and was called "framing the law". By this means the true and traditional law was revealed. Accordingly, elder law took precedence over younger, in contrast to present practice, whereby newer laws replace older ones. With this attitude, when laws needed improving because they were unclear or contradictory, new laws were not adopted but rather older and more original ones were sought. Behind this lies the idea that the laws had been corrupted in the course of human treatment and needed to be corrected. In other words, it was necessary to "frame the law".

Fig. 3.17. The "Golden Age" assembly at Þingvellir in ancient times, as painter W. Collingwood imagined it would have been at Almannagjá.

It must be borne in mind here that the laws were preserved in oral tradition and human memory is not infallible, so that laws in this form were surprisingly flexible and could more easily be adapted to new circumstances than laws which are fixed in writing. In this case the method was not dissimilar to that practised when courts today issue judgement in cases lacking specific legal provisions, and rules have to be formulated supported by legal references such as legal principles and general legal conceptions.

While it is now clear that in fact new rules were often being adopted, by approaching the subject in this manner the mid-platform members of the Law Council (the goðar) by no means had free rein in their rulings. They were bound by traditional conventions, recognised interests and the prevailing legal conceptions – in short, the legal traditions of generations – in a similar manner to that whereby a judge is bound by recognised sources of law when issuing a new

ruling. A majority of the goðar determined the outcome, with the minority obliged to abide by this decision, as can only be considered normal in view of the fact that they were bearing witness to what was considered to be factual. This meant that the society was not controlled by laws formulated at the will and whim of its rulers – the nature of the law limited their power.

Although this method solved many problems, it was impossible to avoid innovation completely in a society whose foundations were being laid and shaped. This was acknowledged with specific instructions on the "making of new laws". Although the law does not state specifically how they were adopted, there can hardly be any question that they required unanimous acceptance. Here it should be kept in mind that formal voting was probably not practised; men expressed their position by voicing dissent or assent, by beating of weapons or clapping their hands. Questions were deemed to be accepted if a good majority of the most powerful and influential leaders gave their assent, and no one was bound by any decision which he had not himself agreed to. In men's minds new laws were thus the equivalent of a covenant between free men. The account by historiographer Ari the Wise (1067-1148) of the adoption of Christianity in the year 1000 shows clearly how people proceeded when a new law was disputed by men of power.

> *As a consequence of this, one man after another named witnesses and both sides, the heathens and the Christians, declared they would no longer share law with the other and then departed from Lögberg.*

People declared they were no longer bound by the same law and the society split. The response to this was to seek a compromise, as the heathen chieftain Þorgeir, goði of the People of Ljósavatn, did.

> *"My advice now," he said, "is that we refuse to allow those people who are most determined on conflict to decide our course, and seek a compromise between them so that each side gains some of its demands, and all of us have one law and one faith. It will prove true, that if the law is split then peace will also be split."*

Thus power was limited, although in a different manner from that involved in framing the laws. A different arrangement was scarcely possible amongst people who lacked a central executive power, as it was necessary to achieve the widest possible consensus.

In accordance with these basic ideas there was no provision for a national leader. No centralised executive power existed in the society in the sense that no single authority looked after law enforcement. The Commonwealth was thus a loosely connected alliance of the country's principal chieftains; they in turn shared mutual obligations with their followers among the farming class. The governing institutions of the society thus performed merely the function of defining people's rights, not of enforcing them. This has generally been described as a flaw in the constitutional structure of the Commonwealth and among the reasons for Icelanders submitting to the Norwegian monarchy in 1262-64. While this may be true enough if seen from a modern perspective, it is scarcely the case if examined according to the premises of the Commonwealth itself. It rejected the centralised executive power represented by the figure of the sovereign, which is not least evident in the emphasis placed by the ancient compilers of Icelandic sagas on the tyranny of King Harald Fine-Hair, in attempting to consolidate his power over all Norway, as one of the main reason for the exodus to and settlement of Iceland.

Centralised executive power was weak in European medieval states and what could be referred to as anarchy characterised many societies other than Iceland. Gradually, royal power grew and peace became more stable than before; this was a development which Icelanders were obliged to follow. Eventually they were no longer able to retain their special position and, like other peoples of the Middle Ages, they submitted to the rule of a sovereign. They did not, however, choose a domestic king, but rather one located at a suitable distance. For them, this was the best way to preserve their independence.

There were five courts at the Althing, one for each quarter of the country, and a fifth court for the entire country. For a judgement to be passed in a quarter court all the judges – 36 in number – had to agree. Failing this, the case was dealt with in the fifth court, where a majority was sufficient to decide the outcome. The fifth court was comprised of 48 judges, 36 of whom participated in the handling of each case. The courts do not appear to have ruled on legal disputes, but rather the Law Council, as has been described previously. The former would only have assessed the facts in a case. Rules of evidence were strictly formal, which meant that the role of the courts was only to judge whether a fact was considered to have been properly established according to form.

Finally, the Lawspeaker must be mentioned, whose chief role was to recite the laws before the Law Council. Originally the laws were unrecorded and his regular recitation of them was intended to ensure their preservation. Apart from this, the Lawspeaker directed the assembly proceedings.

In the winter of 1117-1118 the major step was taken of having the laws written down; subsequently additions were made to them. The outcome was the extensive legal codes which have been preserved as *Grágás* (which literally means “grey goose”) in manuscripts from the mid-13th century. Although the text of *Grágás* is generally terse and bears all the characteristics of learned texts, it is the most extensive of all Nordic medieval law codes, an indication of the extensive legislative efforts in the new and unformed Icelandic society.

MONARCH AND PARLIAMENT

Around 1200 this administrative structure began to disintegrate and the entire first half of the 13th century was characterised by major domestic clashes between the country’s most powerful leaders.

The kings of Norway had long been of the opinion that countries which had been chiefly settled from Norway were in one way or another subject to their sovereignty. By the mid-13th century royal power in Norway had grown considerably in strength following brutal domestic conflicts. Individual Icelandic leaders had often sought the king’s support in their struggle for supremacy and become his liegemen. The king’s control was signed and sealed in 1262-64, when all the country’s principal leaders swore their loyalty to him and made a special covenant laying down both parties’ rights and obligations. The Icelanders agreed to pay the king a tax which was decided, but reserved the right to involvement in the setting of laws, while the king promised in return to ensure peace for them along with certain other specific rights. For the Icelandic chieftains this was the best solution. The king was a long distance away and had scant means of exercising his power in Iceland, so as a result the chieftains retained their independence for the most part.

Norwegian laws were reviewed during the years 1267-77. The final stage in this extensive work was the law codex *Jónsbók*, which was sent to Iceland in 1280 and adopted in the country, following heated debate, at the Althing in 1281. Icelanders raised various objections to the codex, in particular in order to limit the king's power, angering the royal emissary, who claimed that the king alone was to ordain the laws. Icelanders could subsequently request that he make improvements to them. This represents a new philosophy of law as a fiat, which can be traced to Roman law but was foreign to Icelanders of the time. They reacted very critically, maintaining the ancient rights of the population to control lawmaking. Eventually, however, a compromise was reached and revisions made in 1294 did accommodate the wishes of the Icelanders to some extent.

Although *Jónsbók* was originally ill-received it soon became very popular and served as the principal foundation of Icelandic law for centuries. No other work has contributed more to shaping the legal conceptions and social ideas of Icelanders. There are still 45 sections which are wholly or partly current law in the country.

During the years 1262 to 1319 the country's administrative structure was altered in the direction of a state in the modern understanding of the word although, in Iceland as elsewhere, this was not achieved without conflict. The most visible change was that it now became the task of the king and his officials to enforce the laws. This had previously been the responsibility of the parties to the case. The king also assumed part of the legislative power together with the Althing, which did, however, continue to adopt laws independently. Furthermore, the king and his council became the seat of final judicial power in Icelandic affairs.

Changes made to the Althing itself now resulted in the king's officials, the bailiffs (*sýslumenn*), appointing 84 free men to attend the Althing, while the Royal Commissioner (*hirðstjóri*), who was the king's chief official, and the Lawman (*lögmaður*), who replaced the Lawspeaker (*lögsögumaður*) in chairing the assembly, appointed 36 men to sit on the Law Council. This now served both as a legislative institution and a court.

Although the assembly was now comprised of men appointed by the monarchy, it defended its right to legislate and levy taxes right up to the time of Absolutism.

ABSOLUTISM

In 1662 Absolutism was introduced in Iceland, which had been under Danish rule since the 14th century, and the royal senior administration reorganised accordingly. The effect of this on the Althing was to substantially reduce the legislative power of the Law Council. However, it still adopted laws in limited areas up until 1700. The judicial authority of the Law council was also curtailed with the establishment of a Superior Jury (*yfirréttur*) in 1563, presided over by the Royal Commissioner who appointed the 24 members of the jury, preferably from the ranks of the District Commissioners. Appeals against rulings could be brought before this court. By the 18th century the legislative power of the Althing had disappeared. Here the laws of the Absolutist monarch were simply presented to the population to be followed, and judgements were pronounced. As the end of the 18th century approached, assembly meetings were scarcely a shadow of their former selves. To make things worse, major earthquakes in 1789 somewhat damaged the assembly site. A decision was taken to move the assembly to

Reykjavík (which was granted a municipal charter in 1786 and was gradually emerging as Iceland's capital), which was implemented in 1798. The assembly met in Reykjavík the following two years, before it was abolished in 1800 as part of a complete restructuring of the country's legal system. It was reinstated in altered form in 1843.

ÞINGVELLIR AS A NATIONAL CENTRE

The history of Þingvellir is not only linked to issues of national governance. It was here that men gathered by the thousands, from all parts of Iceland, in late June each year on a variety of errands. Merchants and tradesmen would attend to conduct business; poets and storytellers went to entertain others and enrich their own troves; learned men gathered to exchange views; travellers went to tell news of faraway lands; hearty fellows went to compete in sports; and many others went seeking entertainment and to enjoy everything which was on offer, to see and be seen by others. For two weeks the Icelanders lived as if they were a city state – the fields of Þingvellir served the same function as the fora, temples and theatres of Greek city states. They thus played a key role in Icelandic culture.

The extensive Icelandic medieval literature is thus closely connected with Þingvellir, by one means or another, although the cathedral schools and the monasteries also made a sizeable contribution here. Many events described in the Sagas of Icelanders took place at Þingvellir and the same is true of the contemporary sagas dating from the 12th and 13th centuries. In addition to these genres there are the Eddic and Skaldic poems, the Kings' Sagas and learned works of various sorts, for instance, in the field of philosophy, theology, mathematics, geography and natural sciences – not to forget the law codices. The scope of the sagas is very wide, its settings reaching to the banks of the Volga River and Constantinople, across the Mediterranean to the eastern shores of North America, across Greenland and the Arctic. Most importantly, the Icelanders recorded the oldest history of Greenland, the Faroe Islands, the Orkneys, Norway and Sweden. The sagas also contain important chapters from the history of Russia, Denmark, England, Scotland and Ireland. Icelanders could be said to have become the medieval historiographers of the North Atlantic.

THE HERITAGE OF ÞINGVELLIR

Icelandic medieval literature is integrally linked to Þingvellir, especially as far as the Sagas of Icelanders and the Kings' Sagas are concerned. These works are regarded as among the most remarkable literary achievements of the Middle Ages and occupy a leading place in world literature. They shed light on the lives and mentalities of Northern peoples in the Middle Ages, not least during the Viking Age, when these peoples' influence was felt throughout Europe. At the same time they are an important source of information about all Germanic nations. Particular characteristics include championing the independence, individualism and responsibility of each man for his actions.

Icelandic medieval literature has also played a major part in shaping the image of the Nordic countries and their people, both in their own eyes and those of the world. As long as they value this heritage and identity, they must regard Þingvellir as among the most remarkable of their historical sites.

In Iceland a society of settlers developed, the only one in Europe to have detailed

sources describing its very origins. The settlement contributed to destabilising established customary rights and the settlers thus had to shape a new legal structure in a new society. This they had to accomplish on the basis of a shared life philosophy and the conceptions of Nordic, and thus Germanic, peoples as to the proper social structure. Here the assembly was the most important forum for governing the country and it was natural that the settlers soon arranged the holding of an assembly. The Althing was thus one of many assemblies held in Europe, including in the Nordic countries. But it is unique in a number of ways. The first way concerns the particular emphases and detailed attention given to removing legal uncertainty and resolving disputes without a superior authority. This is evident, for instance, in the important roles played by the Lawspeaker and Law Council. Secondly, there are extensive and detailed sources on the organisation of the assembly and its working procedures. The fruit of this activity is the extensive legal collections of the Commonwealth known as *Grágás*, which were previously discussed. Thirdly, the Icelandic Althing has a longer uninterrupted history than any other medieval assembly with the possible exception of the Faroese legal assembly and the assembly on the Isle of Man, sources on the history of which are limited.

Although both the conceptions and philosophies of all the medieval Nordic peoples were very similar, especially bearing in mind the events of the Viking Age, in shaping their new society the settlers of Iceland had to develop a clearer consciousness of what lay behind this philosophy than did those who remained behind and continued to follow ancient traditions without examining them in particular. As a result, medieval conceptions of law and power are manifested especially clearly in the Icelandic Commonwealth.

As was previously mentioned, the basic idea behind the administrative structure of the Icelandic Commonwealth was that laws are actually a covenant between free men, a social contract in the literal sense of the word. This is visible in the practice of referring to legal tradition and general legal conceptions in framing the law, in other words to consider what might be said to derive from the contract of generations, while the making of new laws was a contract among the living, and thus no one was regarded as obliged by anything to which he had not agreed personally. This called for compromise, which is one of the most important factors in the constitutional history of Germanic nations. Thus the legal status of individuals was defined and there the line was drawn – it was left to the parties involved to enforce their rights.

This represents a rejection of the idea that laws were the instrument of an authority which could be applied without restriction, as was subsequently assumed and enforced to the utmost under Absolutism; instead the concept of law implied that power was by nature restricted. This is by no means to imply that the laws were completely satisfactory in all areas, or that they suited everyone equally well. But laws which have been shaped over a long period of time in dealings of successive generations, or which have arisen out of compromise between opposing forces, can be assumed to have suited the great majority fairly well, and offered the common people some protection against overbearing leaders, even if such protection was by no means unfailing, as medieval governing practices were far from perfect.

The history of the Icelandic Commonwealth can probably shed light on significant aspects of constitutional development in Europe, all of which are linked directly or

indirectly to the growth and ascendancy of the rule of law, and can probably clarify our understanding of them. Even though they may have failed to achieve their goal, this does not detract from the value of their underlying ideals, which can still light our path. The plains of Þingvellir are an integral part of this story.

ÞINGVELLIR: A HALLOWED SITE

One of the most important events in Icelandic national history was the adoption of Christianity, which took place at Þingvellir in 1000. The decision to convert to Christianity has probably been the subject of more written speculation than any other event in Icelandic history. Opposing parties upheld Christianity and the old heathen religion, but a peaceful decision was made to adopt the Christian religion and reject heathendom. After this, mass baptisms took place all over Iceland. This remarkable story is preserved by Þingvellir.

King Olaf Tryggvason of Norway (995-1000) set out to convert both Norway and Iceland to Christianity, and lent his support to missionaries in Iceland for this purpose. At the Althing in the summer of 1000 (or possibly 999), the Christian and heathen factions, the latter far more numerous, came together. There was no armed conflict. Instead, they succeeded in reaching a peaceful solution. This was not least due to the contribution of Þorgeir, goði of the People of Ljósavatn and leader of the heathen faction, who was Lawspeaker at the assembly. He accepted the challenge issued by the leaders of the Christians, to declare laws which all would obey. He lay down under a cloak, which was a heathen ritual practice; scholars believe that this entailed that he was endowed with divine authority for his decision.

The following morning Þorgeir called the assembly to gather at the Lögberg and declared that all Icelanders should have one set of laws and one religion, and that their religion should be Christianity. He said that it boded ill for differing sets of laws to apply within the country, and it would lead to strife and armed conflict. Instead, a compromise should be reached, which both Christians and pagans could accept. It was vital that one set of laws, and one religion, should be upheld.

The assembly accepted Þorgeir's proposal, and he was then asked to recite the new laws. Under the new laws, all men should be Christian, and be baptised. Concessions were made to the heathen faction, however, by permitting for the time being the exposure of infants and eating of horsemeat. It would be permitted to practise heathen rites in private, but if these were discovered they could result in outlawry.

The oldest and most reliable source on the adoption of Christianity is the Book of Icelanders by Ari Þorgilsson the Wise. It is believed to have been written around 1130, or a little more than a century after the events at Þingvellir. Ari the Wise had easy access to people closely related to those who had personally experienced the events at Þingvellir about a hundred years before.

Prior to the formal adoption of Christianity, Iceland was not all heathen. A considerable number of Icelanders were Christians, although the Christian mission prior to 1000 had met with little success. The first settlers began to make their way to Iceland after 870. Most were from Norway, but some, mainly their slaves, were from Ireland and the Orkneys and Hebrides. At that time Norway was still heathen, but there was also a considerable Norse population in the British Isles, especially in the Orkneys and Ireland, where Christianity had long been

established. Ireland was one of the first countries at the periphery of Europe to embrace Christianity, as early as the fifth century.

It has been pointed out that the decision made at Þingvellir in 1000, and the mass baptisms which followed, must be regarded as a natural approach to religious conversion in a society moulded by family bonds and solidarity, even "the best proof for perfect renewal of mentality" (Wilhelm Grönbech). Hence there is no reason to suppose that the adoption of Christianity was a mere superficial change to society without deeper meaning. In fact Icelanders strove to build churches and chapels, and before long the church was well established in Icelandic society.

Many scholars maintain that the government of Iceland, from the foundation of the Althing, was based upon a close tie between religion and civil administration. So far as one can tell, the social system was based to a considerable degree upon the heathen religion. In its early period, the Icelandic church is known as the "church of goðar" (chieftains). This focuses on the special relationship that prevailed between the church and the chieftains, or between the ecclesiastical and the secular. The goðar were chieftains, each in his own region, and after the advent of Christianity they continued to sit in the assembly as they had done before. Chieftains manifested their respect for the Christian faith in many ways and built churches on their estates: not only were the churches under their protection, they were also a source of revenue.

Fig. 3.18. Þingvellir church.

The first **church at Þingvellir** was built soon after the adoption of Christianity. In his *Heimskringla* (History of the Kings of Norway), Snorri Sturluson describes how King Olaf Haraldsson, who assumed the crown in 1015, sent timber to Iceland and a church was then built at Þingvellir. The king also sent a large bell which was still in the church when Snorri wrote *Heimskringla* around 1230. The church would

have been fairly large since a major function was assigned to it, both for the assembly proceedings and the synods held at Þingvellir. Medieval sources relate that the church was well stocked with artefacts and ornaments.

Just west of the church were the booths of the bishops of Skálholt, who sat on the Law Council after Christianity was adopted and also chaired synods held there for the Skálholt see, which were held almost every year in the church – generally in connection with the assembly – until the Althing ceased to be held there in 1798.

It is thought that the churches at Þingvellir were always made from timber. For most of the time the parish church has been small, however, serving a small parish, besides which the benefice was a fairly poor one. The first priest named as serving at Þingvellir was Brandur Þórisson who assumed the post in 1190. Since then, there has been a resident clergyman for most of the time. When Þingvellir National Park was established in 1930 the parish was served by a neighbouring minister, and this arrangement was maintained until 1958 when a clergyman was appointed to the church and also performed the duties of national park warden.

The church and the gabled farmhouse on its south side greatly enhance the picturesque quality of Þingvellir. The centrally located church has far from diminished its sanctity.

CULTURE

Þingvellir is the place where the Icelandic nation entered the world. For centuries it was its meeting place where great drama was enacted, playing to a full house in the days of the Commonwealth and all the way down to a handful of people during its death throes in the eighteenth century. But even after the assembly had become redundant, the ancient sun of glory still shone behind the darkness and when the Icelanders launched their independence movement in the 19th century, Þingvellir automatically became the place to imbibe vigour and determination. To modern Icelanders also, Þingvellir is one of Iceland's most magnificent places. Artists and writers who have long sought inspiration in this place still do, as does the whole people. Thus whenever the Icelandic nation considers itself to be standing at a crossroads it seeks strength and solidarity at Þingvellir. All the major festivals in Icelandic history have therefore been held there.

ÞINGVELLIR AS A LITERARY INFLUENCE

In the Sagas of Icelanders, Þingvellir was a place where people enjoyed sanctuary, were able to consult in peace and achieve reconciliation: champions of freedom made decisions there for the benefit of country and people. In the 19th century, when Romantic notions of liberty, national identity and natural philosophy began to gain momentum, Þingvellir assumed a symbolic meaning. The humiliation of Þingvellir over the centuries was considered symbolic then for the humiliation of Iceland itself, as an oppressed Danish colony which had let independence slip through its grasp. Poets and authors adopted the idea of a free and sovereign Iceland, but it is not least in the poems of **Jónas Hallgrímsson** (1807-45), later dubbed "Iceland's beloved son," that Þingvellir is given pride of place in the national consciousness. He wrote prose and poetry describing how the "soul" and "spirit" of the Icelandic nation dwelt at Þingvellir, and how the state of Þingvellir invariably reflected its mental condition. In the minds of 19th-century writers, the only option was therefore to set up the restored Althing, the main

goal of the campaign for independence, at Þingvellir. To them, Þingvellir became a sacred place. People are filled with inspiration and a sense of sanctity there, and only at Þingvellir could it be possible to trust that the leaders of the nation would become instilled with the spirit of national awareness which would help them to make beneficial decisions on Icelandic affairs.

Figure 3.19 The Bell of Iceland by Jóhannes S. Kjarval, 1952.

The Romantic independence movement of the 19th century had an enormous impact on the identity of the Icelandic nation. Most 20th century poets took over where they left off, and in the works of many of the main authors Þingvellir often plays a symbolic role as the setting for or backdrop to important events. People are led there when much is at stake; suffice it to mention **Halldór Laxness** (1902-1998) and his novel "*The Bell of Iceland*". Laxness, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1955, for this work among others, sets many of the key scenes of "The Bell of Iceland" at Þingvellir, where it was said that the bell of Iceland itself rang in days of old. In doing so he lends these scenes, and the words spoken by the characters, a symbolic depth which invokes the history of Iceland and its campaign for independence. It is beyond doubt, and well justifiable too, that in the minds of most Icelanders today, Þingvellir remains a sacred place, where the dormant national spirit dwells and calls the nation to come together at crucial points in time.

ÞINGVELLIR AS SEEN BY VISUAL ARTISTS

Þingvellir has long been an important place for Icelandic visual artists, who still seek inspiration for their work there. Numerous artists from other countries have also painted Þingvellir. One of the first Icelanders to be admitted to the Copenhagen Academy of Art, in the late 18th century, was **Sæmundur Magnússon Hólm**. He is the probable author of a map of the assembly site as it was in the 18th century. The illustration shows the layout of the booths and buildings for the duration of the assembly (*see* Fig. 3.10).

French landscapist **Auguste Mayer** went to Þingvellir in 1836 with an expedition of French scientists led by doctor Paul Gaimard, and painted the following scene at Almannagjá.

Figure 3.20 Scene from Þingvellir by French painter August Mayer, 1836.

Danish artist **Emmanuel Larsen** painted in a similar area ten years later, when he wrote that “each patch and each rock in that place, the Capitol of the old Icelandic republic, recalls the ancient deeds of renown that we know from the sagas and poems.”

British painter and archaeologist **W.G. Collingwood** travelled around Iceland in 1897 specifically to paint and photograph the saga sites, “so that readers of the sagas could better imagine the saga-steads”, as he put it himself. In a painting, which he named *The Golden Age at Þingvellir*, he has gone further and painted the assembly at Þingvellir in ancient times, as he imagined it would have been at Almannagjá (See Fig. 3.25).

Among the first paintings acquired by the National Gallery of Iceland were scenes from Þingvellir by the Danes **Frederik Th. Kloss** and **H. August G. Schiøtt**, from the mid 19th century. And its first Icelandic acquisition was also painted there, *Summer Night* at Þingvellir by **Þórarinn B. Þorláksson** (1867-1924), produced in 1900.

Figure 3.21. “Summer Night” by Þórarinn B. Þorláksson, 1900.

Þórarinn B. Þorláksson was one of the Icelanders who went abroad to study art just before 1900 and returned when the campaign for independence was at its peak. By then, Reykjavík had the first makings of an urban community and was the seat of the government administration. Parliament House had been built in the capital and Iceland had acquired its first brass band, theatre and art museum. At Þingvellir, however, artists continued to find worthy subjects for their work.

The painting *From Þingvellir* (1905) by **Ásgrímur Jónsson** (1876-1958) projects a sense of peace and tranquillity and the completely harmonious cohabitation of man and nature. Here we see the old vicarage and the minister’s daughters sitting by the riverbank.

Figure 3.22 From Þingvellir by Ásgrímur Jónsson, 1905.

Jóhannes Sveinsson Kjarval (1885-1972), one of Iceland’s best loved visual artists, painted many of his best works at Þingvellir. His first major paintings were produced just before and after 1930, when Iceland commemorated the millennium of the establishment of the Althing at Þingvellir. Subsequently, Kjarval produced one masterpiece after another at Þingvellir. He painted *Mountain Milk* at Flosagjá, Þingvellir, in 1941.

Figure 3.23. Mountain Milk by Jóhannes Kjarval, 1941.

In 2000, Iceland commemorated the millennium of the historic adoption of Christianity by the Althing at Þingvellir in summer 1000. An outdoor art exhibition was staged to mark the occasion in Almannagjá and Stekkjargjá, under the title The Seven Virtues Past and Present. Fourteen young artists – seven female and seven male – tackled this project, interpreting the Icelanders' attitudes towards virtues in old and modern times. The works were on exhibit at Þingvellir for the whole summer and commanded a great deal of interest. This showed beyond a shadow of a doubt that Þingvellir, the setting for all the main events and meetings of the Icelandic nation in times of old, has no less of an influence on artists today.

Figure 3.24. Justice by Magnús Tómasson, 2000.

ÞINGVELLIR AND THE ICELANDIC IDENTITY

Of all the phenomena in Icelandic nature and history, Þingvellir is the greatest wonder of all. A place which has come into being through the mighty actions of the forces of the deep. An amphitheatre and backdrop awaiting its audience and players.

It almost seems providential that the Icelanders should have discovered Þingvellir and made it into its meeting place. It was at once the first collective location for the nation and its birthplace: people went there from all sorts of distant communities and merged into a nation after they had established a general assembly to organise their affairs. Þingvellir is the place where the Icelandic nation entered the world and became a fountain where the Icelanders could imbibe inspiration and determination.

And it has been ever since when the Icelandic nation considers itself to be standing at a crossroads. All the major festivals in Icelandic history have therefore been held there.

- **National festival at Þingvellir in 1874**. A national festival was held at Þingvellir in 1874 to commemorate the 1,000th anniversary of the settlement of Iceland. On this occasion, Iceland was granted its first constitution (by the King of Denmark), whereby the Althing was given limited legislative authority and fiscal control. This marked a milestone on the Icelandic nation's path towards independence.
- **Althing millennium festival in 1930**. A festival was held at Þingvellir in 1930 to commemorate the millennium of the establishment of the Althing. At the festival, the nation also celebrated its status as a free and sovereign state, which had been obtained 12 years before.
- **Establishment of the Republic of Iceland in 1944**. A festival was held on the occasion of the establishment of the Republic of Iceland on June 17, 1944. The Althing convened at Lögberg and the constitution of the Republic was declared to have taken in effect. Sveinn Björnsson, Regent, was elected the first President of Iceland.
- **National festival at Þingvellir in 1974**. A national festival was held at Þingvellir in 1974 to commemorate the 1,100th anniversary of the settlement of Iceland.

Fig. 3.25. The 1,100th anniversary of the settlement of Iceland, 1974.

- **Festival of the Republic at Þingvellir in 1994**. In 1994, a festival was held at Þingvellir to commemorate the half-centenary of the Republic of Iceland.
- **Christianity 2000 festival at Þingvellir**. In 2000, Iceland commemorated the millennium of the adoption of Christianity by the Althing at Þingvellir.

THE BEGINNINGS OF TOURISM AT ÞINGVELLIR

Þingvellir's magnetism not only attracts Icelanders to celebrate special occasions. Tourists from Iceland and abroad visit the site year round. At the beginning of the 21st century, Þingvellir is the most visited tourist spot in Iceland, and has been for a long time; most tourists from abroad go there, regardless of whether they plan to make a short or long stay in the country.

Þingvellir has not always enjoyed this status in people's minds, and even as late as the 19th century it was seen as little more than barren and fairly difficult farmland by most people who took any interest in the place. When the first travellers arrived in Iceland from abroad in the 18th century this attitude prevailed among them too, Iceland's nature was primarily seen as menacing and inhospitable and the Icelanders as primitive, poor and uneducated.

Ideas began to change towards the end of the 18th century, as can clearly be seen in the writings of British natural scientists who made expeditions in the latter part of the 18th century. In particular their interest focused on other phenomena and areas than Þingvellir, above all geysers and volcanoes. These expeditions also went to Þingvellir, but this tended to be because it was en route to the Geysir geothermal fields. The well known British explorer and scientist **Joseph Bank**, for example, went to Þingvellir in 1772 and described it as "romantic and picturesque" but made little mention of it in other respects. The young British aristocrat **John Thomas Stanley** described it in similar terms in 1789; neither of them saw Þingvellir in the context of Icelandic cultural history.

Fig. 3.26. Almannagjá as seen by the French traveller Nougaret, 1868.

Nonetheless, Þingvellir did not remain in a secondary role for long. Towards the end of the Napoleonic wars early in the 19th century, British travellers and scientists resumed their visits to Iceland and now a different attitude towards Þingvellir could be discerned. **George Mackenzie**, for example, in his Travels in the Island of Iceland which was published in 1811, mentioned how regrettable it was that the Icelanders had ceased to hold their national assembly in the bosom of such magnificent nature.

Admittedly, few travellers visited Iceland until the second half of the 19th century, but then their number grew sharply as that liner services by steamship began. Around this time Þingvellir had already become one of Iceland's most popular tourist spots, as shown in the writings of English travellers and travel guides around the mid 19th century and later. The Hand-Book for Travellers (London 1858) describes the three "the chief places of interest" in Iceland as Þingvellir, Hekla and Geysir.

A particular reason for this interest in Þingvellir was the nationalist awakening which flourished in much of Europe. Such sentiments came to focus on Iceland and the Icelandic cultural heritage and led to the translation and publication of old Icelandic literature in the late 18th and 19th centuries. As the century progressed, these works enjoyed growing popularity in much of Europe and drew attention to Iceland. One translator of the sagas in the second half of the 19th century was the well known British author and craftsman **William Morris**, who travelled around the country in 1871 and 1873, visiting Þingvellir on both occasions.

In the second half of the 19th century Þingvellir had in a sense become a place of pilgrimage, and travellers, especially British and German ones, linked it to their own cultural histories. To many of them Iceland represented a kind of repository of the essence of Nordic culture. Þingvellir was the very heart of that essence. In describing Þingvellir, some of these travellers said they could visualise the leaders of medieval Icelandic society setting laws and pronouncing judgements. Others related how saga heroes had appeared in their minds when they arrived at Þingvellir. In a certain sense, the place served as a backdrop for the ancient Icelandic saga world.

Alongside this change in attitude to Icelandic culture in the first half of the 19th century, visitors to Iceland also radically altered in the view they took towards Icelandic nature, including Þingvellir. In fact Þingvellir was already considered a remarkable object of study in the eyes of travellers from abroad. As the 19th century wore on, it also came to enjoy growing popularity on account of its unique geological formations. Romantic travellers described it in the spirit of the prevailing notions of that time. Þingvellir was admittedly not regarded as an attractive place, but magnificent, wild, awe-inspiring, in other words "sublime", and an especially apt location for Iceland's unique society in medieval times.

Since the mid 19th century Þingvellir has enjoyed the undivided admiration of Icelanders and visitors from abroad alike. People have visited the place to enjoy its natural beauty, but not least because it has become a shrine for the Icelandic nation, as shown by its role in national celebrations, which has been its profile towards tourists in the 20th century.

Fig 3. 27. Travellers at Þingvellir in the first half of the 20th century.

3.c Form and date of most recent records of site

There are extensive records of field studies at Þingvellir relating to culture, natural science and excavations. All these records are in official archives and files at the National and University Library of Iceland, the National Museum of Iceland, the Icelandic Institute of Natural History, the Þingvellir Commission or the National Energy Authority. Most of the bibliographies or references for these studies are in Chapter 7. Documentation, 7.c. Bibliographies.

STUDIES AND PROJECTS RELATED TO THE MANAGEMENT OF ÞINGVELLIR NATIONAL PARK

The Þingvellir Park Authority manages and documents all restoration work carried out on the site according to maintenance plans. Other studies are made when considered necessary. One example of a recent survey for the Þingvellir Commission in January 2003 was conducted by "Tourism Research and Consultancy": Tourists at Þingvellir and its value for tourism and outdoor leisure. This study was based on data on the composition, mode of travel and various other points regarding Icelandic and foreign visitors to Þingvellir in 2001. Covering the Greater Reykjavík Area, it assessed the value of the Þingvellir area for outdoor leisure activities and tourism and compared it with other protected and outdoor leisure areas in southwest Iceland.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDIES

An overview of the archaeological studies made in the Þingvellir area is given in Chapter 3.a. All reports and documents are archived at the National Museum of Iceland and with the Þingvellir Commission.

NATURAL SCIENCE STUDIES

An overview of ecological studies at Lake Thingvellir was published in a book, “Ecology of oligotrophic, subarctic Thingvallavatn” in 1992, Jonasson, P.M., ed. OIKOS, 437 pp. The book covers the following fields: Geology, meteorology, vegetation of the catchment area, physics and chemistry, plankton, benthos, fish, birds, mammals and synthesis. Studies of the four morphs of arctic charr and the brown trout are regularly undertaken or overseen by the Institute of Freshwater Fisheries in Iceland. Geological studies of the Þingvellir area have focused in particular on the two dominant features of the environment there, namely fissures and lava fields. Both are parts of a larger whole. Geological mapping has therefore not focused specifically on the National Park, but rather on the Lake Þingvallavatn environment and its total catchment area. Ever since the mid 1960s, a priority has been direct measurements of movements in the Earth’s crust in the Þingvellir area.

MAPS AND AERIAL PHOTOS

Aerial photos of the innermost assembly site from 1937, 1949, 1959, 1960, 1971, 1981, 1991 and 1996 are kept by Þingvellir National Park. There is an aerial photograph of the entire National Park with placenames marked on it, a unique record made by the last resident of Skógarkot. Iceland Geodetic Survey has produced maps of the area on the scales 1/100 000, 1/50 000 and 1/25 000.

3.d Present state of conservation

Þingvellir National Park has remained under single administration (the Þingvellir Commission) since it was founded in 1930. Thus the supervisory duties of the National Park administration and its responsibility for conditions in the Park and its impact area are very strong. The Park administration pursues all possibilities to ensure that the National Park does not deteriorate and that it is being run in a sustainable fashion. There are, however, sensitive areas within the park which need special attention continuously.

The most sensitive areas in the National Park are the innermost assembly site as well as the banks of Lake Þingvallavatn (Map 1). Since most tourists come to the innermost assembly site, pressure from them is greatest there. Footpaths have been laid through the innermost assembly site, so as to protect remains, geological formations and vegetation. These paths are properly maintained, by adding paving material and laying turf beside them, whenever needed. Measures are constantly being examined to protect the innermost assembly site as far as possible. There is often a great number of anglers along the banks of Lake Þingvallavatn. The condition of footpaths by the lake is monitored regularly, along with that of footpaths in general inside the National Park.

The floor of the valley has subsided by some 3-4 metres since the Althing was founded at Þingvellir, affecting the innermost assembly site with the associated impacts on the river Öxará which consequently overflows its banks.

Long-term solutions to the problems at these sites are described in Chapters 4 to 6.

3.e Policies and programmes related to the presentation and promotion of the property

One of the characteristic features of Þingvellir is the very small impact that the modern age has had on it. A visitor stands in the same surroundings as generations past, these are the same cliff walls, mountains, water, sky and atmosphere as in days of yore. Pilgrims to Þingvellir can experience the major events which once occurred and still occur here.

It is the policy of the National Park administration to preserve these special characteristics of Þingvellir, with emphasis on presenting the cultural and natural values of the area while at the same time creating a framework for ensuring their protection. The most important area with respect to culture is that of the innermost assembly site and its nearest surroundings with Almannagjá and Lögberg. As for nature and the treasures that it enshrines, there is no single location which is exceptional, because it is the variety characteristic of the entire area – its geology, landscape and biosphere – which lends it value.

The general plan for presenting these characteristics is to encourage high-quality cultural and nature tourism, with low-key information at the assembly site. The emphasis is on high-quality information service at two locations: in the Visitor Centre at the top of Almannagjá and in the Information and Service Centre. Low-key hiking paths are being provided at the assembly site, with bridges were needed to protect the archaeological remains. For the enjoyment of nature there are hiking paths within the park, mostly following old footpaths from the days of the Althing, and camping sites at some distance from the Almannagjá-Lögberg site (Map 1).

Þingvellir National Park is treated in most guide books covering places of interest in Iceland, and is one of the key sights visited in the most popular guided tour in Iceland, the ten-hour “Golden Circle,” which is offered by many travel agencies from the capital city of Reykjavik daily all year round.

Instruction in the National Park

The interpretive programme of the National Park sets as its goal that visitors to Þingvellir have the opportunity of becoming acquainted with its unique history and nature. The National Park employs an interpretive manager who is responsible, under the management of the Director, for developing and directing interpretive issues. In 2002, some 4,000 visitors were guided through the Park under the supervision of its own personnel.

Visitor Centre

The Visitor Centre of Þingvellir National Park is situated right beside the viewing point on Hakið, where visitors begin their walk down Almannagjá. The exhibit in the Visitor Centre is the first in Iceland to be based almost entirely on multimedia, presenting the history and nature of the Þingvellir area through state-of-the-art multimedia technology. Exhibit visitors can select audio or screen texts in four languages (Icelandic, Danish, English and German) and themselves control on touch screens what items of content to observe and in what order. The estimated time for viewing the entire multimedia content on screen is approximately 40 minutes. Also at the Visitor Centre, a movie is shown which was taken under the

surface of Þingvallavatn lake and reveals the diversity of its biosphere. Admission to the exhibit is free of charge, and Centre attendance has remained good since opening.

Fig.3.28. The Visitor Centre.

Walks

Among instructive activities in the National Park, walks are the most popular. Every day of the week during the summer season, from May to September, walks comprise a substantial part of the Park's offerings, with guides speaking Icelandic and English. Walks proceed through the ancient assembly grounds of the Althing and through the entire Park. A new type of walks commenced in the summer of 2001, theme walks, in which scholars are brought in from outside the Park to lead walks entitled "Thursday Evening at Þingvellir." Scholars, historians, natural scientists, artists and authors come to serve as guides for an evening at Þingvellir. Achieving tremendous popularity, these walks were joined by over 1,000 visitors in the summer of 2002, and have succeeded in increasing interest in the National Park, which manifests itself through added participation in its other informational activities and by attracting visitors who do not attend its instruction at weekends.

Publication of brochures

The National Park has sponsored the publication of assorted materials presenting the history and nature of Þingvellir. A brochure replacing older ones appeared in 2000 on the history and nature of Þingvellir, and Söguslóðin ("On the Trail of History") is a brochure which visitors can carry around the Althing area, following numbered points and reading about the events associated with them. All these brochures and the map are available at the National Park's Information and Service Centre and Visitor Centre.

Reception of school groups

Every year, the staff of the National Park receive over 2,000 students at Þingvellir. While the students are of all ages, most are in the 5^{th}-7^{th} grades (having started school at age six). Visits by school groups are organised in consideration of subject matter and the national curriculum, with the groups who arrive receiving instruction in geology, hydrology, nature conservation, the ancient assembly grounds and the history of the Althing. These visits have gone

well, and teachers have expressed great satisfaction with them.

In the autumn of 2001, cooperation began with the Iceland University of Education to develop course materials for posting on the National Park website. The objective for the Þingvellir website (www.thingvellir.is) is to make it a teaching website with diverse content, and the main purpose and goal of the educational project is to compose subject matter and assignments on Þingvellir for the 5th-7th grades and to make this universally accessible on the Þingvellir website. In addition, this project is intended to encourage schoolchildren's field trips to Þingvellir, supporting both preparations and subsequent school work on them, besides enabling pupils, who on account of where they live, disability or other causes cannot tour Þingvellir, to study the area and become as closely acquainted with it as possible by means of computer technology.

The subject matter will be presented in accordance with the national curriculum for elementary schools, and it is planned for students to be able to use the material in a trial run on the website during the spring of 2003.

Presentation of archaeological research

The most recent archaeological research at Þingvellir began in 1998 and is to continue until 2006. The Institute of Archaeology is carrying out these archaeological investigations at Þingvellir in cooperation with the National Museum of Iceland, on behalf of the Þingvellir Commission. For the duration of these interdisciplinary archaeological studies, the National Park will introduce visitors to the research being conducted, through walks, presentations and the National Park website.

The facilities available at Þingvellir are described in detail in Chapter 4.i.

Fig. 3.29 Theme Walk in Þingvellir National Park summer 2002.

4. MANAGEMENT

4.a Ownership

The land of the National Park nominated here, as shown on Map 1, is all under the ownership of the Icelandic State and protected under the Act on Þingvellir National Park no. 59/1928. Address of the managing authority:

Þingvellir Commission
Hverfisgata 4a
101 Reykjavik.

4.b Legal status

The Þingvellir National Park Commission is responsible for the maintenance, management and any conservation or preservation measures which may be necessary to protect the park. Protection is provided under several acts, both a specific act covering Þingvellir and general legislation protecting what are considered to be distinctive features in the area. The specific act is:

- Law on the Þingvellir National Park no. 59/1928. Dealing only with the National Park.

General legislation:

- The National Heritage Act no. 107/2001.
- The National Planning and Building Act nos. 73/1997, 135/1997 and 58/1999.
- The National Architectural Heritage Act no. 104/2001.
- The Nature Conservation Act no. 44/1999 with subsequent amendments.

The main aspects of these laws which may relate to Þingvellir are described in more detail below.

