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**"We are doers!"**

**The social life of silence:  
Risk awareness and risk perception  
at the foot of Katla, Iceland**

Master's thesis in Social Anthropology  
Trondheim, January 2016

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*To me Iceland is sacred soil.*

*Its memory is a constant background to what I am doing. No matter that I don't make frequent references to the country; it is an equally important part of my life for all that. I may be writing about something totally unrelated, but it is still somewhere close by. It is different from anything else. It is a permanent part of my existence, even though I am not continually harping on it. I said it was a kind of background, that's right. I could also say that Iceland is the sun colouring the mountains without being anywhere in sight, even sunk beyond the horizon.*

*W. H. Auden*

*Reykjavík, April 1964*



## *Takk fyrir!*

Let it be clear, I could never have done this alone! Following, there are many people who have my greatest gratitude. First of all the people of Mýrdalur, you *are* this thesis. I hope I have managed to put appreciable words to your “silence.”

*Thank you;*

Martin - for making it easy to ask the silly questions, for slaughtering my ideas and building me up again, for emails and comments when you did not have time, for a lot of humor along the way, for trying to make me see the value of not being in control and especially for a clear and very goal oriented guidance as (finally) my supervisor during the last months.

My host family in Iceland - you are always in my heart! Thank you for including me in your family and daily life, and thank you for the patience with a confused, car wrecking, hiking-addicted Norwegian, though wanna-be Icelander. Thanks for everything, but most of all your warmth!

Heiðrún...where do I begin...to me you represent everything good about Iceland! Thanks for providing me with the key to “get inside” Iceland, for correcting my grammar (both when we were sober and drunk!), for ALWAYS answering my silly questions...the list could be endless...so I will just name the last and most important thing: for all the hláturkast! You are brilliant (and you know it)!

Jorge (lito) - I am forever grateful for your efforts in keeping me sane during field work! The thoughts we shared; the discussions about (crazy) Icelanders, volcanoes, world and existential problems, all the funny stories, laughs and countless ice creams at ísbúðin-these are all moments that I cherish deeply and that will always be with me. I hope you will forever keep a little sunshine in your heart!

Una - for your art, for interesting perspectives, for teaching me to drink coffee, for kitchen-table-discussions of life and love long into the night, and basically for your caring!

Tordis & Magnús - for all the cups of tea, stories, weather discussions and an open door!

Reynir – for taking me flying and for showing me your nature from those unreachable places.

My colleagues at PLU – for help in making it possible to finish this, but more importantly for making it fun to go to work! Trine and Anne Kristine - for good advice towards the end.

Birgitte, Katrine, Marte, Elin, Lars Jørun, Jens and Hanne! What would both schooldays and spare time have been without you! Thanks for listening, supporting, correcting my mistakes and giving good advice! Both you and the extended network from the days at Dragvoll-thank you for lunchtime discussions and all the weird stories! I am still smiling! A special thanks to Hanne, my better half, for always being there.

My mum, dad and sister- who never stopped believing in me! You have been my rock; thank you for babysitting and cooking in busy hours and for your endless support over the years even though you at times had no idea what I was doing. Solveig – for corrector reading and all the encouraging words!

Lars Ivar - for all the technical help and desk building, for pushing me when I needed to be pushed, for laying off when I needed space and for telling me off when I did not see the end of this. Thank you!

Alvida Dís – for being you and making me laugh every day!

All mistakes are my own!

Anna Synnøve Hovstein



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# 1 Introduction

*I woke up in the middle of the night. My clock showed 04.13 am. I had been dreaming about volcanic eruptions every night for the last week. Which was maybe not that strange considering the amount of time spent talking and not least thinking continuously about it. This time it seemed different though. The earth had been shaking, and I had woken up. Was it once more only a dream, or had it been real? Was the pressure in the volcano, Katla, increasing? Was something building up? No, it was probably just another dream. I went back to sleep. The next day I conducted my daily routine of looking at the webpage of Veðurstofa<sup>1</sup> to check the weather forecast and to see where the latest earthquakes in Iceland had been: At 04.11 a.m., earthquake in the Katla caldera!<sup>2</sup>*

Being an active volcano, Katla has followed a fairly distinct cyclical pattern of eruptions. According to historical records and expert knowledge, the volcano is now long overdue. The local population of Mýrdalur at the foot of Katla demonstrates a keen awareness of this predicament outlined by the scientists. Volcanologists and locals both demonstrate knowledge, relatively speaking, of the emergent likelihood of an upcoming eruption and an awareness of the possible consequences of an eruption; jökulhlaup<sup>3</sup>, electricity in the air, poisonous gasses, a tsunami hitting the lower parts of the local community center of Vík, in addition to ash fall making it difficult for people to see and to breathe. The risk involved for people, livestock and property is a well-known fact. Still, the local population at the foot of the volcanic mountain rarely ever thinks about Katla.

*Katla will come when she comes*, the local villagers will tell you if you press them for information about how they make sense out of living close to a highly pregnant volcano and

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1 Veðurstofa is the Icelandic name for the Meteorological Department. In Iceland's case you do not only find the weather forecast on the official web site of Veðurstofa, but also the latest updates concerning volcanic activity, eruptions and earthquakes.

