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4 Automobile Authorship of Landscapes

A Biographical Vignette of Iceland's Interior

Edward Huijbens & Karl Benediktsson

Abstract
The highland interior of Iceland is a landscape transformed by practices of automotive travel. In this chapter we trace the authorship of this landscape through some biographical accounts of those who established such practices in the first half of the 20th century. We relate this history to dilemmas that are evident in the present, concerning land use and politics of nature. At the heart of these dilemmas are certain constructions of the 'freedom to travel' that sit somewhat uneasily with conservation sensibilities. Landscape biography and the notion of authorship enable a fuller understanding of such controversies than a simple mapping of interests and stakeholders.

Keywords: landscape biography, Iceland, superjeeps, travel, authorship

Introduction

On the road map you won’t drive off the edge of your known world. In space as I want to imagine it, you just might (Massey, 2005, p. 111).

[L]andscapes without authors would be like books without writers. They too might exist, but only as bindings filled with empty pages (Samuels, 1979, pp. 64-65).

In landscape studies, the idea of ‘biography’ originates in American geography (Samuels, 1979) and was primarily concerned with biographies of individual people in the (not-too-distant) past and the influence of their decisions and actions upon the landscape (see also Meredith, 1985). A biography of a landscape therefore directs attention to lives lived – not only to land formed by ‘forces’ of various kinds or gazed at with human eyes. Landscape biography, thus conceived, implies an entanglement of multiple personal histories with the ways in which places and spaces are enacted and that which enables this enactment.
Landscapes are thus never fully comprehensible from any one perspective, however informed that perspective might be. To paraphrase anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000), landscapes are worlds-in-formation, never completed but deeply implicated in the life histories of those who inhabit them:

The landscape is constituted as an enduring record of – and testimony to – the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves (Ingold, 1993, p. 152).

While a biography of a landscape thus clearly has affinities with a more general phenomenological approach to landscape (Ingold, 1993; Benediktsson and Lund, 2010), there are certain important differences. Phenomenology focuses on the lived world of concurrent experiences, whereas a biography entails an historical account, allowing for a longer time perspective. Following Roymans et al. (2009), the direction a landscape biography may take depends partially on the time-depth of the analysis. In addition, as a landscape is composed of a myriad of individual life stories, using the biography metaphor for understanding the longue-durée temporality of landscape departs considerably from the emphasis on individual biographies (cf. Bergson, 2001; Braudel, 1958). Through a myriad of life stories with varying time-depths of analysis, the coupling of archaeology and historical geography with the study of current landscapes is allowed for (Kolen, 2005, p. 14 and 18). More profoundly, the comprehension of landscapes in the biographical account does not adhere to a linear chronology of intersecting life histories, since a landscape is to be described as a plenum, i.e. an all-encompassing entity. Biography in this sense thus entails the ‘idea of a coexistence of very different “durations,” superior or inferior to “ours,” all of them in communication’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 238). Two types of duration are distinguishable, ‘… one qualitative and fusional, continuous, the other numerical and homogenous, discrete’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 484). The biographical account of the plenary landscape calls attention to precisely the qualitative, fusional and continuous nature of differing durations. Thus landscapes are allowed to remain plural and contested throughout the history of their making. In this sense the landscape

[...] does not refer to an extant thing but rather the context or the background against which particular things show up and take on significance: a mobile but more or less stable ensemble of practices, involvements, relations, capacities, tendencies and affordances (Anderson and Harrison, 2010, p. 8).
In this chapter, the idea of landscape biography is put to work through a description of an important landscape change in Iceland. This is the transformation of the central interior of the island from a landscape of fear and loathing into one of desire and reverence. This relatively recent transmutation was greatly facilitated through the actions, practices and performances of certain individuals who ‘opened up’ the interior for travel and tourism. This ‘authorship’, as we would like to conceive it, can to a large extent be attributed to the vehicles and their transmutations. This brings about a twofold approach in our chapter. Firstly, as we stay relatively close in time in this chapter, we harken back somewhat to geographer Marwyn Samuels’s (1979) original ideas behind landscape biographies, with focus on the ‘situated life stories’ that are the ‘point[s] of intersection of the mediating categories time and space’ (Simonsen, 1991, p. 430). Similar to Samuels’s original proposal, we want to elucidate an important aspect of the popular tourist destination that is today’s Iceland, by tracing the crossings between human lives and the land itself, both the ‘landscapes of impression’ (Samuels, 1979) that animated travel practices and the ‘landscapes of expression’ that were worked and reworked by these practices. Secondly, we will weave into these situated life stories that which makes possible the practices of key persons. Here we draw on the relations of those ‘trailblazers’ whose stories we recount, with the vehicles they used, and the capacities bestowed upon them through those vehicles.