LAW ON THE ÞINGVELLIR NATIONAL PARK

Þingvellir National Park is protected by a specific Act no. 59/1928 on the Protection of Þingvellir, with subsequent amendments:

> *"As from 1930 Þingvellir by Öxará and its vicinity shall be a protected national shrine for all Icelanders" (Art. 1, first paragraph).*
>
> *"The land inside the boundaries delineated above shall, as determined by the Þingvellir Commission and proven feasible by experience, be protected from the pressures of sheep and goats. The woods and wildlife that may flourish there are nonetheless fully protected. Notwithstanding this, the Commission shall take measures to destroy those animals and birds which cause problems in the protected area or loss to the livestock of regional residents.*
>
> *The Þingvellir Commission also decides on angling in Lake Þingvallavatn north of the line drawn in .. [on Map 1]. There shall be no disturbance to the soil nor construction of buildings, roads, electric power lines or other structures in the protected area or in the land of the farms Kárastaðir, Brúsastaðir, Svartagil and Gjábakki [the buffer zone] without the permission of the Þingvellir Commission."* (Art. 2, paragraphs 6 to 8.)

The protected area shall be under the protection of parliament and indefinitely the property of the Icelandic nation. It can never be sold or mortgaged. (Art. 4).

The Þingvellir Commission, comprised of three members of parliament, oversees the management, on behalf of parliament, of the protected land and other land owned by the state which is specified in Art. 2. [The National Park and the buffer zone as shown on Map 4]. The Þingvellir Commission shall be elected by a proportional vote in the United Chamber of parliament at the end of each session immediately after a general election, for the first time at the parliamentary session in 1928. (Art. 5).

The Þingvellir Commission shall compile a regulation on the protected land which is ratified by the Government. The regulation may include a decision on charges for visiting Þingvellir and allocating those funds towards the cost of protecting it. (Art. 6).

[The Þingvellir Commission appoints a Director. He appoints other staff.]

All unavoidable expenses on the protection of Þingvellir shall, according to this Act, be paid by the treasury. (Art. 7).

[A breach of the provisions of this Act and regulations set pursuant to it shall be punishable by a fine [or a prison sentence of up to two years]. Action on account of breaches of this Act shall be treated as a criminal case.] (Art. 8).

THE NATIONAL HERITAGE ACT

All archaeological remains in Iceland are protected against any kind of disturbance under the National Heritage Act no. 107/2001.

"The aim of the Act is to contribute to the preservation of cultural-historical remains and ensure that Iceland's cultural heritage is passed on intact to coming generations.

Where possible this legislation is supposed to ensure the preservation of cultural-historical remains in their own environment, facilitate national access to acquaintance with Icelandic remains, and promote research into them.

Cultural-historical remains include tangible evidence of national history, such as archaeological remains and old buildings, ecclesiastical artefacts and memorials, archaeological objects, works of art and functional articles, as well as pictures and other sources on the national cultural heritage. Such remains can also include sites connected with cultural history.

Remains of Icelandic cultural history which are preserved in the National Museum of Iceland or in local museums, or have been declared under protection, are considered part of the national heritage.

Under this Act, antiquities are comprised of archaeological remains and archaeological objects. (Art. 1).

By law it is the Archaeological Preservation Agency which:

"...discusses and grants permission for all archaeological research in specified areas and for limited periods of time." (Art. 6, paragraph 1).

"It monitors all archaeological research and advises the parties involved on

the preservation, registration and research of archaeological remains". (Art. 6, paragraph 3).

Archaeological remains are defined as: "*… any kind of remains of ancient manmade structures and other local remains made by man or on which the works of man are located.*" (Art. 9, paragraph 1)...."*Remains more than 100 years old shall be considered as archaeological remains, but younger remains may also be placed under protection.*" (Art. 9, paragraph 11).

According to Article 10 no one may: "*..damage, destroy or alter archaeological remains, nor cover them, repair or disturb them, or move them to another place without the permission of the Archaeological Preservation Agency*".

Archaeological remains registered as protected are more strongly protected than other types. They are recorded in the "Register of Protected Remains". All archaeological remains at Þingvellir have been registered by law since 1927. Accordingly the following applies to registered remains (condensed from Art. 11): Registration of protected archaeological remains shall be published in the Official Journal and the location be specified in as much detail as possible on a map or by other means. Protected archaeological remains or cultural areas shall be identified by special markings. Landowners and tenants shall be notified of the decision on protection by legally verifiable means.

".....Registry of protected archaeological remains shall be officially confirmed as a restriction on property concerned. Those archaeological remains that are protected shall have a restricted buffer zone of 20 metres in all directions from the site's visible borders, unless otherwise provided. In the case of a larger buffer zone, consent of the landowner shall be sought. Protected archaeological remains shall be marked on development plans." (Art. 11, paragraph 3).

THE NATIONAL PLANNING AND BUILDING ACT

The National Park is also protected under the National Planning and Building Act nos. 73/1997, 135/1997 and 58/1999, which gives general rules on land use:

"The aims of this Act are:

- *to ensure that the development of settlement and land use in the country as a whole will be in accordance with development plans which are based on the economic, social and cultural needs of the population, and also their health and safety;*
- *to encourage the rational and efficient utilisation of land and natural resources, to ensure the preservation of natural and cultural values and to prevent environmental damage and over-exploitation, based on the principles of sustainable development;*
- *to ensure security under the law in the handling of planning and building issues so that the rights of individuals and legal persons will not be neglected even though the common interest is the guiding principle;*
- *to ensure the professional preparation of development and active monitoring to ensure that the requirements regarding safety, durability, appearance and suitability of buildings and other*

structures are fulfilled." (Art. 1).

Different types of development plans are in effect in Iceland: the Regional plan, Municipal plan and Local plan, which municipal governments are in charge of producing and must approve for them to become legally binding.

> *"Regional plan: A development plan covering more than one municipality. The role of a regional plan is to coordinate policies regarding land use, transportation and service systems, environmental matters and the development of settlement in the region during a period of not less than 12 years."* (Art. 2, paragraph 9).
>
> *"Municipal plan: A development plan for a specific municipality expressing the local authority's policy regarding land use, transportation and service systems, environmental matters and the development of settlement in the municipality during a period of not less than 12 years." (Art. 2, paragraph 1).*
>
> *"Local plan: A development plan for specific areas within a municipality, based on the municipal plan and containing further provisions on its implementation. Local planning provisions apply equally to urban areas and to rural areas."* (Art. 2, paragraph 3).
>
> *"If there exist within the boundaries of the planning area individual buildings, structures, groups of buildings, natural features or vegetation which is considered desirable to conserve because of their historical, natural or cultural value, without statutory protection, then local conservation provisions shall be included in the relevant development plan. There shall be internal cohesion between regional, municipal and local development plans."* (Art. 9, paragraphs 6-7).

An overview of development plans relevant to Þingvellir National Park and the surrounding area is given in 4.f.

THE NATIONAL ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE ACT

Þingvellir Church is specifically protected under the National Architectural Heritage Act no. 104/2001. The following is an extract from that Act:

> *"The purpose of this Act is to preserve the Icelandic architectural heritage which has cultural-historical value. The Act provides for the protection of buildings and other manmade structures, and for arrangements for the protection of the architectural heritage."* (Art. 1).
>
> *"Manmade structures, buildings or parts of buildings which have cultural-historical or artistic value may be protected. Protection may extend to the immediate vicinity of the said structure. Groups of buildings with the same value as specified above may be protected, whereupon the protection rules apply to each separate building. The purpose of protection is to ensure the best possible preservation of the protected structure."* (Art. 4).
>
> *"All buildings constructed before 1850 are protected, and all churches built before 1918."* (Art. 6).
>
> *"No alterations may be made to a protected property without the permission of the National Architectural Heritage Board."* (Art. 9).

THE NATURE CONSERVATION ACT

The Nature Conservation Act no. 44/1999 with subsequent amendments deals in general terms with nature conservation and natural remains, and defines them. It will refer to Þingvellir in general, as it does to the country as a whole, and enable the prevention of damage to the environment where it is considered to be special, in the highly unlikely event that municipal authorities in the area and/or the Þingvellir Commission should not adhere to its own strategy and development plans.

"The purpose of this Act is to direct the interaction of man with his environment so that it harm neither the biosphere nor the geosphere, nor pollute the air, sea or water. The Act is intended to ensure, to the extent possible, that Icelandic nature can develop according to its own laws and ensure conservation of its exceptional or historical aspects. The Act shall facilitate the nation's access to and knowledge of Icelandic nature and cultural heritage and encourage the conservation and utilisation of resources based on sustainable development." (Art. 1).

"The following landscape types shall enjoy special protection and their disturbance shall be avoided if at all possible:

1. Volcanic craters, rootless vents (pseudocraters) and lava fields;
2. freshwater lakes and pools, 1000 m² or more in area;
3. bogs and fens, 3 hectares or more in area;
4. waterfalls, hot springs and other thermal sources, as well as surfacial geothermal deposits (sinter and travertine), 100 m² or more in area;
5. salt marshes and mudflats.

The opinion of the Nature Conservation Agency and nature conservation committees shall be sought prior to granting of project authorisations or construction" (Art. 37, paragraphs 1-7).

4.c Protective measures and means of implementing them

Enforcement measures and penalties according to Chapter 4.b:

- Under the act on the National Park it is a criminal offence to alter, damage or destroy any properties within the National Park boundaries without the consent of the Þingvellir Commission. The commission is elected by a proportional vote at the end of each term of parliament immediately after a general election.
- Under the National Heritage Act it is a criminal offence to alter, damage or destroy ruins and any properties that fall under the protection of the act, as all ruins do within the Þingvellir Park Area, without the written consent of the Archaeological Preservation Agency.
- No one is allowed to alter, damage or destroy landscape types that fall under the Nature Conservation Act without prior notification to the Environment and Food Agency of Iceland and relevant municipality. In considering development and development plans, municipalities are bound to have special regard to the desirability of preserving these landscape types in consultation with the Environment and Food Agency of Iceland.
- No alterations may be made to a protected property without the permission of the National Architectural Heritage Board, for listed buildings which are protected under the National Architectural Heritage Act.

- According to the National Planning and Building Act, if a development project is carried out in a manner different from that for which permission was granted, or if a building is put to a use other than that which the local authority has authorised, the planning/building officer may stop such actions immediately. If the project requires a development permit the planning officer shall seek the confirmation of the local authority. If the project requires a building permit the building officer shall seek the confirmation of the building committee as soon as possible. The development plan for an area in which construction work has been carried out in violation of the plan may not be amended before the illegal building, or part of a building, has been removed, broken ground smoothed over or activity discontinued. If the need arises, the police shall be obliged to assist a building officer or building committee in carrying out the above measures.

4.d Agencies with management authority

The agency with management authority at Þingvellir is:

Þingvellir Commission

Hverfisgata 4a
104 Reykjavik
Iceland

The members of the Þingvellir Commission are:

- Mr. Björn Bjarnason, Member of Parliament, chairman.
- Mr. Guðni Ágústsson, Minister of Agriculture.
- Mr. Össur Skarphéðinsson, Member of Parliament.

The Þingvellir Commission appoints the Director of the National Park. The Director is in charge of day-to-day supervision of the area, appoints other staff and is responsible for its finances.

The Archaeological Preservation Agency handles implementation of the law on protection of archaeological remains.

Archaeological Preservation Agency

Lyngás 7
220 Garðabær
Iceland

The Environment and Food Agency of Iceland handles implementation of the Nature Conservation Act.

Environment and Food Agency of Iceland

Suðurlandsbraut 24
108 Reykjavik
Iceland

The National Architectural Heritage Board handles implementation of the law on protection of buildings.

National Architectural Heritage Board

Lyngás 7
220 Garðabær
Iceland

The Municipalities of Bláskógabyggð and Grímsnes & Grafningur are planning authorities.

Bláskógabyggð Municipality

Bláskógabyggð
Reykholt
801 Selfoss
Iceland

Grímsnes & Grafningur Municipality

Borg
Grímsnes
801 Selfoss
Iceland

4.e Level at which management is exercised (e.g. on site, regionally) and name and address of responsible person for contact purpose

The agency with overall management authority for the Þingvellir Park is:

Þingvellir Commission
Hverfisgata 4a
101 Reykjavik
Iceland

The individual responsible for day-to-day management of the property and for the budget relating to its maintenance in the park is the Director of the National Park, Mr. Sigurður K. Oddsson, based at the Þingvellir Commission headquarters. Day-to-day work is supervised by Mr. Sigurður K. Oddsson and staff based at the Þingvellir National Park.

E-mail: sko@thingvellir.is
Tel: +354-552-1730
Mobile: +354-896-6309
www.thingvellir.is

4.f Agreed plans related to property

The following is an overview of agreed plans related to the property e.g. regional plan, local plan, conservation plan and tourism development plan.

STRATEGY FOR PLANNING OF THE NATIONAL PARK

In May 1988 the Þingvellir Commission published its planning strategy "Þingvellir – National Park and Environment". The Þingvellir Commission has committed itself to run the Park and the land in the buffer zone on sustainable principles according to this published planning strategy. It is the policy of the National Park administration to preserve the special characteristics of Þingvellir, with emphasis on presenting the cultural and natural values of the area while at the same time creating a framework for ensuring their protection. This can be done by such means as informing visitors to the National Park about its value, thereby also making them active participants in its protection. Efforts will be made to plan

traffic through the National Park and visitor stays in it, in adherence to the aforementioned aims.

The first action taken at the innermost assembly site following the 1988 strategy was to improve access to Lögberg, the main place visited by everyone who goes to Þingvellir. A footbridge was built there to relieve the pressure on Lögberg, which was beginning to show signs of encroachment. This action marked the beginning of the laying of a path network around the assembly site which aimed to improve access while at the same time protecting the site against tourist traffic. In 1993 a draft plan of the innermost assembly site was produced, aimed at improving visitor access while at the same time easing the pressure on the booth ruins and assembly site remnants. This plan assumed paths linking up the main starting points for walks around the assembly site.

A draft plan made of the area around the Information and Service Centre at Leirar assumes that the centre could be expanded by up to double its size and that the car park could be extended. It also assumed that all facilities for the centre's activities, machinery and other accessories for operating the National Park would be behind the Information and Service Centre.

A local plan was completed for the area around the Visitor Centre at Hakið above Almannagjá in 2000, and this was ratified by the Planning Agency. The local plan was consistent with the strategy for planning the National Park which envisaged construction of a cultural centre on the west bank of Almannagjá.

OTHER PROPOSED PHYSICAL PLANS CONNECTED WITH THE AREA:

The Regional Plan for the Central Highlands in Iceland, 1995-2015. The limits of the Central Highlands which were ratified on May 10, 1999 extend to the northern edge of Þingvellir National Park. The regional plan assumes a protected nature area north of the park boundaries (Map 4). In line with the decision of the current committee addressing the Central Highlands and in order to make the plan consistent with the current National Planning and Building Act no. 73/1997, the protected nature area in the municipalities' municipal plans shall be assigned local protection. Other land use according to the proposed plan addresses transportation, construction, preservation of archaeological remains and traditional farming.

The regional plan for Grímsnes & Grafningur and Þingvellir municipality 1995-2015 was ratified by the Minister for the Environment in 1996. In a joint decision, municipalities in the area decided to withdraw this plan in October 2002. This decision awaits the final approval and signature of the Minister for the Environment. In spring 2002, Þingvellir municipality made a resolution that the same policy should remain in effect towards it as that in the regional plan until a municipal plan has been produced for Þingvellir municipality and the whole of Bláskógabyggð. Þingvellir municipality has now merged with the parishes of Biskupstungur and Laugardalshreppur to form the municipality of Bláskógabyggð.

Municipal plan for Bláskógabyggð: Work on the municipal plan for Þingvallasveit will commence in 2003 and it will be incorporated into the municipal plan for the Bláskógabyggð municipality. A municipal plan has been completed for Grímsnes and Grafningur and awaits ratification.

4.g Sources and amounts of funds

Þingvellir National Park receives funds for routine maintenance and management of Park property in the form of yearly allocations in the Treasury budget. The funding is based on an annual plan for administrative costs, divided into two parts:

A. **Fixed-sum funding:** This portion covers the cost of wages, daily operation of the park and routine management. The annual cost of managing Þingvellir is US$ 800,000.

B. **Funding for specific projects:** This portion covers the cost of specific projects such as restoration and new development, and is received from the State in a bidding process based on special administrative procedures:

Funds available for specific projects vary greatly from year to year, depending on what is to be undertaken. The park also receives income from campsite charges and the sale of angling permits, books and souvenirs.

Currently the Þingvellir Commission supports archaeological excavation which commenced in 2002 and will continue until 2006. The objective of this research is to increase further information on the history of Þingvellir and the assembly site. This excavation coincides with excavation at selected district assembly sites around the country, to be carried out during the same period.

Additional sources of funding are received from Landsbanki bank. An agreement was made with Landsbanki in summer 2002 whereby the bank will sponsor interpretative work in the National Park by funding specific projects. In recent years the bank has provided funding for various interpretive projects in the Park. These include marking of paths, publication of brochures and cartography. The objective of the agreement is that the park and Landsbanki will develop interpretative work which increases interest in and understanding of Þingvellir's magnificent history and nature. On the basis of this agreement, work will involve computer-related projects, an interpretative programme including walks and reception of students, lectures by scholars on their research projects related to Þingvellir and publication of general interpretative material. The Park authorities present an annual operating forecast for confirmation by the bank along with a report on implementation of the agreement during the previous year. Payments to Þingvellir are based on the confirmed forecast. In 2002 Landsbanki contributed US$ 32,000 towards projects at Þingvellir. The current agreement is in effect until January 2007 and at the end of that period the partners will evaluate their cooperation and decide whether to extend it.

4.h Sources of expertise and training in conservation and management techniques

The Director of the Þingvellir National Park is a civil engineer with an extensive background in management. He has also received training and attended courses in the field of conservation. The interpretive manager has a BSc in Geography and MLA as a landscape architect and a solid background in running the park. He also has training in nature protection, forestry and soil conservation. The head warden has attended diverse courses in nature conservation and taught classes at the park warden course for the Nature Conservation Agency, and is currently studying public administration at the University of Iceland.

The National Museum of Iceland, the University of Iceland, the Icelandic Institute of Natural History and the Environment and Food Agency of Iceland have highly qualified experts, architects, historians, archaeologists, natural scientists and other specialists at hand and provide assistance and expertise for Þingvellir National Park when needed. They participate when needed in setting up research and conservation plans at Þingvellir according to their specialist fields.

It is the Þingvellir National Park's policy to hire local people as staff as far as possible. They play an important role for maintaining knowledge of the natural processes in the Þingvellir Park.

4.i Visitor Facilities and Statistics

Þingvellir National Park, which is open to visitors all year round, is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Iceland and has long remained so. A study made for the Þingvellir Commission revealed data on the composition, mode of travel and various other points regarding Icelandic and foreign visitors to Þingvellir in 2001. The study showed that 67% of foreign visitors to Iceland in the summer (June-August) of 2001 went to Þingvellir and 57% of tourists at other times of the year. An estimated 290 thousand people visited Þingvellir in 2001, just under 90 thousand Icelanders and around 200 thousand from abroad, on a total of 410 thousand occasions.

In a comparative survey on the value of outdoor leisure areas among residents of the Greater Reykjavík Area, Þingvellir achieved a high and unequivocal rating despite being farther away than all the other areas in the comparison.

Þingvellir is a stopping point on the so-called "Golden Circle," which is one of the very most travelled tourism routes in Iceland: a ten-hour round-trip offered daily from Reykjavík. Tourism at Þingvellir is characterised by most visitors coming there for short visits. National Park guests may be roughly divided into four groups, including those who come as follows:

- on their own on day trips, mainly from the capital area
- on organised group trips
- for the weekend
- due to special interests.

TOURISTS ON THEIR OWN DURING DAY TRIPS

Day-trippers, who include foreign tourists in rental cars, Icelandic families and Icelanders bringing foreign guests along, go to Þingvellir to experience the history and nature of the site.

ORGANISED GROUP TRIPS

According to figures from the Icelandic Tourist Board, the proportion of travellers on organised group trips is around 35%. Groups organised by tourism businesses do not conduct long stopovers at Þingvellir. The estimated average stay of visitors on organised group trips lasts between 30 and 40 minutes.

WEEKEND STAYS

Þingvellir is known as a place to spend the weekend. The campsite there is open from 1 June to 31 August every summer. Numbers of weekend guests gradually

increase until the end of June, peak at the first weekend in August (a bank holiday), then gradually diminish.

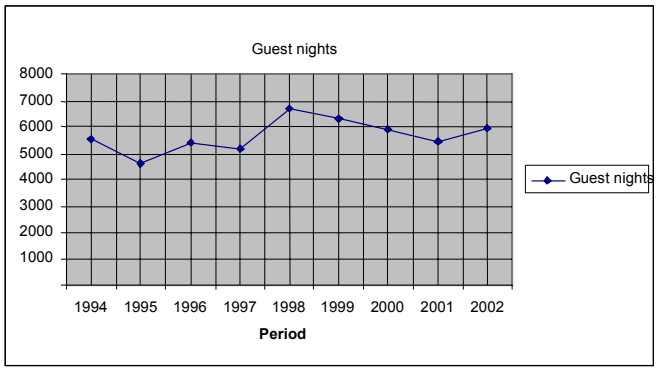

Figure 4.1 Overnight stays in Þingvellir National Park, 1994-2002.

TOURISTS WITH SPECIAL INTERESTS

One of the largest groups coming because of special interests is anglers, who arrive to fish in Lake Þingvallavatn inside the National Park. The Information and Service Centre sells angling permits and Park personnel supervise fishing. The fishing season is from 1 May to 15 September. Whereas 2,950 angling permits inside the National Park were sold in 2001, a greater number of anglers is probable, since older citizens, the disabled and children accompanied by their parents are allowed to fish for free.

For centuries, Þingvellir has been a customary rest stop for those travelling around Iceland on horseback. There are good facilities for equestrians at Skógarhólar, located on the periphery of the National Park. Although two bridle paths lead through the National Park, riding horses through the assembly site is prohibited. A rough but probable estimate is that some 2,000-3,000 horses stay at Skógarhólar each summer, where most of them remain only one night.

Recent years have seen diving gain rapidly in popularity in Iceland. Diving is permitted in two fissures within the National Park, Silfra and Davíðsgjá. Not only is Silfra one of Iceland's best locations for diving, but it is widely claimed to be world-class, the reason being excellent visibility through the clear groundwater, along with the spectacular surroundings of Silfra.

TRAFFIC AND ROADS IN THE NATIONAL PARK

Road No. 36 leads through the National Park and is classed as a major state road. The intersection of Roads No. 36 and 52 at Þingvellir is by the Information and Service Centre. Road No. 36 connects higher-lying communities of the capital city area with the Árnessýsla district, while Road No. 52 connects Þingvellir with Lundarreykjadalur in the region of Borgarfjörður. The Public Roads Administration maintains these national roads, which are intended for free public travel and maintained through state funds. All roads inside the National Park are paved, and have a speed limit of 50 kph. Totals from a fixed traffic counter provide an idea of the number of tourists travelling on the major road, No. 36, to Þingvellir. The number of vehicles driving on this road remained fairly stable until 2000 when the increase can be traced to the sizeable additional traffic in connection with preparations for the festival to mark the millennium of Christianity in Iceland,

which took place at Þingvellir in the summer of 2000.

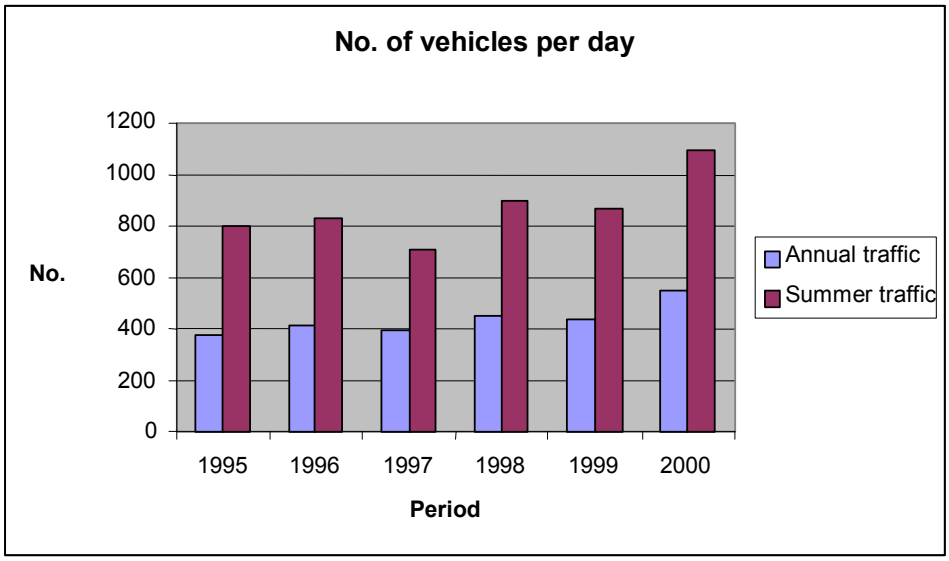

Figure 4.2. Daily Number of vehicles driving on Road No. 36 to Þingvellir.

According to figures from the Public Roads Administration, the average number of passengers per vehicle (apart from the driver) is 1.6. Figure 4.3 presents the number of passengers travelling on this road, based on the above figures.

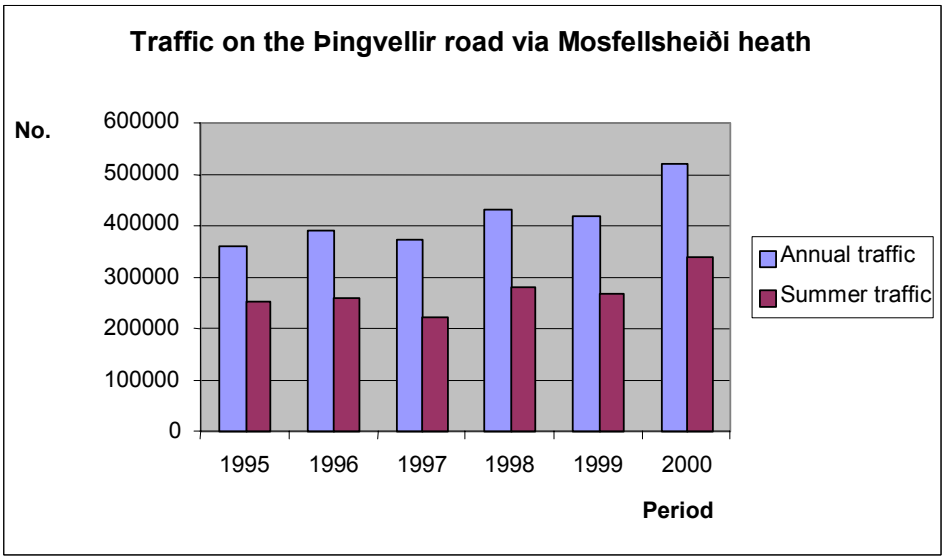

Figure 4.3. Annual number of passengers travelling on the Þingvellir road via Mosfellsheiði heath.

LEIRAR INFORMATION AND SERVICE CENTRE

The National Park's Information and Service Centre is located on the Leirar flats, at the junction of highways No. 36 and 52. An information service and small, specialised bookstore are operated there by the National Park. There is also a franchised restaurant, run by local people.

HOTEL

There is one hotel in the National Park, Hotel Valhöll. First built in 1899, it then stood by the north side of the ancient assembly grounds at *Kastali* (Castle) but was moved in 1929 south of the river Öxará (Map 1). Since that time the hotel has been enlarged, and has today thirty rooms, along with a restaurant and facilities for meetings and other gatherings. The Icelandic State owns the hotel but hotel operations are leased out. The contract with present operator will be in effect until the end of 2007; however, there is as of now no plan to extend the agreement or on future utilisation of the hotel.

VISITOR CENTRE

The Visitor Centre of Þingvellir National Park was opened in 2002 (map 1 and Figure 3.28) and is situated right beside the viewing point on Hakið, where visitors commence their walk down into Almannagjá. The exhibit in the Visitor Centre is the first in Iceland to be based almost entirely on multimedia technology, presenting the history and nature of the Þingvellir region. Exhibit visitors can select audio or screen texts in four languages (Icelandic, Danish, English and German). At the Centre, a movie is shown which was taken under the surface of Þingvallavatn lake. Admission is free of charge.

CAMPSITES

There are two campsites in the National Park. The larger one is located by the Information and Service Centre and has facilities for camping vehicles, tent trailers and tents. The smaller campground, situated by Lake Þingvallavatn at Vatnskot, also receives camper cars, tent trailers and tents.

A stopover for those travelling on horseback is operated at Skógarhólar on the periphery of the National Park and provides both bunk accommodation and a camping ground for horsemen.

PATHWAYS

Footpaths in the National Park have been marked and improved to make it convenient for people to acquaint themselves with the history and nature of Þingvellir. Pathways through the National Park can be divided into two categories, those in the assembly grounds and those in other areas of the National Park (Map 1). In all, some three kilometres of paths have been laid through the assembly grounds and the immediate vicinity, all paved with gravel, although wooden platforms are also used in Stekkjargjá on the way to the waterfall in Öxará river (Map 9). Outside the assembly site about 11 km of footpaths have been paved with gravel. Other pathways within the Park – mere trodden trails – were used for centuries by people living on the small farms in the area of Bláskógahraun, now inside the Park boundaries. Stakes now mark these trails so that people will stay on them and preserve them.

TOILET FACILITIES

Toilets are provided at several points for visitors to the National Park. At the Visitor Centre there are 6 toilets, including 1 for the physically disabled, while the Information and Service Centre has 14 toilets, besides 2 for the physically disabled. Outside the Service Centre, there is a building with toilets and showers

for visitors, along with a washing machine. Each camping site has 2 toilets and sinks with cold water. Skógarhólar has 3 toilets and two showers. Toilet sewage is collected in sumps and driven outside National Park boundaries, in accordance with specific permits on this matter.

PARKING

In the environs of the assembly site there are 4 main parking lots where it is possible to leave cars and walk to the site (Map 1), and there are also 6 major parking lots along the shores of lake Þingvallavatn. Alongside the circular route through the National Park, there are frequent places to pull over and park one to two cars.

EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE

First-aid courses are held every spring for Park personnel, reviewing the basics of first-aid. In the event of serious injuries or accidents, notification is sent through an emergency line which calls the police, an emergency medical team or rescue squad. The police medical team's response time for injuries or accidents is about 35-45 minutes.

4.j Site management plan and statement of objectives

In May 1988 the Þingvellir Commission published its planning strategy "Þingvellir – National Park and Environment". It is the policy of the National Park administration to preserve the special characteristics of Þingvellir, with emphasis on presenting the cultural and natural values of the area while at the same time creating a framework for ensuring their protection. The most important area with respect to culture is that of the innermost assembly site and its nearest surroundings with Almannagjá and Lögberg. Since 1990, systematic work has been under way to improve access by travellers to the assembly site with footpaths and platforms. These measures have substantially reduced trampling and encroachment by visitors on the remains at the assembly site, and treatment of it has improved enormously.

A general management plan will be produced for the National Park by February 1 2004 and address all issues concerning protection of natural and cultural remains, the look of the park, interpretation and care of the site. Clear targets will be set along with an implementation plan for the Park and Þingvellir area, which will serve as its strategy for ten years at a time, to be reviewed at intervals of five years.

In continuation of the protection plan, the Þingvellir Commission's development plans will also be reviewed. Until a revised local plan goes into effect, implementation within the National Park and innermost assembly site will be conducted in accordance with the strategy and the municipal plans that have already been put forward.

Since the single greatest source of wear and tear on the sites is visitors, an important aspect of the management plan is to control visitors through persuasion, signs and well run and organised hiking paths. A project plan is included in Appendix II.C.

Regarding Archaeological research emphasis will be put on protection of the ruins by using remote sensing and geophysical techinques whenever feasible.

4.k Staffing levels

Four permanent staff work for the National Park on a year-round basis. The Director is in charge of its day-to-day operation and finances. Working under him are the interpretive manager, head warden and a manual labourer, all of them residents in the municipality. From May 1 to September 1, 10 are taken on to work in the park. They are responsible for supervision, instruction and minor maintenance work, along with other permanent employees.

5. FACTORS AFFECTING THE PROPERTY

5.a Development pressures

The Þingvellir Commission and the municipal authority have the power to forbid new housing or developments within Þingvellir National Park boundaries as well as within the buffer zone (Map 4). The Þingvellir Commission is empowered to initiate new developments, as long as they do not conflict with protection legislation and the desires of the local authority. All the archaeological remains within park boundaries have been registered under the National Heritage Act and are thus protected by law. They must not be touched without prior permission from the Archaeological Preservation Agency, which serves to protect the remains against new construction. Nonetheless, vigilance is required so that small-scale improvements possibly needed to protect ruins in the innermost assembly site do not damage important archaeological remains.

There are plans to improve parking areas, construct new ones and improve other facilities to receive tourists such as footpaths, signs, etc. These improvements will be carried out in consultation with the Archaeological Preservation Agency as the responsible authorities. Before these projects are undertaken, plans will be drawn up for acceptance by the Archaeological Preservation Agency and Municipality of Bláskógabyggð.

An approved regional plan is ready in accordance with laws applying to Bláskógabyggð, and it is anticipated that a municipal plan being prepared for that community will be finished within two years. Park authorities have had site plans prepared for certain areas inside the National Park; an overview of these areas appears on Map 4. These are plans which have been approved by the Þingvellir Commission. The intention is to renew the site plan for the innermost assembly site within two years.

Vigilance is required if small scale works in the area are not to damage the National Park. The Public Road Administration has plans to rebuild the road 365 from Gjábakki to Laugarvatn that runs through the eastern most part of the National Park to improve traffic safety and traffic management (map 1). It will be emphasised during road design to minimize the environmental impacts of the road and take into account the importance of the natural and cultural heritage of the Þingvellir National Park.

HOLIDAY CHALETS

Inside Park boundaries, private parties own holiday chalets by a property contract with the Þingvellir Commission, generally for a ten-year period. It is not permissible to build new holiday chalets in the lands of Þingvellir National Park; however, there are no plans for moving those already there. A site plan approved by the Þingvellir Commission is available, applying to all tracts in the National Park with holiday chalets.

FORESTRY

Conifers have been planted at various places in Þingvellir National Park (Map 8). The first planting was done in 1899, with the resulting “Pine Grove” now being considered the pioneering experiment of Icelandic foresters with growing conifers

in Iceland. The Pine Grove is located some 1,000 metres north of the assembly grounds, although the most extensive forestry areas within the National Park are just west of the fissure Hrafnagjá and just east of the fissure Stekkjargjá. In addition, forestry plots reach east toward Skógarkot in the middle of the lava field Þingvallahraun. The Þingvellir Commission and Icelandic Forest Service signed a declaration of partnership in the summer of 1999 on caring for the woods at Þingvellir. This declaration says that the Þingvellir Commission will cooperate with the Icelandic Forest Service on preserving and caring for the arboreal vegetation inside Þingvellir National Park. The Þingvellir Commission will seek professional advice from the Icelandic Forest Service in connection with tracts of natural birch woods as well as cultivated woods. On behalf of the Þingvellir Commission, the Icelandic Forest Service will provide its expert staff to handle supervision and will undertake specific actions if needed. The Pine Grove shall receive particular attention, with the objective of letting the oldest trees prosper as much and as long as possible. The aim is also to assess the wooded lands within the National Park, and, on the basis thus provided, to consider special measures when found necessary. Finally, thinning has been undertaken in recent years, in consultation with the Icelandic Forest Service, and the Forest Service will continue to be responsible for thinning the woods inside the National Park.

Fig. 5.1 Clearing of Evergreens at the Assembly site.

The principal threats directed at the area with points of interest inside the innermost assembly site are forestry and erosion damage by the river Öxará. Afforestation is a problem at several places where trees have been planted in ruins or too close to them; these sites have been identified in Map 8. The park authorities have identified critical areas within the innermost assembly site where trees might damage the ruins and will cut those trees down.

5.b-c Environmental pressures, natural disasters and preparedness for them

The sole environmental pressure at Þingvellir National Park is erosion and encroachment by the river Öxará where the main ruins are located, as seen in Map 8. Öxará has sometimes flooded the flat areas, and cut out its banks at many points, and during research in 2002, remains of an old ruin appeared reaching out into the river. A run-off river, Öxará is difficult to obstruct or keep within definite banks, since the nature of run-off rivers is varying flow and erosive power, causing migration of the channel. As may be seen from Map 8, channels are still somewhat evident where Öxará used to run over the flat land between Almannagjá and the Þingvellir farmhouse. According to ancient sources, Öxará was diverted into the fissure of Almannagjá and down onto the flats of Þingvellir in order to channel water to the assembly site. Thus, its encroachment was caused by humans and is the first known diversion of water in Iceland.

Apart from the environmental pressure on the flat land from Öxará, the appearance of Þingvellir stems from natural disasters or earthquakes in the area during the last 9-10,000 years. Fissures and cracks form and land subsides when a series of earthquakes occurs. Since the Althing was founded at Þingvellir, this subsidence may be figured to have amounted to nearly four metres, meaning that the flat stretches east of Almannagjá have subsided by four metres since then. In the summer of 2000, two strong earthquakes shook south Iceland, upon which rocks fell from the fissure walls at two places in Hestagjá, and small rocks dropped down in Almannagjá.

Öxará has modified the appearance of the assembly site with sediment, while subsidence of the ground has caused water to encroach into the innermost assembly site. Encroaching water and subsiding land directly affected assembly activities. It is thought that Þingvellir Church was moved to its present location in the 16th century and the site for court sessions transferred in 1594 when it had become isolated on an islet in Öxará. When land sank in 1789, some of the hayfield at Þingvellir was submerged; also, fissures opened up in and around the field so that livestock were endangered. At Vatnskot near the centre of the caldera, the ground subsidence measured some 2.5 m in 1789, and a major portion of the hayfield was submerged. Moreover, the general public thoroughfare over the mouth of Öxará river and along Hallurinn was also flooded; subsequently, assembly sessions were discontinued at Þingvellir and transferred to Reykjavík.

There was an attempt in 1921 to dam the most westerly channel of Öxará in order to protect assembly remains on the west bank of the river, and that is the only action taken to reduce the pressure from water on objects of interest associated with the assembly. Land will continue to subside at Þingvellir, leading predictably to encroachment on the banks by water and the river.

Although Park authorities monitor major changes in river flow and will attempt to prevent the river from destroying sites of artefacts, it is extremely difficult to hinder run-off rivers, as mentioned previously, and impossible to respond to the land sinking. The most significant mitigation measure to prevent the loss of evidence on the assembly grounds is therefore to map the areas where there are ruins, as has already been done, in addition to excavating or investigating more precisely the sites of ruins thought to be interesting. That should be done by the

methods found to be best suited in each instance, with the object of disturbing the appearance of Þingvellir as little as possible. Mitigation measures are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

5.d Pressures from tourism

Tourist pressure affects the Lögberg area. The results of an excessive number of visitors and the measures taken to mitigate the damage to sites and to the visitor experience are described below. The National Park may be divided into the following three areas with respect to area pressure from tourists and area tolerance for tourists:

- innermost assembly site
- shoreline
- interior reaches of the National Park.

INNERMOST ASSEMBLY GROUNDS

By far the greatest part of travellers to Þingvellir pass through the innermost assembly site, creating the heaviest pressure due to tourists there. This area is not quite 5 ha in size.

After a policy on planning was established, as approved by the Þingvellir Commission in 1988, tourist access was dramatically improved from what it had been previously. A footbridge and platform were built in 1990, with the footbridge reducing pressure on Lögberg, where substantial deterioration was visible. This measure marked the beginning of constructing a system of footpaths through the innermost assembly site so as to protect it from encroachment by tourists, while at the same time improving access. Following registration of remains in 1986 to 1992, it was possible to engage in still more effective measures toward improvement of the innermost assembly site, organising the area in consideration of protecting points of interest, so that tourist traffic was directed past the ruins, rather than over them, by building attractive footways.

Figure 5.2. Wooden Footbridge at Lögberg.

As paths and other connections within the area have become more numerous, tourists have shown much more care for it. Because paths and walkways are wide and clearly delineated, the routes for tourists are clear. Encroachment by

tourists on this area is closely watched, continuously looking for techniques of improving their access and decreasing their impact on the innermost assembly site.

SHORELINE

The shoreline of Lake Þingvallavatn attracts anglers and other visitors. There are seven large parking lots distributed beside the lake. The main footpaths alongside the lake are on trails and trodden routes, some of which have been marked by stakes. Vegetation by the lake has deteriorated at many of the most popular angling points. The Park administration has carefully monitored the status of paths and vegetation in these areas and will seek means of protecting them if needed, so that they will not lose quality.

INTERIOR REACHES OF THE NATIONAL PARK

In the interior reaches of the National Park, the condition of vegetation and paths is good, since the paths are wide, rough trails indicated by stakes, and all routes marked. Because it is a very small fraction of the total number of tourists coming to the National Park who go on long hikes, there is much less pressure on the interior portion of the Park. Plans exist for promoting those areas more and thereby increasing traffic through them, since current traffic is well within their carrying capacity.

GENERAL POINTS ON ORGANISING THE RECEPTION OF TOURISTS

Park authorities emphasise informing those tourists arriving at Þingvellir about the culture and nature of the area, and doing so without spoiling the innermost assembly site and the unique atmosphere reigning there. Manmade structures are to be kept away from the innermost assembly site and to be built at points hidden away from it.

In 2002, a Visitor Centre was opened for tourists, and thoroughly presents the history and natural conditions of the area. Although the Visitor Centre is within walking distance of the innermost assembly site, it is not visible from there. Plans have been made to improve the facilities there even further in coming years.

More plans will be prepared during the next few years on arrangements for reception and service of tourists in the National Park, with emphasis on extending the time they stop in the area and finding means of distributing them better throughout the region, offering organised recreation at more frequent points around the National Park. These matters will be dealt with in more detail in the future according to the project plan in Appendix II C.

5.e Number of inhabitants within Park lands

There are no permanent residents inside the National Park. The population of the community Bláskógabyggð, in which the National Park is located, was 887 on December 1, 2002, and the number of residents in the buffer zone was fewer than ten.

6. MONITORING

6.a Key indicators of conservation status

There are currently three key indicators for the status of conservation in the park:

- state of the Öxará riverbanks
- condition of ruins in the innermost assembly site
- appearance of walking paths through that assembly site.

One of the tasks in the current management plan accompanying this application is to set up a monitoring programme and revise the key indicators, based among other things on the study and further registration of archaeological remains in the innermost assembly site.

6.b Administrative roles in monitoring the premises

The Archaeological Preservation Agency monitors the site of the ruins in the innermost assembly, though not doing so regularly, but as the occasion arises. The Park administration contacts the Archaeological Preservation Agency when ruins are disturbed. In addition, the Archaeological Preservation Agency watches over excavation and research at the Þingvellir ruins, and a permit is required from the Institute. When the management plan is reviewed, the division of assignments between the Archaeological Preservation Agency and the Park administration will be organised more precisely.

Day-to-day monitoring is carried out by the staff of Þingvellir National Park.

