

Europe's largest national park established

Icelanders undertake their biggest-ever nature conservation project

Vatnajökull National Park in Iceland, at 12,000 km² the largest national park in Europe, was formally established at a ceremony held on 7 June 2008. This area is unique as nowhere else is there such a mixture of dynamic icecap and outlet glaciers, geothermal energy and frequent subglacial volcanic activity coupled with outburst floods.

Initially, the park will include some areas already under protection, for example Skaftafell and Jökulsárgljúfur National Parks, Lónsöræfi wilderness and Vatnajökull Glacier, larger than all other glaciers in Europe combined. Already measuring about 12% of the country, the parks boundaries are expected to expand in the coming months and years, and talks with landowners and municipalities are in progress. "I am very optimistic that the natural wonderlands of Langisjór and Eldgjá will become part of the park by year's end," said Þórunn Sveinbjarnardóttir, Minister for the Environment, at the opening ceremony.

New era unveiled

The Minister added that the founding of Vatnajökull National Park signals a new era of wildlife conservation in Iceland, "...a new approach and a new ideology. The natural diversity of this region is astonishing, and this grandeur is such that it could justify designation as a United Nations World Heritage Site."

The park is the single largest nature conservation project that Icelanders have ever undertaken. Moreover, it marks one of the largest economic and rural development schemes that the government has implemented in Iceland. Tourists visiting this protected area are expected to grow significantly, increasing employment and revenue opportunities for the local economy. New ideas are emerging regarding work, research, art and education based on personally exploring & experiencing the park's unique nature.

Visitor Centres are the park's core service facilities. Two already exist, and four will be added. They contain exhibitions and displays, provide information and hold various cultural events, as well as house Park Wardens. Facilities for Park Rangers will also be expanded. The development and expansion of services and facilities is scheduled for completion in five years.