We demonstrate the landscape manifestations of these practices through maps. With these we show how roads and tracks constitute the highland interior of Iceland, authored by several trailblazers through time. However, in realisation of landscape’s plenary nature, we show how these roads and tracks remain contested and thus how this is a map never completed but ongoing. It is a map on which travellers could suddenly find themselves lost.

Engaging with the Highlands

Iceland’s settlement is for the most part confined to the coast and lowlands; the interior is largely an uninhabited highland plateau. These highlands have become the stage for an increasingly intense struggle over resource use (Benediktsson, 2007 & 2008; Thórhallsdóttir, 2007a, b; Sæþórsdóttir, 2010), where interests of hydropower, domestic and international tourism, and nature conservation all lay claims to the area. Human technological capacity has facilitated an ever-increasing material impact of these activities and they have become a conspicuous part of the landscape in many places.
This has not always been so. The first part of the 20th century was pivotal for the ways in which the biography of the highland interior of Iceland has developed. Before the 1920s the highland landscapes were not subjected to great human impact – except for the drastic decline in vegetation resulting at least in part from a long history of grazing. These landscapes did not figure prominently at all in the spatial imaginings of Icelanders of their own country, although they had been traversed frequently during some periods in Iceland’s history. By the 17th century they had become more or less *terra incognita*; wilderness deemed useless and dangerous (Benediktsson, 2000). This set the tone for the perception of the highlands as wilderness as geographers Anna Dóra Sæþórsdóttir, C. Michael Hall and Jarkko Saarinen (2011) recount. They state that

\[ T \]he wilderness of Iceland is nowadays perhaps more a subjective and social *idea* than a *reality* in a natural science sense. Nevertheless, the idea of wilderness and its social construction remain important as part of the cultural economy of the Highlands and the country as a whole (Sæþórsdóttir et al., 2011, p. 269).

The transmutation of the central interior into a ‘wilderness region’ for travel and tourism did not only rest upon changed ideological associations, however, but also visceral, material, mutual encounters between people and landscapes. The first winds of change regarding direct engagements with the interior came with the arrival of Enlightenment ideals in Iceland in the middle of the 18th century, although the precise geography of the highlands remained largely unknown (Sigurðsson, 1990). Late in the 19th century, natural scientists started travelling through the highlands to gather data in order to fill in the blank spaces on the map. The most significant of these was Þorvaldur Thoroddsen, a geographer whose prolific writings brought his first-hand knowledge of the interior to the attention of the nation. Some of his writings bear witness to the ambivalence that characterised attitudes towards these landscapes:

A solemn silence reigns in Iceland’s highest and harshest wilderness areas; no sound is heard except that of water in the gullies and of the blowing wind; the birds fly silently across; they have no reason to dwell there and speed across the desert. One can say that nature is dead and fossilised… (Thoroddsen, 1908, p. 165).

Scientific curiosity may have spurred Thoroddsen’s exploration of the highlands, but his description here speaks to a certain aesthetic sensibility:
that of the sublime. That sensibility had for a century been an increasingly prominent part of the cultural construction of the highlands and was central to their emergence as a travel destination some decades later.