6.c Findings and consequences of previous reports

Compiling previous annual reports has led to the following findings and consequences regarding conservation measures:

- The paths and bridges currently in the innermost assembly site were constructed in connection with registration of remains in the area from 1986 to 1992, and in connection with a report on the status of the ruins. Registration of remains demonstrated that considerably more extensive objects of interest were present than had been expected. Moreover, the poor condition of booth ruins was very clearly illustrated. Where trails had been trodden over the booths, they were actually flattening out into shapeless hummocks and piles of dirt. Some of the ruins had deteriorated a great deal through heavy pressure from numerous tourists, so that they were under serious threat. It had become imperative to improve the pathways through the assembly site.
- It was also suggested in these reports that one or more sites with ruins be particularly investigated through archaeological excavation in order to obtain more information on the assembly site. This is to be undertaken, and the project is described in more detail in Chapter 3.a, where archaeological research is discussed. Subsequent to the registration of remains, measures were taken to protect features of interest. A footbridge was constructed skirting the Snorrabúð ruins as well as such other sensitive spots as Lögberg between Hamraskarð and Krossskarð, and paths were repaired and improved. An archaeologist supervised the installation of the footbridge, which was formally opened on 24 June 1990 and rests on narrow iron rods

drilled into the rock but removable, if desired, without leaving visible traces. The experience from constructing this bridge is excellent, since it provides substantially better access to the features of interest. In addition, experience has shown that the bridge is used by over 90% of tourists, besides protecting features of interest from being trodden down, and creates easier access for the disabled to the most sacred site of the Icelandic nation.

7. DOCUMENTATION

7.a. Photographs, slides and video

SLIDES AND PHOTOGRAPHS

There are 32 pictures on slides of the Þingvellir area included with this application. Two maps have been made, Maps 10 and 11, which show the angle from which the pictures were taken (see Appendix I). The slides are in Appendix III. The pictures have also been added to a CD Rom which is in Appendix IV.

MULTIMEDIA CD ROM

A multimedia CD Rom that gives an overview of the history of Þingvellir is included in Appendix IV. This presentation was made last year and is on display at the Visitor Centre at Þingvellir.

CD ROM

Included on a CD Rom is a powerpoint presentation with the same photographs as are seen on the slides see Appendix IV.

VIDEO

A video is included that gives an overview of the Þingvellir area, with the title "*Thingvellir – Iceland's Natural Heritage*". Publisher Bergvík.

BOOKS

Two books with information and photographs of the Þingvellir National Park are also included for the purpose of illustration purpose only:

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- Pétur M. Jónasson and Páll Hersteinsson, eds.: "*Þingvallavatn – Undraheimur í mótun*". Mál og menning 2002.

7.b. Management plans and maps

One map of the Þingvellir area in included in Appendix IV. Ísland 1:25 000, sérkort. By Icelandic Geodetic Survey, Printed 1994.

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APPENDIX I: MAPS

MAP 1. Þingvellir National Park: 1:50 000

MAP 2. Published Map of Þingvellir National Park

MAP 3. Satellite Image Map of Þingvellir Area

MAP 4. Administrative Boundaries

MAP 5. The Innermost Assembly Site

MAP 6. Recorded Archaeological Remains

MAP 7. Archaeological excavation sites

MAP 8. Archaelogical remains under pressure

MAP 9. Trailheads, parking and visitor flow

MAP 10. Index of pictures and view angles

MAP 11. Index of pictures and view angles

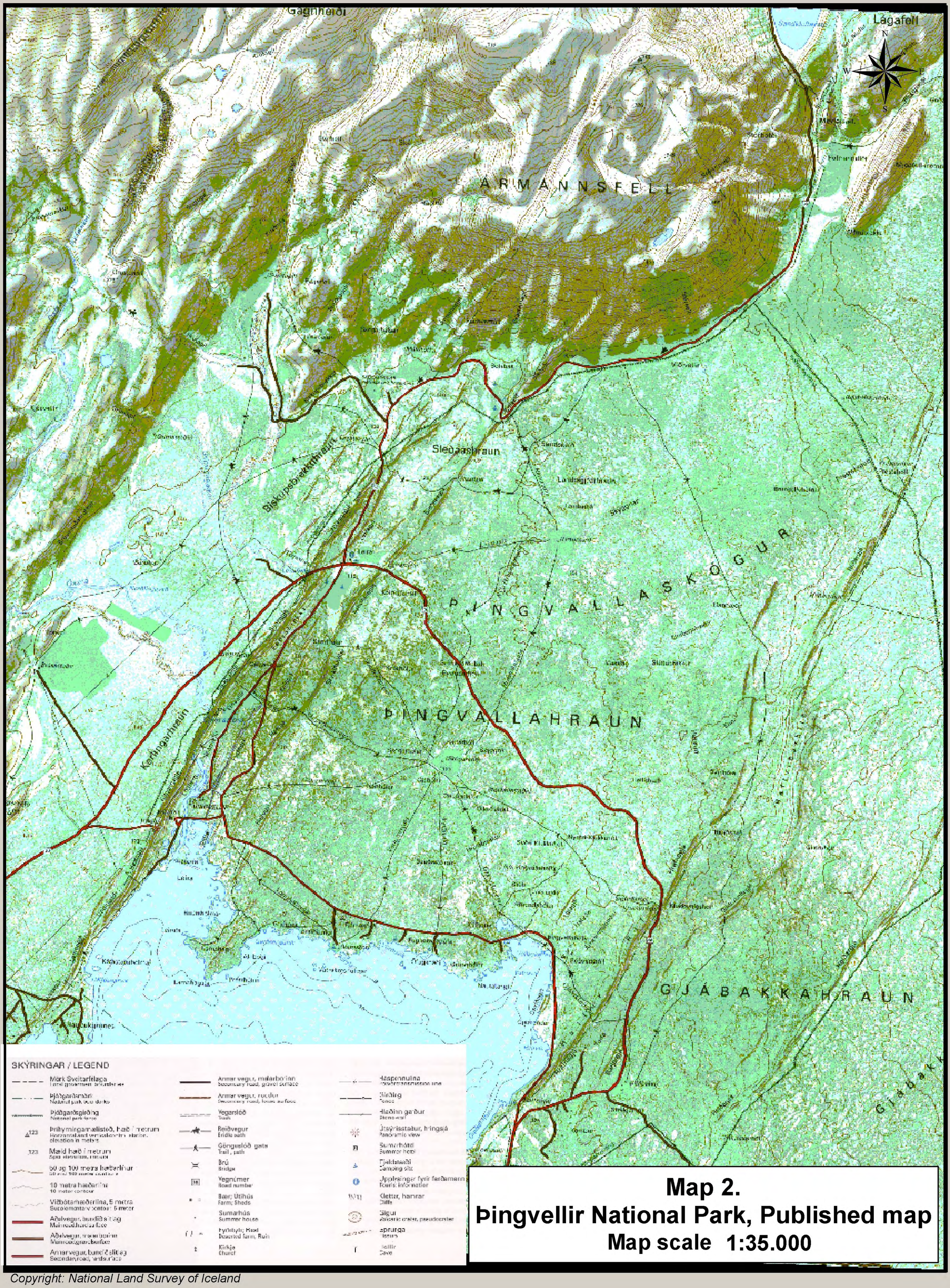
Thingvellir National Park. Map 1

Map scale 1:50.000

Legend

Tracks
- Riding track
- Walkingpath
- Walkingpath
- Roads
- Fench
- hlallar arc

Water
- River
- River
- River that dries up
- River that dissapears
- Ditches
- Assembly site
- Camping site
- Hotel
- Ruins
- Church
- Horse camp
- Campsite
- Information center
- House
- Administrative Boundaries
- National Park Boundaries 1928
- National Park

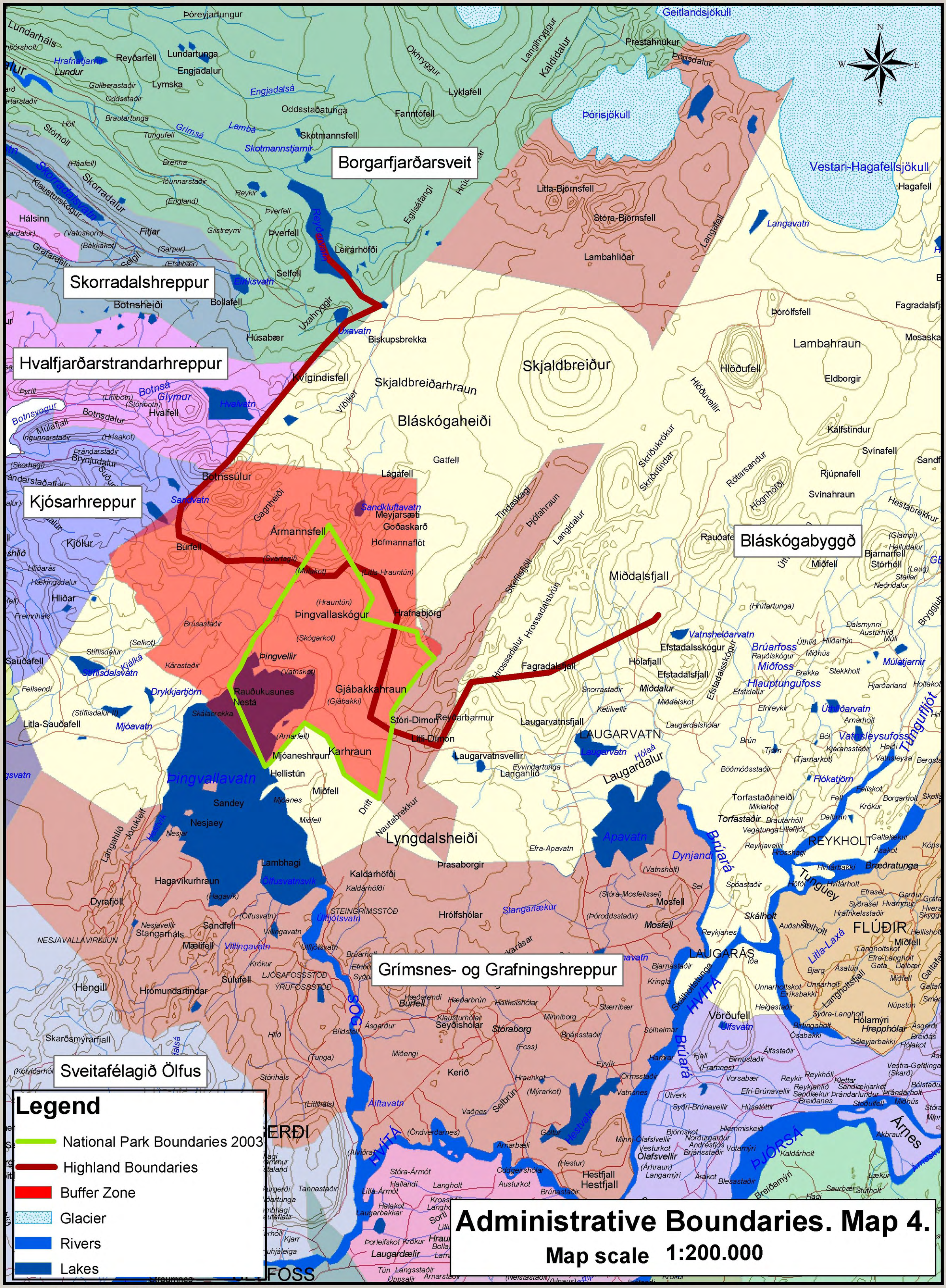


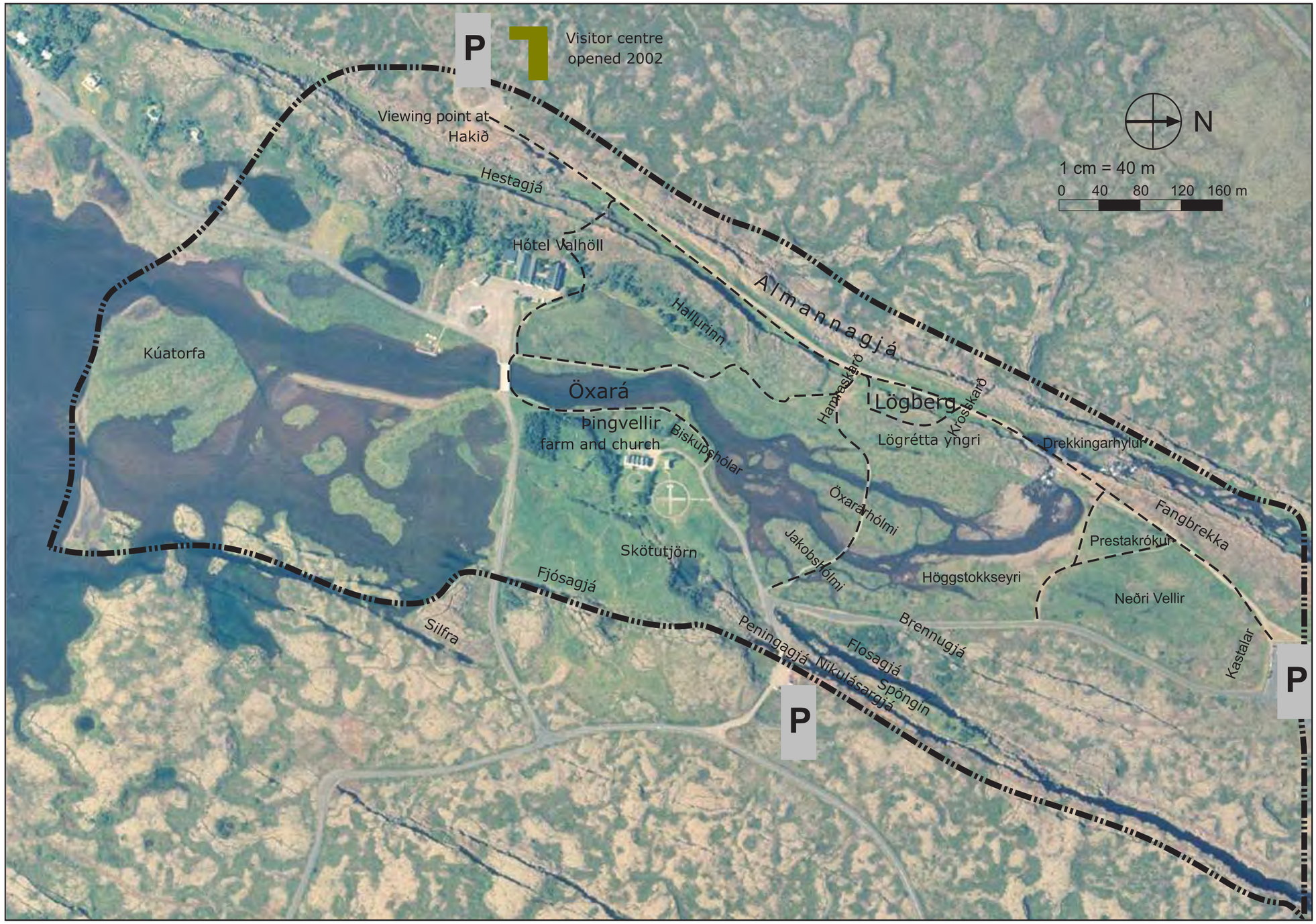
Krókagil
Stórhóll
Skál
Smjörbrekka
Meyjarsæti
Goðaskarð
Súlnalækur
Fossabrekkur
Súlnagil
Slættugil
Svartagil
Klömbrugil
Kaplagil
Ármannsfell
Stórkonugil
Hofmannaflöt
Mjóafell fremra
Sláttubrekka
Orrustuhóll
Bæjarfell
(Svartagil)
Stekkjadalur
Ármannsgil
Fjárhúsmúli
Grásteinagil
Stóragil
Hrútagil
(Múlakot)
Bolabás
Sleðaás
Kriki
Tindask
Kjóavellir
Grímagil
(Litla-Hrauntún)
Grímagilslækur
Biskupsbrekkuhraun
Sleðaáshraun
Prestahraun
Prestastígur
Prestahóll
Brúnkolluhöfði
Hrafnabjargabás
Arateigur
Brúsastaðabrekkur
Hvannagjá
Sleðaásgjá
(Hrauntún)
Kræklur
(Hrafnabjörg)
Hlíðargjá
Öxará
Hlíðarstígur
Rani
Trausti
Brúsastaðir
Langistígur
Snókagjá
Leirugjá
Þingvallaskógur
Hrafnabjörg
Stekkjargjá
Krókhólar
Djúpugrófarholt
Öxarárfoss
Flosagjá
Háagjá
Þingvallahraun
Grímsnes- og Grafningshreppur
Blásk
Almannagjá
Þingvellir
(Skógarkot)
Svínhólar
Raftviðarhlíð
Gildruholtsgjá
Gildruholt
Stórhöfði
Nónhólar
Hellishæð
Heiðargjá
Valhöll
Ölkofradalur
Rauðshóll
Hrafnabjargaháls
Hestagjá
Klukkuhólar
Sauðasteinar
Ámundahólar
Kárastaðir
Tjarnir
Leirutá
Lambhagi
Alnbogi
(Vatnskot)
Grýla
Grunnhólar
Vatnsvik
Hrafnagjá
Rauðukusunes
Presthólmi
Þingvallavatn
Gjáarendar
Gjábakkahraun
Eldborgir
Hallvík
Bæjargjá
Heiðargjá
Nestá
(Gjábakki)
Grjótnes
Hallstígur
Einbúi
Búr
Arnarsetur
Sandskörð
Lögmannsbrekka
Reyðarbarmahraun
Skógartögl
Stapi
Stapatjörn
Stóri-Dímon
Jafnabrekkur
Taglaflöt
Litli-Dímon
Tintron
Arnarfell
(Arnarfell)
(Arnarnes)
Arnarfellsey
Karhraun
Reyðarbarmur
Laugarva
Barmaskarð
Rótólfsstaðahæðir
Mjóaneshraun
Langitangi
Hellistún
Latvík
Bás
Svínanes
Hrútadalir
Hamraselshæðir
Vatnsvík
Gola
Miðfell
Mosar
Sandey
Borg
Mjóanes
Miðavík
Dansvík
Garðsendavík
Digranes
Borgarskarð
Ferðamannahorn
Bringur
Kornbrekkur
Driftarendi
Biskupsflö
Kringlumýri
Hrafnsklettar
Búðavík
Múli
Hrútadali
Litli-Reyðarbarmur

Legend

- Roads
- Administrative Boundaries
- National Park Boundaries 1928
- National Park Boundaries 2003

Map 3.
Satelite Image of Þingvellir National Park
Map scale 1:50.000





Map 5. The Innermost Assembly Site.

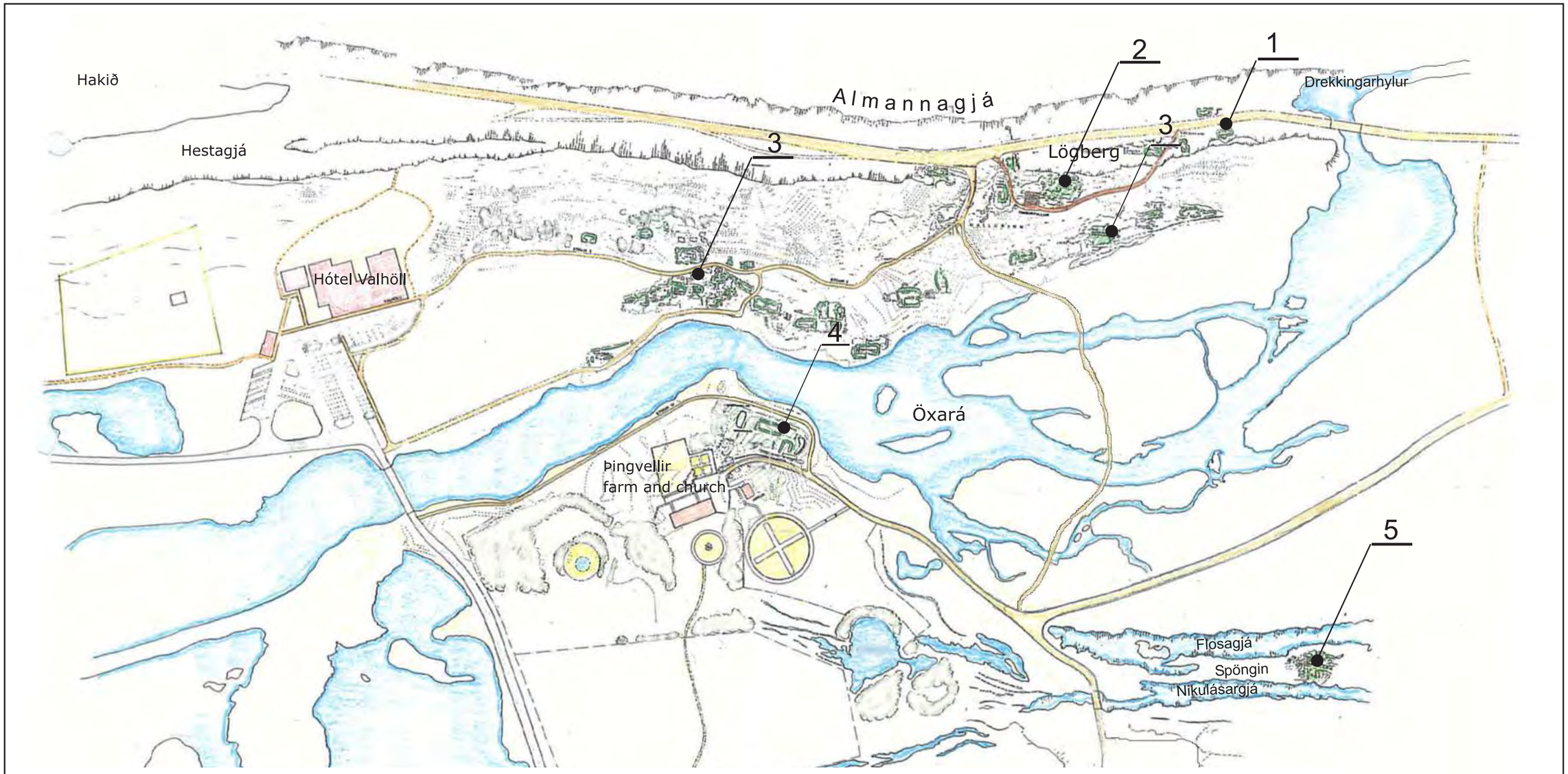
Trails

Boundary of Innermost Assembly Site

P Parking

ÞINGVELLIR ÞJÓÐGARÐUR

Map: Einar Ásgeir Sæmundsen



Map 6. Archaeological Remains According to Survey by Guðmundur Ólafsson 1986-1990.

1. In Almannagjá
2. Lögberg - On top of the slope
3. Along the slope
4. Biskupabúðir - west of the church
5. Spöngin - Between the two faults called Flosagjá and Nikulásargjá

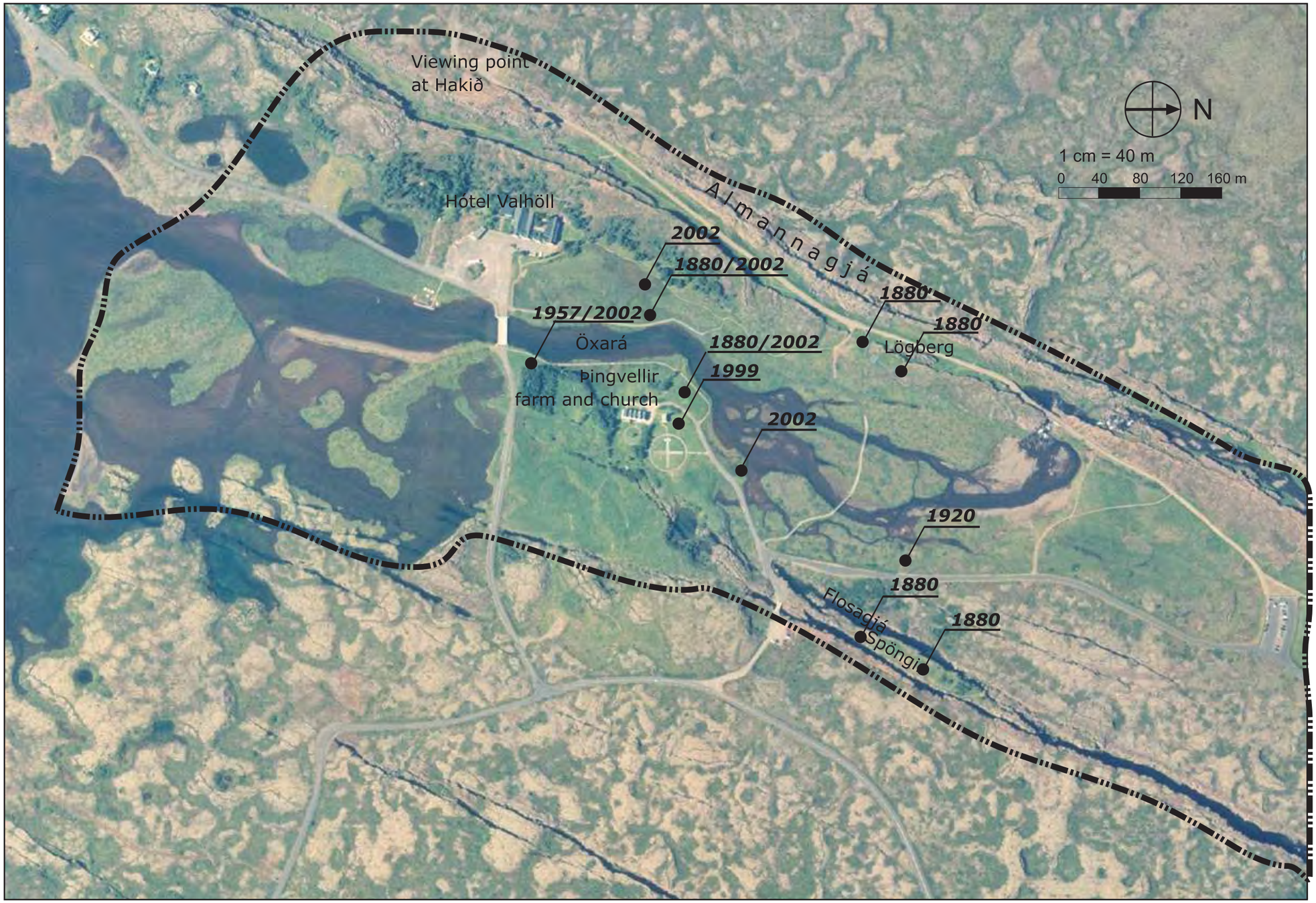
N

1cm = 25 m

0 25 50 75 100 125

ÞINGVELLIR ÞJÓÐGARÐUR

Map:Reynir Vilhjálmsson
Einar E. Sæmundsen



Map 7. Archaelogical Excavation at Þingvellir.

1880
Sigurður Vigfússon

1920
Matthías Þórðarson

1957
Gísli Gestsson

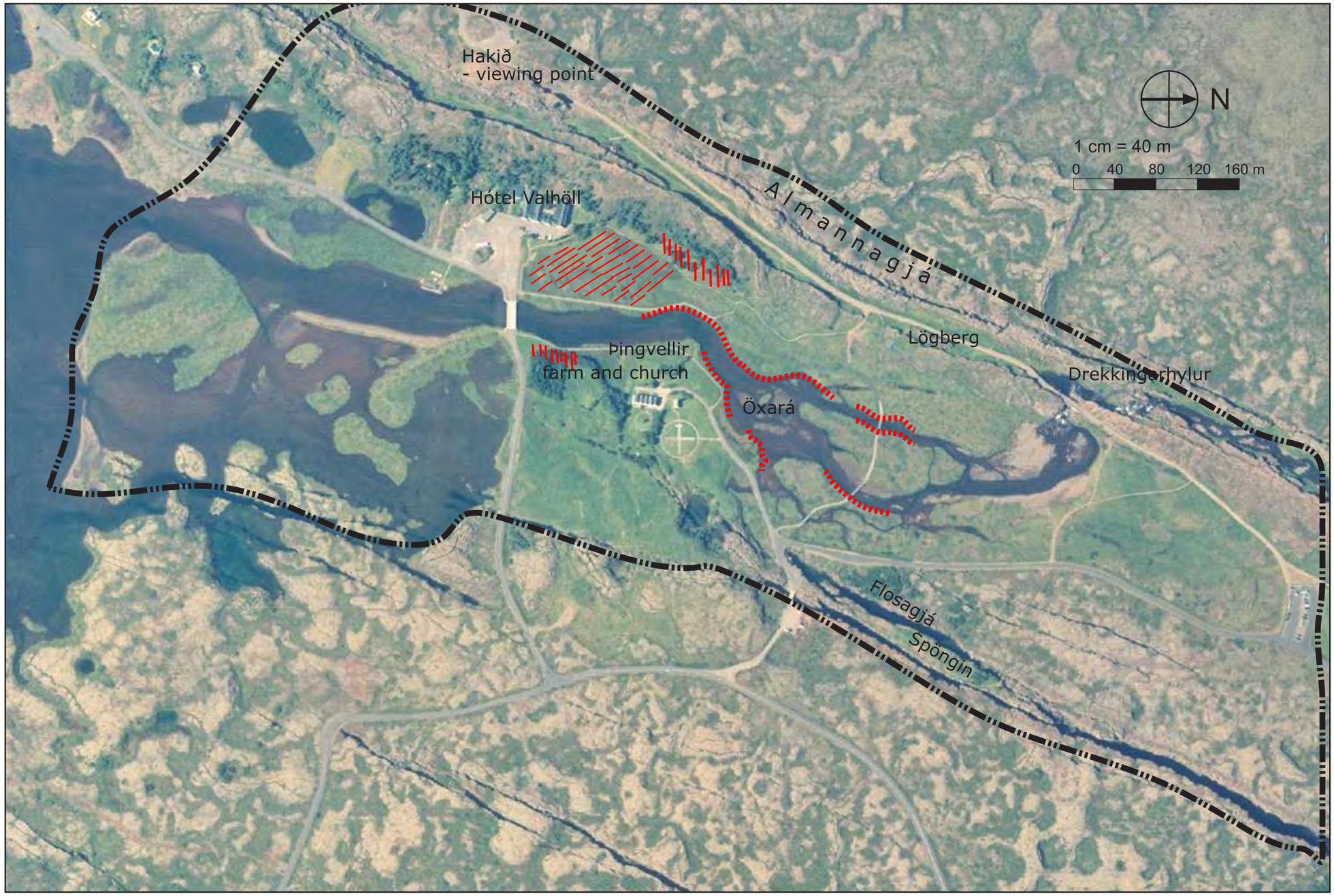
1999
Institute of Archaeology

2002
Institute of Archaeology

Boundary of the
Innermost Assembly Site

ÞINGVELLIR
NJÓÐGARÐUR

Map: Einar Ásgeir Sæmundsen



Map 8. Archaeological remains under pressure.

Erosion caused by the river

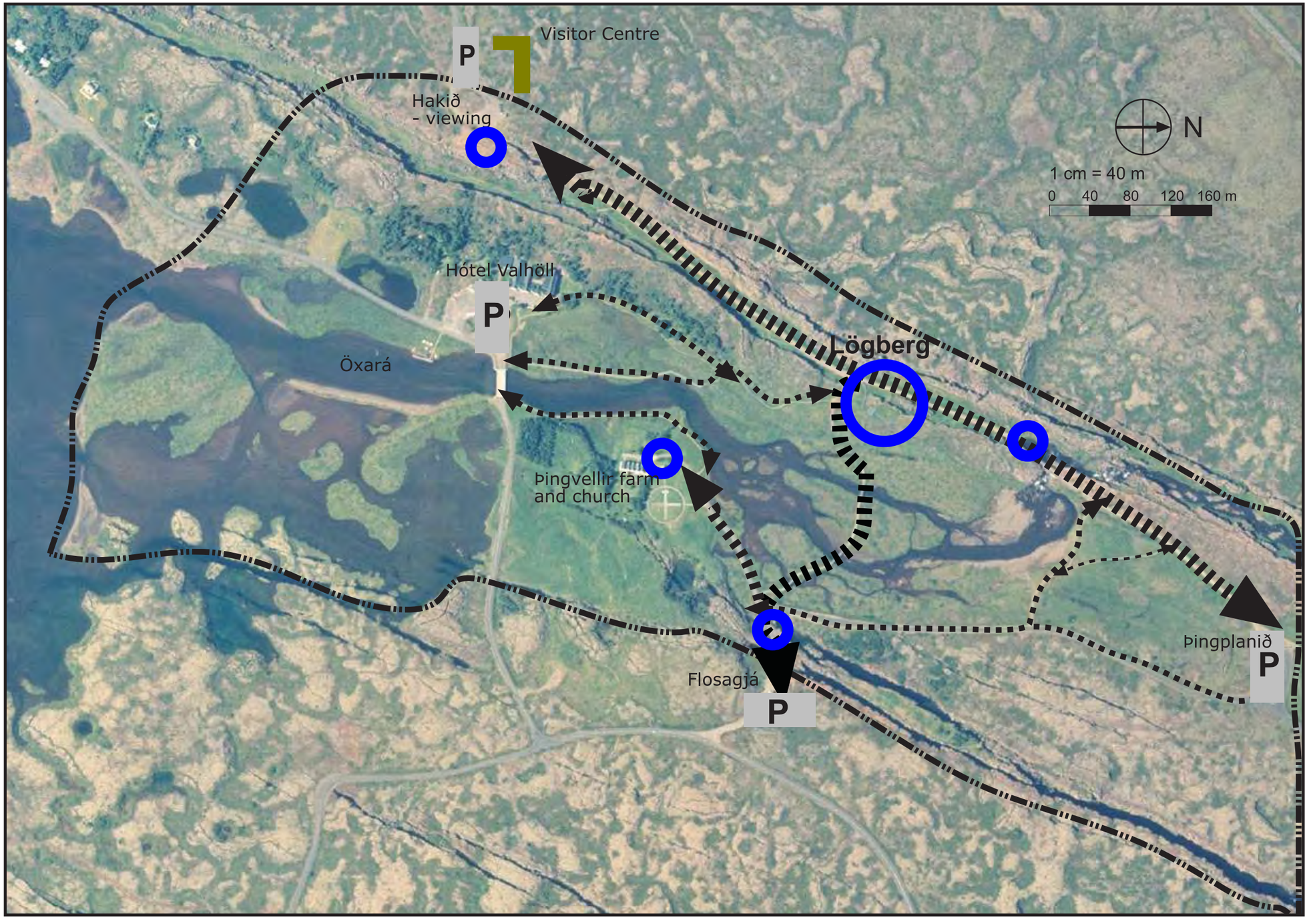
Wet area/marsh caused by land subsidence

Archaeological remains beneath planted trees

Boundary of innermost assembly site

ÞINGVELLIR ÞJÓÐGARÐUR

Map: Einar Ásgeir Sæmundsen



Map 9. Trailheads, parking and visitor flow.

Most frequent

Less frequent

Lögberg main destination

Other popular destinations

P Parking

Boundary of innermost assembly site

ÞINGVELLIR ÞJÓÐGARÐUR

Map: Einar Ásgeir Sæmundsen

A1 View from the intersection south across campsite towards assembly site

A2 View south within the fault Snóka, the deepest fault at Thingvellir

A3 View south towards the assembly site. Mt. Hengill in the background

A4 Rock formation in Stekkjargjá

A5 In front of the Öxarárfoss waterfall

A6 View south across the assembly site. Mt. Hengill in the background

A7 View of the assembly site from east

A8 View of the assembly site from the SSW. Mt. Skjaldbreiður in the background

A9 The assembly site in winter. Faults and roads clearly visible

A10 View from south over the assembly site

A11 Along the shoreline

A12 Angling in the eastern part of the National Park

A13 Ropy lava in Hrafnagjá in the eastern side of the National Park

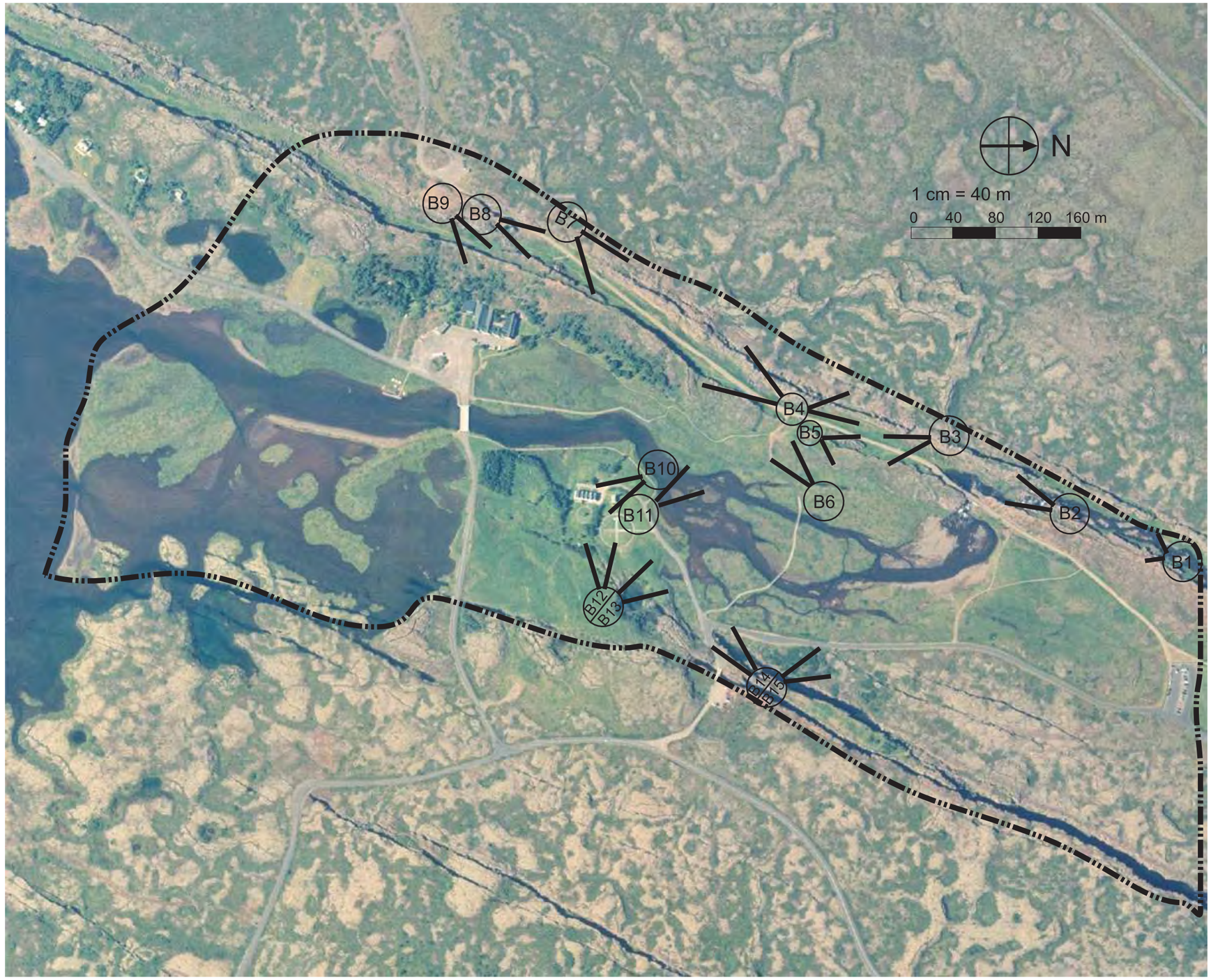
A14 The abandoned farm site Skógarkot

A15 Remains of the old farm site Hrauntún

The Innermost Assembly Site

Map 10. Index of Pictures and View Angles.

Map: Einar Ásgeir Sæmundsen



B1 The river Öxará in the fault

B2 View across Drekkingarhylur

B3 View across Lögberg towards Þingvellir farm and church

B4 Inside the fault Almannagjá

B5 At the platform on Lögberg.

B6 The trail in Almannagjá. Lögberg at the bottom of the picture

B7 The celebration to mark the 1,100 anniversary of the settlement in Iceland in 1974

B8 From the viewpoint Hakið towards Lögberg

B9 From the viewpoint Hakið towards Þingvellir farm and church

B10 The church at Þingvellir

B11 From Þingvellir church towards Lögberg

B12 Northern lights above the assembly site

B13 Across the Skötutjörn pond. Mt.Botnssúlur in the background

B14 View towards Þingvellir farm from Spöngin

B15 Across Flosagjá in winter. Mt. Botnssúlur in the background.

Map 11. Index of pictures and view angles.

ÞINGVELLIR ÞJÓÐGARÐUR

Map: Einar Ásgeir Sæmundsen

APPENDIX II: ATTACHMENTS

Appendix II.a. Authorization

Appendix II.b. Place names

Appendix II.c. Project plan

Appendix II.d. List of illustrations

Appendix II.e. List of photographs and slides

APPENDIX II.A. AUTHORIZATION

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   a) Unesco publications;
   b) co-editions with private publishing houses for World Heritage publications: a percentage of the profits will be given to the World Heritage Fund;
   c) postcards - to be sold at the sites protected under the World Heritage Convention through national parks services or antiquities (profits, if any, will be divided between the services in question and the World Heritage Fund);
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3. I also understand that I shall be free to grant the same rights to any other eventual user but without any prejudice to the rights granted to Unesco.

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5. All photographs and/or slides will be duly credited. The photographer's moral rights will be respected. Please indicate the exact wording to be used for the photographic credit. The photograper shall be credited by refering to his name.

6. I hereby declare and certify that I am duly authorized to grant the rights mentioned in paragraph 1 of the present authorization.

7. I hereby undertake to indemnify Unesco, and to hold it harmless of any responsibility, for any damages resulting from any violation of the certification mentioned under paragraph 6 of the present authorization.

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Kristas Sigmundsdóttir
Director of Cultural Affairs

Reykjavík	28/1 2003	Ministry of Culture
Place	Date	Signature, title or function of the person duly authorized

APPENDIX II.B. PLACENAMES

1. Introduction

Following is an overview of placenames within Þingvellir National Park.

2. Historic placenames

Icelandic placenames are generally transparent in meaning, as the Icelandic language has changed little since the early centuries of the nation's history. Thus from the placenames of Þingvellir one may read a rich history and spectacular landscape.

Placenames at Þingvellir which occur in medieval sources are the following: *Bláskógar* (Blue Woods), mentioned in the Book of Icelanders and the Book of Settlements (*Landnámabók*); the name applied to the lava field north, west and south of Þingvellir Lake, with its low-growing trees. At that time the lake was called *Ölfusvatn* (Ölfus Lake). *Vellankatla* (Bubbling Kettle) is a spring at the east of the lake, whose name appears in the Book of Icelanders. Nothing is known of the farms in the Bláskógar area prior to the days of the Althing but after its foundation the estate was known as *Þingvöllur* (Assembly Plain), according to the Book of Settlements. *Lögberg* (the Law Rock) is mentioned in the Book of Icelanders. *Öxará* (Axe River) and *Öxarárhólmi* (Axe River Islet) are mentioned in the Book of Settlements, and *Kolsgjá* (Kolur's Gorge) in the Book of Icelanders. In the Sagas of Icelanders, the placenames *Almannagjá* (Everyman's Gorge), *Fang(a)brekka* (Wrestling Slope) and *Vellir* (Plains) by the Öxará are named. *Þórhallsstaðir* or *Þórhallastaðir* ("Þorhallur's Place") is believed to have been located where Skógarkot later stood. It derives its name from Þórhallur ölkofri.