In 1927 the Touring Club of Iceland (Ferðafélag Íslands) was established by a group of prominent men in Reykjavík. Modelled on similar establishments in other countries, the club’s central aim was to inform Icelanders about their own country and encourage them to travel, not least in those parts that were not well known to the public (Lerner, 2006). This included the highlands, where the club established simple tourist huts in several places, promoted certain routes and supported the building of cairns – an age-old ‘landscaping’ practice – to aid in wayfinding. Nationalist sentiments building towards Iceland’s independence in 1944 added further strength to rationalist impulses to explore and chart the highlands, and dovetailed nicely with romantic ideas about travelling into the wilderness in order to experience solitude and test the limits of oneself against the forces of sublime nature. One of the first leaders of the club, Björn Ólafsson, wrote:

The task of the Touring Club is to make the Icelandic nation aware of the country’s beautiful and powerful nature. [...] The nation gets its temperament from the land. But some are stuck in the gravel [i.e. in the urban settlements] and others in remote valleys. The influence of the land is therefore uneven and it becomes one-sided (Ólafsson, 1932, quoted in Lerner, 2006, p. 28).

Travelling out of the everyday environment – to other settled regions but even more into the interior – was thus seen as a character-building exercise that would help in developing not only a love for the land, but in producing loyal subjects in a country that was heading towards full independence.

Apart from the handful of tourist huts the highland landscapes themselves were not much affected materially by these developments. However, they coincided with the advent of automobile travel. With the automobile, the aforementioned ideological construction of the highland interior gathered pace intensively. The new travel technology enabled a relatively small group of young men to establish their ‘authorship’ over the area. Over the period of some two decades, from 1930 to 1950, they laid out the tracks that have since directed the engagement of most travellers with the highlands. The concept of ‘path dependency’ – recently brought into landscape studies (Mahoney, 2000; Palang et al., 2011) – seems particularly apposite. And here personal biographies are useful and indeed necessary for understanding the landscape biography itself. We will now look closer at the personalities, motives and practices that were involved.
Establishing Authorship

The automobile arrived in Iceland – then an almost entirely roadless country, by the way – in 1904, but the technology only showed itself to be viable a decade or so later (Sigurðsson and Bjarnason, 2003). Initial roadbuilding efforts were naturally enough mostly confined to the settled lowlands (figure 4.1). The first highland route made passable for motor vehicles was the Kaldidalur route in West Iceland, opened by the Roads Administration in 1929 (Víðis, 2003). This was done in preparation for the 1000-year anniversary of Alþingi (the Icelandic parliament) in 1930, as the route had historically connected the West of the country to the fields of parliament at Þingvellir. Reaching an altitude of more than 700 m a.s.l. and only open during the summer months, this primitive mountain road was for some years the only connection for motorised travel between the southwest and the west and north of Iceland. The other major routes between the south and the north were gradually explored and opened up, although the presence of large glacial rivers substantially hampered travel.

Figure 4.1 The Icelandic road system in 1936

Most roads were only passable during summer. The central highland area is demarcated as in planning documents from 1999. The roads were digitized by Victoria Frances Taylor from a published road map (Scale: 1: 1 000 000). Map made by Karl Benediktsson
In 1930 the first attempt was made to cross Kjölur, an old route between the westernmost two of the large ice caps of central Iceland, Langjökull and Hofsjökull. The four young men who took part in the expedition all knew the basics of the route, having crossed it on horseback before (Víðis, 2003). The vehicle – a three-year old Ford – was not powerful enough (Magnússon, 1975) and the group turned back to the south having finished only the first third or so of the distance. But they had gained some first-hand knowledge of the varying conditions found in the landscapes of the highlands. Driving through stretches of reasonably flat ground covered by gravel and sand was easy, but the rough and rocky terrain of other stretches made car travel very difficult, as well as the muddy patches where remnants of vegetation were to be found.

With this experience the group of four started to prepare an even more audacious project: to cross Iceland at the very centre, between Vatnajökull and Hofsjökull. This route, known as Sprengisandur, was much less travelled than the Kjölur route, but sheep farmers provided information to fill in the substantial gaps still found on existing maps. In 1932 a first attempt was made, but it was not successful. A year later, in 1933, however, the first traverse of Sprengisandur was completed. The large river of Tungnaá was a particularly difficult obstacle, but a ferry stationed there for farmers provided a flimsy but workable solution. The group took some six days to complete the 250 km or so between the lowland farms at the northern and southern ends. Even though travelling in August, they encountered all kinds of weather en route, including fairly heavy snowfall, and judging by the standards of later times, this seems to have been a foolhardy undertaking indeed. Be that as it may: it gave the four men a formidable reputation in a nation that was rapidly developing a taste for the automobile as a way to not only get from A to B, but to experience the country's varied landscapes as tourists.

Two of the travel companions on this first automobile crossing had grown up on farms in the south of Iceland, at the very edge of the interior plateau. Their own biographies had thus been intertwined with that of these landscapes since childhood. One of these, Sigurður Jónsson frá Laug, had been instrumental in getting the Kaldidalur route cleared. The other, Einar Magnússon, was involved in the establishment of Iceland Travel (Ferðaskrifstofa Íslands) in 1932 (Magnússon, 1975). The aim was to make travels for foreigners in Iceland more affordable, so that they would not have to hire a large group of horses and assistants to venture beyond Reykjavík and the immediate southwest. This was one of the reasons for undertaking the journey, although mostly it seems to have been their own youthful
enthusiasm and willingness to test the limits of a new and unproven technology that was the driving force.

After this bold claim to the automobile authorship of the highlands, nothing much happened for a decade or more. While successful, the adventurous traverse had actually clearly shown the limits of the new technology of mobility in these unforgiving landscapes. Being rear-wheel-drive only and with a rather impotent engine, the Ford had been pushed as much as driven, and clearly this was not going to be a viable way for travelling in the interior. This was to change radically with the introduction of new vehicles during World War II (Sigurðsson and Bjarnason, 2003). British armed forces occupied the country in 1940, to be superseded by US forces in 1941. With the forces came two new types of vehicles with four-wheel drive: the light and agile Jeeps and heavier weapon-carrier trucks. Their off-road capacity did of course not go unnoticed by Icelanders. At the end of the war, many army jeeps and trucks found their way into Icelandic hands. Two of the new owners, Guðmundur Jónasson and Páll Arason, were to become especially important figures in the biography of the highlands.

Páll Arason (1915-2011) was an illustrious figure in many respects. Born in North Iceland, he became a keen nature enthusiast in his teens and wanted to pursue studies in natural history. The Great Depression put his personal biography on a different track, however, as the family could not afford to support his education (Hjálmarsson, 1994). Eventually he moved to Reykjavík to seek work as a driver, but in the 1940s he started travelling in the northern highlands together with a group of friends. One trip in particular – a hiking trip to the remote Askja volcano in the northeastern interior – seems to have been a revelatory experience. The volcanic caldera and its environs became a landscape of deep impression:

> From that moment, I always had this desire to travel in the mountains and deserted areas. It was as if I had caught a bacterial infection I could not get rid of (quoted in Hjálmarsson, 1994, p. 134).

Páll became an ardent explorer of the highlands, on foot and on horseback. As he put it himself, ‘the wilderness got hold of me’ (Arason, 1975, p. 59). At the end of the war he bought one of the army trucks and started a career as a tour operator, the first of several such operators who over the next ten to fifteen years changed the map of the highlands radically. His first tours were into the northern highlands and over Sprengisandur to the south, where tourists were carried over the river Tungnaá in a boat.
An even more important actor and landscape author was Guðmundur Jónasson (1909-1986), who founded a travel operation that still carries his name. His empire started with him buying a Dodge ¾-ton army truck in 1946, fitted out for carrying ten passengers. More trucks were soon added. What Guðmundur is still remembered for, however, is his discovery of a passable (albeit tricky) ford over the aforementioned large and fast-flowing Tungnaá. With this, the main obstacle for north-south crossings of the interior was removed. What followed was the rapid development of the so-called ‘highland safari’ – a round tour of the highlands, with tent accommodation and full catering en route. The customers were both domestic and foreign for the first years, but Icelanders themselves gradually took to travelling on their own rather than with these organised tours.