Placenames which refer directly to the Althing and its proceedings, and are known from old sources, are *Þingvöllur* (Assembly Plain) and *Lögberg* (Law Rock), *Almannagjá* (Everyman's Gorge) and *Fangabrekka* (Wrestling Slope). Other names for natural features are: *Bláskógar* (Blue Woods), *Ölfusvatn* (Ölfus Lake), *Vellankatla* (Bubbling Kettle), *Öxará* (Axe River), *Öxarárhólmi* (Axe River Islet), *Vellir* (Plains) and *Kolsgjá* (Kolur's Gorge).

Only one old placename refers to a person who lived there: Þórhallsstaðir.

3. Latter – day placenames

Placenames which are known from later sources, and refer to Althing proceedings, may still have source value with regard to older times:

Drekkingarhylur (Drowning Pool), *Gálgi* (Gallows), *Kagahólmi* (Whipping-post Islet) *Klukkuhóll* (Bell Hill). The names of several booths, used during the Althing assembly, are also known: *Njálsbúð* (Njáll's Booth), *Snorrabúð* (Snorri's Booth), *Byrgisbúð* (Shelter's Booth), *Mosfellingabúð* (the Mosfell People's Booth), *Lögmannsbúð* (the Law Man's Booth), *Amtmannsbúð* (the Regional Governor's Booth), *Stiftamtmannsbúð* (the Governor's Booth), *Fógetabúð* (the Sheriff's Booth), *Biskupabúð* (the Bishops' Booth).

The principal names for natural features are: *Hallurinn* (the Slope), *Spöngin* (the Neck), also known as *Heiðna-Lögberg* (Heathen Law Rock) or *Gamla-Lögberg* (Old Law Rock), *Hakið* (the Platform), *Arnarklettur* (Eagle Rock), *Hamraskarð* (Crag Cleft), *Krossskarð* (Cross Cleft), *Strókar* (Rock Pillars), also known as

Víkingaskipið (the Viking Ship), *Bergbrúður* (Rock Bride), *Steingerður* (Woman's name, can mean turned to Stone), *Kastalar* (Castles), *Silfra* (Silvery – a fissure with a clear spring), *Öxarárfoss* (Axe River Falls), *Leirur* or *Leirar* (Mudflats), *Seiglur* (Tough Places), *Tæpistígur* (Perilous Path), *Skötutjörn* (Skate Pond), *Dverghóll* (Dwarf Hill), *Svelghóll* (Swirl Hill), *Krókhóll* (Hook Hill), *Danskidalur* (Danish Dale), *Skeggi* (Edge – a pit in a grass field), *Fagrabrekka* (Fair Slope), *Langistígur* (Long Path), *Leynistígur* (Secret Path), *Brúnstígur* (Edge Path), *Steinbogi* (Rock Arch), *Skyrklifshólar* (Curd Cliff Hills), *Sandhólar* (Sand Hills), *Krókhólar* (Hook Hills), *Gapi* (Gape – a hollow lava hill), *Skyggnar* (Lookouts), *Rauð(s)hóll* (Red or Red's Hill), *Rif* (Reef), *Grýla* (an inlet which bears the name of an ogress from folklore), *Öfugsnáði* (Awkward Pest – a headland) and *Fuglstapaþúfa* (Bird Shit Rock Tussock).

Fissures and gorges are an important aspect of the Þingvellir landscape. The principal ones are: *Brennugjá* (Burning/Stake Gorge), *Flosagjá* (Flosi's Gorge), *Nikulásargjá* (Nikulás's Gorge – an 18th-century name), *Peningagjá* (Money Gorge - a 20th Century name), *Hellugjá* (Slab Gorge), *Háagjá* (Tall Gorge), *Davíðsgjá* (Davíð's Gorge), *Snókagjá* (Rock Pillar Gorge), also known as *Snóka, Lambagjá* (Lamb Gorge), *Hrafnagjá* (Raven Gorge), *Hvannagjá* (Angelica Gorge), *Leiragjá* (Clay Gorge), *Seiglugjá* (Tough Gorge), *Skötugjá* (Skate Gorge), *Kattargjá* (Cat Gorge), *Vallagjá* (Plains Gorge), *Litlagjá* (Little Gorge).

Some placenames indicate that natural features were used as landmarks to tell the time from the position of the sun (from the farmhouse of Þingvellir): *Miðmundatún* (miðmund=midway between noon and 3 pm, tún=grassfield), *Miðaftansdrangur* (miðaftan=approx. 6 pm, drangur=rock pillar), *Dagmáladalur* (dagmál=approx 9 am, dalur=dale). *Nónhólar* and *Nónhæð* (nón=approx. 3pm, hólar=hillocks, hæð=hill) were used as landmarks from Skógarkot, and *Dagmálavík* (dagmál=approx. 9 am, vík=inlet) from Vatnskot.

Several placenames refer to the church and clergy: *Kirkjutún* (Church Field), *Klukkuhóll* (Bell Hillock), *Klukkustígur* (Bell Path), *Prestakrókur* (Priests' Corner), *Prestateigur* (Priests' Meadow), *Presthólmi* (Priests' Islet), *Biskupshólar* (Bishops' Hillocks).

The spectacular natural features of Þingvellir are reflected in unusual placenames such as *Bláskógar* (Blue Woods), *Vellankatla* (Bubbling Kettle), *Silfra* (Silvery), *Öxará* (Axe River) and *Spöngin* (the Neck), while Þingvellir's unique geological location at the junction of two tectonic plates is reflected in the many names of gorges and fissures mentioned above.

Some placenames are formed from personal names, such as *Þorleifshaugur* (Þorleifur´s Barrow), while a number of placenames are directly derived from the animal husbandry practised in the area, *Sauðahellir* (Sheep Cave) being an example.

The placenames of Þingvellir are evidence, above all, of the highly varied activities which have taken place here through the ages, as Iceland's centre of government: legislative and judicial assemblies – including executions – as well as religious ritual, and not least animal husbandry, and the everyday life of the inhabitants for more than a thousand years.

APPENDIX II.C. PROJECT PLAN FOR ÞINGVELLIR NATIONAL PARK

1. Introduction

The Þingvellir Commission has sole management responsibility for the Þingvellir National Park, under the Office of the Prime Minister, according to a specific act of law: *"As from 1930 Þingvellir by Öxará and its vicinity shall be a protected national shrine for all Icelanders".*

The Þingvellir Commission published a strategy for Þingvellir National Park with a development plan in 1988 which has been adhered to since and has given important guidance for the work that is currently done in the park. The strategy covers the area of the National Park and its buffer zone.

Included in this appendix are the key management objectives from the current strategy and a list of key projects that will be executed for the next five years from year 2003 to 2007, including a project to renew the current management plan for Þingvellir National Park.

2. Current key management objectives

The Þingvellir Commission has committed itself to run the Park and the land in the buffer zone on sustainable principles according to its published planning strategy "Þingvellir – National Park and Environment" from 1988. It is the policy of the National Park administration to preserve these special characteristics of Þingvellir, with emphasis on presenting the cultural and natural values of the area while at the same time creating a framework for ensuring their protection. The most important area with respect to culture is that of the innermost assembly site and its immediate surroundings with Almannagjá and Lögberg. As for nature and the treasures it enshrines, there is no single location which is exceptional, because it is the variety characteristic of the entire area – its geology, landscape and biosphere – which lends it value.

3. Key projects

The following is an overview of key projects foreseen to be implemented within the next five years in Þingvellir National Park.

Management plan

Renewal of the current management plan for the next ten years is pending, to be review at intervals of five years. The primary aims of the renewed Management Plan are to ensure that strategy is directed towards ensuring the conservation and the presentation of the proposed World Heritage Site and to increase understanding and enjoyment of the site. Policies shall also be directed towards positive measures for the enhancement of the site and its buffer zone for the benefit of its character and appearance, at the same time as contributing to the economy.

The plan will address all issues relating to the conservation of the cultural and natural heritage of Þingvellir, the appearance of the National Park, interpretation and directions for land use. Subsequently, an implementation plan will be made, including a review and finalisation of National Park planning schedules. The general management plan will be in place on February 1, 2004.

Interpretation

The general plan for presenting the characteristics of Þingvellir is to encourage high-quality cultural and nature tourism, with low-key information at the innermost assembly site. The emphasis is on high-quality information service at two locations: in the Visitor Centre at the top of Almannagjá and in the Information and Service Centre at Leirar (see Map 1). According to a sponsorship agreement between the National Park and Landsbanki bank, the bank will sponsor interpretive work at Þingvellir until January 1, 2007. For the duration of the agreement a range of projects will be carried out to present the rich history and nature of Þingvellir. They include:

- The interpretive programme including guided walks, thematic walks, school programmes and other presentations.
- Upgrading of the multimedia exhibit at the Visitor Centre at Hakið.
- Upgrading of the National Park website www.thingvellir.is which will include an educational web and a database on the history and nature of Þingvellir.
- To create and renew information panels and signs in the National Park, including the innermost assembly site
- Development of a small interpretive exhibit in Vatnskot emphasising the rich ecology of Lake Þingvallavatn.
- Publication of leaflets, brochures and other presentation material relating to the history and nature of the National Park.

Construction

It is necessary to continue development of the site for tourists. A guiding principle will be not to disturb or impact remains and natural areas in the Park., The main tasks are:

- Facilities for storage of National Park equipment at the Information and Service Centre.
- Enlargement of the Visitor Centre.
- Enlargement of parking lots at the Visitor Centre.
- Viewing platform at Hakið and design of the area around the Visitor Centre.
- Interpretive facilities and toilets at the main parking lots (near the assembly site and Flosagjá).
- Enlargement of the Information and Service Centre at Leirar.
- Enlargement of the parking lot at the Information and Service Centre.
- Facilities at Arnarfell.

Maintenance projects

The main forseeable maintenance projects are:

- Renovation and restoration of the trail in Almannagjá and the bridge at Drekkingarhylur.
- Completion of the main parking lots around the assembly site.
- Maintenance of footpaths and bridle paths through the Park..
- Thinning and clearing of planted tree material will be carried out according to an agreement between the National Park and the Icelandic Forest Service from 1999. It is aimed to clear away the tree material which has been planted among the ruins and remains at the innermost assembly site.

APPENDIX II.D. LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1.1 Location of Þingvellir National Park in Iceland. Map: National Land Survey of Iceland.

Fig. 1.2 Coordinates of the Þingvellir National Park boundaries. National Land Survey of Iceland.

Fig. 3.1 Lögberg, assembly site. Photograph by Mats Wibe Lund.

Fig. 3.2 Ancient routes to Þingvellir. Map by Guðmundur Ingvarsson.

Fig. 3.3 Aerial view of faults and fissures at Þingvellir. Photograph by Mats Wibe Lund.

Fig. 3.4 The great northern diver. Photograph by Jóhann Óli Hilmarsson.

Fig. 3.5 The abandoned farm site Skógarkot. Photograph by Rafn Hafnfjörð.

Fig. 3.6 Þingvellir farmhouse and church. Photographer onknown (National Museum of Iceland).

Fig. 3.7 The abandoned farm site, Hrauntún. Photograph by BR.

Fig. 3.8 Snorrabúð (Snorri's Booth). Photograph by Einar Á. Sæmundsen.

Fig. 3.9 Drawing of the assembly site at Þingvellir, propably from 1781-82. National Museum of Iceland.

Fig. 3.10. Map of the Law Council in 18th century, propably by Sæmund Hólm, 1789. Royal Library of Copenhagen.

Fig. 3.11 Map of the assembly site by Matthías Þórðarson from 1921. The Yearbook of the Icelandic Archeological Society, 1921/22.

Fig. 3.12 Illustration of a tau crosier by Kristján Eldjárn. Yearbook of the Archaeological Society, 1970.

Fig. 3.13 Manmade platform at Lögberg. Drawing by Guðmundur Ólafsson.

Fig. 3.14 Árnes and the assembly site. Drawing by Brynjólfur Jónsson. Yearbook of the Archaeological Society 1883.

Fig. 3.15 Booth ruins at the Árnes assembly site. Drawing by Brynjólfur Jónsson Yearbook of the Archaeological Society 1883.

Fig. 3.16 Archeological research at Þingvellir 2002. Photograph by Einar Á. Sæmundsen.

Fig. 3.17 The Golden Age at Þingvellir, painting from 1897 by W.G. Collingwood. British Museum.

Fig. 3.18 Þingvellir Church. Photograph by Rafn Hafnfjörð.

Fig. 3.19 The Bell of Iceland, painting by Kjarval, 1952. Reykjavík Art Gallery, Kjarvalsstaðir.

Fig. 3.20 Scene from Þingvellir by A. Mayer. From Paul Gaimard, Vouage en

Island 1835 et 1836. Paris 1838-1852.

Fig. 3.21 Summer Night at Þingvellir, painting by Þórarinn B. Þorláksson, 1900. The National Gallery of Iceland.

Fig. 3.22 From Þingvellir, painting by Ásgrímur Jónsson, 1905. The National Gallery of Iceland.

Fig. 3.23 Mountain Milk. Painting by Jóhannes S. Kjarval, 1941. Gallery of Federation of labor unions in Iceland.

Fig. 3.24 Justice, Photograph by Hannes Sigurðsson.

Fig. 3.25 National festival at Þingvellir, 1974. Photograph by Mats Wibe Lund.

Fig. 3.26 Almannagjá as seen by the French traveller Nougaret. From Nougaret 1868.

Fig. 3.27 Travellers at Þingvellir 1920-30. Photograph by Sigurður Tómasson.

Fig. 3.28 Visitor Centre at Hakið. Photograph by Einar Á. Sæmundsen.

Fig. 3.29 Theme Walk in Þingvellir National Park. Photograph by Einar Á. Sæmundsen.

Fig. 4.1 Overnight stays in Þingvellir National Park, 1994-2002. Graph by Einar Á. Sæmundsen.

Fig. 4.2 Daily Number of vehicles driving on Road No. 36 to Þingvellir, 1995 - 2000. Graph by Einar Á. Sæmundsen.

Fig. 4.3 Annual number of passengers travelling on the Þingvellir road via Mosfellsheiði heath. Graph by Einar Á. Sæmundsen.

Fig. 5.1 Clearing of Evergreens at the Assembly site. Photograph by Einar Á. Sæmundsen.

Fig. 5.2 Wooden footbridge at Lögberg. Photograph by Guðmundur Ólafsson.

APPENDIX II.E. LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS

A1. View from the intersection of roads 36 and 53 across campsite.
Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

A2. View south within the fault Snóka.
Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

A3. View towards the assembly site.
Photographer Mats Vibe Lund.

A4. Rock formation in Stekkjargjá.
Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

A5. In front of the Öxarárfoss waterfall.
Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

A6. View south across the assembly site.
Photographer Mats Vibe Lund.

A7. View of the assembly site from the east.
Photographer Mats Vibe Lund.

A8. View of the assembly site from SSW.
Photographer Mats Vibe Lund.

A9. The assembly site in the winter. Faults and roads clearly visible.
Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

A10. View from south across the assembly site.
Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

A11. Along the shoreline.
Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

A12. Angling in Lake Þingvallavatn.
Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

A13. Ropy lava in Hrafnagjá.
Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

A14. The abandoned farmsite Skógarkot.
Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

A15. Remains of the old farm Hrauntún.
Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

B1. The river Öxará.

Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

B2. View across Drekkingarhylur.

Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

B3. View across Lögberg.

Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

B4. In the fault Almannagjá.

Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

B5. The flag at Lögberg.

Photographer Mats Vibe Lund.

B6. The trail in Almannagjá.

Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

B7. The festival in 1974 to celebrate 1,100 years of settlement in Iceland in 1974. Photographer Mats Vibe Lund.

B8. From the viewpoint Hakið towards Lögberg.

Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

B9. From the viewpoint Hakið towards Þingvellir farm and church.

Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

B10. The church at Þingvellir.

Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

B11. From the church towards Lögberg.

Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

B12. Northern lights above the assembly site.

Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

B13. Across the Skötutjörn pond.

Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

B14. View towards the Þingvellir farm from Spöngin.

Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

B15. Across Flosagjá in the winter. Mt. Botnssúlur behind.

Photographer Rafn Hafnfjörð.

Memo

Registration of Þingvellir National Park on UNESCO's World Heritage List

Information on geological features at Þingvellir 07. 10. 2003

Introduction

A meeting concerning the nomination of Þingvellir National Park on the World Heritage List was held in Iceland in the beginning of August this year. Adrian Phillips and Henry Cleere attended the meeting on behalf of UNESCO. During the meeting they asked for more detailed information on the geology of Þingvellir. Particularly a more detailed explication or comparison on the difference between Þingvellir rift zone and other islands on the mid-ocanic ridge system.

Kristján Sæmundsson Ph.D., geologist, is the expert on Þingvellir geology and has provided the following information on the subject. The text that follows is based on the original text from the nomination of Þingvellir National Park, with a short amendment and a few changes to the original text.

Summary on geological features at Þingvellir

From 2. Chapter

Significance:

Þingvellir and its surroundings are of outstanding value as a geological monument. It is unique from a geological perspective, as the most lucid example on Earth of a spreading type plate boundary on dry land.

The chief characteristic of the Þingvellir landscape is fissures, the largest of which, *Almannagjá* (Everyman's Gorge), forms a cliff wall and backdrop to the ancient assembly site. These fissures are part of the Þingvellir rift valley, formed on tectonic plate boundaries where two crustal plates are moving apart. The Þingvellir rift valley can be particularly clearly seen on the surface and was cited as an example when the theory of plate tectonics was being formulated in the 1960s – the foundation for modern understanding of geological processes and land formation. The Þingvellir rift is the most lucid example on dry land where plate separation on a mid-ocean ridge can be sensed and understood. Þingvellir and the lake Þingvallavatn surroundings are thus of outstanding value as a geological monument, not only for Iceland but also globally.

Authenticity / Integrity:

The primary geological distinction of Þingvellir lies in the fact that Iceland is located on a diverging plate boundary, the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, where the Eurasian and North American crustal plates are spreading apart. There are 55,000 km of diverging plate boundaries in the world and, along most of their length, they are a submarine feature. Only in Iceland and Djibouti are a few hundred km exposed subaerially. Other Islands on the mid-oceanic ridge system lie on the flanks of the ridges far off from the zone of plate separation which is hidden below the sea. This applies to the chain of islands on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge such as Jan Mayen, the Azores, St. Helena and Tristan da Cunha. These islands are a subareal part of huge off rift stratovolcanoes, among which are also Öræfajökull, 2119 m, Iceland's largest volcano. These lack the rift zones that typify the actual zones of spreading as seen at Þingvellir. A branch of the diverging plate boundary in Iceland extends into the rift valley at Þingvellir, where one of the clearest,

if not the clearest example, of diverging plate boundaries on dry land can be seen anywhere in the world. Continental rifts that branch off from the mid oceanic ridges form entirely different geological setting and rock types. One of them is the Rift Valley system of East Africa. Iceland exists because it lies on the centre of its active spreading ridge combined with a mantle plume generated hot spot. There are other examples of interaction between a spreading centre and a hot spot on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, but the underlying mantle plume is more powerful in Iceland, causing the excess volcanic production and emergence of the huge land mass that is Iceland. Iceland is the largest island on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge and the only one where the actual spreading zone of the ridge is visible. As the Þingvellir rift valley can particularly clearly be seen on the surface, it was cited as an example when the theory of plate tectonics was being formulated in the sixties – the foundation for modern understanding of geological process and land formation. In the days when Wegener's theory of continental drift was rejected by most scholars in the middle of the twentieth century, German and Danish geologists pointed to the Þingvellir fissures as clear proof that horizontal crustal extension was taking place and they identified the driving force in convection currents within the Earth's mantle. They could hardly have come closer to the truth. From the edge of Almannagjá a variety of basaltic volcanic edifices can seen, such as those formed in water and under glaciers as well as the more common subaerial craters and shields. Thus Þingvellir combines in a single place a diverse range of volcanic and tectonic phenomena of a type hardly paralleled anywhere in the world.

From 3. Chapter

Nature

Iceland is geologically a young volcanic island, ranging 16 million years back in age. It straddles the diverging plate boundary of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, with spreading zones that are characterized by a high volcanic production as a result of the ongoing hot spot activity and crustal growth. The rifts are a corollary of this process. They are generally of low topographical expression due to lava flows that smooth them out at intervals, hence the rarity of fault-bounded lakes nested within them. Lake Þingvallavatn is an exception with a pronounced low in volcanic production. This has persisted since the last interglaciation (over 100,000 years) but at the same time dilatation and subsidence of the rift floor has proceeded at an undiminished rate. This is the reason that the fault escarpments are higher in its surroundings than anywhere else in the spreading zone of Iceland and actually proportional in height to the age of the various surface lavas.

Þingvellir plain is on the western slope of a large lava shield that was formed some 10,000 years ago, shortly after the Ice Age glacier melted, and has a surface area of 200 km². The lava flowed into Lake Þingvallavatn and blocked its outflow, but a sizeable stretch has gradually vanished into the lake as the rift has deepened. The surface of the Þingvellir lava is typical hummocky pahoehoe. On the walls of Almannagjá the internal structure can be seen, innumerable thin flow units which characterize all shield lavas.

Aerial view of faults and fissures at Þingvellir National Park.

The faults and fissures of the Þingvellir rift have grown incrementally. Measurements over the past 40 years show a latent creep of about 3 mm/y extension and 1 mm vertical displacement of the rift zone. However, short rifting events involving extension and subsidence of a few metres also occur. One event is known from historical times. It occurred in spring 1789 and lasted for 10 days. The subsidence then measured 2.5 m in the middle of the rift.

New addition

Comparison with other islands on the mid-oceanic ridge system

Other islands on the mid-oceanic ridge system lie on the flanks of the ridges far off from the zone of plate separation which is hidden below the sea.. This applies to the chain of islands on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge such as Jan Mayen, the Azores, St. Helena and Tristan da Cunha. These islands are the subaerial part of huge off rift stratovolcanoes, among which are also Öraefajökull, 2119 m, Icelands largest volcano. These lack the rift zones that typify the actual zones of spreading as seen at Thingvellir.

With best regards,
Halldóra Hreggviðsdóttir, project manager

Sent to: Adrian Phillips, IUCN.
Henry Cleere, ICOMOS.
Kristján Sæmundsson (PhD), geologist, National Energy Authority.
Margrét Hallgrímsdóttir, General Director of the National Museum of Iceland.
Ragnheiður Þórarinsdóttir, Head of section, UNESCO coordinator, Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.
Sigurður K. Oddsson, Director of Þingvellir National Park.
Sólrún Jensdóttir, Director of Office of International Relations, Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

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Reykjavík, November 20, 2003
Ref: MMR00090220/87.300: 00.012/RHÞ/--

Re: Nomination of Þingvellir, Iceland on UNESCO World Heritage List.

Dear Mr. Bandarin.

Please find enclosed some additional information to our nomination document regarding the history and geology of Þingvellir.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture in Iceland has made these information available for the evaluating bodies, ICOMOS and IUCN, so the World Heritage Center does not have to forward the information to them.

Yours sincerely

Ragnheiður H. Þórarinsdóttir
Adviser

Þorgeir Ólafsson
Head of Division

Copy sent to: ./. Henry Cleere, ICOMOS
./. Adrian Phillips, IUCN

ALTHING AND THINGVELLIR

Þingvellir - the name means assembly-fields - is the site upon which Alþingi, the Icelandic General Assembly, was conducted for more than 850 years, from 930 until 1798.

Iceland was settled in the period from about 870 to 930 A.D. mainly from Norway, Ireland and Scotland. About 930 the settlers introduced a legal order to the society that was being formed on the island generally known as the Icelandic Commonwealth.

As far as is known Iceland's settlement marks the point in time at which planned navigation across the North Atlantic began. Secondly, with Icelands settlement migration took place to the north which was unprecedented, and finally Europeans then took the first step in the direction of the New World. Thus the Icelandic Commonwealth can in some ways be regarded as a precursor to the colonies established in North America in the seventeenth century.

Icelandic society had to be built up from the very beginning. The settlers came from far and wide and were of different origins and this was bound to loosen the influence exerted by tradition and usage. They therefore had to lay particular emphasis on the development of methods for solving disputes, including legislation and judicial resolution.

Lively legislative activity took place in the Icelandic Commonwealth and voluminous law books were compiled.

The political structure of Nordic and other Germanic societies in the period of the Viking age – the great nordic migration – from the 9th to the middle of the 11th centuries[1] was characterized by two central institutions the king and the assembly. Among Nordic peoples, the assembly was undoubtedly the more important in this period; for wherever Nordic people established themselves they held assemblies.

The assembly, then, was a robust institution among these ancient Nordic peoples, while kingship, by comparison, was weak. Indeed, in the various Nordic settlements, in the Faroe Islands, in Iceland, and in Greenland, kings were not even a part of the political structure.- The settlers rejected kingship and centralized government. They were protected by the Atlantic Ocean.

The establishement of the Alþingi - the general assembly for Iceland - is dated to the year 930.

The most important institution within the Alþingi was the Lögrétta - the Law Council. It consisted of 48 chieftains as councillors and each of them was allowed to have two advisors with them in the Council. To these were added the lawspeaker, and two bishops, so that as many

[1] The Battle of Stamford Bridge in South England near Hastings in 1066 is often considered to mark the end of the Viking Age. The Icelandic historian and chieftain gives a detailed description of the battle in hin King´s saga, The Heimskringla and his final words are: "Also it grew dark in the evening before the slaughter came to end." (Ch. 93).

as 147 men sat in the Law Council. However, only the 48 chieftains could vote in the council.

These chieftains - in Icelandic goði - had a number of freeholders as followers and the nexus between a chieftain and a follower was formed by a personal contract which was terminable by either. They had a mutual obligation to support each other. The chieftaincy (Icelandic "goðorð") was the chieftain´s private property and could be bought and sold at will.

By law the Council had a triple function. There men could frame their laws or "put their laws right", make new laws; and grant permits and exceptions. Its main functions was in other words to legislate; but we must bear in mind that, to begin with, laws were unwritten conventions or traditions.

Where the law was disputed, disagreements could be referred to the Law Council; that is, the Council could be asked to pronounce upon the content of the laws in force. Following a complex legal procedure the Council arrived at a decision which was later made public.[2] In such cases, the Council was not setting laws, but was rather bearing witness to the content of the pre-existing, ancient, good and traditional laws of the land, as applied to the particular situation which was the occasion for quarrel. This is what was meant by framing the laws or putting the laws right: reaching an understanding as how to fit, or adjust, pre-existing legal conventions to questionable situations. The idea behind the expression to frame the laws or putting the laws right was thus retrospective to bring to light the substance and content of those ancient laws.

In practice however, this was not by any means done, but new laws were introduced. Nevertheless it is of paramount importance that the subject be approached with this idea in mind. Those who framed the laws were not free to make rules after their own will and inclination. They had to be guided by the accepted interests, traditional rights and deeply rooted ideas of the members of the community . This meant that the law itself - the good ancient law - bound the hands of the lawgiver like a covenant - a covenant of the generations - and thus acted as a curb on the arbitrary exercise of power.

This procedure of "righting" the laws, however, was not sufficient for dealing with certain problems. During the Settlement Period, it had already become clear that under certain conditions it was necessary for the law council to make new laws. On the other hand, it was unclear how this could be done, given the understanding of law described a moment ago. Men were bound by the pre-existing tradition, not by the decision of others; which in practice meant that all new laws had to be agreed unanimously, namely by approval of a large majority of the most powerful and influential chieftains. In keeping with this, new laws were binding because of general agreement, not enforcement. New laws were thus regarded as a covenant between free individuals. If agreement could not be reached, legal accords broke down or the question was arbitrated. We find many examples in the history of the icelandic commonwealth. Such compromise was reached as the christianity was introduced in Iceland. In the Book of the Icelanders written about 1130 the oldest record of the introduction of the christianity we read that it came mighty near to fighting between the heathen and the christian and one man after

[2] You can find the same idea behind the para 234 in the treaty of the European Union as the European Court of Justice giver preliminary rulings concerning interpretation of the treaty. Here we must keep in mind the judicial activism og the court.

another began to call witness, and declare himself out of the law with the others, the christian and the heathen. And a compromise was then agreed whereby the principal heathen leader was deputed to settle the matter. And a compromise was reached. Christianity was declared by the law as the religion of the land with some concessions towards heathen practice – In the Icelandic Commonwealth appears in reality a society based on a social contract.

This attitude promoted checks by one powergroup of another, so that rules were shaped out of some kind of compromise which was the main feature of the political ideas in the Icelandic Commonwealth and the compromise is one of the most important element in the nordic political ideas. Although these were the rules of game especially for the more powerful, they supported the general wiewpoint that power was limited, which afforded the common folk some sort of protection against oppression.

The third function of the Law Council was to grant special legal permissions and exceptions. In this connection we are told explicitly that unanimous agreement in the Council was required. Conceptually the granting of exceptions was closely akin to making new laws.

The chief figure in the Law Council was the Lawspeaker, who was elected by the Council for a three-year term. His main job was to recite the law before the Law Council. Here, the Law Council's function was to follow the recitation critically. Little is known, however, about the details of the recitation. The Lawspeaker was the chairman of the Law Council and thus the leader of Alþingi.

In addition to the Law Council five courts met at Alþingi. As mentioned a while ago disputes about the content of the law could be sent to the Law Council for resolution. It appears that such disputes did not go to the courts which were conceived first and foremost as triers of fact. Proof in these courts was highly formalized.

I noted that originally the laws existed in the form of recognized traditions which were transmitted orally from one generation to another. At the general assembly of 1117, it was decided that the laws were to be written down, and this decision was executed during the following winter. At the same time the laws were reviewed.

Subseqently, the original written codes were copied, and changes and additions entered in accordance with the needs and interests of various individuals. These codes are the most comprehensive legal compilation in existence in the native language of any germanic people.

Being the place of assembly, Þingvellir became the capital of Iceland for two weeks of every year all during the Commonwealth period, and played, without doubt, a very powerful role in stimulating the great scholarly and literary work which was wrought in Iceland during those centuries. Here we can mention the Edda, the sagas, historical works e.g. the oldest history of Greenland, Iceland, Faroe Islands, The Orkneys, Norway and Sweden, parts of the history of Denmark and England and Scotland. We can say that Icelanders in this period became the historians of The North Atlantic. In addition we can mention scholarly works on theology – the sagas of saints, sagas of apostles, saga of St. Mary – translated works on general history, and works og geography, navigation, astronomy, mathematics and chronology. These works were, of course, connected with the Church, particularly the episcopal diocese, the cathedral school

and the monasteries.[3] But there is no doubt that in this place – Þingvellir – there came together men from every part of the country who exchanged their views, quarreled with one another, and received news from abroad. Although the Icelanders were thinly distributed across a rather large country, they were in a way citizens in a city-state here in Þingvellir for a fortnight each summer.

The role of Thingvellir is for Iceland, and I take the permission to say, for the whole nordic world similar to the role of Agora for greek culture and Forum Romanum for the Roman world.

The fundamental principle in the Icelandic Commonwealth was rejection of centralized executive power. The role of the political institutions was to define the law, not to enforce it. The enforcement was the role of the individuals. – But at length it was not sufficient to keep order in the society. And early 13th century, the political structure of Iceland had begun to break down and in the light of the disorder generated in Iceland by the power struggles among the most poverful clans, it is fairly evident that an institution which was better able than the Alþingi was needed to be established.

In the 12th and 13th centuries, the Nordic world began also to be influenced by the doctrine that the power to legislate rested in secular sovereigns. In this view - traceable to Roman law, as revived in Bologna in the 11th century - law was deliberately made, and was expression of the sovereign's will. It was a view that, in the Nordic nations, coexisted uncomfortably with the traditional Germanic conception of law as ancient preexisting institution and a social contract.

Kingship was one obvious answer to the Icelanders' problems, and was in accord with the general trend of political thought in the Middle Ages, as royal power was growing through-out Europe.

The subjection of Iceland to the Crown of Norway was achieved voluntarily, through a special treaty - a Charter. One condition of the treaty was that the king was to let the Icelanders have peace and Icelandic laws, and by this we may understand that while the Icelandic chieftains were willing to leave law enforcement to the king, they reserved the right to participate in any lawmaking which superseded their existing laws.

The changes in the political order which came with the union with Norway called for new legislation in Iceland. A code of law was presented to the Alþingi in 1281, where it was ill received and three separate groups of assemblymen, each representing one of the medieval estates - the clergy, the nobility and farmers issued critical remarks.

Then the emissary of the king became furious that peasants should have the effrontery to suppose that they might ordain laws for the land: that which was given to the king alone to do. He demanded that they should approve the book, unconditionally. Here spoke a man well-versed in civil law with the principle from the the law code of Justinian as a guiding light: Ouod principi placuit legis habet vigorem.

Bearing in mind the ancient ideas each group answered for itself that they would not act so as to

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[3] See e.g. Jónas Kristjánsson: Eddas and Sagas. Iceland's Medieval Literature. Reykjavík 1988.

loose their national freedom. After a heated debate the code was adopted provisionally. But between 1294 and 1314 it was revised to a certain extent, in accordance with the wishes of the Alþing. This law code soon became very popular, and today there are still 45 chapters from this code valid law in Iceland.

Briefly, the political structure of Iceland was changed in the following ways: The king was the country's chief official. He appointed a representative in Iceland, who sat in the Alþingi and a number of district magistrates. The king's representative appointed 84 farmers to attend the Alþingi, of whom 36 were selected to sit in the Law Council. The chief official of the Council now came to be called Lawman instead of Lawspeaker.

The underlying principle in the Law Code from 1281 concerning royal power and responsibility is that the king is bound by the ancient laws, which is his duty to amend, in consultation with the nation.

The political set-up which I have just described lasted until the advent of Absolutism in 1662, although certain changes followed the Reformation 1540-1550. These changes resulted from the tremendously increased power of the king, who dominated the church in both administration and property. With the establishment in 1593 of a high court which the king appointed himself, the power af the Alþingi was greatly diminished.

In 1662 Absolutism was introduced in Iceland. Great administrative changes followed; but despite this, Alþingi continued to set laws until as late as 1700. After that, the Law Council functioned only as a court, and Alþingi became a forum for discussion which forwarded petitions to the king instead of making law.

During the 18th century, the number af assemblymen gradually decreased, so that in 1795, for instance, the Law Council contained only four members. In 1798, the Alþingi was moved to Reykjavík, and held there in the two succeeding years. In 1800 it was abolished. It was revived in a new form in Reykjavík in the year 1843.

And finally back to the Icelandic Commonwealth. The precepts in the law-codes on legislation manifests that the Icelanders held fast to ancient way af thinking about law. The precepts evince a deliberate attempt to adapt to new conditions - including active legislative work.

Admittedly these provisions did not solve the problem, but instead they have provided one of the most explicit sources to be found anywhere on the subject of medieval thinking on law and legislation. Thus they are particularly well suited to shed light on this important element of western political theory and at the same time on the evolution of the modern idea of democracy and the rule of law.[4]

The Icelanders were obliged, however, to solve their constitutional problems in accordance with

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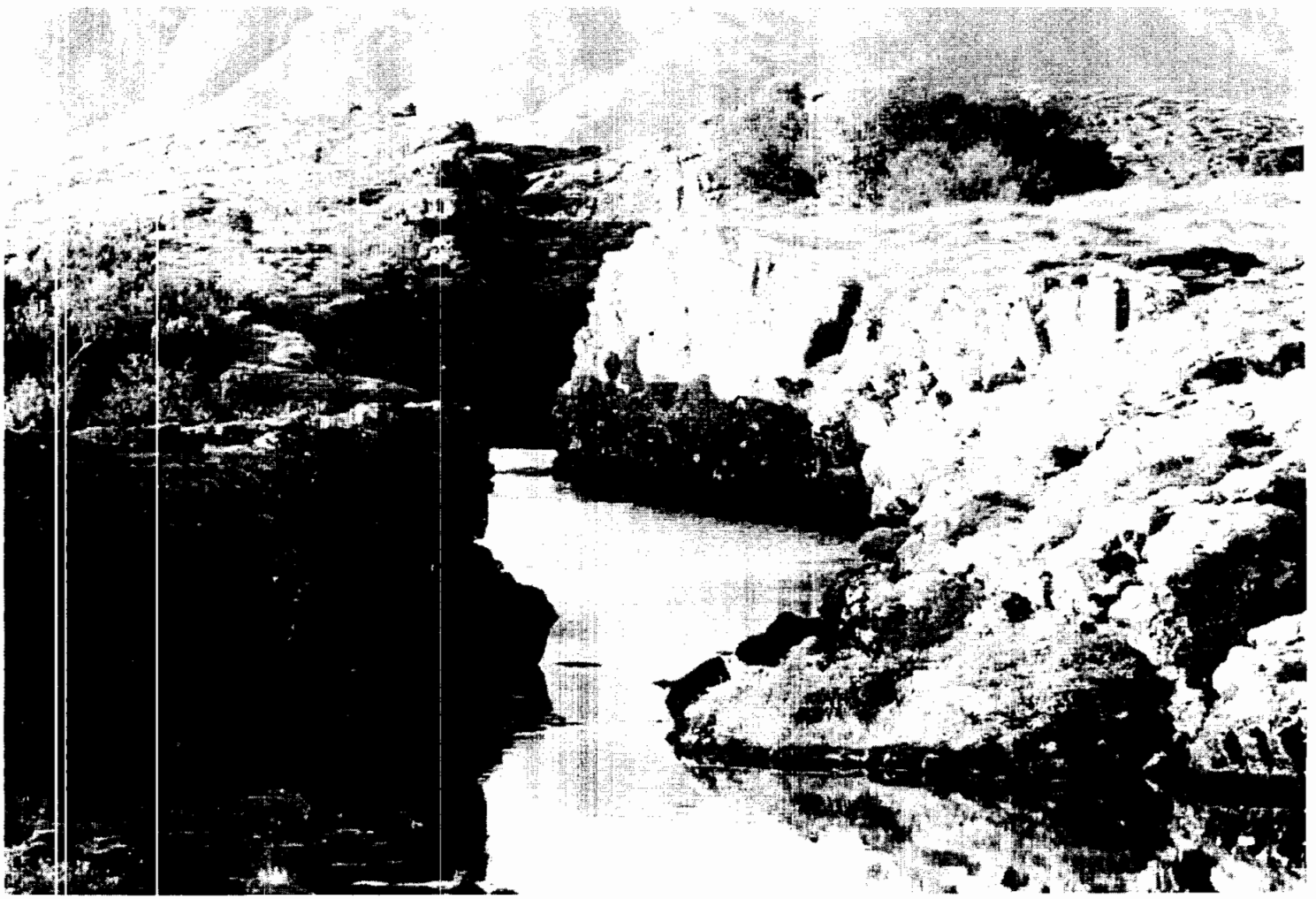
[4] The Icelandic Commonwealth has inspired German nationalists c.f e.g.: Grágás. Handwörterbuch zur deutschen Rechtsgeschichte I. Isländisches Recht. Handwörterbuch zur deutschen Rechtsgeschicte II. Bibiliography. Marxists c.f. Einar Olgeirsson. Ættarsamfélag og ríkisvald í þjóðveldi Íslendinga (Clan versus State in the Icelandic Commonwealth) Reykjavík 1954. libertarians c.f. e.g. David Friedman: Private Creation and Enforcement of Law: A Historical Case. Journal of Legal Studies 8 (1979)

the generally accepted medieval view on proper political constitution involving extensive royal prerogatives. They did so by accepting the authority of the Norwegian king, but supposed that they could ensure their freedom under an absentee monarch whom they believed bound by the common laws of the land. They asserted this with the condition in the Charter that the king should let them obtain Icelandic law, and to this they continued to refer for centuries.

Sigurður Líndal.

Þingvellir National Park

Operational Plan 2004 to 2008



1. INTRODUCTION **2**

2. PRIORITY PROJECTS IN THE MANAGEMENT PLAN **2**

3. FUNDING FOR DEVELOPMENT AND OPERATIONS **2**

4. FACILITIES AND SERVICES **3**

Planning 3

Paths, platforms, car parks 3

Campsites 4

5. ECOSYSTEM **5**

6. EDUCATION AND RESEARCH **5**

7. HERITAGE SITES AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPE **5**

8. ADMINISTRATION **5**

Work facilities 5

Internal activities 6

External relations 6

1. INTRODUCTION

A operational plan for five years is here put forward, in accord with the management plan for the Þingvellir National Park for the years 2004 to 2024, and its principal objectives are stated. The operational plan is to be renewed every five years, and thus the projects described here comprise the first stage of four.

The projects are categorised according to their nature, and for each project an implementation period is estimated, on the basis of its importance, priority, and approximate ideas of cost.

The operational plan is put forward here for the first time in this form. It is not expected to remain unaltered throughout the five-year period it covers, as much remains unclear regarding funding, costs and other progress. The plan will thus be reviewed annually, taking account of what has been achieved, and the latest information on premisses for continuing work.

2. PRIORITY PROJECTS IN THE MANAGEMENT PLAN

In the management plan, emphasis is placed upon a number of items as high-priority, as they are the necessary prerequisite for sensible ongoing work, or otherwise important. The priority projects are listed here again:

- A formal local plan must be made in accord with the law, which will further develop certain factors connected to planning discussed here.
- A monitoring plan should be made, with the objective of revealing in a systematic manner where encroachment by visitors causes changes that exceed acceptable limits. The plan should also provide for responses in such cases.
- The completion of mapping and cataloguing of heritage sites should be encouraged. The results of this work will be useful in the making of a local plan, and in identifying those sites which may be at risk and require protective measures.
- A clear policy should be formed regarding sponsorship as a source of funding, in order that it may be of use as soon as possible in internal development within the national park.
- Regular consultation should be organised with many stakeholders connected to the national park, for consultancy and reference.
- Improvements are required in promulgation of information and signposting.

All the above-mentioned tasks are expected to be completed within the term of this first operational plan.

3. FUNDING FOR DEVELOPMENT AND OPERATIONS

In this operational plan, it is assumed that funding for operations and development will be similar in the next five years as in 2003, when total available funds were ISK 83 million, of which ISK 13 million was derived from the park's own revenue, while the rest was allocated from the government Budget. It is hoped that more revenues raised by the park itself, and sponsorship by private parties of individual projects, will add somewhat to the available funds, but the effects of these resources remain unclear.