The travel of locals was also facilitated through the introduction of civilian models of the light army jeeps, developed by their American producers immediately after the war, with other car manufacturers developing their own versions. Most notable of these was the British Land Rover. The Soviet GAZ 69 also entered the stage in 1953. All these vehicles were imported to Iceland in large numbers. Farmers bought them; country doctors who had to serve large and difficult areas also acquired them. In short, they provided an ideal solution to travel in a country with a road network that was still quite primitive, even in the settled lowlands (figure 4.1). Concomitantly, these vehicles became the basis for a veritable explosion in offroad travel as they became increasingly available to people. Finding new routes became a popular sport inspired by the efforts of the trailblazers and often without much deliberation beforehand:

We often did not make a travel plan at all when we reached the highlands, but drove according to what the eye saw and what chance offered (Ólafsson, 1975, p. 173).

The inevitable result was that a network of jeep tracks soon crisscrossed the interior (figure 4.2). In a way, this entailed a ‘democratization of travel’ – in order to experience the varied landscapes of the highlands it was no longer necessary to organise costly expeditions, whether they entailed horses and guides as in former times or group tours in large, specialised trucks. Mountain travel became a popular pastime, at least for a segment of the population. Certain places in the highlands began to attract an increasing number of visitors. Among them were the geothermal locations Hveravellir (on the Kjölur route) and Landmannalaugar in the southern highlands.
With the developments described above, the budding aspirations of Icelanders with regard to the highland interior were greatly intensified. In effect, a new chapter had been opened up in the biography of the highland landscapes, with the help of the technology of automobility. This has complex implications for the landscape politics of today. After the novelty phase of the new technology, the situation remained relatively stable for some decades. Farmers and jeep owners in towns accumulated more and more knowledge of the vehicles, their possibilities and limitations.

For a good part of the year, the conditions in Iceland – especially in the highlands – are marked by the presence of snow. In addition, more than a tenth of the country is covered by glaciers. For a long time these conditions precluded the use of ordinary automobiles. Building on the particular ‘travel culture’ of exploration and freedom that had been brought about by the developments described above, some 4WD enthusiasts started modifying their vehicles in order to be able to drive on snow and ice. The basics were simple: ordinary jeeps were fitted out with extra-wide tyres and, when driving on snow, air was let out of the tyres, thereby enlarging the ‘footprint’ of the vehicles and allowing
them to float on snow. The original trial-and-error experimentation developed into sophisticated technical innovation, and eventually the ‘superjeep’ was born (Huijbens and Benediktsson, 2007 & 2009). Since the late 1980s, this has been the vehicle of choice for the most dedicated wilderness travellers, and has also become an important part of commercial tourist services.

Not only did the superjeep lead to the conquering of the ‘final frontier’ – the ice caps that had hitherto been out of reach for all but specialised snowmobiles – but it also spurred a new and popular sport: winter off-road driving. Suddenly, virtually all of Iceland’s landscapes had been claimed by automobile authorship – the whole of the interior was open and ripe for exploration and the experience of freedom.

Apart from the modified superjeeps, a great number of more mundane vehicles populates Icelandic roads. Today Iceland has one of the world’s highest rates of automobile ownership per capita (Collin-Lange and Benediktsson, 2011), unmodified jeeps and/or SUVs that can handle conditions beyond the tarmac forming a prominent part of the fleet. This adds to the number of domestic highland travellers, potential and actual. Moreover, the number of international tourists has grown rapidly (Jóhannesson et al., 2010). In addition to the organised group tours, they too have moved towards more

Figure 4.3  Prepared for war? Austrian ex-army truck in the Icelandic landscape

Photo: Karl Benediktsson
independent modes of travel, either in rental cars (including small jeeps or SUVs) or in their own vehicles brought over on the ferry from mainland Europe. In fact, the most extreme vehicles seen in the highland landscapes in summer tend to be those of Continental European tourists (figure 4.3).

Concerns over the environmental impact of these travel practices have gradually increased. Whereas no questions seem to have been asked at first about the impact of vehicle tracks on the delicate vegetation and soils, this has since become a major worry. Each summer the media carry news of some careless and clueless tourists whose vehicles have sunk up to the axles in soft pits of mud – or worse still, in the scarce and precious patches of vegetation still found in the highlands – with voluntary rescue squads having to get them out of the mess. Such incidents incite moral indignation, but while ‘off-road driving’ is strictly forbidden by law (unless the ground is frozen and covered by snow), the culpable drivers almost never have to face up to their responsibility in court. The reason is that the very definition of a road is not all too clear in Icelandic legislation. In this way, the eulogized biographies of those who established their authorship of these landscapes in the middle of the 20th century have come back to haunt the nation. Carried over into the present, the past practices of automobility provide the grounds for today’s complex and contradictory politics of landscape.