It is assumed that the available income mentioned above will be split in a similar fashion to 2003, when about ISK 50 million were spent on operations, and ISK 33 million on development. The projects in the plan have been assigned to individual years in accord with order of priority and approximate estimates of cost, so that total annual costs will be in accord with the available funds for development.

It is assumed that costly projects, such as durable surfacing of the road through

the Almannagjá gorge and enlargement of staff facilities, will receive special funding.

It is not clear what the effect will be on the operations of the national park if Þingvellir is included on the World Heritage List, as is the intention. Some increase may be expected in numbers of visitors, and they may perhaps be expected to stay for longer to explore the unique features on which the nomination is based. This may affect human resources, the burden on man-made structures and services, and the need for information material.

4. FACILITIES AND SERVICES

Planning

No.	Target	Timeframe	Carried out by
4.1.	Overall planning of services. Summary of what services to be provided where, connection and mutual support of service units.	2004-2005	Staff, consultants
4.2.	Local plan for the entire national park.	2005-2006	Contractors
4.3.	Decision on future arrangements for Valhöll: environment, buildings, business.	2004-2008	Staff, consultants
4.4.	Decision on future arrangements for Skógarhólar, taking account of collaboration with the Equestrian Federation and other possibilities.	2006	Staff

Paths, platforms, car parks

No.	Target	Timeframe	Carried out by
4.5.	Interpretive centre, viewing platform and Almannagjá linked by footpath suitable for the disabled.	2004	Designers, contractors
4.6.	Durable surface for road through Almannagjá from Hakið down to car park at Kastali. Stage I: Research, design of road and utilities, consultation and development permits. Stage II: Tender and implementation	 2004-2005 2006	 Archaeological Pres. Agency, consultants, Public Roads Administration Designers,Contractors
4.7.	Evaluation of options and costs of renewal of improvement of bridge at Drekkingarhylur. Decision on further action. Tender and implementation.	2006-2007	Consultants, staff, contractors
4.8.	Gravel path, partly new, partly existing, through the area of historic booths from Hamraskarð along the west bank of the Öxará river. Heritage sites by the path signposted and explained.	2007-2008	Volunteers, Contractors, staff, archaeologists
4.9.	Path marked along east bank of the Silfra gorge, (iron) steps down to lake surface, and platform.	2004	Contractors
4.10.	Wooden path along east side of Öxará river. From bridge opposite Valhöll to north of Biskupsbúð.	2004-2005	Contractors

4.11.	Car park completed at Kastali. Centre laid with grass paving, pavements paved with slabs.	2004	Contractors
4.12.	Car park at Efri-Vellir surfaced with tarmac. Kerbs finished.	2005	Designers, contractors
4.13.	Pedestrian platform in Stekkjargjá gorge rebuilt, similar to present form but lower. Ends finished, information signs erected. South section North section	 2004 2005	Contractors, staff
4.14.	Gravel surface for Kóngsvegur at Gjábakki: bridle path between routes 36 og 365.	2006	Archaeological Pres. Agency, contractors
4.15.	Horse corral at Gjábakki and car park.	2005	Contractors
4.16.	Gravel road built from Vellankatla to Hrafnagjá. Wood shavings on path up the slope to Hrafnagjá.	2006	Archaeological Pres. Agency, Contractors
4.17.	Gravel road from Gjábakkastígur at Hrafnagjá to route 36	2007	Contractors
4.18.	Alterations to platform at Lögberg to make it less noticeable.	2008	Designers, contractors
4.19.	Path to Skógarkot suitable for wheelchairs.	2008	Volunteers, contractors
4.20.	Access for the handicapped to angling at Vatnskot and Hallvik or Vatnsvik.	2005-2006	Designers, contractors
4.21.	Facilities provided for launching non-motorised boats. Location, design, implementation.	2005-2006	Staff, consultation, contractors
4.22.	Car parking at the lake shore except at Vatnskot: gravel surfacing for roads, car parks defined by timber structures.	2005	Designers, contractors
4.23.	Vatnskot: New building for facilities: WC, information, picnic shelter. Durable surface for roads and car park.	2005-2007	Designers, Contractors
4.24.	Connection of bridle path alongside main road, from route 36 below Kárastaðir to above Stórhöfði. Gravel surface.	2005	Staff, Contractors

Campsites

No.	Target	Timeframe	Carried out by
4.25.	New sanitary facilities building opened at Syðri-Leirar.	2004	Contractors
4.26.	New sanitary facilities building opened at Fagrabrekka.	2004	Contractors
4.27.	Facilities for emptying chemical toilets, i.e. tank with rising equipment. Gravel car park enclosed by stone walls on three sides.	2004	Staff, contractors

5. ECOSYSTEM

No.	Target	Timeframe	Carried out by
5.1.	All alien trees removed from parliament site	2004-2008	Local people, Forestry Service
5.2.	Research into renewal of birchwoods in consultation with Forestry Service	2008-	Forestry Service
5.3.	Plan for halting desertification and restoration of vegetation in eroded areas in collaboration with Soil Conservation Service. Implementation	2005-2006 2006-2009	Soil Conservation Service, staff, volunteers
5.4.	Discussions with Landsvirkjun on lake water level and outlet at Efra-Sog.	2004-2005	Staff, Landsvirkjun, scientists

6. EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

No.	Target	Timeframe	Carried out by
6.1.	Database on research. Summary of what has been studied. Collaboration with other bodies.	2004-2005	Staff, power companies, angling assoc.
6.2.	Education plan including content, emphasis, target groups and methods.	2005-2006	Staff, consultants, consultation, contractors
6.3.	Collaboration plan with Church and Parliament.	2004-2005	Staff
6.4.	Signs: Design, tender, texts, pictures.	2005-2008	Staff, contractors
6.5.	Signs at interpretive centre.	2004	Designers, contractors
6.6.	Outdoor facilities, education and information at Hakið: design, signs, models.	2005-2008	Designers, staff, contractors
6.7.	Information signs about the national park on access routes. Signs to show footpaths, services, historical summary. Total design for "gateway."	2004-2005	Designers, staff, Public Roads Admin., contractors

7. HERITAGE SITES AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

No.	Target	Timeframe	Carried out by
7.1.	Organisation of cataloguing of heritage sites in collaboration with Archaeological Preservation Agency. Prioritisation, timeframe.	2004-2005	Archaeological Pres. Agency
7.2.	Cataloguing of heritage sites.	2006-2008	Contractors

8. ADMINISTRATION

Work facilities

No.	Target	Timeframe	Carried out by
8.1.	Enlargement of premises for national park work at the service centre at Leirar. Needs analysis, design, implementation.	2005-2008	Staff, designers, contractors

8.2.	Storage building for machinery and tools	2006	Designers, contractors

Internal activities

No.	Target	Timeframe	Carried out by
8.3.	Guidelines: more introduced, and compiled into an organised handbook. Steps towards a quality-control system.	2005-2006	Staff, consultants.
8.4.	Environmental management system implemented.	2006	Staff, consultants
8.5.	Safety: analysis, liability and legal status, plans and guidelines. Safety handbook.	2005	Staff, consultants, Admin. Of Occ. Safety and Health, rescue organisations
8.6.	System to record no. of visitors and services used.	2005	Staff, Public Roads Admin., consultants
8.7.	Manning plan: derived from service plan, role and job descriptions, FTE, subcontracting.	2005	Consultants, staff
8.8.	Monitoring plan covering ecosystem, heritage sites and infrastructure, e.g. paths in national park. Specifies standards for condition, and response.	2005-2008	Staff, consultants, Archaeological Pres. Agency

External relations

No.	Target	Timeframe	Carried out by
8.9.	Rules on access by special-interest groups and use of national park for commercial purposes.	2004	Staff, consultants, consultation
8.10.	General conditions for business by private parties, rules on tenders for services.	2004	Staff, consultants
8.11.	Sponsorship by private parties of projects within the national park, rules and policy.	2004	Staff, consultants
8.12.	Consultation plan, national park initiates annual meetings with stakeholders.	2004	Staff

Translated into English by Anna Yates

Þingvellir National Park

Management Plan 2004 to 2024

Note: This is a tentative version pending the enactment of a new bill on Þingvellir National Park later in May 2004. It is in all respects complete and lacks only the number of the new law and date of signing.

Agreed by the Þingvellir Commission, ## May 2004

_____

Björn Bjarnason
Minister of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs, Chair

_____

Guðni Ágústsson
Minister of Agriculture

_____

Össur Skarphéðinsson
Member of Parliament

1. SUMMARY 3

2. INTRODUCTION 3

3. DESCRIPTION OF NATIONAL PARK 4

3.1. Basic information 4

3.2. National park administration 4

3.3. Land use, access and service 5

3.4. Nature 6

3.5. Cultural landscape and heritage sites 6

4. IMPORTANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE 7

4.1. Setting for history and culture 7

4.2. Unique natural factors 8

5. LIMITING FACTORS 9

5.1. Legal and organisational framework 9

6. PRINCIPLES OF MANAGEMENT PLANNING 10

7. LAND USE 11

7.1. Vision for 2024 11

7.2. Zoning of the national park 11

7.3. Local plan 16

8. ACCESS AND TRAFFIC 16

8.1. Present situation 16

8.2. Vision for 2024 17

8.3. Principal objectives 17

8.4. Monitoring 18

9. VISITS, ACTIVITIES AND FACILITIES 18

9.1. Present situation 18

9.2. Vision for 2024 18

9.3. Principal objectives 19

9.4. Monitoring 19

10. ECOSYSTEM 20

10.1. Present situation 20

10.2. Vision for 2024 20

10.3. Principal objectives 20

10.4. Monitoring 21

11. INSTRUCTION 21

11.1. Present situation 21

11.2. Vision for 2024 21

11.3. Principal objectives 22

12. RESEARCH, SCIENCE AND MONITORING 22

12.1. Present situation 22

12.2. Vision for 2024 23

12.3. Principal objectives 23

13. ECONOMY AND COMMUNITY 23

13.1. Present situation 23

13.2. Vision for 2024 24

13.3. Principal objectives 24

14. HERITAGE SITES AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPE 24

14.1. Present situation 24

14.2. Vision for 2024 25

14.3. Principal objectives 25

15. ADMINISTRATION 26

15.1. Present situation 26

15.2. Vision for 2024 26

15.3. Principal objectives 26

16. PRIORITISATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF PROJECTS 27

17. REVIEW AND EVALUATION 27

ANNEX A: PROCEDURES IN MANAGEMENT PLANNING 29

ANNEX B: MAPS 32

1. SUMMARY

In the management plan put forward here for the Þingvellir National Park, the factors emphasised are broadly similar to those of the prior management plan of 1988. As before, the most important objective is to safeguard the nature, historical area and heritage sites of the National Park for the future, while also making preparations for visitors, whose numbers may be expected to rise steadily.

The management plan is based upon a vision for the period until 2024. The situation in the current year in the main fields is summarised, and this is followed by an exposition of the principal objectives which must be achieved in order to make the vision a reality.

In the 1990s, systematic development of facilities and services commenced; it is fair to say that this was a prerequisite for the national park to be able to receive a fast-growing number of guests in recent years, without serious consequences. This management plan stresses the importance of further planning and monitoring, in order to make better use of the existing infrastructure and facilities, and to expand these factors without more encroachment on nature than has already taken place. In addition, emphasis is placed upon visitors having access to education on the unique interplay of history and nature to be found at Þingvellir.

The policymaking work involved extensive consultation with visitors to the national park and many stakeholders. This provided a veritable mine of information on the attitudes and ideas on which the management plan is based; the policymakers have striven to reflect the main messages of this consultation in the management plan.

The management plan is accompanied by an operational plan, which will be renewed every five years. The intention is that the effectiveness of management of the national park be evaluated in tandem with the renewal of the operational plan.

2. INTRODUCTION

The Þingvellir National Park was founded by legislation passed by Alþingi (parliament) in 1928. The Act says: "From the beginning of 1930 Þingvellir by the Öxará river and its vicinity shall be a protected national shrine for all Icelanders." In 1988 a management plan was drawn up for the national park, and the time has come to prepare a new management plan, taking account of what has been achieved in recent years. The Icelandic government has applied to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee (WHC), nominating Þingvellir for inclusion on the World Heritage List. Sites included on the World Heritage List are internationally recognised conservation areas, which are generally major tourist attractions. Þingvellir is nominated for the World Heritage List on grounds of its unique cultural landscape.

This document contains the Þingvellir Commission's management plan and vision for the national park for the next twenty years, which provides guidance on the interaction of protection and utilisation, planning and operations.

In the creation of the management plan, extensive consultation was carried out with many stakeholders, and the views of visitors to the national park were elicited on their experience. Almost universally the view was expressed that the nature and appearance of Þingvellir should be safeguarded, while visitors should also be offered the opportunity to enjoy what the place has to offer, and to learn.

The form in which the management plan is put forward is in accord with guidelines from IUCN, the World Conservation Union. Visions and objectives are described in certain fields which differ from each other, but which come together in the multifaceted role of the national park. The text is partly drawn from the nomination document submitted to UNESCO.

In pursuance of this management plan, an operational plan has been prepared for the next five years, and such plans will be regularly renewed for the duration of the management plan.

3. DESCRIPTION OF NATIONAL PARK

3.1. Basic information

The Þingvellir National Park is located in the southwest region of Iceland, in the Bláskógabyggð municipality, about 50 km from the capital, Reykjavík. The boundaries of the national park are shown on Map I in Annex B.

The area of the national park is 237 km^2; its boundaries are defined in the Þingvellir National Park Act no. ###/2004. The national park was established by legislation on the protection of Þingvellir in 1928; it was the first conservation area in Iceland. According to the guidelines of IUCN, the World Conservation Union, Þingvellir falls within the definition of category II of conservation areas: national parks. The objective of conservation of the areas covered by this category is mainly ecosystem protection and recreation.

3.2. National park administration

Administratively the national park is under the aegis of the Prime Minister's Office, but is governed by the Þingvellir Commission, comprising three members of parliament. The commission's address is:

Þingvallanefnd (Þingvellir Commission)
Hverfisgata 4a
101 Reykjavík

At the time of publication of this management plan the Þingvellir Commission comprises the following members of parliament:

Björn Bjarnason, Minister of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs, Chair
Guðni Ágústsson, Minister of Agriculture
Össur Skarphéðinsson, Member of Parliament

The Þingvellir Commission appoints a director for the national park, who is responsible for day-to-day operations, together with the head warden and interpretive manager.

The director of the national park is Sigurður Oddsson.
The head warden is Guðrún Kristinsdóttir
The interpretive manager is Einar Á. E. Sæmundsen

Office of the director of the national park:

Tel: +354 552 1730

The postal address of the national park is:

Þjóðgarðurinn á Þingvöllum (Þingvellir National Park)
Þjónustumiðstöð
801 Selfoss

Contact numbers for the management office:

Tel: +354 482 2660
Fax: +354 482 3635
Website: www.thingvellir.is
e-mail: thingvellir@thingvellir.is

The following agencies have a mandated role to play in matters concerning the national park:

Archaeological Preservation Agency (www.fornleifavernd.is)
Environment and Food Agency (www.ust.is)
Bláskógabyggð local authority (blaskogabyggd.is)

3.3. Land use, access and service

The few residents within the national park live on two farms west of the rift valley, which is the focus of the national park, while in two areas there are also some summer cabins. No business is permanently established within the national park, with the exception of those companies which run hotel and catering facilities.

Route 36 is the main link between the national park and the capital and adjacent areas, and almost all visitors arrive by this route. The national park is also on route 52, the Uxahryggir-Kaldidalur road, which is a mountain road with little traffic, and closed in winter. These routes intersect at the service centre at Leirar.

Visitors have two main reasons for visiting the national park. On the one hand they wish to see the heritage site where parliament assembled in olden times, and on the other hand they wish to spend time in the open air and enjoy the natural beauty of the place. The vast majority of visitors to the park come in the summer months, from June to August.

Around the parliamentary site are four car parks, where visitors can leave their vehicles and enter the site on foot. Along the shore of Þingvallavatn (Þingvellir Lake) are another six car parks, while in many places by the roads lay-bys provide space for one or two cars.

Bridle paths and footpaths lead into the national park from west, east and north. Two bridle paths lead through the national park, and at Skógarhólar is a waystation for horse-riders in the area. Various popular walking routes connect to the national park, such as the route from Hvalfjörður via Leggjabrjótur.

The parliamentary site, located east of the Almannagjá gorge, is about five hectares in area. The vast majority of visitors to Þingvellir come to the parliamentary site, and hence this is the area under the greatest pressure, so paths are widest and best signposted here.

Along the shore of Þingvellir Lake, encroachment by visitors has left clear signs of wear. The principal footpaths along the lakeside have not been formally laid, but have been gradually trodden over the years. Angling permits are sold at the service centre, and national park staff monitor the angling.

The national park's network of paths is quite extensive, especially in the Þingvellir lava field. Many of the paths are ancient routes used by those who attended parliament, and leading between former farms.

At Leirar, at the junction of routes 36 and 52, is the national park service centre. This includes an information service, a specialist bookshop run by the national park, and privately-run catering. North of the centre is the national park's staff accommodation.

The national park interpretive centre is located on the western edge of the Almannagjá gorge, Hakið, whence visitors can walk down into Almannagjá. In the interpretive centre multimedia technology is used to present Þingvellir's cultural history and nature. Admission to the presentation is free.

Two campsites are located in the national park. The larger of the campsites comprises a number of smaller sites around the service centre, with facilities for motor homes (RVs), trailer-tents and tents. A smaller campsite is located at Vatnskot by Þingvellir Lake, in the middle of the shoreline; this can also accommodate motor homes (RVs), trailer-tents and tents. In addition, there is a campsite at Skógarhólar, the waystation for riders, but this is mostly used by visitors who arrive on horseback.

The national park has lavatory facilities at the interpretive centre and service centre and at the campsites. Guests at the campsite by the service centre have access to showers and laundry facilities.

One hotel, Hotel Valhöll, is located within the national park. Originally built in 1899, it was moved to its present location in 1929. The building has since been

extended. It has 30 guest rooms, a restaurant, and meeting and function facilities. The buildings and land are owned by the Icelandic state, while the business is privately run.

3.4. Nature

Iceland lies at the junction of two tectonic plates which are diverging and slipping. In such areas, rift valleys often form between the plates; in general these are hard to discern, as they rapidly fill with lava which levels the surface. At Þingvellir, however, a rift valley of this nature is unusually clearly discernible, due to the fact that over the past 100,000 years subsidence and divergence in the rift valley have been accompanied by little volcanic activity. Deep fissures have also formed in the surface of the earth's crust; these are more clearly seen at Þingvellir than anywhere else in Iceland. Due to continental drift, the fissures at Þingvellir are widening by an average of 3 mm annually.

The majority of the national park area is covered in lava, which flowed from a shield volcano east of the rift valley about 10,000 years ago; the pile of lava strata is clearly visible in the Almannagjá gorge.

Þingvellir Lake is the largest natural lake in Iceland, with an area of 83 km^2; a small proportion of the lake falls within the national park. The ecosystem of the lake reflects the fact that it lies at the junction of two continents, Europe and America. The bird that tokens the lake is the great northern diver or common loon (*Gavia immer*), an American species whose only European breeding place is in Iceland. The white-tailed eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) used to breed by the lake also, and is occasionally seen there today. Minks reside by the lake, and arctic foxes are seen from time to time.

3.5. Cultural landscape and heritage sites

Alþingi (parliament) was founded at Þingvellir in 930 AD, and ever since then the place has been inseparably united with the history of Iceland and the Icelanders. Many traces remain at Þingvellir of activity relating to the parliamentary assembly; remains are visible of at least 50 booths (semi-permanent shelters) and other structures built by those who attended Alþingi. In addition to the accommodation of those attending parliament, there were also booths for tanners, brewers, victuallers etc. The walls of booths were built of turf and rock, atop which a wooden frame supported a tented roof of woollen fabric. Remains of booths are typical for assembly sites, and Þingvellir is the largest and most important such site.

Walls of booths were probably built from materials available nearby, while in later times the ruins of older booths were re-used. New booths were often constructed on the ruins of older ones. Thus low mounds of ruins gradually developed in the most popular areas, where the majority of those who attended parliament stayed. Traces of booths from different times may be seen; most of the ruins visible on the surface at Þingvellir today date from the 17th and 18th centuries.

The ruins do not given an entirely accurate picture of the size of the assembly or the number of people who attended it, as many did not build booths, but stayed in tents, and thus left little trace of their presence.

The principal heritage sites are in the area where Alþingi assembled. Heritage sites are also found in many other parts of the national park, especially around deserted farms in the Þingvellir lava field.

- The largest group of archaeological remains is on the plain beneath *Hallurinn* (the Slope), where many ruins of booths may be seen, arranged in rows and clusters, in an area of about 200 x 300 m. The most recent ruins are clearest, while remnants of three or four layers of older ruins may be seen projecting from them. Among them are ruins of the *Lögrétta* (the Law Council).

- At the top of the slope is a man-made platform. This is believed to be the remains of the old *Lögberg* (Law Rock). Close by is *Snorrabúð*, named after the chieftain Snorri.
- The third collection of ruins consists of booths in the Almannagjá gorge, most of them from the latter centuries of the Alþingi.
- On the eastern side of the river, adjacent to the churchyard, are extensive ruins of booths known as *Biskupabúðir* (Bishops' Booths).
- At some distance are old man-made structures on *Spöngin* (the Neck), a narrow strip of land between the Nikulásargjá and Flosagjá fissures.

Many heritage sites have been preserved at Þingvellir which are associated with habitation and daily labour, as well as ruins connected to the old assembly. On the surface, traces of outhouses, sheep pens, enclosures and abandoned farms may clearly be seen in many parts of the area. Within the national park, an unusually complete cultural landscape of the 18th and 19th centuries is preserved, providing interesting insight into rural life before mechanisation. This is accompanied with a wealth of placenames relating to farming and utilisation of natural resources, in addition to those placenames which are derived from parliamentary activities.

4. IMPORTANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE

Þingvellir is a protected national shrine, and a symbol of Icelandic national unity.

Þingvellir is one of the most important cultural heritage sites in Iceland, where the main strands of Icelandic history have been woven from the start of the settlement in the 9th century to the present day. The story of Þingvellir, from the establishment of the Alþingi around 930 AD, provides insight into how a Viking Age pioneer community organized its society from scratch and then evolved. Þingvellir also combines in a single place an assortment of natural phenomena which only a handful of places on Earth can boast. The interplay of history and the extraordinary natural setting make this a unique place.

Þingvellir has been nominated for inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List as an area with a unique cultural landscape. This is on the basis of the following:

- The Alþingi at Þingvellir preserves the history of a parliament at the cusp of the early and high middle ages, and sheds light on Viking Age notions of polity, law and authority, since in Iceland the creation of a new pioneer society and a flourishing literary culture went hand in hand. These ideas, which were the common heritage of the Germanic peoples, have played a major role in shaping systems of government in many European countries up to the present day. The historic site at Þingvellir is unique in that remains dating from the very beginning of the Alþingi can be found there. These are the only ruins that show the overall layout of an assembly site from this time, and the only assembly ruins so clearly visible at the surface.
- At Þingvellir natural features and unique geological characteristics at a tectonic plate boundary have created the setting for an extraordinary history, a setting almost unchanged from the time when the Alþingi was first established. The environment at Þingvellir and its natural heritage have played a powerful role in inspiring great scholarly, artistic and literary work, and been central in the making of the Icelandic nation.

4.1. Setting for history and culture

The pioneer society that came into existence when the Alþingi was established around 930 AD is the only society in Europe for which such detailed records exist of the earliest origins, along with remarkable archaeological remains to support them. The history which has thus been passed down regarding parliamentary

procedure during the Old Commonwealth age (930-1263/64) sheds light on important elements in European constitutional development, all of which are linked directly or indirectly to the growth and ascendancy of the rule of law, and can clarify our understanding of them. The oldest extant historical work in Icelandic, the Book of Icelanders (*Íslendingabók*) by Ari Þorgilsson the Wise, written 1120-1130, is the prime source of information about the settlement and the origins of Iceland's nation state and parliament at Þingvellir. The establishment of a single assembly for the whole country was unique to Iceland. Þingvellir, chosen to be the site of Alþingi, was, for the two weeks of the parliament session each year, the equivalent of an administrative capital.

One of the unique aspects of the Alþingi was the particular emphasis and detailed attention given to removing legal uncertainty and resolving disputes, in the absence of an executive power. This is evident, for instance, in the important roles played by the *lögsögumaður* (Lawspeaker) and *lögrétta* (Law Council). There are extensive and detailed sources on the organisation of the assembly and its working procedures. The legal code of the Old Commonwealth, known as *Grágás*, is one of the most remarkable legal codices among the medieval Germanic peoples. One section of this codex is actually considered to be the first known writing of the Icelandic language, some two hundred years after the establishment of the Alþingi.

The Icelandic Alþingi has a longer continuous history than any other medieval parliament, with the possible exception of the parliaments in the Faroe Islands and on the Isle of Man; historical sources on these assemblies are limited.

In shaping their new society, the Viking Age settlers of Iceland had to ponder more clearly the concepts underlying the society than those who remained in their homeland, who could continue to adhere to ancient customs without paying any particular attention to them. Iceland is unusual in that the Viking Age was perpetuated in such cultural factors as social structure, administrative procedures and political philosophy of the Old Commonwealth. Thus medieval notions of law and authority are seen in especially clear form in Iceland. The Old Commonwealth of Iceland, founded by the first settlers, has been called the first European state in the New World, and a precursor of those that would later be instituted on the other side of the Atlantic.

The historical site of the Alþingi at Þingvellir is unparalleled in the world. Þingvellir is remarkable as the only Germanic assembly site where remains of administrative structures such as *Lögberg* (Law Rock), *Lögrétta* (Law Council) and

Biskupabúðir (Bishops' Booths) have been preserved. Remains of many man-made structures pertaining to parliament and its functions, dating from the 10th to 18th centuries, can be found there. In its entirety, the historical site at Þingvellir is also unique, in that traces of a large part of the attendees' booths can still be seen on the surface and the overall layout of the assembly area can still be visualised.

4.2. Unique natural factors

Þingvellir is unique from a geological perspective. Its geological uniqueness lies primarily in the fact that in few (or no) other places in the world are tectonic plate boundaries so clearly discernible on dry land. The fissures which are characteristic of the geology of Þingvellir form where two continental plates are moving apart, as the land between them rifts and subsides. The Þingvellir rift valley can be particularly clearly seen on the surface, and was cited as an example when the theory of plate tectonics – the foundation for modern understanding of geological processes and land formation – was being developed.

The Þingvellir rift is the clearest example on dry land where plate separation on a oceanic ridge can be seen and grasped. Þingvellir and the environs of Þingvellir Lake are thus of outstanding value as a geological monument, not only for Iceland but also globally.

The ecosystem of Þingvellir Lake is unique in the world. Four separate morphs of Arctic char have evolved there, and the lake also has a distinctive stock of brown trout which is well known for its longevity and large size. The trout, which can reach sizes of thirty pounds and more, is believed to have become trapped in the lake shortly after the end of the Ice Age, when the land mass rose.

The *gjábleikja* or "fissure char" is a unique breed of small char found in fissures in the park, which appears to have evolved in the fissure swarm which follows the volcanic zone that lies across Iceland, from the southwest corner via the highlands to the northeast of the island. The breed is best known in the national park area, where the fissures lead out into the lake.

Precipitation is heavy in the catchment area. About nine-tenths of the water that flows into Þingvellir Lake passes underground via fissures into the lake. The fact that the lava is of recent age means that the groundwater absorbs ample quantities of minerals, and this is one of the contributory factors in the diverse ecosystem of the lake. Due to subsidence and lava fields, a large variety of habitats have been formed, such as hiding places for fish in fissures and hollows along the shore of the lake. Þingvellir Lake is remarkably fertile and eutrophic, although it is very cold. About one-third of the lake bottom is covered with vegetation, and the lake abounds in algae. Low-growing vegetation extends to depths of about ten metres, while extensive belts of tall vegetation grow at depths of ten to thirty metres. A total of about 150 species of algae and vascular plants and 50 species of microorganisms have been identified from the lake shore down to great depths. At Vellankatla at the east of the lake, where large quantities of water flow from under the lava field, the only known cave-dwelling creature in northern Europe was recently discovered: a pale, sightless amphipod of American origin. It appears to have survived in groundwater in caves beneath the Ice Age glacial cover. This is the oldest extant freshwater animal species in Iceland. Thus the biological history of Þingvellir Lake has origins stretching back hundreds of thousands of years.

5. LIMITING FACTORS

5.1. Legal and organisational framework

The Þingvellir National Park functions on the basis of Act no. ###/2004, which superseded the original Preservation of Þingvellir Act no. 59/1928. Unlike other Icelandic national parks, the Þingvellir National Park is not directly subject to the Nature Conservation Act no. 44/1999. The Þingvellir National Park Act makes clear provision for protection and maintenance of this area, which is to be "the property of the Icelandic nation."

The Bláskógabyggð local authority is the planning authority for the area. No development is permitted, however, within the area of influence of the park, without the consent of the Þingvellir Commission. A master plan is in preparation for Bláskógabyggð for the period 2004 – 2014. Until this is approved, the national park is subject to the master plan 1995-2015 for the municipalities of Þingvellir, Grímsnes and Grafningur; the Þingvellir rural district has now merged with the Biskupstungur and Laugardalur rural districts to form Bláskógabyggð.

The Þingvellir Commission published a management plan, *Þingvellir, þjóðgarðurinn og umhverfi* (Þingvellir – National Park and Environs), in May 1988; the present management plan for Þingvellir 2004 to 2024 follows on from that document.

Heritage sites in the national park are subject to the National Heritage Act no. 107/2001, and are protected. Þingvellir Church is subject to the Architectural Heritage Act no. 104/2001.

In addition to the legislation referred to above, the operations of the national park must also take account of, among other things, the Nature Conservation Act no. 44/1999 with subsequent amendments. This applies particularly to provisions on conservation of the landscape and art. 37 on geological formations and ecosystems, which are especially protected, and disruption of which is to be avoided.

The above-mentioned legislation and its relevance to the Þingvellir National Park are discussed in section 4b. of the application for the inclusion of Þingvellir on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

5.1.1. Subjective restrictions

The first legislation on the national park in 1928 states that Þingvellir is a protected shrine for all Icelanders. Although nearly a century has passed since that legal text was composed, there is every indication that this is indeed the place of Þingvellir in the national consciousness. The place is hallowed ground to Icelanders in many senses, as described above, especially as a central place in Icelandic history, as the site where many archaeological remains are preserved, as the spectacular setting for historical events, and as a place of outstanding natural beauty.

The romantic sanctity of Þingvellir, related to nationalism and the campaign for independence, has to some extent given way to a new interpretation of Þingvellir as the historic setting of parliament and government in a pioneer community, in a place which is a remarkable work of nature. For these reasons it is foreseeable that any major changes to the present organisation of Þingvellir, to which the nation is accustomed, would meet with opposition. It may reasonably be deemed unthinkable that the Icelandic public could accept any major development within the national park, especially in the vicinity of the parliamentary site itself. On the other hand it is likely that a compromise may be reached on changes which entail the conservation in the main of the present organisation, while facilitating guests' enjoyment of what the national park has to offer, within the limits of conservation. This viewpoint emerges clearly from the consultation with the public and with stakeholders, on which the management plan has been partly based, and hence the plan is in accord with that viewpoint.

6. PRINCIPLES OF MANAGEMENT PLANNING

The management plan put forward here is guided by the following principles:

The Þingvellir National Park has a special status which is inseparably tied to certain places within the national park retaining their natural character, partly for the sake of nature itself, and partly due to the important events which took place as Þingvellir, traces of which have been left behind in the earth.

By its management the national park administration seeks to protect this special value, so that it will not be diminished although many visit and enjoy it. The society of present and future reaps most benefit from the national park when a reasonable compromise between conservation and utilisation is achieved. The purpose of conservation is to ensure the possibility of equivalent future use.

The main principle of the national park's management is that nature not be disrupted beyond what has already occurred, unless the impact on the special value of the site is insignificant, and the change is conducive to utilisation relevant to the unique aspects of the national park. When the impact of management decisions relating to the balance of conservation and utilisation is unclear, conservation has priority.

In its services to visitors, the park places emphasis on outdoor activity and instruction on nature, history and the heritage sites which typify the national park

beyond other places.

All man-made structures, organisation and management of the national park shall embody respect for its special status.

7. LAND USE

7.1. Vision for 2024

Land use and planning at Þingvellir have the objective of preserving the appearance, cultural landscape and ecosystem of the area, while also seeking to enable visitors to the national park to enjoy their visit. The paramount principle of planning and development in the national park is that the land and its character, ecosystems and heritage sites, be conserved in a sustainable manner. The approved local plan divides the territory of the national park into zones, each of which is clearly defined, for which conditions on the extent and appearance of man-made structures are stated. The plan also specifies what types of activity are permissible within each zone, and their extent, together with criteria which must be fulfilled regarding sustainability and environmental protection.

7.2. Zoning of the national park

The national park is divided below into zones reflecting differing use, conservation criteria and cultural significance.

The policy on land use put forward here is automatically overridden by a lawful local plan once approved. The local plan is expected to be in accord with the broad principles of this management plan.

Each zone is described, and the present situation, limits of acceptable change and policy for each are briefly explained. The zoning of the national park is shown on a map in Annex B.

Zone S1: Þingvellir lava field and other leisure areas

The Þingvellir lava field covers the majority of the area of the national park; the lava is covered with low-growing vegetation and dwarf birch. In several places coniferous trees have been planted. Within the lava field, the abandoned farmsteads of Hrauntún and Skógarkot form hubs for a network of footpaths, which are ancient routes, and thus constitute heritage sites in their own right. No new paths have been made in the area, but some of the paths have been improved by surfacing with gravel, while others are simple dirt tracks. Some of the paths are assigned for use as bridle paths. There are few paths in the northernmost sector of the lava field.

Limits of acceptable change:

The overall appearance of the zone shall not change to any noticeable degree, and traffic shall be managed in such a way that random encroachment does not have an impact on the land. Some of the paths shall be preserved as simple dirt tracks. There shall be no further spread of coniferous woods.

The policy for this zone is as follows:

There shall be no important man-made structure in the zone other than paths that harmonise well with the environment, for those who wish to walk in the lava field and enjoy the environment, or to visit the abandoned farmsteads. Skogarkot shall be made accessible to visitors with limited mobility by means of a path which is suitable for wheelchairs.

Coniferous woods shall be thinned and confined, so that the natural vegetation of the area is allowed to thrive. The dwarf birch shall be especially examined, and consideration shall be given to the possibility of encouraging its distribution. This shall be restricted to the ecotype already present.

Heritage sites shall be maintained, and information on them provided for passers-by.

Zone S2: Leirar

The zone is at the junction of route 36 (Reykjavík-Selfoss) with route 52 (Þingvellir-Uxahryggir/Kaldidalur). In this zone a service centre for visitors is now located, along with staff facilities, the national park administrative offices and campsite. The zone is not deemed to be particularly sensitive, and there is some scope for extension of the present services if necessary, in accord with the forthcoming local plan, especially north of route 36. The road cuts the campsite off from the service centre, and hence the speed of traffic at this point must be drastically reduced.

Limits of acceptable change:

The entire zone may be developed, but in a style and appearance which harmonises as far as possible with the surroundings. Emphasis on durable, low-maintenance building materials which retain a good appearance in spite of use and weathering.

The policy for this zone is as follows:

At Leirar development shall not exceed what is necessary in order to serve a rising number of visitors, in keeping with other service in the area. Staff facilities and administrative offices will remain there.

Buildings, e.g. staff accommodation and national park offices, are to be low-rise structures north of road, as at present. On the existing campsite provision shall be made for all kinds of camping accommodation, in accord with the standards of the time, but no extension of campsites is planned.

Zone S3: Lake shore

The Lake shore is a strip of land by the lake, about 50 metres, across contiguous with the parliamentary site at the west. Along the shore, there is considerable wear and tear, and visible impact on vegetation.

Limits of acceptable change:

Along the shore the interplay of lake, lava and vegetation shall be protected, without any man-made structures other than those necessary in order to provide sufficient access for anglers and others seeking outdoor activity. The overall appearance of the zone shall not be altered noticeably, and traffic shall be managed in such a way that random encroachment does not have an impact on the land.

The policy for this zone is as follows:

Good car parks, and easy access to the lake shore from the road shall be provided. Anglers shall be directed to specified areas (angling sectors), where the surface will be altered to some extent in order to tolerate the pressure. Means shall also be sought of increasing the number of angling sites available within the national park, e.g. at Arnarfell, and also outside the park in collaboration with other landowners, thus reducing the load within the park.

The campsite at Vatnskot shall be exclusively for light tents, and closed for access by all motor vehicles, as the vegetation there is very sensitive, and easily damaged. Many important heritage sites are also located in this zone. At Vatnskot instruction shall be provided on the heritage sites and the utilisation of the lake, and there shall be access from there to the lake shore for those with limited mobility.

Special attention must paid to Vellankatla, where the water flowing from beneath the lava field is visible, leading to the possibility of instruction on the groundwater system of the national park.

In consultation with *Veiðifélag Þingvallavatns* (Þingvellir Lake Angling Association) a slipway shall be erected south of Arnarfell, where small boats and kayaks can be beached, at a reasonable distance from the angling areas. Such facilities would necessitate provision of car parking for boaters.

Zone S4: Parliamentary site

The parliamentary site is delimited by the Almannagjá gorge to the west, Neðri vellir to the north, Flosagjá gorge to the east and Þingvellir Lake to the south, as indicated in more detail on map II. The zone is defined as the site of the ancient Alþingi (parliament) and this is the focus of the aspects of the national park concerned with cultural history. Within the parliamentary site there are many archaeological remains, including traces of the booths (semi-permanent shelters) erected by these who attended the assembly during the last centuries of the Alþingi at Þingvellir, before 1800. Three buildings are located within the parliamentary site: Þingvellir Church, Þingvellir Manorhouse, and Hotel Valhöll. The manorhouse is used by clergymen when they hold religious services in the church, and by the director of the national park, and it is also an official residence of the prime minister, with facilities to hold receptions for visiting dignitaries. The manorhouse and church are in excellent condition after extensive renovations in recent years, but Hotel Valhöll requires extensive and costly renovation work if it is to remain standing. The land within the parliamentary site is constantly subsiding, and in addition there is a constant risk of sudden subsidence during earthquakes - as has been seen over the centuries.

Limits of acceptable change:

The uniqueness of the parliamentary site consists on the one hand in its history and archaeological remains, and on the other hand in the geological formations within which that history took place. Acceptable change is thus restricted primarily by the constraints of conservation of archaeological remains, and the respect which they should be shown. The natural environment and vegetation must also be conserved, as the visible setting of that history, without distracting attention toward irrelevant man-made structures.

The policy for this zone is as follows:

It is important that traffic through the parliamentary site be confined to well-made paths which lead visitors to points of interest. Along the paths instruction is provided to visitors, e.g. by means of signs and other media, which tie the history to its setting.

The operational premisses of a hotel in Valhöll must be reconsidered, taking account of the maintenance of the building, seasonal fluctuations in numbers of guests, and technical factors such as drainage. The aim will be that the scale of activities at the location where Valhöll now stands be changed, so that hotel operations will be reduced, while the emphasis will be on catering; in addition, plans should provide for facilities for Alþingi (parliament) and the government to hold meetings, and for other parties who wish to hold functions or seminars. The accommodation is to be adapted to these uses, although hotel accommodation need not be closed down entirely.

Þingvellir manorhouse is now utilised by the prime minister's office, and also has facilities for the director of the national park and for clergy. Plans should be made for the prime minister to be provided with facilities elsewhere in the national park, while the use of the manorhouse should reflect the fact that it is located where visitors, keen to learn about Þingvellir, are passing through the parliamentary site.

Motor traffic within the parliamentary site shall be confined to the special needs of those with limited mobility, the tasks of park wardens, and operational needs, except where special events and functions require otherwise.

Zone S5: Hakið

A zone has been allocated on Hakið, for use similar to the present use, allowing for normal expansion in accord with rising numbers of visitors. An interpretive centre and a viewing platform are now located on Hakið. From there a path leads down the Almannagjá gorge and into the parliamentary site.

Limits of acceptable change:

On Hakið, lava formations adjacent to Almannagjá shall be protected from wear, with the small amount of vegetation that thrives there, while otherwise provision is made for man-made structures and roads as necessitated by services to visitors, including those with limited mobility, provided that this is done in harmony with the environment. Structures on Hakið shall not be noticeable from the parliamentary site.

The policy for this zone is as follows:

On Hakið, the principal entrance to the national park shall be located; visitors arrive by road, receive instruction and see an overview of the area, then walk down Almannagjá, which leads them into the network of footpaths. At this principal entrance, visitors will be able to buy books and souvenirs, and refreshments. The man-made structures are to form an entrance which will have a simple and tasteful appearance. For most visitors to Þingvellir, this is their first stopping-place, and its appearance must be in accord with that.

Building plots, car parks and driving routes must be planned in accord with necessary future development and reception of large numbers of visitors, e.g. when festivities are held in the park. A local plan has been made for Hakið.

Zone S6: Summer cabin zones

Summer cabins are located in two zones. One extends from Hotel Valhöll to the southwest along Hallurinn to the boundary of the conservation area, while the other, much smaller, is adjacent to Gjábakki, where six cabins are located. These summer cabins have been built on separate sites, which are leased for ten-year periods. The cabins are of various different types, and the vegetation around them is variable, and generally inconsistent with the vegetation of the national park.

Limits of acceptable change:

It is clear that the summer cabin zones have been altered, and are not suitable for conservation in their present from. On the other hand, it shall be ensured that the zones do not become any more inconsistent with their surroundings than is now the case; no further building shall be permitted in these zones, nor enlargement of cabins.

The policy for this zone is as follows:

The policy shall be pursued that when summer cabins are offered for sale the national park shall exercise its pre-emptive right to purchase, and shall take over plots when leases expire; initially, the main emphasis is to be placed upon the Gjábakki zone.

The local plan shall provide for factors such as appearance, vegetation and access, in so far as is necessary in order to safeguard the interests of the national park.

Zone S7: Gjábakki and Arnarfell

Gjábakki is an abandoned farm estate which contributes much to the overall landscape on the eastern edge of the rift valley. The farm buildings have disappeared. This is a popular waystation for horsemen, and the old route between Þingvellir and Skálholt passes through here.

South of Gjábakki is Arnarfell, a hill 239m high, which marks the southeastern

border of the national park. It is an interesting area for walkers, which has good views, geological formations and heritage sites all in one place. Considerable soil erosion has taken place in the area.

Limits of acceptable change:

This zone shall not be disrupted more than is already the case. Erosion at Arnarfell shall be halted in consultation with the Soil Conservation Service, after which efforts shall be made to restore the vegetation to its natural condition.

The policy for this zone is as follows:

Gjábakki will be a starting point for walking routes, and a centre for other outdoor activity in the eastern part of the national park, and information on the area shall be placed there.

Paths shall be marked, and people shall be informed about them, so that visitors to the national park have easier access to this part of the park. At Arnarfell new angling areas shall also be promoted. Otherwise, no development is envisaged in the zone.

Below Arnarfell a campsite shall be marked out, with minimum services.

Zone S8: Þingvellir Lake

Þingvellir Lake is one of the most prolific fishing lakes known. The abundance of fish, inexpensive angling permits and easy accessibility from urban areas make the lake an excellent place for outdoor activity in the form of angling, not least for children and youngsters. Public debate, in parliament among other places, reflects the public wish to re-establish fish species which have been lost from the lake. There is also much interest in boating on Þingvellir Lake, which is at present not permissible for the general public. However, there is no reason to suppose that small non-motorised boat traffic at a reasonable distance from the shore would cause any problem.

Limits of acceptable change:

It is important not to disrupt the flora and fauna of the lake beyond what is already the case, and thus care shall be taken that such disruption does not result from developments. Careful monitoring is required to ensure that activities on the lake and within the catchment area do not cause pollution.

The policy for this zone is as follows:

In consultation with the angling association, rules shall be written on angling methods. Also, non-motorised boats will be permitted on the lake within the National Park. A suitable site shall be found for a slipway, where rules on angling, sailing routes and safety rules will be promulgated.

Emphasis shall be placed upon instructing visitors about the ecosystem of the lake in an interesting manner, by inviting them by various means to look beneath the surface.

Efforts shall be made to reach an agreement with Landsvirkjun (National Power Company) on management of water flow and water level, taking account of the needs of the lake's ecosystem, and on re-establishing habitats of fish stocks that have been lost.

Zone S9: Farms

Farms within the national park are Brúsastaðir and Kárastaðir, in the southwest corner of the park. Traditional sheep husbandry is practised at Brúsastaðir, while Kárastaðir is now only a residence, and not a working farm. The buildings are typical of farm buildings. At the western edge of Kárastaðir property is *Vinaskógur* (Friendship Forest), where many visiting dignitaries have planted trees. The Icelandic Forestry Association has care of the forest.

Limits of acceptable change:

Special attention must be paid to the environmental impact of agriculture on the farms, and it must be ensured that activities there do not have any noticeable effect upon the national park in other ways.

The policy for this zone is as follows:

The farms shall continue to be inhabited and farmed as at present, but renewal of leases, e.g. at change of tenant, is subject to the consent of the Þingvellir Commission.

Zone S10: Svartagil and Skógarhólar

Svartagil is a former farmstead leased from the church estate of Þingvellir, now abandoned. Considerable soil erosion has taken place there, and this must be halted in collaboration with the Soil Conservation Service. A gravel pit for construction material is also located there.

At Skógarhólar is a natural plain; a sheep pen built in 1925 stands here, which was formerly used for the autumn round-up by farmers of Þingvellir. Facilities for horsemen are at Skógarhólar, under an agreement between the national park and *Landssamband hestamanna* (Equestrian Federation). The agreement expires in 2005.

Limits of acceptable change:

In this zone, the protection and nurturing of natural vegetation shall be promoted.

The policy for this zone is as follows:

The aim is to continue to quarry material from the gravel pit at Svartagil, but to restrict this to the national park's own needs. Quarrying shall be organised in such a way as to minimise environmental impact, and the gravel pit shall be made to harmonise with the present environment. The same place is to be used for disposal (burying) of organic waste from the national park. These factors are to be dealt with more fully in the local plan, and the zones are to be delimited.

The intention is that the horsemen's waystation at Skógarhólar remain, and that riders will be able to ride in the national park, away from the most-visited locations, on marked bridle paths. The operational criteria of the waystation will be the same as for other similar activities within the national park.

7.3. Local plan

No formal legally-binding local plan exists for the Þingvellir National Park as a whole, and the master plan in preparation for Bláskógabyggð does not specify arrangements within the national park. The management plan for the national park from 1988 has been used as a source. The emphasis of that document is similar to that put forward here.

Local planning ought to be carried out for the entire national park, thus addressing in more detail the principles of planning discussed here. The plan shall include standardised design requirements for all new construction at Þingvellir, and also guidelines for renovation and repair of existing buildings. Building plots need to be defined, along with the locations of paths and roads.

8. ACCESS AND TRAFFIC

8.1. Present situation

Þingvellir is one of Iceland's most-visited tourist attractions; recent surveys show that in summer two-thirds of foreign visitors to Iceland visit Þingvellir, and about half in winter. In 2001, 290,000 people visited Þingvellir, of whom 200,000 were foreign visitors. Many tourists visit Þingvellir and two other major tourist attractions, the Gullfoss waterfall and Geysir geothermal area, in the same trip. During the winter, access to the national park is contingent upon weather and road conditions.

A road for motor vehicles leads from the service centre to the parliamentary site, and onwards along the lake shore to the east. Within the parliamentary site a network of paths has been established, which connects with Hakið via the Almannagjá gorge. In the Þingvellir lava field are various old routes which are still clearly visible, some of which have been improved by surfacing with gravel. Horsemen have access to some of the paths in the lava field.

8.2. Vision for 2024

The Þingvellir National Park is open to all throughout the year, and is much visited by Icelanders, as well as by a large proportion of foreign tourists. Visitor traffic is managed in an active and organised manner in order to ensure that nature, heritage sites and other valued qualities are not subjected to wear exceeding the defined acceptable limits. As they pass through the park visitors receive clear messages on the rules with which they must comply regarding access and traffic. Footpaths and other options for activities are well signposted, and instruction is offered by various means of what ay be seen at each location.

Roads for motor vehicles and car parks are adequate for receiving visitors in a safe and effective manner, and emphasis is placed upon a system of footpaths which lead the visitor on foot between the main points of interest. Provision is also made for horseback traffic on certain paths outside the most sensitive and most-visited sites, while provision is also made for cyclists on the principal paths, and for access for those with limited mobility to the principal sites. Motor traffic is mainly excluded form the most sensitive areas such as the parliamentary site, and motor traffic is prohibited on paths and tracks. The road and path system is designed to make as little visual impact as possible, and to ensure quiet and safe flow-through of visitors.

8.3. Principal objectives

The national park and its principal service structures are to be open to visitors all year round. Winter opening is to be in accord with conditions (weather, road conditions), and emphasis is to be placed on promulgating information on the services available at any time.

Within the national park, a well-organised system of safe and well-made paths, which harmonise well with the environment, is to be maintained. The form of each path is to reflect its role, the traffic it is intended to bear, and its importance in the overall plan.

The principal sites within the national park shall be accessible via paths suitable for wheelchairs, in so far as this is practicable.

The national park is to be accessible on the Internet, whereby visitors will be able to enjoy a "virtual" visit to the park, and receive instruction, to some extent as if they were visiting in real life. Visitors, both from Iceland and abroad, can prepare for their visit by learning about Þingvellir on the website.

A local plan shall be approved for the entire national park, which shall state that motor traffic shall not damage the appearance and peace of the national park, while the network of footpaths plays a correspondingly important role. Car parks shall be located on the margin of sensitive areas, and to a limited degree within them, mainly for those who make a brief visit, and for those with limited mobility.

One of the objectives of the network of paths is to disperse visitors, and thus spread the load through the national park. In order for this to succeed, it is necessary that all paths be well signposted, and that places of interest be clearly indicated.

Provision is to be made for horseback traffic in the planning of the network of paths, to the extent that the policy on land use and conservation allows within each zone. The principle shall be observed, however, that horseback traffic be separated from the areas which are most sensitive, and those where pedestrian

traffic is greatest.

8.4. Monitoring

The condition of the network of paths shall be assessed each year, and a plan made for maintenance and new developments. Traffic outside the paths shall be estimated, and an assessment shall be made of whether the paths are sufficient to sustain the traffic they carry.

9. VISITS, ACTIVITIES AND FACILITIES

9.1. Present situation

People visit Þingvellir for a variety of reasons, relating both to nature and to history. The facilities and services offered at the national park reflect this variety.

There are many indications that Þingvellir is growing in popularity for outdoor activities, and facilities in the park are in demand for a variety of outdoor activities; the needs of those involved in these different activities can be difficult to reconcile. The most popular are e.g. horse-riding, boating, angling, bird-watching, diving, cycling, and finally general outdoor life and walking. These leisure activities have a variable impact upon the environment, and no formal approach has yet been developed in order to limit the pressure on the environment where it is excessive, or is approaching the limits of tolerance.

Anglers are keen to gain better access to the lake, and at more locations than at present. Better lavatory facilities are required, and improvement would be desirable in the way visitors treat the site. Demand from different groups may require rules of interaction, which should be developed in consultation with the groups in question. The unique nature of the lake offers various opportunities to make the ecosystem beneath the surface more visible to visitors.

No consistent principle or policy exists with regard to the criteria and general conditions of agreements with businesses and organisations which function within the national park.

The role of the national Lutheran church within the national park has changed in recent years, and the church is of the view that it should play a larger role than at present.

Opinion polls among visitors to the national park, and consultative meetings, indicate that visitors are in favour of improved facilities and catering for those who visit the park, a greater variety of accommodation, and improved access to some sites, e.g. for those with limited mobility. Facilities for receiving large parties also need improvement.

The services provided at Þingvellir vis-à-vis the flow of visitors, and demand for specific types of service, have not been analysed.

9.2. Vision for 2024

Facilities for receiving the different groups who visit Þingvellir National Park are good throughout the year, and aim to provide good access and an enjoyable experience for visitors, while also ensuring conservation and good treatment of the natural environment and heritage sites. The principle of all development and arrangements in reception of visitors is that the main objective be that visitors be informed about the unique cultural and natural features of Þingvellir.

The atmosphere of Þingvellir is peaceful, with a sense of sanctity, and man-made structures harmonise well with the environment. Within the national park one may enjoy nature, experience history, learn, and engage in outdoor activities, in a vivid and enjoyable manner. Visitors usually leave the national park having learned something new.

Services to visitors which require development, such as hotels, are outside the

national park, and park management collaborates fruitfully with tourist businesses nearby.

In development of service, care is taken to utilise the same facilities for multiple uses where possible, but also to minimise the risk of conflicts between different groups.

The objective is to develop services at one or two specified service areas in accord with a local plan, and not to spread services throughout the national park. This is the most economical solution, and causes the least disruption due to installation of transport and utility systems.

All services within the national park are subject to defined quality standards and to official licensing.

9.3. Principal objectives

The national park is to provide campsites as hitherto, while other accommodation is to be outside the national park, urban areas being within an easy distance. The present campsites are to be developed in accord with the general expectations of campers.

Catering services, other services for visitors and lavatories are to be planned specifically on the basis of the flow of visitors in the park, on the principle that services be accessible, but also modest and low-profile.

The business premisses of hotel operations at Valhöll are to be considered, taking account of other services within the park and around it. Finally, a decision is to be made on future arrangements. Facilities are to be provided for conferences and functions held by parliament, the government and others at Valhöll, in addition to which certain guests may be accommodated there.

All facilities to be developed in the national park are to take account of the unique cultural and natural status of Þingvellir, with the objective that visitors leave knowing more than when they arrived.

Individual aspects of the history of Þingvellir are to be put across by visual, dramatised and vivid means.

Facilities at the lake are to be improved, in order to prevent damage to sensitive nature, and making provision for year-round use.

Utilisation, zones, rules of interaction and licensing are to be defined in consultation with all groups of users, e.g. anglers, boaters and kayakers, and divers.

9.4. Monitoring

It is necessary to monitor carefully the impact of visitors on the national park, and to ensure that as many as possible may enjoy a visit to the park without exceeding the limits of acceptable change.

The monitoring entails the following:

- Regular assessment of the condition of sensitive areas, using a checklist of aspects to be monitored. Comparison of the results of assessment of condition with established criteria.
- If it transpires that the condition is inconsistent with acceptable limits, certain responses shall be determined, generally consisting of a change in facilities in order to handle a heavier load, without affecting or restricting utilisation.

It is necessary to keep records of all assessments, criteria and responses.

10. ECOSYSTEM

10.1. Present situation

Coniferous trees were planted at several locations in the Þingvellir National Park during the twentieth century. The first were planted in 1899, and this marked the commencement of coniferous afforestation in Iceland. Such afforestation has now ceased, and the generally-accepted view is that such a major alteration to the ecosystem and appearance of the national park is not justifiable. It has also been pointed out that tree roots can cause damage to nearby archaeological remains. The national park has collaborated with the Forest Service on thinning and care of the coniferous trees in the national park.

The plant ecosystem has been studied and partly charted, but this work has not been completed. Some desertification has taken place in the northernmost sector of the park, especially at Svartagil and Arnarfell.

The national park is affiliated to *Veiðifélag Þingvallavatns* (Þingvellir Lake Angling Association) and is a participant, along with other parties, in research and conservation of the lake's ecosystem.

Minks, and to a lesser extent foxes, cause disruption to birdlife, and the national park has applied protective measures against these predators.

10.2. Vision for 2024

The effects of human presence are not to have any further impact on the ecosystems of the Þingvellir National Park than is already the case, and this is to be thoroughly ensured in planning and action. Imported species shall be excluded except in the case of changes to the ecosystem on a national scale, and previous interventions have been partially rectified, especially within the parliamentary site, where vegetation is restored to the condition of former centuries, specifically due to the role of the parliamentary site as a historical setting and for the conservation of heritage sites. The national park makes a contribution to the maintenance and restoration of the ecosystem of Þingvellir Lake, e.g. by protection of fish breeding sites in the Öxará river. The variety and distribution of species has been researched and charted. Changes to the ecosystem are systematically monitored, and the causes of change are analysed. Emphasis is placed upon publicising those aspects of the ecosystem which are typical for Þingvellir, or otherwise unusual.

Fluctuations in the surface level of Þingvellir Lake have been reduced in order to protect the habitat of the kuðungableikja (whelk-trout, so-called after its principal prey) and brown trout. By the same token, a route has re-opened for the brown trout to migrate down into the Efra-Sog river, formerly a natural outlet of Þingvellir Lake (before the Sog was harnessed to generate hydroelectric power).

10.3. Principal objectives

Detailed distribution maps shall be compiled for vegetation, wild animals and birds.

Vegetation not native to Þingvellir is to be removed form the parliamentary site, e.g. coniferous trees and poplars, and also from other locations where such trees are adjacent to important heritage sites. The care and thinning of coniferous trees in other zones shall have the objective that other vegetation be able to thrive.

Soil erosion is to be prevented by measures which are consistent with the species already in place, and emphasis shall be placed upon not using species not native to the place which spread beyond defined soil reclamation zones.

The areas where visitor traffic could have an impact upon fauna, e.g. birds' nesting sites, shall be identified, and traffic shall be managed in accord with this.

Fox and especially mink shall be controlled, preferably in collaboration with other

landowners around the lake.

In collaboration with Landsvirkjun (National Power Company), measures shall be applied to conserve the ecosystem of the lake and to open a route for the brown trout into the Efra-Sog river.

10.4. Monitoring

A detailed plan shall be made on monitoring of the ecosystem at Þingvellir, in collaboration between the national park, higher education institutions, and other agencies concerned with the ecosystem. The role of the monitoring is to provide warning of changes, and to add to knowledge, e.g. of interaction between species.

11. INSTRUCTION

11.1. Present situation

Extensive educational activities now take place at Þingvellir, with the objective of informing the public about the history and nature of Þingvellir. Multimedia material is available at the interpretive centre on the nature and history of Þingvellir, in addition to printed literature, and organised guided tours of the area. In addition, a project is in progress in collaboration with the Iceland University of Education, with the objective of making the Þingvellir website a teaching tool for pupils at the middle stage of compulsory education (10-12 years old).

Consultation with visitors and stakeholders indicates that this educational activity is not sufficiently well publicised. There is also considerable interest in educational material being increased further, not least signs and markings within the national park.

At present the instruction is relatively localised, with the emphasis upon the parliamentary site. This entails that there is considerable pressure upon the parliamentary site, and visitors spend a relatively short time there. By offering educational material which directs visitors' interest to other locations, the burden may be to some extent evened out and spread.

Much remains to be done in research and cataloguing of archaeological sites, and hence it is difficult to cover these in educational material. However, such material could, even now, be very important in instruction on cultural history; this would be based upon scholars' hypotheses, until further research produces more solid evidence.

Educational activities within the park must be clarified, and collaboration must be increased with other bodies (Reykjavík Energy, Landsvirkjun (National Power Company), the Archaeological Preservation Agency and the Institute of Natural History) involved in education and research in the region. Collaboration with schools must be promoted, and they must be encouraged to see Þingvellir as a location for teaching in many different subjects.

11.2. Vision for 2024

An organised and constant flow of students visits Þingvellir; before setting off they have done careful homework using the large variety of educational materials – both in print and multimedia – available about Þingvellir, and the subject of their own visit.

At Þingvellir, visits by students, and other visitors eager to learn, commence at the interpretive centre, where national park staff explain how the booklets, guidance, multimedia material, signs etc. may be used in order to gain knowledge, and link it to the unique surroundings.

At certain places special provision is made for students who wish to examine the organisms of the lake, vegetation on land or birdlife in connection with their studies.

At Þingvellir provision is made for scholars and artists who seek inspiration and study there, and their work is presented there. The national park collaborates with stakeholders regarding facilities and presentations, so that it is easy to organise visits to many different parties on the same trip.

Emphasis is placed upon instruction, e.g. with guides, regarding those factors which are unique to Þingvellir: heritage sites, cultural history, geology and the ecosystem of the lake.

Effective collaboration exists with the important national institutions which have been based at Þingvellir over the centuries – parliament and the national Lutheran church – so that their role in the history of Þingvellir is satisfactorily covered in educational materials. These institutions honour their history at Þingvellir by intertwining their present-day activities to some degree with the work of the national park.

11.3. Principal objectives

The publication of accessible information material for use away from Þingvellir is to be organised and established in collaboration with educational authorities and experts in each field. Emphasis is to be placed upon interactive multimedia material, which may easily be updated.

The interpretive centre and facilities there are to be improved and strengthened, and it is to become the centre of educational activity, setting a standard for all other educational material. The different factors are mutually supportive: accessible information at the interpretive centre, well-signposted landmarks, heritage sites and historical information on site.

Frequent guided tours are to be offered, with guides who are well qualified in the many different fields of scholarship relating to Þingvellir.

Signs are to be designed providing information and guidance. They are to be of good quality and durable with regard to weathering. A small number of simple variants of signs should be designed, so that economies will be achieved in mass production.

Systematic monitoring is required in order to ensure that educational material is available, and that the content is consistent with the highest standards of preparation and presentation. The condition of signs and signposts must be monitored, and maintenance carried out as required.

Discussions are to be initiated with parliament and the national Lutheran church regarding their part in education and work carried out by the national park. A policy is also to be developed regarding participation by other groups connected with the history of Þingvellir, such as the followers of the ancient Norse religion, *Ásatrú*.

12. RESEARCH, SCIENCE AND MONITORING

12.1. Present situation

A number of different parties are involved in research relating to Þingvellir and Þingvellir Lake. Each of these parties works independently, and there is little or no collaboration between them, except to some degree within each individual field of scholarship. The national park administration has not seen it as part of its role to initiate coordination in these matters, as e.g. only a small part of the lake falls within the national park. The Þingvellir Commission has provided grants to several projects, especially on the ecosystem of Þingvellir Lake; reports on this have been promulgated in books published about the lake.

The regular activities of the national park do not include any specific fostering of scholarly work and research, except where this has been initiated for some special reason, e.g. through *Kristnihátíðarsjóður* (research fund founded in 2000 to mark the millennium of Christianity in Iceland) or on the initiative of individual scholars

or bodies. No register has been compiled of all research relating to Þingvellir.

Consultation during the development of this management plan revealed that people were in favour of the national park taking some initiative in this field, e.g. by keeping records of all research and knowledge in one place, and providing access to them. Interest was also expressed in coordinated guidance, which could lead to more knowledge where it is most lacking.

12.2. Vision for 2024

The national park's involvement in research will primarily be indirect, by facilitating the work of researchers, and participating in presentation of findings, e.g. by their inclusion in educational materials. Emphasis is placed upon factors relating to Þingvellir's unique status, with regard to both nature and history. Especial emphasis is placed upon study of archaeological sites, and their contribution to our knowledge of historic development, life and ideas in the past, and the role of Þingvellir as a centre of Icelandic life during the middle ages.

Attention is to be drawn to the role of Þingvellir in Icelandic medieval history, and collaboration initiated with those who are involved in scholarly research on assembly sites in Iceland, and the authorities at such historic sites as Skálholt, Reykholt and Hólar, to name but a few. Importance is attached to all research and its findings being as visible and accessible as possible, to both scholars and the public, provided that this does not compromise the integrity of the sites.

The Internet is an important forum for exchange and promulgation of information on prior research and its findings, which is useful e.g. in the planning of new studies and for an evaluation of the state of knowledge at any time.

12.3. Principal objectives

A system of collecting and disseminating information on research, researchers and their findings shall be established. Initially, a relatively simple information system is to be established on the Internet. Means must be found of ensuring that information on research is received from the researchers.

In the preparation of educational plans, account shall be taken of research findings, and these findings shall be presented to national park visitors as possible, and as occasions arise.

13. ECONOMY AND COMMUNITY

13.1. Present situation

The national park consults with many bodies and parties connected to the park's work. These are primarily public bodies in the fields of archaeology, forestry, soil reclamation and other such matters subject to public administration, in addition to bodies in local and national government. In general, one may say that this consultation takes place as required, in order to resolve matters that arise in the work of the national park. There has been little consultation with other bodies connected with the national park, e.g. power companies and various public associations.

The location the national park is adjacent to the capital city (30 mins. by road), and to urban centres in south Iceland, yet it is away from all major transport routes, and there is no urban development in its immediate vicinity. For this reason, there has been minimal development of services on the borders of the park.

The economic effects of the national park must thus be seen as a inseparable part of growth and profitability in Icelandic tourism in general, the national park being one of the most-visited tourist attractions in the country.

Within the national park itself various potential exists for producing revenue from

visitors, which have hitherto remained unexplored.

13.2. Vision for 2024

The Þingvellir National Park takes the initiative in cultivating relations with many parties and bodies connected to the park, through active and organised consultation. Thus efforts are made to avoid conflicts of interest, and synergistic effects are hoped for through the involvement of different bodies.

The national park seeks collaboration and consultation with organisations and institutions connected to the history of Þingvellir, primarily parliament and the national Lutheran church.

The national park consults with local authorities adjacent to the park, on matters where their interests may overlap, e.g. planning issues.

The national park issues rules for leisure activities such as diving, angling and horse-riding, in consultation with relevant associations, and seeks to provide for such activities, with the emphasis on spreading the load, so that minimal permanent effects result.

The national park consults with large companies located in the vicinity of the national park, e.g. power companies, with regard to common interests such as the organisation of publicity and research, flow of visitors and distribution systems.

Business within the national park is in principle run by the national park itself, or under contract with the Þingvellir Commission in those fields where experience has been gained of contracting out specified services to private businesses, e.g. catering, which the national park would otherwise clearly have to undertake itself.

Private businesses do not operate e.g. in the field of leisure activities, as at Þingvellir the emphasis is upon peace and quiet and learning. All activities are consistent with objectives on conservation, sustainability and respect for the sanctity of Þingvellir in people's consciousness. The national park will give adequate notice of all changes which affect those whose livelihood is based upon the national park or visitors to the park, and will seek to mitigate the effects of such changes.

13.3. Principal objectives

A plan for organised consultation with the above-mentioned parties, guided by the principles of coordination and synergy.

The national park will carry out regular surveys of visitors' views on service and their experience of the park, e.g. in connection with the preparation of each operational plan.

14. HERITAGE SITES AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

14.1. Present situation

No complete register exists of all known heritage sites in the Þingvellir National Park, with their locations, dimensions and description. It is possible that some heritage sites may be at risk, e.g. due to erosion by the Öxará river, and other remains may be affected by subsidence adjacent to the lake. Limited excavations have taken place at various locations, with variable results. Heritage sites are found in many parts of the park, but mostly within the parliamentary site and at abandoned farm sites in the lava field.

The Archaeological Preservation Agency deals with applications and grants permits for all archaeological excavations at Þingvellir, and at other places in Iceland, in accord with legislation. The agency emphasises the fact that the archaeological remains at Þingvellir may be the most remarkable in the country,

and hence that great care must be taken.

Many of the archaeological remains are clearly visible on the surface, under a layer of soil and vegetation. It is important that such remains not be overwhelmed by vegetation, and that the vegetation not have such root systems as to damage the archaeological remains or hinder study of them. This means that it is necessary to some extent to restrict or eliminate vegetation.

Funding for archaeological research at Þingvellir has been of various kinds, e.g. from the Þingvellir Commission, the National Museum of Iceland and *Kristnihátíðarsjóður* (research fund founded in 2000 to mark the millennium of Christianity in Iceland). No clear policy has existed on the prioritisation of such studies, and there is no clear frame of reference with regard to procedures.

It is necessary to monitor the condition of heritage sites, especially those which are above ground, e.g. stone walls which may suffer weathering or other damage, for instance due to encroachment by visitors.

14.2. Vision for 2024

In the work of the national park, emphasis is placed upon no harm being caused to heritage sites, access to them, and research in the present and future. The role of the national park is primarily to provide for activities by other bodies, which carry out and manage archaeological research in the area, but also to coordinate such work with other activities in the national park. In its day-to-day work the national park is responsible for care and monitoring of the archaeological sites in consultation with the Archaeological Preservation Agency, and it intervenes if encroachment by visitors, vegetation, weathering or similar factors appear likely to have an impact. The prerequisite for organised conservation and care is the detailed cataloguing of the archaeological sites.

Within the area of archaeological remains, visible traces shall be indicated in clear but modest manner, while more information is given on the archaeological sites in the interpretive centre, e.g. through virtual-reality media. Visitors will here have the opportunity to learn about what is known of structures, parliamentary practice and the society of that time, with reference to other subjects such as geology, ecology and philosophy. The surroundings of the heritage sites shall invariably embody respect for their sanctity.

14.3. Principal objectives

Detailed cataloguing of all heritage sites within the national park, together with an evolution of their condition and the need for maintenance and monitoring. Prioritisation of measures to conserve heritage sites which may be at risk.

Clear but modest signs to mark heritage sites, in connection with footpaths within the heritage area. The signs shall also refer to further information available at the interpretive centre or elsewhere.

Footpaths planned in the archaeological area so that visitors can observe the archaeological sites without impact upon them, e.g. by encroachment on them.

Clear criteria for methods in archaeological research with regard to equipment, transfer of soil and similar factors, in addition to an obligation upon the party carrying out the research to provide information on timing, extent, and impact upon other activities.

Schedule for monitoring and maintenance of heritage sites and areas in collaboration with the Archaeological Preservation Agency. Plan for protective measures if heritage sites are deemed to be at risk. Standards for appearance of archaeological areas, e.g. with regard to vegetation cover and adjacent structures.

15. ADMINISTRATION

15.1. Present situation

The Þingvellir National Park is governed by the Þingvellir Commission, which comprises members of parliament, who are elected to the commission by parliament. The Commission appoints a director of the national park, who is also its CEO. The work of the park comprises two main fields, wardenship of the park and education. In 2003 staff of the national park numbered 7.8 (full-time equivalent), including four permanent posts. The national park receives funding of ISK 70.6 million from the A section of the Budget in 2004, and it has further revenues of about ISK 12.4 million. It thus has about ISK 83 million at its disposal for 2004. In recent years, the diversity of work undertaken by staff has increased greatly, and hence many parties are called upon for their expertise.

The inner administration of the national park is well organised, but is not subject to any formal systems such as quality control systems.

15.2. Vision for 2024

The aim of management of the national park is that as many people as possible should be able to enjoy what the national park has to offer, without affecting its quality. Emphasis is placed upon visitors enjoying the park in diverse ways, and restrictive management is applied only where it clearly serves the interests of conservation in accord with this management plan. Efforts are made to offer visitors the opportunity to enjoy the national park to some extent at all times of year, as conditions permit.

The safety of national park visitors and staff is ensured by clear rules and guidance. Within the national park an organised quality-control system is applied, which ensures that maintenance and other regular tasks are well organised and that there is a response to the unexpected.

Admission to the national park is free of charge to all. Visitors must pay for specific services which they use, e.g. participation in organised activities, angling permits, camping etc. In addition to being a source of revenue, these fees are used as a means of managing the burden on nature caused by these services. Efforts are made to spread the load of such services as far as possible. Services relating to the educational work of the national park are generally free of charge. An important factor in funding of educational projects within the park is sponsorship by private business.

Private business activity within the national park, e.g. catering, is subject to a clear frame of reference to maintain a natural and eco-friendly appearance, with respect for the dignity of the place. Such services are located in accord with policy on land use, and generally at a reasonable distance from the parliamentary site.

The park administration shall make provision for the work of volunteers, from both Iceland and abroad, e.g. by providing clear project descriptions and accommodation for volunteers.

15.3. Principal objectives

A well-defined system is to be introduced in the spirit of environmental management, which links the limits of acceptable change for the various factors with the carrying capacity of visitors passing through and spending time in the park. The system is to make provision for monitoring, and for intervention in cases where changes exceed acceptable limits. More detailed definitions shall be made of the limits of acceptable change which are here specified for each zone, as applicable.

A quality-control system shall be introduced for the internal administration of the national park, in accord with the scope of its activities, including e.g. maintenance of man-made structures.

Risks which may be posed to staff and visitors in the national park shall be evaluated, and safety rules and plans shall be drawn up in collaboration with administrative bodies concerned with public safety. Safety rules shall be promulgated to visitors in specific locations as necessary, and facilities shall be of high quality and well maintained. The legal status of the national park shall be explored with regard to possible liability for visitors' safety.

Rules shall be drawn up on sponsorship of national park projects by private business, specifying e.g. how the sponsor's contribution is to be credited, what projects are suitable for sponsorship, and other factors regarding the interests of both parties, but with the emphasis on the national park's dignity. A decision shall also be made on policy regarding requests for use of the national park for special commercial purposes, e.g. as a location for films or advertisements.

A frame of reference is to be developed regarding tenders, licensing and private business within the national park. This frame of reference is to ensure that the business is in accord with the overall policy of the national park regarding appearance, conservation and dignity.

A forecast of visitor numbers for the next ten years shall be available at all times, as a reference for decision-making and prioritisation.

16. PRIORITISATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF PROJECTS

In the principal objectives put forward for the different fields discussed above, several factors may be identified which form a basis for organised development in accord with this management plan. The factors, which are listed again below, will be reflected in an operational plan put forward in connection with the management plan.

- A formal local plan must be made in accord with the law, which will further develop certain factors connected to planning discussed here.
- A monitoring plan should be made, with the objective of revealing in a systematic manner where encroachment by visitors causes changes that exceed acceptable limits. The plan should also provide for responses in such cases.
- The completion of mapping and cataloguing of heritage sites should be encouraged. The results of this work will be useful in the making of a local plan, and in identifying those sites which may be at risk and require protective measures.
- A clear policy should be formed regarding sponsorship as a source of funding, in order that it may be of use as soon as possible in internal development within the national park.
- Regular consultation should be organised with many stakeholders connected to the national park, for consultancy and reference.
- Improvements are required in promulgation of information and signposting.

All the above-mentioned tasks may reasonably be expected to be completed within the term of the first operational plan.

17. REVIEW AND EVALUATION

The Þingvellir Commission submits to parliament for each electoral term a report on the status and progress of affairs of the national park, for the information of parliament and the general public.

During the twenty-year period of the management plan, provision is made for four operational plans, each for a period of five years. It would be normal, at the end of each operational-plan period, when a new operational plan takes effect, for stock to be taken of the success of the operational plan, and of how the

management plan meets the requirements of the time. It is to be excepted that over a period of twenty years various external factors, beyond the control of the national park, may change, and this may have an impact upon the management plan, and on the prioritisation based upon it.

Criteria to be applied in review of results are based upon the guiding principles of this management plan.

Criterion no. 1 consists in an answer to the following question: *"Has the special value of the national park been successfully safeguarded, so that the potential for equivalent use has been ensured for the future?"*

If there are any indications to the contrary, a response is necessary, possibly by restricting use.

The answer to the question is derived from the following data:

- Records of the results of systematic monitoring.
- Evaluation by staff, scholars, and others familiar with the national park.
- Results of opinion poll on visitors' evaluation.

Criterion no. 2 consists in the answer to the following question: *"Have visitors to the national park had the opportunity to enjoy its unique character and learn about it, in an accessible manner?"*

The answer may lie in ideas of change to the reception of visitors, and how operational funds are best spent for that purpose.

The answer to the question is based principally upon the following data:

- Records of findings of quality and safety monitoring.
- Findings of opinion polls on quality of service and educational material.
- Statistics on visitor numbers, use of services, duration of stay, operational results, etc.

Gathering of data for review and assessment of results is thus primarily as follows:

- Systematic recording of data on the status of various factors (environmental monitoring, quality, safety, etc.). Such record-keeping should be governed by clear guidelines, and the recording of data is to be continuous in accord with the nature of the subject.
- Opinion polls of visitors to be repeated during the preparation of each new operational plan. The poll is to cover diverse factors concerned with the visitor's evaluation of his/her experience and the quality of the service.
- Consultation with stakeholders which is organised and recorded, e.g. by annual meetings.

Evaluation of results is a prerequisite for good planning, and it may lead to revision of the management plan itself. If the management plan is amended, stakeholders must be informed of these amendments.

ANNEX A: PROCEDURES IN MANAGEMENT PLANNING

This management plan and vision for the Þingvellir National Park is the fruit of work by many different people and agencies, which commenced in the summer of 2003. Guðrún Kristinsdóttir, head warden at Þingvellir, has supervised the work on behalf of the Þingvellir National Park, while national park director Sigurður K. Oddsson and interpretive manager Einar Á. E. Sæmundsen also took part in the process, together with the Þingvellir Commission.

The project was carried out by the Alta consulting company, under the management of Halldóra Hreggviðsdóttir, and the management plan was edited by Árni Geirsson. Other members of Alta staff also contributed, mainly with regard to stakeholder consultation and processing of findings.

In this project, the emphasis has been on ensuring that policy on the management of the national park is in keeping with the wishes of its owners, the people of Iceland. Thus priority was given to consultation with visitors and stakeholders.

Work commenced in the summer of 2003, with an opinion poll of visitors to the national park. They were asked about e.g. their attitude to the national park, the services provided there, and what qualities of the national park had most significance for them. Several consultative meetings were also held with stakeholders, in order to explore their views on conservation and utilisation of the national park. A total of 78 businesses, agencies and organisations were invited to send a representative to consultative meetings with regard to management planning, and over 100 representative attended such meetings with members of the planning group. Following the consultative meetings, the ideas which had emerged were explored further, and were applied directly to the management planning. In addition to the opinion poll and consultative meetings, use was made of many existing books on Þingvellir, the document prepared for the nomination of Þingvellir to the UNESCO World Heritage List, and the findings of a consultative meeting held in connection with the nomination.

The work was carried out in accord with guidance from leaders in management planning for nations parks and other conservation areas, such as experts Adrian Phillips and Henry Cleere, who visited Iceland on behalf of UNESCO in connection with the nomination of Þingvellir to the World Heritage List, and also guidelines from the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS).

This document was translated into English by Anna Yates.

List of stakeholders invited to consultative meetings in connection with management planning.

The following stakeholders were invited to consultative meetings in connection with management planning:

- Andri Snær Magnússon, novelist
- Archaeological Preservation Agency
- Ármenn Angling Association
- Árnessýsla rural areas planning officer
- Árnessýsla rural areas tourism officer
- Árni Magnússon Institute
- Ásatrúarfélagið [followers of the Old Norse religion]
- Association of Icelandic Anglers
- Bjarni Harðarson, journalist
- Bláskógabyggð municipality
- Catering service, Þingvellir service centre
- Dalsel guesthouse
- Deanery of Árnes
- Destination Iceland
- Environment and Food Agency
- Gamla-Borg café
- Geysir tourist services
- Grímsnes- og Grafningshreppur municipality
- Guðmundur Tyrfingsson bus company
- Hamrahlíð High School
- Highlander
- Hólar College
- Hótel Valhöll
- Hvanneyri Agricultural College environmental planning department
- Iceland Environmental Consultancy
- Iceland Excursions - Allrahanda
- Iceland School for Tourist Guides
- Iceland Touring Club
- Iceland Tourist Board
- Iceland Travel [Icelandair subsidiary]
- Iceland University of Education
- Icelandic Association of Driver/Tourist Guides
- Icelandic Cyclists' Federation
- Icelandic Forestry Association
- Icelandic Forestry Service
- Icelandic Kayak Club
- Icelandic Mountain Bike Club
- Icelandic Natural History Society
- Icelandic Society for the Protection of Birds
- Icelandic Tourist Guide Association
- Icelandic Travel Horses
- Icelandic Travel Industry Association

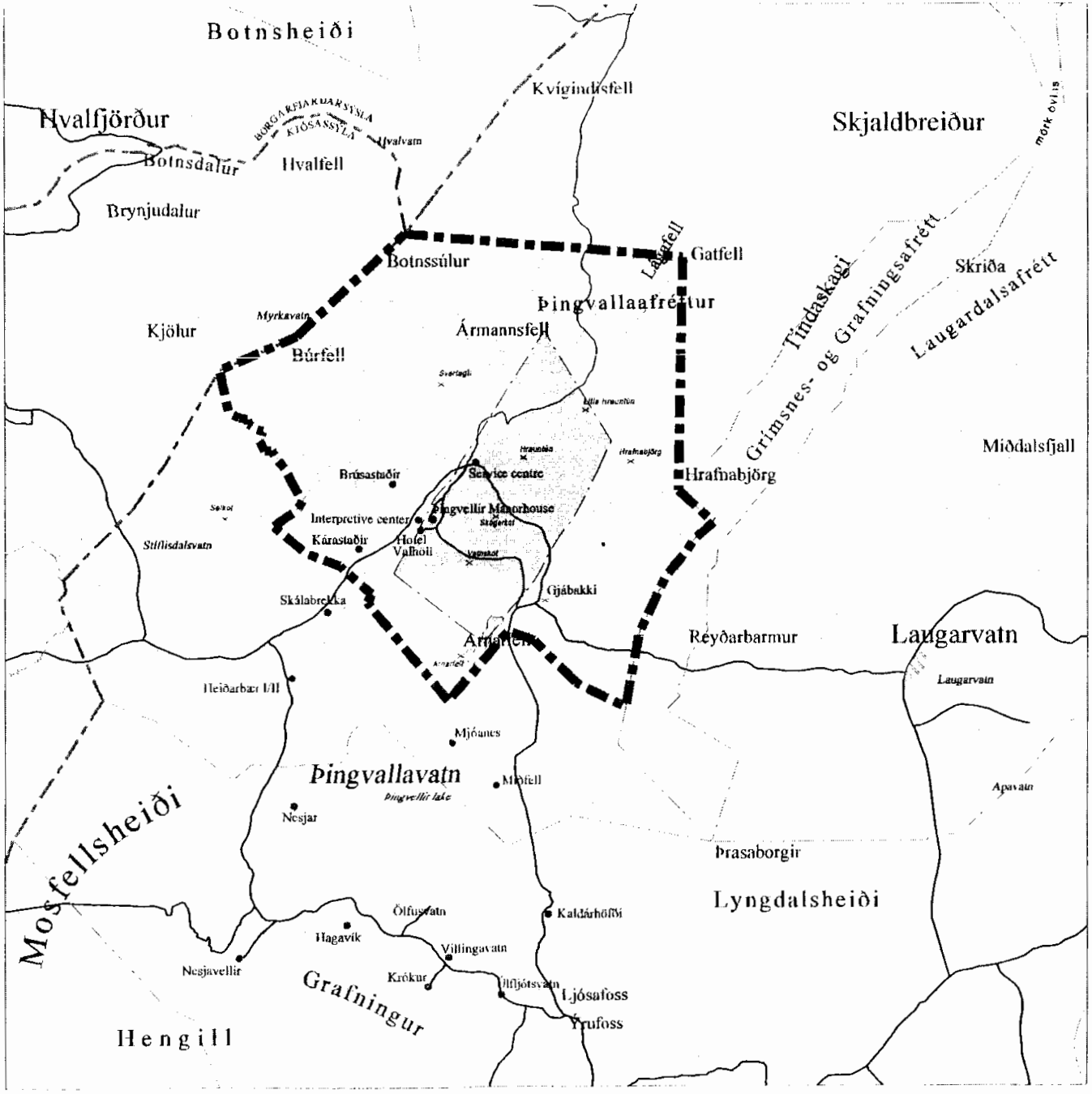
- Institute of Freshwater Fisheries
- Institute of Natural History
- Kópavogur Natural History Museum
- Landssamband hestamannafélaga [Equestrian Federation]
- Landsvirkjun [National Power Company]
- Landvernd – National Association for the Protection of the Icelandic Environment
- Laxfiskar, fish biology research
- Ministry of Communications
- Ministry of Education and Culture
- National Church of Iceland – Bishop's Office
- National Energy Authority
- National Museum of Iceland
- Nesbúð tourist services
- Páll Valsson, historian
- Parliament: information and technology department
- Placenames Institute
- Prime Minister's Office
- Rangers' Association of Iceland
- Reykjavík angling Association
- Reykjavík Complete [City of Reykjavík]
- Reykjavík Education Service Centre
- Reykjavík Energy
- Reykjavík Excursions
- Reykjavík Museum - Árbæjarsafn
- Róbert Haraldsson, philosopher
- Saga og miðlun, cultural tourism
- Sigrún Helgadóttir, biologist
- Skálholtsskóli (church cultural and educational centre)
- Soil Conservation Service of Iceland
- South Iceland Tourist Information
- Sport Diving Club
- Storyworks
- Sumarliði Ísleifsson, historian
- Sveinn Einarsson, Ministry of Education and Culture
- Þingvellir Lake Angling Association
- Tourism Research and Consultancy
- Tourism School, Kópavogur High School
- Útivist travel club
- Vestfjarðaleið Travel

ANNEX B: MAPS

The annex contains two maps:

Map 1: Boundaries of national park

Map 2: Zoning



ÞINGVELLIR NATIONAL PARK

Map 1: Park boundaries

Þingvellir national park, a protected national shrine for all Icelanders, by law from 1928

New boundaries; Þingvellir, national park, a protected national shrine for all Icelanders, by law from 2004

County boundaries

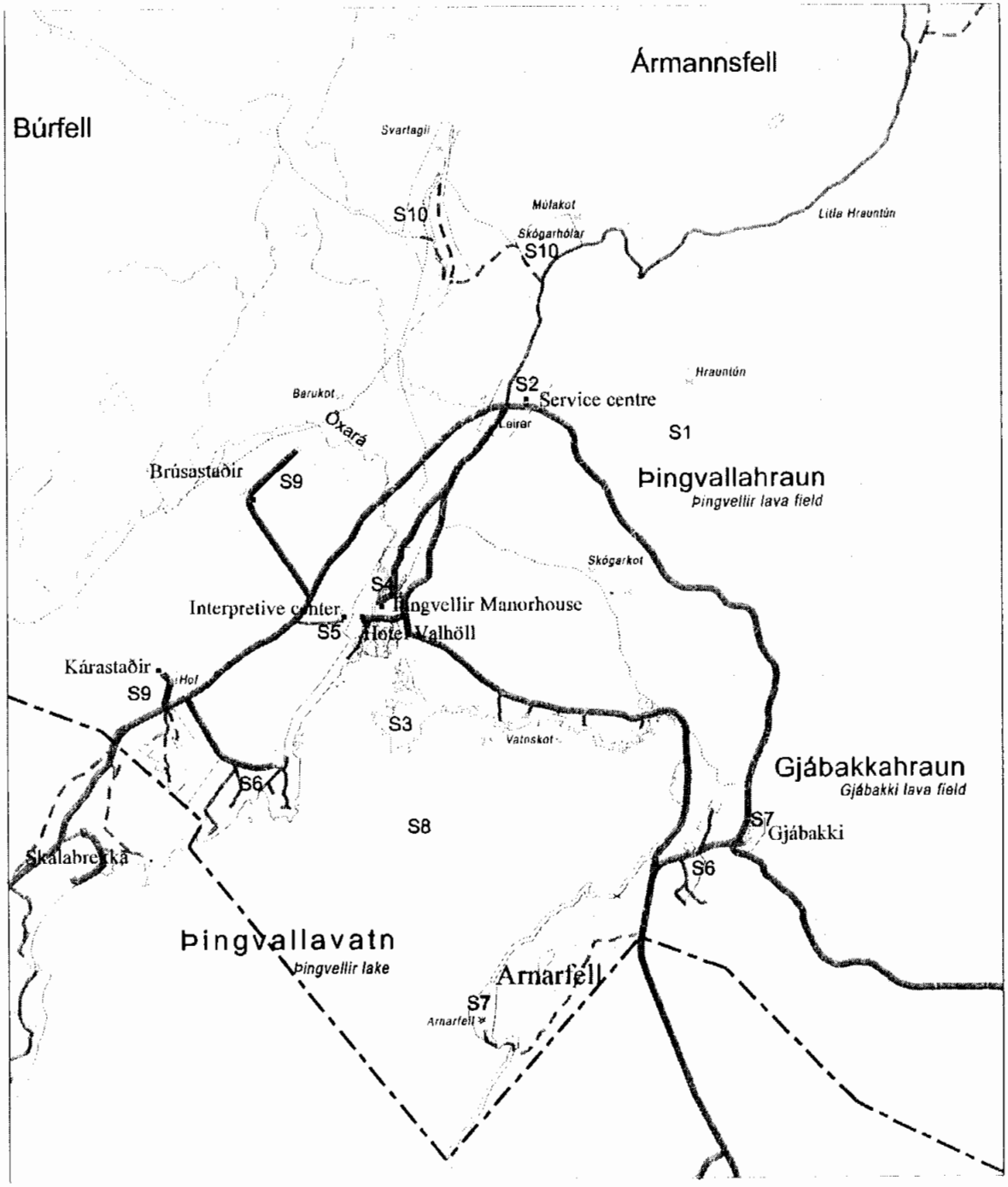
Municipal boundaries

Farm / building

Abandoned farmstead / ruin

Road

100 m contour



ÞINGVELLIR NATIONAL PARK

Map 2: Zoning

- National park boundaries
- S1: Þingvellir lava field and other leisure areas
- S2: Leirar
- S3: Lakeshore
- S4: Parliamentary site
- S5: Hakið
- S6: Summer cabin zones
- S7: Gjábakki and Arnarfell
- S8: Þingvallavatn (Þingvellir lake)
- S9: Farms
- S10: Svartagil and Skógarhólar
- Farm / building
- Abandoned farmstead / ruin
- Road
- Secondary road
- Bridle path and foothpath
- Footpath

0 1 2 3 4 5 km

Thingvellir (Iceland)

No 1152

1. BASIC DATA

State Party:	Iceland
Name of property:	Thingvellir National Park
Location:	Bláskógabyggð municipality district of Arnessysla
Date received:	29 January 2003

Category of property:

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site.* In terms of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, paragraph 39, this is a *cultural landscape*.