Conservation, Authority and Authorship

As mentioned above, the interior of Iceland has become a contested landscape, where groups and people who conceptualise nature in very different ways engage in often fierce ‘tournaments of value’, to use anthropologist Arjun Appadurai’s (1986) memorable phrase. Far from being a terra incognita, it is now for increasing numbers of people a source of scenic enjoyment, mental stimulation, national identity, natural purity, economic significance, or all of those.

The particular mode of engaging with the highland landscapes that is embodied in the culture of 4WD travel relates to these contests in a way that brings its own contradictions into play. First, jeep travel is lauded as an effective and democratic way for the ordinary Icelander to enjoy and appreciate these landscapes. Iceland is a country with a strong Nordic tradition of public access rights to land (almannaréttur) and the phrase ‘freedom to travel’ (ferðafreiði) has become used to highlight what the protagonists of 4WD travel see as a basic right – to be able to drive (almost) anywhere they like. Concerns with the negative impact of driving off-track in delicate nature have been met through education and campaigns organised for example by
the ‘4x4 Touring Club’ (Ferðaklúbburinn 4x4), established in 1983 (Snæland, 2008). The jeep – especially the superjeep, being a source of national pride as an example of successful innovation – can be seen as contributing, in a modern and motorised way, to the nation-building project that was at the heart of the formation of the travel clubs in the 1920s and 1930s.

Second, increasing environmental sensibilities have contributed to the designation of more protected areas – national parks and nature reserves – and the enlargement of existing ones. This relates to domestic and international tourism in a double-edged manner: increasing tourist numbers bring the need for careful management into focus, but local hopes for boosting tourism are sometimes a very prominent reason for establishing new protected areas. In any case, ideas of the purified ‘wilderness’ that have been part of the environmental movement for a long time have influenced protected area planning. In addition, the SUV has of course become an emblem in environmental circles for the unsustainable excesses of the consumer society (Vanderheiden, 2006). Managing the accessibility of motor vehicles – reining in the jeeps – has become one of the main issues in conservation planning, as will be discussed further below.

Last but not least, the building of hydropower stations in the highlands has become a hugely divisive issue. And also here there is a fraught relation with jeep culture. The research necessary for the exploitation of the hydropower research, and the building of the dams and power stations themselves, has been assisted greatly by jeep technology. It is no coincidence that the parts of the highlands with the highest density of tracks are those where most of the power stations are located, namely in the Pjórsá-Tungnaá area in the central south (cf. figure 4.2). Needless to say, the views of conservationists and the hydropower industry have diverged considerably on these matters.

All these aspects of jeep culture add their own storylines to the biography of the highland landscapes and, if further excavated, would undoubtedly reveal a host of authors and the ways in which they engaged with the highland landscapes in past, present and future. One particular recent development intrigues us in the context of this chapter. We bring it up here as a small example of how the landscape of the highlands is being authored under the auspices of the technological assemblage of the jeep, inspired by those who introduced this travel mode and left the first tracks. This is the debate around what constitutes a ‘road’. It relates to the current effort of creating a legislative setup that covers the highland interior in a comprehensive manner. The first major task in this effort has been to establish ownership of the highland interior. To this end, the government has been pursuing a litigation process with landowners around the country, establishing the
exact boundaries of the part of the highland interior that is publically owned (þjódlenda). At the same time, the National Land Survey of Iceland has been trying to establish which of the tracks, established through the years, should be shown on the map as vehicular roads. Here the aforementioned tensions between conservationists and those wanting to harness the energy potential of the highlands become evident. The former, enjoying the support of the government in power at the time when this was written, are laying claims to ever greater expanses of the highland interior and designating them as nature reserves and/or national parks. These areas are to be subjected to regulations and rules of travel, in effect limiting vehicular traffic through zoning and land use planning in favour of other modes of recreation deemed more sustainable and less harmful for vegetation and soil.