Brief description:

The nominated property is the open-air site of the Althing, or general assembly representing the whole of Iceland, which was held from around 930, when it was established by the Vikings, until 1798, and its hinterland, the Thingvellir National Park.

2. THE PROPERTY

Description

The core of the nominated area is the Althing or site of the general Assembly of Iceland. This site, which was used continuously from its inception around 930 until 1798, has come to have both deep historical and symbolic associations for the people of Iceland. The assembly site is against the northwestern boundary of the Thingvellir National Park, which thus provides the setting for the site to the south and east.

The property is located 49km from Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland. The national park was founded in 1930 as Iceland's first national park, one of the earliest parks in Europe. It was greatly enlarged in the 1950s and further extended in 1998. It now covers an area of 93sq km.

The landscape of the park is located in an active volcanic area. Its most well defined feature is a major rift, which has produced dramatic fissures and cliffs demonstrating inter-continental rifting in a spectacular and understandable way. These cliffs and rifts bound the site to the southeast and northwest. To the north, volcanic mountains rise towards the permanent icecap of Langjokull. On three sides the park is therefore enclosed by a belt of mountains and grass covered lava fields, while the remaining side to the southwest borders Lake Thingvallavatn, the north end of which lies inside the park.

A formal buffer zone is proposed against the north and west boundaries of the national park and southwest over Lake Thingvallavatn. Although there is no proposed formal Buffer Zone proposed outside the national park on the south and east sides, the nomination states that the land to the east and southeast of the Park boundaries has been designated as nature protection areas and thus is 'considered to act as a buffer zone'. The remaining area to the south of the park boundaries has designated land-use in line with the aims of the national park and thus also can be considered as a buffer zone.

The nominated property presents tangible and intangible cultural qualities and natural qualities as follows:

Tangible qualities:

i. *The remains of the site of the Althing or Icelandic General Assembly*

ii. *Remains of agricultural use of the park landscape from 18th and 19th centuries*

iii. *Thingvellir Church and adjacent farm*

iv. *The population of arctic char in Lake Thingvallavatn*

Intangible qualities:

i. *The Althing site reflects wider Medieval Germanic notions of law and authority*

ii. *The association of the Althing site and its nearby wider landscape with the notions of Icelandic identity, liberty and 'natural philosophy' which have made it a national shrine*

The remains of the site of the Althing or Icelandic General Assembly

Thingvellir means Assembly Field. It was in 930 that the Icelanders created a general Assembly or parliament, known as Althing, a two-week open-air gathering. It lasted right through until 1798. The assembly had several institutions: the Law Council, five courts and the Lawspeaker. The principle task of the Council was to 'frame the law'. The 12th century chronicles, the *Book of Icelanders* (*Islendlingabok*) describes the search for a suitable assembly site, convenient for the routes across the island. The site chosen, although towards the south of the island formed a suitable focus for the greatest concentration of the farming population.

Remains at Thingvellir include fragments of around 50 attendees' booths. Booths, built of turf and stone with a canvas roof provided temporary accommodation for those attending the assembly. They were frequently repaired or re-built on the same site. Those remaining seem to date from the 17th and 18th centuries – the final flourishing of the Assembly – and seem to have been built on top of earlier remains.

Although six excavations have been carried out at Thingvellir (see below), the site has not been thoroughly excavated. However initial research and recent (2002) trial trenches, suggests that the belowground deposits could be substantial and provide evidence dating back to the 10th century.

Although the Norse settlers colonised many countries, only in two are there remains of open-air assembly sites: in Iceland at Thingvellir, and in Britain at the Tynwald in the Isle of Man and at the Thingmount in the Lake District, Cumbria. Thingvellir is the most extensive and complete.

Remains of agricultural use of the park landscape from 18th and 19th centuries

The hinterland of the Althing was agricultural land on which the prosperity of the island depended. No one now lives in what is now the National Park; three farms in the area when the park was established were bought out and the houses and buildings gradually abandoned. The last residents left in the 1960s.

The park landscape contains abundant remains of structures associated with earlier agricultural use of the land, such as houses, outhouses and sheep pens, surrounded by their small subsistence homefields for arable crops and perhaps hay, and a network of tracks linking the farms to each other and to the Assembly site on which they converged. The vast open expanses of land around the enclosed fields was grazing land – for the sheep and cattle of the farms but also to be used by the horses of those attending the Assemblies.

There are the remains of six farms, a summer farm or *sheiling*, a chapel and a brew-house. It is surmised that most of the remains date from the 18th and 19th centuries, although documentary evidence for specific settlements such as the Grimsstadir farm goes back to the 10th century. It seems quite likely that the farms were rebuilt many times on the same site, so that what survives reflects a much earlier land-use pattern probably dating back to the great Age of Settlement 870-930, and thus linking the landscape to the prolonged use of the Assembly site.

The park landscape is therefore a relict cultural landscape, providing ample evidence for the way the landscape was husbanded over the past 1000 years, and for the close relationship between the Assembly site and the farmed landscape, which supported the inhabitants of the island.

Thingvellir Church and adjacent farm

The present Thingvellir Church, a protected building, dates from the 1850s, but it is on the site of a much larger church dating from the early 11th century. The neighbouring Thingvellir Farm is a relatively modern building in classic Icelandic form, which now serves as a country residence for the President of Iceland.

The population of arctic char in Lake Thingvallavatn

The nominated property displays a very strong interaction between natural and cultural factors. One of the key natural features put forward in the nomination is the population of four types of Arctic char found in Lake Thingvallavatn.

Reflection by the Althing site of wider Medieval Germanic notions of law and authority

The Norse settlers who colonised Iceland in the 9th and 10th centuries from Scandinavia, Britain and Ireland brought with them a system of governance that prevailed at the time amongst Germanic peoples in northern Europe – an assembly of free and armed men who passed and controlled laws, a leader referred to as a king who took the lead in times of war, and the ability of farmers to choose which chieftain they followed. In Iceland as the settlers found an empty land they were able to develop a society that persisted in essence for centuries. The Assembly site is now a tangible reminder of this Germanic system that survived in Iceland while elsewhere it changed and adapted as the settlers intermingled with existing populations.

Thingvellir's pivotal association with mediaeval Germanic law and governance thus has a far-wider significance than within Iceland.

The 'new' society that evolved in Iceland is also seen by some to be the first European State in the 'New World' and a precursor to those later established on the west of the Atlantic.

The association of the wider landscape near the Althing site with notions of Icelandic identity, liberty and 'natural philosophy'

The interplay between Thingvellir's landscape, with its dramatic contrasts between cliffs, fissures, lava fields and grassy plains, and its history, has given the area a pivotal role in the national consciousness. It has come to be seen as the kernel of Iceland and an icon for the nation. Thingvellir's role in the governance of the island for 800 years has developed into a wider association with ideals of liberty and natural philosophy, so much so that the area is now seen as possessing a sacred quality – the home of the national spirit.

History

Iceland appears to have been unpopulated when Nordic peoples arrived in the 9th century – part of a mass westward migration from Scandinavia, Britain and Ireland. Settlement begun around 870 and Iceland is considered to have been fully settled by around 930, the time between those two dates being known as the Age of Settlement.

At around the same time, the Nordic migration reached the Faroe Islands and Greenland. In all three places national assemblies of free and armed mean were established in line with Germanic traditions, but unlike other settlements in already populated countries, national leaders or kings who could lead in times of war, were not established – largely because it seems the islands offered strategic protection.

In Iceland, the Althing or main Assembly lasted initially for two weeks a year and was held, as in all Germanic Societies outdoors. Its role was to set and maintain the laws and resolve disputes in the laws themselves. The laws were seen as a covenant between free men, a sort of social contract. These laws were written down in 1117-8 and have been preserved in 12th century manuscripts.

The Commonwealth, as this early society was known, was a loose association of the country's principal chieftains. No centralised authority existed – the governing institutions defined people's rights, it did not enforce them. Its ideals of laws and power, that power was by nature restricted and laws defining that power had emerged over generations by mutual agreement, were heralded in the Icelandic sagas written between the 12th and 13th centuries.

By the early 13th century the administrative structure was beginning to disintegrate in the face of clashes between the country's most powerful leaders.

At the time of the exodus from Norway and other parts of Europe, royal power in those countries was still quite weak. Over the following three hundred years, royal power grew to be much more effective to the extent that by the

13th century a country's strength was seen to lie in being within the control of a strong monarch. Iceland choose to align itself with the Norwegian monarchy in 1262-4, but with the chieftains largely retaining their independence.

Between 1262 and 1319 the administrative structure was amended to give the king and his officials the right to enforce laws and to allow the king to appoint the Law Council. It still however retained it right to legislate.

In 1662 'Absolutism' (i.e. absolute control by the king) was introduced in Iceland, which meant that the role of the Law Council was substantially reduced. It did still adopt laws in limited areas up until 1700. However within fifty years after this the legislative powers of the Althing had finally disappeared and by the end of the 18th century meetings of the Assembly were a mere shadow of what they had once been. After an earthquake damaged the assembly site in 1789, the Althing was moved to Reykjavik where it met until it was finally abolished in 1800.

The ideals of the early Commonwealth, as written down in the sagas, greatly influenced those who in the 19th century begun to campaign for a free and sovereign Iceland. Poets and authors who took up the theme saw Thingvellir as a place where the 'soul' and 'spirit' of the Icelandic nation resided. Similarly artists were inspired to paint not just the place but evocations of the 'noble' systems of justice associated with it.

This nationalistic awakening coincided with similar feelings across Europe and a growing awareness of landscape as spiritual asset. Icelandic sagas were translated and gained popularity elsewhere in Europe. Iceland came to be seen as the repository of Nordic culture and more and more tourists started to make pilgrimages to Thingvellir.

In 1930, to coincide with the millennial celebrations of the establishment of the Althing, the Icelandic government formally recognised the significance of Thingvellir by establishing it as a national park, one of the first in Europe.

Management regime

Legal provision:

The nominated property is protected by the 1928 *Law on the Thingvellir National Park* (No.59/1928), which came into force when the National Park opened in 1930. This established the Thingvellir National Park Commission, which has overall responsibility for the management of the Park.

All archaeological remains in Iceland are protected under the 2001 *National Heritage Act* (No. 107/2001). The Archaeological Preservation Agency has been set up to administer this law.

The *National Planning and Building Act* (No. 73/1997, as revised by No 135/1997 and No. 58/1999) establishes a comprehensive land-use planning system analogous to those in force in the Nordic countries and the United Kingdom. Protection of the nominated property and its buffer zone is included in the Regional Plan for the Central Highlands, as well as the plans of the Municipalities of Bláskógabyggð and Grimsnes & Grafningur.

Historic buildings are covered by the *National Architectural Heritage Act* (No. 104/2001) and are administered by the National Architectural Heritage Board. Thingvellir Church is the only building within the National Park protected under this law.

Nature conservation is covered by the *Nature Conservation Act* (No. 44/1999 and amendments).

All of these statutes contain provisions for prosecutions and penalties for transgressions that adversely impact archaeological sites and ruins, historic buildings, specific landscape types, etc and for unauthorized development projects or changes of use.

Management structure:

Overall management of the existing Park is the responsibility of the three-man Thingvellir National Park Commission. Traditionally, its members are selected from the three main political parties; the current chairman is a former Minister of Education, Culture, and Science and now Minister of Justice.

There is a full-time staff of three, headed by the Director, who has considerable experience in the field of national park management. During the tourist season (1 May to 1 September) between ten and twelve temporary wardens are employed.

Resources:

Thingvellir National Park receives funds for maintenance and management from the Treasury budget. The funding is based on an annual plan that covers both running costs and projects. Income generated on the site is retained in the park.

In addition the Thingvellir Commission funds archaeological excavation. This started in 2002 and is planned to continue until l2006.

Interpretative work in the park is sponsored by Landsbanki.

Justification by the State Party (summary)

The State Party suggests that the outstanding universal value of the property stems from a combinations of the following cultural assets:

- The site of the general assembly or Althing for the whole of Iceland, established in 930
- The association of the assembly with its exposition of Germanic Law and the 12th record of Icelandic Law – the *Grágás*
- The uninterrupted history of the Althing
- Unique reflection of mediaeval notions of law and authority
- Large area of physical remains of the Althin
- Outstanding cultural landscape of the National Park
- Peaceful change of religion in year 1000
- Inspirational landscape of Thingvellir

3. ICOMOS EVALUATION

Actions by ICOMOS

The site was visited by a joint ICOMOS/IUCN mission in August 2003.

ICOMOS has also consulted its International Scientific Committee on Historic Gardens / Cultural Landscapes.

Conservation

Conservation history:

Archaeological research in the form of excavations and survey has taken place at Thingvellir on a relatively small scale in 1880, 1920, 1957, 1986–92, 1998, and 2002. Excavation is currently in progress at the Biskupabuðir site near the church, carried out by the Institute of Archaeology, a private company.

There is an urgent need for an archaeological research programme for the Innermost Assembly Site as part of the Conservation Management Plan. This should concentrate on the recording of all visible remains and of sub-surface remains, using modern geophysical techniques such as magnetometry, resistivity surveying, ground radar, and infrared remote sensing. The most important objective should be established the how far the structures associated with the Althing extend into the landscape. Thereafter excavation should be kept to a minimum and orientated to problem solving, rather than the exposure of large areas of remains.

State of conservation:

There are virtually no significant visible remains on the ancient assembly site. There are however significant visible remains of structures, such as the large Snorrabuð and the extensive buildings around the Biskupabuðir site, along with some of the 17th and 18th century booths. There is, however, a great deal of buried evidence of the booths and other structures that provided for those who attended the annual meetings. The conservation of these elements above ground is acceptable, although the slow process of decay below ground will continue.

Care must be taken to ensure that these do not deteriorate further as a result of uncontrolled visitor access.

Thingvellir Church, and the neighbouring Thingvellir Farm, are both conserved and maintained impeccably.

Management:

The Commission published its planning strategy *Thingvellir – National Park and Environment* in 1988. This resulted in a number of interventions from 1990 onwards on the Innermost Assembly Site, designed to improve visitor access and ease pressure on the major elements of the historic site by means of the construction of footpaths, stairways, and viewing platforms.

At the present time a Conservation Management Plan is nearing completion. This is being drafted by a commercial consultancy group working closely with the Director and Interpretation Manager of the Park. This was presented in detail to the mission on 6 August 2003. In the opinion of the mission it conforms fully to the requirements of the World Heritage Committee in respect of management mechanisms and reflects current thinking on management planning. A number of modifications proposed by the mission (e.g. preparation of annual action plans; revision of main plan on a six-year cycle; need for archaeological research plan) were accepted and will be incorporated into the final plan. This was to be submitted to the Commission by the end of 2003 and the approved text sent to the Advisory Bodies and the UNESCO World Heritage Centre by 1 March 2004.

Risk analysis:

Threats identified in the nomination are:

- Development pressures:

The main development threat is the plan to 'rebuild' State Road no 365, which runs through the southern part of the park from Gjábakki in the west and continues through the buffer zone to Laugarvatn in the east. This is being put forward for traffic safety and traffic management reasons. The nomination dossier suggested that this would be done in a way tot 'minimise environmental impacts' and to 'take into account the importance of the natural and cultural heritage'.

The mission was concerned about this scheme. Subsequent to the mission it was learned that the speed limit of 50 km/h that applies to other roads within the Park (see dossier, page 64) will be increased to 90 km/h for the No. 365 Road, which will be rebuilt on a route further south so as provide a more "scenic" view of Lake Thingvallavatn.

The State Party was asked to consider proposing an alternative route outside the nominated area – see below.

- Holiday chalets:

Private chalets within the park let by the Thingvellir Commission for a ten-year period are mentioned as a possible threat but it is said that there are no plans to remove them. However it is stated that no new chalets will be allowed.

Outside the Park, chalets are visually obtrusive particularly around Lake Thingvellir – *see authenticity, threats and recommendations below.*

- Forestry:

Conifers were planted at various places the park from 1899 onwards as pioneering experiments in Icelandic forestry. Most prominent is Pine Grove around 1,000 metres north of the assembly site. The dossier mentions allowing the oldest trees to continue to prosper 'as much and as long as possible'.

The intrusiveness of these trees near to the heart of the proposed World Heritage Site would seem to call for a shorter timescale for their removal – *see authenticity and recommendations below*.

- Environmental pressures:

Subsidence of the land below the assembly site, some 3-4 metres over the past 1,000 year, creates problems with flooding from the River Öxará. Earthquakes in the area have added to this problem. Mitigation measures are being considered.

- Water quality:

One issue not addressed in detail in the dossier is the threat to the water quality of Lake Þingvallavatn. This ecosystem of the lake is very sensitive to the impact of any artificial inputs, especially nitrogen and this could be exacerbated by discharge from summer houses. Summer houses within the park have leases, which stipulate appropriate controls over use, and waste discharge. However, 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, controls over pollution are needed for all the summerhouses, not just those in the Park. *See recommendations below.*

- Visitor pressure:

The annual visitor numbers are believed to be in the neighbourhood of 300,000, 5000–6000 of them making use of the camp-site within the Park.

Tourism is seen as a major contributor to the national economy of Iceland, and there is a national campaign to increase visitor numbers. This, coupled with possible inscription on the World Heritage List, is predicted to increase visitor numbers to Thingvellir to as many as one million per year in the coming decade.

Ways of mitigating impact is addressed in the dossier. However the mission stressed the importance of provision being made for substantially increased visitor numbers in the Conservation Management Plan, a point that was accepted.

Two detailed issues need to be addressed:

- The central parking place, immediately east of the historic core, is intrusive
- A heavy concrete bridge over the River Öxará on the route in the gorge is inappropriate in such a beautiful setting. *See recommendations*

Authenticity and Integrity

Authenticity is not overall an issue at this property. The overall cultural landscape has changed little since the 10th century, and more recent buildings such as the Thingvellir Church and Farm respect traditional styles. However there are two specific aspects of the property that lack authenticity.

Contemporary "summer houses" are particularly intrusive along the western shores of Lake Thingvallavatn south-west of the Innermost Assembly Site, and there is also a scatter of them in the wider landscape to the east of the Assembly Site. In terms of design these are unexceptionable, but their presence is incompatible with the objectives of the Park.

It is understood that the plots on which these were built were made available on ten-year leases at a time when management of the Park was less rigorous than it is today. Those alongside Lake Thingvallavatn also constitute an extra cause for concern because of the possibility of pollution from sewage discharges into the Lake.
Another non-authentic element is conifer plantation within the Innermost Assembly Site, planted from 1899. The objection to these is the fact that these are non-indigenous trees: it is now established that there were no conifers on the island when the first settlers arrived in the 9th century. There is a somewhat cautious policy of the progressive felling of these conifers and their replacement with indigenous species.

Overall the nominated site can be said to have integrity – with the boundary encompassing all the necessary attributes of the Althing and its surrounding landscape.

Comparative evaluation

Although a number of medieval assembly sites are known in other European countries, particularly Norway, Thingvellir is both historically, archaeologically and symbolically the most significant.

In some other countries, the assembly sites are those of local or regional assemblies that performed a different role. The Althing as a national assembly represented the whole country and was in effect the capital of Iceland for two weeks each year when key legal and administrative decisions were made.

At Thingvellir the site has more visible remains that at other comparable sites and also it appears potentially to have very rich archaeological layers yet to be explored. No other sites show visible ruins, although mounds are extant at the Tynwald in the Isle of Man, Gulating, and Frostating in Norway, and at the Thingmount in UK.

As well as physical remains and national status, the Althing site in Iceland has come to have extra values connected with its long use, with knowledge of its governance role transmitted down the centuries in the Icelandic sagas, and through its dramatic natural setting that has changed little since the 9th century. It has thus acquired symbolic associations with Icelandic identify and with Norse culture and is perceived as a place of aesthetic appeal.

The Tynwald on the other hand, although arguably older than the Althing is heavily restored and landscaped and sits in an urban setting: it has not come to associated with feelings of identity, nor is it perceived as capturing the essence of Germanic law in a way that the Althing does. The Thingmount is largely unknown and, although in a beautiful setting, is not associated with any communal memory of its function or significance. And most of the five Norwegian *tings* are marked with later 19th and 20th century monuments.

The Althing is thus unique for its extensive built remains, its unspoilt setting and for its strong known associations with Germanic Law and Norse culture.

Outstanding universal value

General statement:

The Thingvellir National Park is of outstanding universal value for:

- The large area of physical remains of the site of the national assembly or Althing established for Iceland in 930, and which persisted in use until the 18th century.

- The association of the Althing and Thingvellir with Germanic Law and governance, an association long known and appreciated through the Icelandic sagas and the written codification of the *Grágás* Laws, and one that was strengthened in the 19th century through the independence movement and through growing awareness of landscape appreciation and its perceived association with 'natural' and 'noble' laws
- The association between the Althing and its hinterland, (now the landscape of the National Park) agricultural land which traditionally provided grazing grounds for those attending the Althing and across which tracks led to the Assembly grounds.
- The fossilised cultural landscape of the park which reflects the farmed landscape over the past thousand years through abandoned farms, fields, tracks and through association with people and events recorded in place names and archival evidence, thus documenting the settlement of Iceland, and the high natural values of this landscape
- The inspirational qualities of the Thingvellir landscape, derived from its unchanging dramatic beauty, its association with national events and ancient systems of law and governance, have given the area iconic status and turned it into the spiritual centre of Iceland

Evaluation of criteria:

The site has been nominated on the basis of *criteria iii and vi*:

Criterion iii: The Althing and its hinterland, the Thingvellir National Park, represent, through the remains of the assembly ground, the booths for those who attended, and through landscape evidence of settlement extending back possibly to the time the assembly was established, a unique reflection of mediaeval Norse/Germanic culture and one that persisted in essence from its foundation in 980 AD until the 18th century.

Criterion vi: Pride in the strong association of the Althing to mediaeval Germanic/ Norse governance, known through the 12th century Icelandic sagas, and reinforced during the fight for independence in the 19th century, have, together with the powerful natural setting of the assembly grounds, given the site iconic status as a shrine for the national.

4. ICOMOS RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation for the future

The site has a unique cultural significance to the Icelandic people as in effect a national shrine, linked to ancient traditions. This spiritual significance is closely connected to the perceived 'natural' and unchanging nature of the site and its remoteness from modern living.

In order to sustain this significance on a wide largely open site, it will be necessary to give attention to even comparatively small details of the site.

The following issues need addressing in this connection:

Plan to 'rebuild' State Road no 365:

The existing Road 365 through the eastern part of the National Park is planned to be 'improved' into a fast highway, constructed for 90 km/h traffic. Two alternative routes were being considered at the time of the mission, both of which involved about 3–5km of new or upgraded road (roughly half of this in the Park itself, and half in land to the east).

An environmental impact assessment (available only in Icelandic) had been prepared. 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.

Subsequent to the mission the State Party was asked to suggest alternative routes outside the nominated site. An alternative was put forward which cut through a small triangle at the southeast of the nominated site, but with the rest of the road being outside the nominated site.

ICOMOS would recommend acceptance of this route provided that the triangle of land is taken out of the nominated site, thus leaving the road either outside the nominated site or along its boundary, and that the new road does not lead to upgrading of the existing routes within the nominated area. The State Party's response to ICOMOS's view is still awaited.

The Mission also commented on the need to exercise control over the whole of Lake Thingvallavatn as a single ecosystem. The State Party was asked to extend the Buffer Zone to cover the whole of the Lake and this they have now agreed to do.

Summerhouses

The summerhouse within the park are visually intrusive and also potentially environmentally damaging, although with its seems adequate controls in place through their leases. Those around the edge of the Lake Thingvallavatn are also potential damaging to the sensitive ecology of the lake and appear to have less control in place.

It would be desirable if leases were not renewed in the park when they expire (even though this has financial implications). Furthermore stronger controls are needed for those summerhouses outside the park, which could impact on the waters of the lake within the park. In order to further control the wasters of the lake it would be desirable if the whole lake could be made part of the buffer zone.

Forestry

The impact of conifer plantations on the aesthetic qualities of the site is in place quite negative. It would be desirable for particularly areas close to the assembly site to be the subject of an eradication programme.

Recommendation with respect to inscription

That the site be inscribed on the World Heritage list as a *cultural landscape* on the basis of ***criteria iii and vi,*** subject to the following recommendations:

- A comprehensive programme of archaeological research, with emphasis on non-destructive recording which be included in the Management Plan.
- Plans should be developed for the progressive acquisition of holiday houses within the Park as and when their leases some to an end. Stricter controls should be put in place for effluent from holiday houses bordering Lake Thingvallavatn.
- A programme to remove non-indigenous conifers from the entire Park and replace them, where appropriate, by native species should be part of the Management Plan.
- The revised road scheme should be accepted subject to the conditions outlined above.
- It is recommended that the central car park at Flosagjá, on the eastern side of the Öxará, should be closed.
- The steel and concrete bridge over the Öxará river should be replaced by a lighter construction more in harmony with the landscape.

ICOMOS, March 2004

Thingvellir (Islande)

No 1152

1. IDENTIFICATION

État partie : Islande

Bien proposé : Parc national de Thingvellir

Lieu : Municipalité de Bláskógabyggð district d'Arnessysla

Date de réception : 29 janvier 2003

Catégorie de bien :

En termes de catégories de biens culturels, telles qu'elles sont définies à l'article premier de la Convention du patrimoine mondial de 1972, il s'agit d'un *site*. Aux termes de l'article 39 des *Orientations devant guider la mise en œuvre de la Convention du patrimoine mondial*, il s'agit d'un *paysage culturel.*

Brève description :

Le bien proposé pour inscription est le site en plein air de l'Althing, ou Assemblée plénière représentant l'ensemble de l'Islande, qui s'est tenu à partir de la date de son établissement par les Vikings, aux alentours de 930, jusqu'en 1798, et son arrière-pays, le parc national de Thingvellir.

2. LE BIEN

Description

Le cœur de la zone proposée pour inscription se compose de l'Althing, le site de l'Assemblée plénière de l'Islande. Ce site, utilisé continuellement depuis son établissement aux alentours de 930 jusqu'en 1798, a acquis une profonde signification, tant historique que symbolique, pour les Islandais. Ce lieu d'assemblée se trouve à la frontière nord-ouest du parc national de Thingvellir, qui sert ainsi de cadre au site au sud et à l'est.

Le bien se trouve à 49 km de Reykjavik, capitale de l'Islande. Le parc national, le premier d'Islande, a été fondé en 1930, ce qui fait de lui l'un des plus anciens d'Europe. Il fut agrandi dans les années 1950, puis à nouveau en 1998, et couvre aujourd'hui 93 km².

Le paysage du parc se trouve sur une zone volcanique active. Son trait le plus caractéristique est un grand rift qui a donné naissance à des fissures spectaculaires et à des falaises qui expliquent le processus de distension continentale de manière spectaculaire et compréhensible. Ces falaises et ces rifts délimitent le site au sud-est et au nord-ouest. Au nord, les montagnes volcaniques s'élèvent en direction de la calotte glaciaire de Langjokull. Sur trois côtés, le parc est donc fermé par une ceinture de montagnes et de champs de lave où l'herbe a poussé, tandis que le côté restant, au sud-ouest, borde le lac Thingvallavatn, dont l'extrémité nord pénètre dans le parc.

Une zone tampon officielle est proposée aux frontières nord et ouest du parc national et au sud-ouest du lac Thingvallavatn. Bien qu'aucune zone tampon officielle ne soit proposée en dehors du parc national au sud et à l'est, la proposition d'inscription indique que les terrains à l'est et au sud-est des limites du parc ont été classés zones naturelles protégées, et sont donc « considérés comme faisant office de zone tampon ». L'occupation des sols assignée à la zone restante, au sud des limites du parc, est conforme aux objectifs du parc national, et celle-ci peut donc être considérée aussi comme une zone tampon.

Le bien proposé pour inscription présente les caractéristiques culturelles et naturelles tangibles et immatérielles suivantes :

Caractéristiques tangibles :

i. *Les vestiges du site de l'Althing, ou Assemblée plénière islandaise*

ii. *Les vestiges d'usage agricole du paysage du parc aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles*

iii. *L'église de Thingvellir et la ferme adjacente*

iv. *La population d'ombles chevaliers du lac Thingvallavatn*

Caractéristiques immatérielles :

i. *L'Althing reflète les notions germaniques médiévales de la loi et de l'autorité*

ii. *Le site de l'Althing et le paysage environnant s'associent à des notions islandaises d'identité, de liberté et de « philosophie naturelle » qui en ont fait un sanctuaire national*

Les vestiges du site de l'Althing ou Assemblée plénière islandaise

Thingvellir signifie « plaines de l'assemblée ». En 930, les Islandais créèrent une Assemblée plénière, un Parlement connu sous le nom d'Althing, assemblée en plein air qui se tenait sur deux semaines. Elle dura jusqu'en 1798. Cette Assemblée comptait plusieurs institutions : le conseil législatif, cinq cours de justice et le chef, l'« homme qui dit la loi ». La principale tâche du conseil était de « définir la loi ». Les chroniques du XIIe siècle, le *Livre des Islandais* (*Islendlingabok*), décrivent la recherche d'un site d'assemblée approprié, carrefour commode entre toutes les routes qui traversaient l'île. Le site choisi, bien que situé au sud de l'île, était un lieu de rassemblement convenant à la plus grande partie de la population d'agriculteurs.

Les vestiges de Thingvellir comportent les fragments d'environ 50 cabanes en tourbe et en pierre, sous un toit de toile et destinées à abriter les participants le temps de l'Assemblée. Elles étaient fréquemment réparées ou reconstruites au même endroit. Celles qui restent semblent dater du XVIIe et du XVIIIe siècle, l'épanouissement ultime de l'Assemblée, et avoir été construites par-dessus des vestiges antérieurs.

Bien que six fouilles aient été effectuées à Thingvellir (voir ci-dessous), le site n'a pas fait l'objet de fouilles complètes. Toutefois, les premières recherches et de récentes fouilles de reconnaissance (2002) suggèrent que les dépôts souterrains pourraient être importants, avec des vestiges datant parfois du Xe siècle.

Bien que les colons nordiques aient colonisé quantité de pays, seuls deux conservent encore les vestiges de sites d'assemblée à ciel ouvert : l'Islande, à Thingvellir, et la Grande-Bretagne, avec le Tynwald sur l'île de Man et le Thingmount, dans la Région des lacs, en Cumbria. Thingvellir est le plus vaste et le plus complet.

Vestiges d'usage agricole du paysage du parc aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles

L'arrière-pays de l'Althing était constitué de terres agricoles dont dépendait la prospérité de l'île. Personne ne vit aujourd'hui dans ce qui est désormais le parc national ; trois fermes situées dans la zone d'établissement du parc ont été rachetées, et les maisons et bâtiments progressivement abandonnés. Les derniers résidents sont partis dans les années 1960.

Le paysage du parc abrite de nombreux vestiges des structures associées à l'usage agricole antérieur des terrains, comme les maisons, les annexes et les enclos à moutons, entourées par de petits champs de subsistance destinés aux cultures arables et peut-être au foin, et un réseau de voies reliant les fermes les unes avec les autres et avec le site de l'Assemblée, en direction duquel elles convergeaient. Les vastes étendues autour des champs clos étaient des pâturages, pour les moutons et le bétail des fermes, mais accueillaient aussi les chevaux des membres de l'Assemblée.

Il subsiste des vestiges de six fermes, d'une ferme d'été ou *sheiling*, d'une chapelle et d'une brasserie. On suppose que la plupart de ces vestiges datent des XVIIIe et XIXe siècles, quoique les preuves documentaires de certains peuplements, tels que la ferme de Grimsstadir, remontent au Xe siècle. Très probablement, les fermes ont été rebâties à plusieurs reprises sur le même site, de sorte que ce qui subsiste reflète un schéma d'occupation des sols bien plus ancien, remontant probablement à la grande époque de la colonisation, entre 870-930, et reliant ainsi le paysage à l'utilisation prolongée du site de l'Assemblée.

Le paysage du parc est donc un paysage culturel relique, fournissant amplement la preuve de la gestion du paysage sur les 1 000 dernières années et de l'étroite relation entre le site de l'Assemblée et le paysage agricole qui assurait la subsistance des habitants de l'île.

Église de Thingvellir et ferme adjacente

L'église actuelle de Thingvellir, un bâtiment protégé, date des années 1850, mais elle se dresse en lieu et place d'une autre bien plus grande, datant du début du XIe siècle. La ferme voisine de Thingvellir est un bâtiment relativement moderne de forme islandaise classique, qui sert aujourd'hui de maison de campagne au président islandais.

La population d'ombles chevaliers du lac Thingvallavatn

Le bien proposé pour inscription présente une très forte interaction entre facteurs naturels et culturels. L'un des principaux traits naturels mis en avant dans la proposition d'inscription est la population de quatre types d'ombles chevaliers que l'on trouve sur les bords du lac Thingvallavatn.

Expression des notions germaniques médiévales de loi et de l'autorité dans le site de l'Althing

Les colons nordiques qui ont colonisé l'Islande aux IXe et Xe siècles, venus de Scandinavie, de Grande-Bretagne et d'Irlande, ont amené avec eux le système de gouvernement qui prévalait à l'époque parmi les peuples germaniques d'Europe du Nord : une assemblée d'hommes libres et armés, qui promulguaient et contrôlaient les lois, un chef, le roi qui prenait la tête des armées en temps de guerre, et la possibilité pour les fermiers de choisir le chef qu'ils allaient suivre. En Islande, les colons qui trouvèrent une terre inhabitée purent développer une société dont l'essence perdura pendant des siècles. Le site de l'Assemblée est désormais un rappel tangible de ce système germanique qui survécut en Islande tandis qu'ailleurs il évoluait et s'adaptait, au fur et à mesure du mélange entre les colons et les populations autochtones.

L'association essentielle de Thingvellir avec la loi et le gouvernement germanique du Moyen Âge a donc une importance qui s'étend bien au-delà de l'Islande.

La « nouvelle » société apparue en Islande est également considérée par certains comme le premier État européen du « Nouveau Monde » et comme un précurseur de ceux qui furent plus tard établis à l'ouest de l'Atlantique.

L'association du paysage autour du site de l'Althing avec les notions islandaises d'identité, de liberté et de « philosophie naturelle »

L'interaction entre le paysage de Thingvellir, avec son contraste spectaculaire entre falaises, fissures, champs de lave et plaines herbeuses, et son histoire a donné à cette région un rôle pivot dans la conscience nationale. Il est devenu le noyau de l'Islande et une icône pour la nation tout entière. Le rôle qu'a joué pendant 800 ans Thingvellir dans le gouvernement de l'Islande s'est développé dans le cadre d'une association plus vaste avec des idéaux de liberté et de philosophie naturelle, tant et si bien que cette région est désormais considérée comme un lieu quasi sacré, recueil de l'esprit de la nation.

Histoire

L'Islande semble avoir été inhabitée à l'époque où les peuples nordiques arrivèrent au IXe siècle – dans le cadre d'une migration massive en direction de l'ouest venue de Scandinavie, de Grande-Bretagne et d'Irlande. Le peuplement a commencé aux alentours de 870 et l'Islande est considérée comme ayant été entièrement colonisée aux environs de 930, l'intervalle entre ces deux dates étant connu comme « le temps de la colonisation ».

À peu près à la même époque, la migration nordique a atteint les îles Féroé et le Groenland. Dans ces trois lieux, des assemblées nationales d'hommes armés et libres ont été établies dans la tradition germanique mais, contrairement à ce qu'on a pu constater dans les pays déjà peuplés, on n'instaura pas de chefs nationaux ou rois capables de mener la bataille en temps de guerre, essentiellement parce que les îles semblaient offrir une protection stratégique.

En Islande, l'Althing, ou Assemblée plénière, durait à l'origine deux semaines par an et se tenait, comme dans toutes les sociétés germaniques, en plein air. Il avait pour rôle de fixer et de maintenir les lois et de trancher les différends au sein des textes de loi eux-mêmes. Les lois étaient vues comme un accord entre hommes libres, une sorte de contrat social. Elles furent consignées par écrit en 1117-1118 et ont été préservées sous la forme de manuscrits du XIIe siècle.

Le Commonwealth, nom de cette société primitive, était une association libre des principaux chefs du pays. Il n'existait pas de pouvoir centralisé – les institutions gouvernantes définissaient les droits du peuple, mais ne les faisaient pas appliquer. Ses idéaux en matière de lois et de pouvoir – un pouvoir limité par nature et des lois qui, pour le définir, émergeaient au fil des générations, par accord mutuel - étaient chantés dans les sagas islandaises écrites entre le XIIe et le XIIIe siècle.

Au début du XIIIe siècle, la structure administrative commença à se désintégrer, face aux conflits entre les chefs les plus puissants du pays.

À l'époque de l'exode de Norvège et d'autres régions d'Europe, le pouvoir royal dans ces pays restait assez faible. Dans les trois siècles qui suivirent, il grandit jusqu'à devenir beaucoup plus efficace, tant et si bien que, au XIIIe siècle, la force d'un pays était synonyme de contrôle d'un monarque fort. L'Islande choisit de s'aligner sur la monarchie norvégienne en 1262-1264, les chefs conservant largement leur indépendance.

Entre 1262 et 1319, la structure administrative fut amendée pour donner au roi et à ses officiels le droit de faire appliquer les lois et pour permettre au roi de nommer le conseil législatif. Toutefois, il conserva son droit de légiférer.

En 1662, l'« absolutisme » (c'est-à-dire le pouvoir absolu du monarque) fut introduit en Islande, d'où une diminution non négligeable du rôle du conseil législatif, qui continua pourtant d'adopter des lois jusqu'en 1700, mais dans certains domaines seulement. Cependant, dans les cinquante ans qui suivirent, les pouvoirs législatifs de l'Althing finirent par disparaître et, à la fin du XVIIIe siècle, les réunions de l'Assemblée n'étaient plus que l'ombre de ce qu'elles avaient jadis été. En 1789, après un tremblement de terre qui endommagea le site, l'Althing fut transféré à Reykjavik, où il se réunit jusqu'à son abolition en 1800.

Les idéaux du Commonwealth des débuts, exprimés dans les sagas, ont grandement influencé ceux qui, au XIXe siècle, commencèrent à faire campagne pour une Islande libre et souveraine. Les poètes et les auteurs qui reprirent ce thème voyaient Thingvellir comme le lieu abritant l'« âme » et l'« esprit » de la nation islandaise. De même, les artistes étaient inspirés non seulement par le paysage, mais par les évocations des « nobles » systèmes de justice qui y étaient associés.

Cet éveil nationaliste coïncidait avec une vague similaire en Europe, et à une prise de conscience croissante de la valeur spirituelle du paysage. Les sagas islandaises furent traduites et gagnèrent en popularité dans d'autres pays d'Europe. L'Islande commença à être considérée comme dépositaire de la culture nordique, et de plus en plus de touristes commencèrent à se rendre en pèlerinage à Thingvellir.

En 1930, pour coïncider avec les célébrations du millénaire de l'établissement de l'Althing, le gouvernement islandais a officiellement reconnu l'importance de Thingvellir en en faisant un parc national, l'un des premiers en Europe.

Politique de gestion

Dispositions légales :

Le bien proposé pour inscription est protégé par la *loi sur le parc national de Thingvellir* de 1928 (n° 59/1928), entrée en vigueur à l'ouverture du parc, en 1930, et qui a mis sur pied la Commission du parc national de Thingvellir, chargée de la gestion globale du parc.

Tous les vestiges archéologiques en Islande sont protégés en vertu de la *Loi sur le patrimoine national* de 2001 (n° 107/2001). L'Agence de conservation archéologique a été créée pour administrer cette loi.

La *loi de planification et de construction nationale* (n° 73/1997, révisée par les lois n° 135/1997 et n° 58/1999), établit un système complet de planification de l'occupation des sols analogue à ceux en vigueur dans les pays nordiques et au Royaume-Uni. La protection du bien proposé pour inscription et de sa zone tampon est incluse dans le plan régional des Central Highlands, ainsi que dans les plans des municipalités de Bláskógabyggð et de Grimsnes & Grafningur.

Les bâtiments historiques sont couverts par la *loi sur le patrimoine architectural national* (n° 104/2001) et sont administrés par le Conseil du patrimoine architectural national. L'église de Thingvellir est le seul édifice protégé par cette loi dans le parc national.

La conservation naturelle est couverte par la *loi sur la conservation de la nature* (n° 44/1999 et amendements).

Tous ces textes contiennent des dispositions stipulant des poursuites et des amendes en cas de transgressions ayant un impact néfaste sur les sites et ruines archéologiques, les bâtiments historiques, les divers types de paysage, etc., ainsi qu'en cas de projets de développement sans autorisation ou de changements d'usage.

Structure de la gestion :

La gestion globale du parc existant est de la responsabilité de la Commission du parc national de Thingvellir, composée de trois personnes. Traditionnellement, ses membres sont choisis dans les trois principaux partis politiques ; le président actuel est un ancien ministre de l'Éducation, de la Culture et des Sciences et est aujourd'hui ministre de la Justice.

Le personnel se compose de trois personnes à temps plein, avec à sa tête le Directeur, dont l'expérience dans le domaine de la gestion des parcs nationaux est considérable. Pendant la saison touristique (du 1er mai au 1er septembre), entre dix et douze gardes intérimaires sont employés.

Ressources :

Le parc national de Thingvellir reçoit des fonds pour l'entretien et la gestion du budget du ministère des Finances. Le financement repose sur un plan annuel couvrant à la fois les coûts de fonctionnement et les projets. Le parc conserve les recettes générées par le site.

De surcroît, la commission de Thingvellir finance les fouilles archéologiques, commencées en 2002 et qui devraient se poursuivre jusqu'en 2006.

Landsbanki parraine les travaux d'interprétation dans le parc.

Justification émanant de l'État partie (résumé)

L'État partie suggère que la valeur universelle exceptionnelle du bien provient de l'association des caractéristiques culturelles suivantes :

- Le site de l'assemblée plénière d'Islande, ou Althing, établie en 930
- L'association de l'assemblée avec la loi germanique et le 12e registre de la loi islandaise – le *Grágás*
- L'histoire ininterrompue de l'Althing
- Une image unique des notions médiévales de la loi et de l'autorité
- Les vestiges physiques de l'Althing sur une grande aire
- Le paysage culturel exceptionnel du parc national
- Le changement de religion pacifique en l'an 1000
- Le paysage de Thingvellir qui a inspiré bien des artistes

3. ÉVALUATION DE L'ICOMOS

Actions de l'ICOMOS

Une mission conjointe ICOMOS/UICN s'est rendue sur le site en août 2003.

L'ICOMOS a également consulté son Comité Scientifique International sur les jardins historiques / paysages culturels.

Conservation

Historique de la conservation :

Des recherches archéologiques sous forme de fouilles et d'études ont eu lieu à Thingvellir, à relativement petite échelle, en 1880, 1920, 1957, 1986-1992, 1998 et 2002. Des fouilles sont actuellement en cours sur le site de Biskupabuðir, à proximité de l'église, sous la direction de l'Institut d'archéologie, une société privée.

Un programme de recherches archéologiques pour le site central de l'Assemblée s'impose de toute urgence, dans le cadre du plan de gestion de la conservation, qui devrait se concentrer sur l'inventaire de tous les vestiges visibles et souterrains à l'aide des techniques géophysiques modernes : magnétométrie, étude de la résistivité, radar au sol et détection à distance par infrarouges. L'objectif le plus important devrait être d'établir à quelle distance les structures associées à l'Althing s'étendent dans le paysage. Par la suite, les fouilles devraient être maintenues au strict minimum et axées sur la résolution des problèmes plutôt que sur l'exposition de larges étendues de vestiges.

État de conservation :

Il n'y a pratiquement aucun vestige significatif visible sur le site de l'ancienne assemblée. Cependant, on en trouve quelques-uns, comme le grand Snorrabuð et les importants bâtiments autour du site de Biskupabuðir, ainsi que certaines des cabanes du XVIIe et du XVIIIe siècle. Il existe toutefois un grand nombre de vestiges enfouis des cabanes et autres structures d'accueil des participants aux réunions annuelles de l'assemblée. La conservation des éléments en surface est acceptable, mais le lent processus de dégradation va se poursuivre sous la surface.

Il faut faire attention à ce qu'un accès incontrôlé des visiteurs n'entraîne pas de plus amples détériorations.

L'église de Thingvellir et la ferme voisine de Thingvellir sont toutes deux dans un état de conservation et d'entretien impeccable.

Gestion :

La Commission a publié en 1988 sa stratégie de planification, *Thingvellir – Parc national et environnement*, d'où un certain nombre d'interventions à partir de 1990 sur le site central de l'Assemblée, conçues

pour améliorer l'accès des visiteurs et alléger la pression sur les principaux éléments du site historique par la construction d'allées, d'escaliers et de plates-formes panoramiques.

Actuellement, l'élaboration du plan de gestion de la conservation, rédigé par un cabinet-conseil travaillant en étroite collaboration avec le directeur et le responsable de l'interprétation du parc, touche à sa fin. Il a été présenté en détail à la mission le 6 août 2003. De l'avis de celle-ci, il est pleinement conforme aux exigences du Comité du patrimoine mondial en ce qui concerne les mécanismes de gestion et reflète la pensée actuelle en matière de planification de la gestion. Plusieurs modifications proposées par la mission (préparation de plans d'action annuels, révision du plan principal tous les six ans, besoin d'un plan de recherche archéologique, par exemple) ont été acceptées et seront incorporées au plan final. Celui-ci devait être soumis à la Commission d'ici à la fin de l'année 2003, et le texte approuvé devait être alors envoyé aux instances consultatives et au Centre du patrimoine mondial de l'UNESCO avant le 1er mars 2004.

Analyse des risques :

Les menaces identifiées dans le dossier de proposition d'inscription sont les suivantes :

Pressions de développement : La principale menace de développement concerne le plan de « reconstruction » de la route nationale n°365, qui traverse la partie sud du parc à partir de Gjábakki à l'ouest et continue à travers la zone tampon jusqu'à Laugarvatn, à l'est, avancée pour des raisons de sécurité et de gestion de la circulation. Le dossier de proposition d'inscription suggérait que cela serait fait de façon à « minimiser les impacts environnementaux » et à « prendre en compte l'importance du patrimoine naturel et culturel ».

La mission s'est dite préoccupée par ce projet. Après la mission, on a appris que la limitation de vitesse de 50 km/h applicable aux autres routes dans le parc (voir dossier, page 64) passerait à 90 km/h pour la route n° 365, qui sera reconstruite sur un trajet plus au sud pour fournir une vue plus « pittoresque » du lac Thingvallavatn.

Il a été demandé à l'État partie de considérer la possibilité de proposer une route alternative qui se situerait en dehors de la zone proposée pour inscription– *voir ci-dessous.*

Chalets de vacances : Des chalets privés loués dans le parc par la Commission de Thingvellir pour des baux de dix ans sont mentionnés comme une menace possible, mais il n'y aurait aucun projet de suppression. Toutefois, il est indiqué qu'aucun nouveau chalet ne sera autorisé.

En dehors du parc, les chalets constituent une gêne visuelle, particulièrement autour du lac Thingvellir – *voir authenticité, menaces et recommandations ci-dessous.*

Sylviculture : Des conifères ont été plantés à divers endroits du parc à partir de 1899, dans le cadre d'expériences pionnières dans la sylviculture islandaise, dont la plus éminente est Pine Grove, à quelque 1 000 m au nord du site de l'Assemblée. D'après le dossier, les arbres les plus vieux seront autorisés à continuer de pousser « autant que possible et le plus longtemps possible ».

Or le caractère intrusif de ces arbres à proximité du cœur du site du Patrimoine mondial proposé semblerait plutôt inciter à leur abattage à plus ou moins court terme – *voir authenticité et recommandations ci-dessous*.

Pressions environnementales : L'affaissement du terrain en deçà du site de l'assemblée, de 3-4 mètres dans les mille dernières années, crée des problèmes d'inondations par la rivière Öxará, un problème que les tremblements de terre ont accentué. Des mesures sont envisagées pour y pallier.

Qualité de l'eau : Le dossier omet de traiter en détail une menace, celle qui pèse sur la qualité de l'eau du lac Thingvallavatn. L'écosystème du lac est en effet très sensible à l'impact d'apports artificiels, notamment l'azote, et cela pourrait être accentué par les déversements des chalets d'été. À l'intérieur du parc, ces derniers disposent de baux qui stipulent des contrôles appropriés sur l'utilisation et sur l'élimination des déchets. Toutefois, il existe de plus plusieurs centaines de chalets d'été sur les rives en dehors du parc. Le lac étant un système commun avec une partie du site proposé pour inscription, les contrôles sur la pollution sont nécessaires pour tous les chalets d'été, et non pas seulement pour ceux du parc. *Voir recommandations ci-dessous.*

Pression des visiteurs : Le nombre annuel de visiteurs est estimé à 300 000, dont 5 000-6 000 qui utilisent le site de campement dans le parc.

Le tourisme est considéré comme un apport majeur à l'économie nationale islandaise, et il existe une campagne nationale pour augmenter le nombre des visiteurs. Cela, associé à la possible inscription sur la Liste du patrimoine mondial, devrait selon les prévisions augmenter le nombre des visiteurs de Thingvellir dans la décennie à venir, peut-être jusqu'à un million par an.

Des méthodes pour en atténuer les conséquences sont abordées dans le dossier de proposition d'inscription. Toutefois, la mission a souligné l'importance de prévoir cette augmentation substantielle du nombre de visiteurs dans le plan de gestion de la conservation, un point qui a été accepté.

Deux questions détaillées doivent être traitées :

- Le parc de stationnement central, immédiatement à l'est du cœur historique de la zone, est envahissant.

- Un pont de béton massif enjambant l'Öxará, sur la route dans les gorges, est inapproprié dans un cadre aussi beau. *Voir recommandations.*

Authenticité et intégrité

L'authenticité, globalement, n'est pas un problème pour ce bien. Le paysage culturel a peu changé depuis le Xe siècle, et les édifices plus récents comme l'église et la ferme de Thingvellir respectent les styles traditionnels. Cependant, deux aspects spécifiques du bien manquent d'authenticité.

Les « chalets d'été » contemporains sont particulièrement envahissants sur la rive occidentale du lac Thingvallavatn, au sud-ouest du site central de l'Assemblée, et d'autres sont aussi éparpillés dans le paysage à l'est du site de l'Assemblée. En termes de conception, ils n'ont rien d'exceptionnel, mais leur présence est incompatible avec les objectifs du parc.

Il apparaît que les parcelles sur lesquelles ils ont été construits ont été mises à disposition dans le cadre de baux de dix ans, à une époque où la gestion du parc était moins rigoureuse qu'elle ne l'est aujourd'hui. Ceux qui se trouvent sur les bords du lac Thingvallavatn constituent un motif supplémentaire d'inquiétude à cause de la possibilité de pollution par les déversements d'eaux usées dans le lac.

L'autre élément non authentique est la plantation de conifères à partir de 1899 sur le site central de l'assemblée, l'objection reposant sur le fait qu'il s'agit d'essences non autochtones : il est en effet établi aujourd'hui qu'il n'existait pas de conifères sur l'île à l'époque de l'arrivée des premiers colons, au IXe siècle. Il y a une politique prudente d'abattage progressif de ces conifères et de remplacement de ceux-ci par des espèces indigènes.

Dans l'ensemble, on peut dire que le site proposé pour inscription possède une intégrité dans la mesure où il comprend tous les éléments caractéristiques de l'Althing et de son paysage environnant.

Évaluation comparative

Bien que plusieurs sites d'assemblée médiévale soient connus dans d'autres pays d'Europe, notamment en Norvège, Thingvellir est à la fois du point de vue historique, archéologique et symbolique le plus significatif.

Dans certains autres pays, les sites d'assemblée sont ceux d'assemblées locales ou régionales assumant un rôle différent. L'Althing, en tant qu'assemblée nationale, représentait tout le pays et était de fait, deux semaines chaque année, la capitale de l'Islande, le lieu où se prenait des décisions juridiques et administratives primordiales.

À Thingvellir, le site possède plus de vestiges visibles que les autres sites comparables ; de surcroît, il possède de très riches couches archéologiques restant à explorer. Aucun autre site ne présente de ruines visibles, quoiqu'il subsiste des tertres au Tynwald dans l'île de Man, à Gulating et à Frostating en Norvège et qu'un tertre à gradins s'élève au-dessus du sol au Thingmount au Royaume-Uni.

Outre les vestiges physiques et le statut national, le site de l'Althing en Islande a acquis des valeurs supplémentaires, reliées à la durée de son usage, à la connaissance de son rôle gouvernemental transmis au fil des siècles dans les sagas islandaises, et à son cadre naturel spectaculaire, qui a peu changé depuis le IXe siècle. Il a ainsi acquis des associations symboliques avec l'identité islandaise et avec la culture nordique, et il est perçu comme un lieu d'une grande beauté.

Le Tynwald, par ailleurs, quoique sans doute plus ancien que l'Althing, a été lourdement restauré et redessiné ; de plus, il s'inscrit dans un cadre urbain : il n'est pas associé à un sentiment d'identité nationale, non plus qu'à l'essence de la loi germanique comme c'est le cas avec l'Althing. Le Thingmount est largement inconnu et, bien qu'inscrit dans un environnement magnifique, il n'est associé à aucune mémoire commune de sa fonction ou de son importance. Et la plupart des cinq *tings* norvégiens comprennent des monuments de la fin du XIXe siècle et du XXe siècle.

L'Althing est donc unique par l'importance de ses vestiges construits, son environnement intact et les fortes associations avec la loi germanique et la culture nordique qu'on lui connaît.

Valeur universelle exceptionnelle

Déclaration générale :

Le parc national de Thingvellir est d'une valeur universelle exceptionnelle pour :

- La grande zone de vestiges physiques du site de l'assemblée nationale ou Althing établie pour l'Islande en 930, et qui est demeurée en usage jusqu'au XVIIIe siècle ;

- L'association de l'Althing et de Thingvellir avec la loi et le système de gouvernement germanique, une association connue depuis longtemps au travers des sagas islandaises et la codification écrite des lois dans le *Grágás,* renforcée au XIXe siècle par le mouvement indépendantiste et la sensibilité croissante au paysage et à ce qui est perçu comme son association avec des lois « naturelles » et « nobles » ;

- L'association entre l'Althing et son arrière-pays (aujourd'hui le paysage du parc national), les terres agricoles où paissaient traditionnellement les montures des participants à l'Althing et traversées par des chemins menant au lieu de l'assemblée ;

- Le paysage culturel relique du parc, qui reflète le paysage cultivé pendant les mille dernières années par des fermes, champs, pistes abandonnés et par l'association avec des hommes et des événements consignés dans les noms de lieu et les archives, documentant ainsi le peuplement de l'Islande, et les précieuses valeurs naturelles de ce paysage ;

- L'inspiration qu'a apportée le paysage de Thingvellir de par sa beauté spectaculaire et immuable, son association avec des événements nationaux et d'anciens systèmes de lois et de gouvernement, ont conféré à cet endroit le statut d'une icône et en ont fait le centre spirituel de l'Islande.

Évaluation des critères :

Le site a été proposé pour inscription sur la base des *critères iii et vi* :

Critère iii : L'Althing et son arrière-pays, le parc national de Thingvellir, représentent, par les vestiges du lieu de l'assemblée, les cabanes des participants et les preuves dans le paysage d'un peuplement remontant peut-être à

l'époque de la constitution de cette assemblée, une illustration unique de la culture nordique/germanique médiévale, dont l'essence a perduré depuis sa fondation en 980 jusqu'au XVIIIe siècle.

Critère vi : La fierté de l'association entre l'Althing et le système de gouvernement médiéval germanique/nordique connue par les sagas islandaises du XIIe siècle, renforcée pendant la lutte pour l'indépendance au XIXe siècle et, associée à la force de l'environnement naturel de l'assemblée, a conféré au site le statut d'une icône en tant que sanctuaire pour les Islandais.

4. RECOMMANDATIONS DE L'ICOMOS

Recommandations pour le futur

Le site revêt pour le peuple islandais une importance culturelle unique, qui en fait *de facto* un sanctuaire national, associé à des traditions séculaires. Cette valeur spirituelle est étroitement liée au caractère immuable et perçu comme « naturel » du site, ainsi qu'à son éloignement de la vie moderne.

Pour maintenir cette importance sur un vaste site ouvert, il sera nécessaire de prêter attention à des détails relativement mineurs du site.

À cet égard, les questions suivantes doivent être traitées :

Plan de « reconstruction » de la route nationale n° 365 : La nationale 365 actuelle, qui traverse la partie est du parc national, doit être « améliorée » pour devenir une voie rapide, construite pour une circulation à 90 km/h. Deux projets de routes ont été étudiés durant la mission lesquels impliquaient environ 3 à 5 km de voie neuve ou améliorée (environ la moitié dans le parc lui-même, et l'autre moitié à l'est).

Une étude d'impact environnemental (disponible en islandais uniquement) a été préparée. Les avantages d'une nouvelle route en termes d'amélioration de l'accès sont clairs, mais une pratique convenable à l'heure actuelle favoriserait des alternatives pour éviter totalement une région si sensible.

Suite à la mission, il a été demandé à l'État partie de suggérer des routes alternatives situées en dehors des délimitations du bien. Une nouvelle route a été proposée qui couperait une petite zone triangulaire au sud-est du site proposé pour inscription, le reste de la route se situant à l'extérieur de la zone proposée pour inscription.

L'ICOMOS recommanderait d'accepter le tracé de cette route si la zone triangulaire est exclue du site proposé pour inscription, laissant ainsi la route soit à l'extérieur du site soit à la limite de celui-ci et si cette nouvelle route ne conduit pas à la rénovation de routes existantes dans la zone proposée pour inscription. La réponse de l'État partie à la suggestion de l'ICOMOS n'a pas encore été reçue.

La mission a également souligné la nécessité d'exercer un contrôle sur l'ensemble du lac Thingvallavatn en tant qu'écosystème unique. Il a été demandé à l'État partie d'étendre la zone tampon afin de couvrir l'ensemble du lac, ce qu'il a maintenant accepté de faire.

Chalets d'été : Les chalets d'été dans le parc sont gênants visuellement et potentiellement préjudiciables à l'environnement, même si il semble que des contrôles appropriés aient été stipulés dans les baux de location. Ceux qui se trouvent sur les rives du lac Thingvallavatn représentent également une nuisance potentielle pour l'écosystème sensible du lac, et semblent en outre moins bien contrôlés.

Il serait souhaitable de ne pas reconduire les baux dans le parc à leur expiration (en dépit des implications financières). En outre, des contrôles plus stricts sont nécessaires pour les chalets d'été extérieurs au parc, susceptibles d'avoir un impact sur les eaux du lac dans le parc. Pour mieux contrôler les déversements dans le lac, il serait souhaitable d'intégrer la totalité du lac à la zone tampon.

Sylviculture : L'impact des plantations de conifères sur les qualités esthétiques du site est assez négatif. Il serait souhaitable de mettre en place un programme d'abattage, particulièrement dans les zones à proximité du site de l'Assemblée.

Recommandation concernant l'inscription

Que, sous réserve des recommandations ci-dessous, le bien soit inscrit sur la Liste du patrimoine mondial en tant que *paysage culturel* sur la base des ***critères iii et vi***:

- Un vaste programme de recherche archéologique, mettant l'accent sur un inventaire non destructeur, devrait être inclus dans le plan de gestion ;
- Des plans devraient être élaborés en vue du rachat progressif des chalets de vacances dans le parc à l'expiration de leur bail. Des contrôles plus stricts devraient être mis en place en ce qui concerne le déversement des eaux usées des chalets de vacances bordant le lac Thingvallavatn ;
- Un programme d'abattage des conifères allogènes dans tout le parc et de remplacement par des espèces autochtones quand cela sera approprié devrait être intégré au plan de gestion ;
- Le tracé révisé de la route devrait être accepté selon les conditions mentionnées ci-dessus.
- Il est recommandé que le parc de stationnement central à Flosagjá, sur la rive orientale de l'Öxará, soit fermé.
- Le pont d'acier et de béton sur l'Öxará devrait être remplacé par une construction plus légère, plus en harmonie avec le paysage.

ICOMOS, mars 2004

WORLD HERITAGE NOMINATION - IUCN TECHNICAL EVALUATION

ÞINGVELLIR 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, Reykjavik; Jónasson P. M. (ed.), 1992, **Thingvallavatn** Oikos Press (this contains numerous scientific papers); Lugmayr H., 2002, **The Althing at Thingvellir** Edda Media and Publishing, Reykjavik; Þorsteinsson B., 1986, **Thingvellir – 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 km^2, 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. COMPARISION 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:

<u>The existence of some plantations of exotic coniferous planting</u>

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.

<u>Plans to upgrade a road through part of the nominated site</u>

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

Þingvellir 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 Þingvellir as a natural site in due course. Without prejudice to the evaluation of any such future nomination, the case may be made stronger if Þingvellir 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

Þingvellir 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.

CANDIDATURE AU PATRIMOINE MONDIAL - ÉVALUATION TECHNIQUE DE L'UICN

Parc National de Þingvellir (Islande) ID N° 1152

Le parc national de Þingvellir a été proposé pour inscription en tant que « paysage culturel »

1. DOCUMENTATION

i) Littérature consultée: Daníelsson H., 2001, Þingvellir Edda Media and Publishing, Reykjavik; Jónasson P. M. (ed.), 1992, Thingvallavatn Oikos Press (this contains numerous scientific papers); Lugmayr H., 2002, The Althing at Thingvellir Edda Media and Publishing, Reykjavik; Þorsteinsson B., 1986, Thingvellir – Iceland's National Shrine Örn og Örlygur Publishing House.

ii) Consultations: 8 évaluateurs indépendants. La mission a aussi rencontré les autorités du parc national, les représentants du Musée national d'Islande, le ministère de l'Environnement, le ministère de l'éducation, la science et la culture, le Directeur de l'Agence pour l'environnement et l'alimentation de l'Islande, le président du Comité islandais pour l'UNESCO, le président et les membres de la Commission du parc national de Þingvellir et plusieurs universitaires et scientifiques.

iii) Visite du site: Henry Cleere (ICOMOS) et Adrian Phillips (UICN), août 2003

2. RÉSUMÉ DES CARACTÉRISTIQUES NATURELLES

Le Parc national de Þingvellir (Catégorie de gestion II de l'UICN) est spectaculairement situé sur la dorsale médio-atlantique formée par la fissuration des plaques tectoniques d'Amérique du Nord et d'Europe. Le site est limité au sud-est et au nord-ouest par des sillons parallèles. Ce phénomène se produit lorsque des champs de lave très récents s'effondrent au moment de la séparation des plaques sous-jacentes, créant un cas classique de «graben» ou «bloc effondré». La subsidence se poursuit avec des séismes périodiques. Au nord, on peut voir des montagnes volcaniques qui s'élèvent en direction de la calotte glaciaire permanente de Langjökull.

La majeure partie du drainage de la région vers le nord-est est souterraine mais la rivière Öxara coule à travers le centre historique du parc. Elle rejoint de grandes sources froides issues du sous-sol pour se déverser, au sud-ouest, dans le lac Þingvallavatn - le plus grand lac d'Islande. Ce système lacustre présente aussi un intérêt scientifique considérable car il abrite quatre formes distinctes d'ombles chevaliers qui ont évolué depuis la fin de l'âge glaciaire, il y a seulement 10 000 ans.

Le décor de Þingvellir contribue à donner au site son caractère peu commun et sa beauté – ainsi qu'une unité particulière. Ces qualités ont d'autant plus d'importance à la lumière du rôle clé joué par Þingvellir dans l'histoire de l'Islande depuis plus de 1000 ans. C'est là que presque tous les grands événements qui ont marqué ce pays ont eu lieu (voir le rapport de l'ICOMOS).

L'importance de Þingvellir pour les Islandais a été reconnue par la législation qui a créé là, en 1928, le premier parc national de l'Islande et un des tout premiers parcs d'Europe. Le parc est entré en vigueur en 1930; sa superficie a été beaucoup agrandie dans les années 1950 et à nouveau en 1998. La zone actuelle du parc, 92,7 km^2, est proposée pour inscription sur la Liste du patrimoine mondial et comprend l'extrémité nord-est du lac Þingvallavatn.

Il convient de noter trois points, en particulier, à propos du Parc national de Þingvellir:

- il illustre très clairement un lien extrêmement solide entre des facteurs naturels et culturels. Les valeurs naturelles sont certainement plus importantes dans ce site que dans la plupart des paysages culturels inscrits sur la Liste du patrimoine mondial;
- les valeurs naturelles sont très bien documentées: elles ont trait non seulement à l'histoire et à l'archéologie de la région mais aussi à sa géologie, son drainage, sa faune, sa flore et au système lacustre, qui ont fait l'objet de plus d'une centaine d'articles scientifiques;
- le site a une importance culturelle unique pour les Islandais pour lesquels il est en réalité un sanctuaire national; cela devrait se refléter dans les très hautes normes de gestion et de conception mais il faut, naturellement, tenir compte de la volonté du public d'accéder à la région.

3. COMPARAISON AVEC D'AUTRES SITES

Le texte de la proposition prétend qu'il n'y a qu'un seul autre endroit sur terre où l'on puisse observer en surface une fissure tectonique: Djibouti, en Afrique de l'Est (bien qu'il existe, naturellement, beaucoup d'autres exemples spectaculaires de formation de fossés d'effondrement).

4. INTÉGRITÉ

4.1 Limites

Les limites du site proposé étant celles du Parc national, le site est beaucoup plus grand que le cœur historique lui-même qui ne couvre que quelques hectares. Cela se justifie pour les raisons suivantes:

- la proposition ne concerne pas uniquement un site historique mais un paysage culturel qui a d'importantes valeurs naturelles;
- elle respecte l'unité du paysage créé par la formation de failles de deux côtés ainsi que des montagnes et un système lacustre sur le troisième et le quatrième côtés;
- elle fournit une unité rationnelle aux fins de la gestion;
- il y a des liens fonctionnels entre le cœur historique et la région alentour, lieu de convergence d'un réseau de routes et zone importante pour le pâturage des chevaux de ceux qui venaient autrefois assister à l'assemblée de Þingvellir.

La zone tampon qui entoure le site proposé comprend des terres protégées contre le développement par différents plans locaux et – en certains endroits – des dispositions qui donnent au Parc national le pouvoir de mettre son veto à des activités de développement inacceptables. Compte tenu de la longue histoire de la dégradation des terres en Islande, qui est surtout la conséquence du défrichement de la végétation naturelle et des pressions de pâturage des moutons, ces sauvegardes sont importantes pour garantir la protection du bassin versant autour de Þingvellir. Elles devraient bientôt être renforcées par une nouvelle stratégie nationale de conservation de la nature. Tout cela semble généralement suffisant, notamment parce qu'une bonne partie du bassin versant est pratiquement inutilisable à des fins économiques.

Il n'est pas évident qu'il y ait suffisamment de garanties permettant de protéger la qualité du lac Þingvallavatn. Une petite partie du lac seulement se trouve dans le site proposé mais il s'agit naturellement d'une seule unité écologique, et tout problème se produisant, où que ce soit, dans le lac, pourrait avoir des incidences sur l'intégrité du site (voir aussi le paragraphe sur les questions de gestion, ci-dessous). Toutefois, selon les recommandations des Organes consultatifs, l'État partie a décidé, dans une lettre datée du 15 mars 2004, d'inclure le reste du lac dans la zone tampon du site.

4.2 Gestion et ressources

Le Parc national de Þingvellir est administré au titre de sa propre législation (tous les autres parcs d'Islande sont gérés dans le cadre du réseau de parcs nationaux) qui crée un conseil de trois parlementaires faisant office de comité de gestion. Cela reflète l'importance du site pour la nation islandaise. Tout en séparant le parc, dans une certaine mesure, des autres aires protégées du pays, cela garantit un niveau élevé d'intérêt et d'appui politique et une priorité pour le financement.

La gestion quotidienne incombe au directeur du parc aidé du directeur de l'interprétation. Il y a un autre membre du personnel permanent mais 10 à 12 personnes sont employées, pendant les mois d'été, comme gardes temporaires pour aider à gérer le grand nombre de visiteurs. Le personnel semble extrêmement professionnel mais pourrait peut-être bénéficier de contacts plus étroits avec d'autres personnes travaillant dans le même domaine, par exemple dans le cadre de la Commission mondiale des aires protégées (CMAP) de l'UICN.

Le budget de fonctionnement annuel, financé par le gouvernement, s'élève à USD 800 000 et, en plus, des projets spécifiques sont financés de temps en temps (par exemple, le nouveau centre d'accueil des visiteurs). La Banque nationale d'Islande a joué le rôle de mécène pour les activités d'interprétation destinées aux visiteurs. Le financement du parc semble globalement adéquat.

Les dispositions de planification de la gestion sont en préparation. En 1988, la Commission de Þingvellir a adopté un plan de développement pour le parc et la zone tampon. Avec l'aide de consultants, des travaux sont en cours pour préparer, d'une part, un «plan magistral» (c'est-à-dire un plan d'occupation des sols requis au niveau statutaire) et, d'autre part, un plan de gestion révisé pour tenir compte, entre autres, d'un éventuel statut du patrimoine mondial. Le plan de gestion devrait être adopté d'ici mai 2004, au plus tard, avant la réunion du Comité du patrimoine mondial. Il sera soutenu par un plan d'application ou des plans de travail annuels subséquents. Ces dispositions, qui tiennent compte de la participation des acteurs, semblent appropriées bien qu'il semble y avoir quelque confusion dans la terminologie du plan.

4.3 Menaces

Bien que la population de l'Islande soit relativement faible et que le Parc national de Þingvellir occupe une zone relativement importante, il y a quelques problèmes de gestion complexes. Certains proviennent du fait que la plupart des visites sont concentrées sur un petit secteur du Parc national, c'est-à-dire le cœur historique du site d'assemblée interne qui nécessite une gestion très rigoureuse. D'autres problèmes proviennent de la sensibilité extrême de l'écosystème subarctique aux impacts, notamment anthropiques. D'autres encore sont la conséquence d'un statut de Parc national et peut-être de bien du patrimoine mondial.

4.3.1 Problèmes de gestion relatifs au tourisme

Le Parc national de Þingvellir reçoit environ 300 000 visiteurs par an, plus que la population du pays. En fait, 68% de tous les étrangers qui se rendent en Islande visitent le site tout comme les Islandais eux-mêmes. Ils se déplacent en voiture ou en autobus et il y a, actuellement, trois parkings pour ces véhicules: l'un surplombe le site, près du centre d'accueil des visiteurs, au sud-ouest, le deuxième est immédiatement à l'est du cœur historique et le troisième, environ 400 m au nord. En outre, il y a d'autres places de parking près du centre des services qui comprend les magasins, les restaurants, etc., à environ 1,5 km au nord-est du cœur historique. Enfin, les automobilistes sont libres de se garer ailleurs, par exemple le long des berges du lac mais il ne semble pas qu'ils soient nombreux à le faire.

Durant les mois d'été, il y a parfois plusieurs centaines de personnes simultanément dans le site. Un réseau de sentiers a été tracé pour la visite du site à pied et doté de points de vue et de sentiers de bois recouvrant les sols sensibles. La plupart des visiteurs viennent de l'ouest, de Reykjavik, et arrivent au centre d'accueil des visiteurs qui dispose d'une présentation

d'interprétation excellente. À partir de là, il y a une vue superbe sur le site. La promenade descendant dans une gorge formée de blocs de lave éboulés est réellement spectaculaire.

Il convient de résoudre les problèmes suivants:

- Le parking central, qui se trouve juste à l'est du cœur historique est importun et inutile; il affecte directement l'intégrité de la zone et devrait être éliminé. Il y a deux autres zones de parking à proximité et si l'on met en place des services de parking et de transport imaginatifs en limitant l'accès aux personnes handicapées, il n'y aura pas de perte d'accès du public.

- Un pont sur la rivière Öxara, sur le chemin d'accès piétonnier dans la gorge, offense le regard; il est parfaitement déplacé dans ce magnifique paysage d'importance historique (il surplombe un étang dans lequel des femmes furent noyées en punition, au Moyen-Âge). Il s'agit d'un ouvrage lourd, vestige de béton du temps où les véhicules empruntaient cette route. Ce pont devrait être remplacé par une structure plus légère.

- Il y a un cimetière national près de la petite église de Þingvellir; toutefois, deux personnes seulement y ont été enterrées et cela, il y a de nombreuses années. L'endroit est vaste et de conception quelque peu maladroite. Il semble qu'il y ait des doutes quant à son avenir possible. Cette question devrait être résolue dans le plan de gestion.

- Actuellement, l'information est transmise aux visiteurs dans une présentation audiovisuelle, au centre d'accueil des visiteurs et dans des brochures, ainsi que par des promenades guidées. Il est prévu d'installer une signalisation dans le site, ce qui serait utile à condition que les panneaux soient conçus et positionnés avec sensibilité. L'utilisation de matériel électronique pour des promenades autoguidées doit être encouragée.

4.3.2 Problèmes de gestion relatifs à la pollution

À cet égard, la principale préoccupation a trait aux menaces qui pèsent sur la qualité de l'eau du lac de Þingvallavatn. Cet écosystème est très sensible aux incidences de tout apport artificiel, en particulier d'azote. Il est donc préoccupant qu'il y ait de nombreuses résidences d'été autour du lac dont plusieurs, selon certaines informations, gèreraient très mal le déversement des effluents. L'urine, en particulier, peut augmenter le niveau d'azote. Il y a relativement peu de résidences d'été dans le Parc national et celles-ci sont soumises à des baux de 10 ans qui exigent un contrôle approprié des déversements de déchets et d'eaux usées. Toutefois, il vaudrait mieux que ces baux ne soient pas renouvelés lorsqu'ils arriveront à expiration.

En outre, il y a plusieurs centaines de résidences d'été sur les berges du lac, en dehors du parc. Le lac étant une unité dont une partie se trouve dans le site proposé, il est essentiel d'introduire et d'appliquer des contrôles stricts de la pollution pour toutes les résidences d'été et pas seulement celles du parc. Il convient d'ajouter que le parc déploie des efforts considérables pour éviter la pollution causée par les visiteurs aux points de concentration dans le site (par exemple, en extrayant les eaux usées des latrines tant dans le centre d'accueil des visiteurs que dans le centre de services).

4.3.3 Problèmes de gestion relatifs au parc national et au statut potentiel de bien du patrimoine mondial

Ayant présent à l'esprit, d'une part l'importance des questions d'intégrité dans un bien du patrimoine mondial éventuel et, d'autre part, l'importance de maintenir ou de restaurer des systèmes naturels dans les aires protégées de Catégorie II telles que le Parc national de Þingvellir et enfin, les normes générales de bonnes pratiques associées avec les aires protégées, deux autres problèmes se posent:

<u>L'existence de plantations de conifères exotiques</u>

Dans la mesure du possible, celles-ci devraient être éliminées (sauf la zone de plantation de mémorial qui devrait être respectée). Des arbres indigènes tels que le sorbier des oiseaux, le

bouleau et le saule de l'Arctique devraient être plantés à leur place. Un programme d'éradication est actuellement en cours et devrait se poursuivre malgré l'opposition du public. L'éducation permanente relative à l'importance des systèmes naturels est nécessaire pour obtenir une meilleure compréhension du public. Le bassin versant aussi devrait être protégé contre ce genre de plantations dont on a établi qu'elles augmentent le ruissellement de l'azote et l'acidification des systèmes aquatiques.

Plans d'amélioration d'une route à travers un secteur du site proposé
Il est prévu «d'améliorer» la route 365 qui traverse le secteur est du Parc national pour en faire une grande route rapide prévue pour une circulation à 90 km/h. Trois routes alternatives sont actuellement à l'étude: deux supposeraient la construction de 3 à 5 km de route nouvelle ou améliorée (en gros la moitié dans le parc lui-même et la moitié dans des terres se trouvant à l'est). À la limite occidentale, les routes alternatives rejoindraient la route 36 qui traverse le parc à Gjabakki, où une limite de 50 km/h est en vigueur. Une troisième solution a été proposée par l'État partie dans une lettre à l'ICOMOS datée du 2 février 2004 dans le cadre de laquelle une section de 1 km de la route traverserait l'extrémité sud du site proposé. L'ICOMOS a proposé d'exclure cette extrémité sud de la proposition mais, au moment où nous rédigeons ce rapport, l'UICN n'a pas eu connaissance de la décision finale de l'État partie à cet égard.

Diverses raisons sont données afin de créer une nouvelle route « toutes saisons » et rapide, en lieu et place de la route «d'été» existante. Il s'agit d'améliorer le trafic touristique entre Reykjavik et les sites populaires de Gullfoss et Geysir à l'est, de réduire le temps mis par les utilisateurs des résidences d'été à l'est du parc pour rejoindre Reykjavik, d'améliorer les communications dans la nouvelle municipalité de Bláskógabyggð et d'améliorer l'accès à la capitale pour les horticulteurs qui résident à l'est du parc.

La proposition de construction de ce qui est en réalité une nouvelle route dans un secteur du parc et du site proposé est inquiétante; notamment parce que les travaux devaient commencer au printemps 2004, avant que le Comité du patrimoine mondial n'examine la proposition. Cela semble être le cas alors même qu'une étude d'impact sur l'environnement (disponible seulement en islandais) a été préparée et est actuellement à l'étude. Les avantages d'une nouvelle route du point de vue d'un accès amélioré sont clairs mais les bonnes pratiques de l'heure favorisent les solutions épargnant une zone sensible. Si la construction a lieu, il est inévitable que le trafic augmentera à travers le parc - tout en évitant le cœur historique plus sensible. La nouvelle route 365 proposée sera, en principe, incompatible avec le bien du patrimoine mondial car elle traversera les sillons orientaux (plaque européenne) et sera source de pollution accrue; elle pourrait aussi augmenter les pressions en faveur de l'amélioration de la route 36 et de l'augmentation de la limite de vitesse.

Le mieux serait que la route ne soit pas construite et que l'on étudie la possibilité de construire d'autres routes autour du parc. Toutefois, si la décision est prise de la construire, il faudrait imposer dans tout le parc, une limite de vitesse de 50 km/h, interdire l'accès à tout véhicule transportant des matières dangereuses, et ne pas améliorer la route 36. En d'autres termes, s'il faut construire cette route, sa conception et sa gestion doivent respecter les qualités particulières du site.

5. AUTRES COMMENTAIRES

Le Parc national de Þingvellir n'a pas été proposé au titre des critères naturels. La question de savoir s'il faudrait qu'il le soit a été soulevée durant l'évaluation ainsi que par plusieurs évaluateurs. Il semble que les autorités islandaises souhaitent proposer Þingvellir en tant que site naturel, en temps voulu. Sans préjudice de l'évaluation d'une telle proposition future, les chances seraient probablement plus fortes si Þingvellir faisait partie d'une proposition sérielle illustrant l'importance de la dorsale médio-atlantique dans son ensemble – une caractéristique mondiale présente dans plusieurs îles ou archipels autres que l'Islande.

6. RÉSUMÉ DE L'UICN

Le Parc national de Þingvellir est proposé en tant que paysage culturel. La région a des qualités naturelles impressionnantes qui font partie intégrante des valeurs du site, notamment :

- le site proposé présente un fossé d'effondrement intercontinental, de manière spectaculaire et facile à comprendre;
- le site est de grande beauté naturelle avec une diversité impressionnante de formes topographiques;
- il existe une interaction étroite entre les aspects naturels et culturels/historiques du site; et
- le lac Þingvallavatn présente un intérêt limnologique considérable.

En outre, à quelques exceptions près, le site est bien géré et maintient actuellement son intégrité générale. L'UICN recommande néanmoins de demander à l'État partie de résoudre les questions suivantes concernant la gestion du site:

- l'emplacement du parking central, immédiatement à l'est du cœur historique, devrait être fermé;
- le pont de béton sur la rivière Öxara devrait être remplacé par une structure plus légère;
- le plan de gestion devrait être plus clair quant à l'avenir du cimetière national;
- il serait bon de concevoir et positionner avec la plus grande rigueur les panneaux d'information à l'intérieur du site;
- les contrôles devraient être plus stricts afin d'éviter les éventuels déversements polluants des résidences d'été qui se trouvent autour du lac Þingvallavatn;
- il serait bon d'envisager de ne pas renouveler les baux des résidences d'été qui se trouvent à l'intérieur du parc;
- le programme d'élimination des conifères exotiques devrait se poursuivre; et
- les propositions d'amélioration de la route 365 devraient être remises en question. Si c'est impossible, une limite de vitesse de 50 km/h devrait être imposée à tout le trafic qui traverse le Parc national et des sauvegardes devraient s'appliquer au transport de produits dangereux; décision devrait aussi être prise de ne pas améliorer la route 36.

7. CONCLUSION

L'UICN a indiqué à l'ICOMOS que d'après son évaluation des valeurs naturelles du Parc national de Þingvellir, ce site mérite d'être inscrit sur la Liste du patrimoine mondial en tant que paysage culturel.