Here the recent planning of Vatnajökull National Park, designated in 2008 and Europe's largest national park, is a case in point. As part of its first conservation plan, several tracks were singled out for permanent closure, some of which had been in use for decades. This was met by an outcry by the 4x4 Touring Club and other enthusiasts of this mode of travel. On October 2, 2010, members of this club rallied in their superjeeps to a mountain pass in the highlands, Vonarskarð (which translates as ‘the Pass of Hope’), for protest. The first truck crossed this pass already in 1950. The protest group raised a hefty steel cross at the highest point (figure 4.4).

Replacing the Christian INRI on the cross were the numbers 874-2010, representing Iceland’s ‘official’ year of settlement (874 AD) on the one hand, and on the other the year marking the passing of freedom to travel, according to the protesters. The National Park Board had announced earlier in the year that the route through the pass would be closed to motorised traffic. The 4x4 Touring Club members, along with other associations of outdoor recreationists, oppose such unilateral top-down management directives and claim that the main threat to the wilderness quality of the highland interior stems from the development of hydro- and geothermal power facilities. They thus claim in effect that outdoor recreation has become trapped between those keen to develop the energy potential of the highland interior for the continued industrialisation of Iceland through the introduction of multinationally-owned aluminium smelters, and those who want to push particular notions of wilderness in the highlands. What is intriguing is the fact that those in jeeps and other forms of motorized vehicles and those making direct use of the landscapes (e.g. through hunting and fishing) have joined forces with those using the landscape for recreation and touring, in opposition to the conservation efforts. The former group wants the highlands to remain open for all kinds of travel at all times.
In diverse and sometimes contradictory ways, therefore, the authorship of the highland landscapes as wilderness in the minds of today’s Icelanders is intimately related to the history of automotive technology and the cultures of travel fostered by it. Indeed, media researcher Melissa Aronczyk (2005, p. 1) has stated that ‘[w]ithout cars, wilderness as we know it could not exist’.

Concluding Remarks

Drawing on vignettes from the situated life stories of those who blazed the highland trails of Iceland’s interior, we have sought to establish the ways in which these life stories inform and animate the on-going biography of the country’s landscapes. Through the mobile affordances of the jeep as its technology has developed, more and more areas have been opened up to the ‘freedom of travel’. This very notion now finds itself pitched in a battle of survival with competing trajectories of development. All these diverse material and mental constructions compose what is the highland interior of this subarctic island today. They are simultaneously landscapes of impression and expression (cf. Samuels, 1979).
Whilst contradictory at first glance, those arguing for the ‘freedom to travel’ to get into contact with Iceland and appreciate its landscapes do so in jeeps on tracks laid down by a number of pioneers. These again drew on the knowledge of local farmers and shepherds. But what this contradiction reveals to us is that a biographical approach lends itself well to studies of landscape history that are increasingly being called upon as support for planning and management of landscape (Palang et al., 2011). Knowledge produced through the history of automobile practices is thus not constituted by a history following a determined path to the present, but by a history which is worked through a myriad of life stories at different times, conditioned by the different technologies and material conditions of each time, in this case facilitating different modes of travel. A biographical approach thus allows a more insightful and historically conscious understanding of the present-day situation and its difficult controversies than a direct and simple mapping of interests and stakeholders, such as commonly employed in landscape and environmental management.

Today, the myths that have developed around individual travel biographies are being translated into a particular form of the freedom to travel. The landscapes of the highland interior are being animated as spaces of automotive freedom. With legislative pressures to regulate the planning of land use in the highlands, including roads and other infrastructure, those drawing on the biographies of the trailblazers feel their freedom curtailed. The map displayed in figure 4.2 gives a hint of the current state of the biography of Iceland’s interior. Efforts are constantly being made to freeze time and hold on to a landscape of yesteryear. However, those advocating the freedom of automotive travel want to be able to ‘drive off the map’ and continue as the authors of their own biographical trajectories. And with it they claim authorship over the highland landscape.

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