2 Note from my field work diary.

3 When volcanoes under glaciers erupt, big lakes are created under the ice due to the huge heat generation in the eruption. This happens before steam, ash and gases manage to break the surface of the glacier. When the «dam» of this under-surface lake breaks we get what we call a jökulhlaup. This is an enormous amount of water mixed with ice bergs, ash and mud that flows out of the glacier (Thorsteinsson, 2010).

having done so for many years. *It is only outsiders who worry about it*, they will add if you push the topic even further. Risk perception – the sense of risk - is exceptionally low, even though risk awareness is high. The potential hazards due to Katla are simply out of mind, and certainly not a topic of conversation between locals. Rather, in their way of life it is a conscious Non Topic. The local population of Mýrdalur goes about their daily lives without thematizing risk in relation to Katla, except when going through the evacuation drill initiated by the Icelandic state and carried out by the local rescue team. This silent treatment is beautifully brought out by Ingimundur<sup>4</sup>, an old man living with his wife in Vík, recalling a conversation he had with his mother about the eruption in 1918, the year in which the last eruption took place. His mother was eight years at the time of the eruption:

*The only thing my mum told me about the eruption is that it got so dark that you could not even see your hand if you held it up in front of your eyes. She never said anything else; one does not talk about it here. If I wanted to know something I would have had to ask.*

*Me:*

*But, when you were young, did you talk about it then, since there were more people in your parent's generation who had experienced it?*

*Ingimundur:*

*No, we never talked about it...or maybe barely. We knew about Katla, of course, but it wasn't something you cared about.*

## **The aim of the study**

People have always had to relate to hazards of different kinds and in many cases, our life and mode of living are at the mercy of these hazards and force us to relate to and live with risk. What I wish to take a closer look at in this thesis is **how people relate to risk in a way that makes it possible to live with**. I wish to do so by investigating how people in Mýrdalur act in accordance with nature<sup>5</sup> and the volcano Katla, and how a down playing and non-construction

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<sup>4</sup> All names are changed

<sup>5</sup> Nature is a much discussed notion, and I wish to stress that throughout this thesis the word is mainly used as a synonym to the physical environment that surrounds us.

of risk becomes a key element for maintaining a stable life there. Following, a continual theme in this thesis will be the social life of silence. Silence, according to Kirsten Hastrup, “is packed with meaning” (1995, p.123). She makes the additional comment that “agency is not merely located in the mind”, nor are “expressions of inner experiences not reserved for words” (Hastrup, 1995, p. 81). Rather, she argues, “most cultural knowledge is stored in actions rather than words” (Hastrup, 1995, p. 82).

What then, does this silence do, for whom, and with what effects? These are sub-questions I will explore in this thesis.

Mýrdalur’s special geological setting triggered my interest in risk perception a long time ago, and the part that follows will present my field’s geographical and geological context. Knowing this context is, in my opinion, a presumption to be able to understand the patterns of thoughts and behavior of the people in Mýrdalur.

## **The field - geographical and geological context**

People have at all times been forced to relate to the nature surrounding us. Some live in areas of constant change in nature and environment, areas vulnerable to earthquakes, avalanches, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis etc. The people living in this type of areas have to relate to what we call environmental risk.

Natural hazards have since the settlement of Iceland at the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century had striking effects. Volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, poor soil and a rough climate with cold air and moisture and powerful winds, have had its impact on the people living here. Their surroundings have in many ways been threatening, and some have been forced to leave their homes and property because of volcanic activity, jökulhlaup, lava and ash, which both have polluted the drinking water, and made the soil infertile. Still, many keep on living in these areas close to the volcanoes, Vík í Mýrdal being one of them.

## **Að fara austur<sup>6</sup>**

Að fara austur is a commonly used expression by the people I knew in Reykjavík who had connections to Mýrdalur. If you said you were going east, they would automatically know that you were going to Mýrdalur. It takes approximately two hours to drive the 18 kilometers from Reykjavík to the main center of the area; the little community Vík. About 300 people live in Vík. They are distributed on a little more than 100 houses that lies in a small area close to both the sea and the mountains.



Figure 1 Vík seen from the sea towards Mýrdalsjökull and Katla (hiding the skies) - Private picture

West of Vík there are wide agricultural areas in the lowland, with farms scattered around. To the east of Vík you mostly find sand, which has also given its name to the area; Kötlusandur<sup>7</sup> or more commonly used: Mýrdalssandur. Even though vegetation is advancing, there is still little that binds the sand to the ground and now and then sandstorms are whirling about in the area. In the middle of Mýrdalssandur there is a tiny agricultural area with a small cluster of farms; Álftaver. Upwards from the sand and the agricultural areas the canyon-like mountains start forming, before the majesty of the area peeks from the clouds (that so often is found in this area); Mýrdalsjökull. Mýrdalsjökull is one of Iceland's biggest glaciers and has the volcano Katla well hidden under the huge icecap. The volcano is Iceland's most active and hazardous, and has had 21 eruptions in historical time. It has also been the most regularly

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<sup>6</sup> Going east

<sup>7</sup> Katlasands

volcano with eruptions every 40- 60 years (Björnsson, 2002)(Einarsson, 2007). The previous eruption was in 1918, which means that Katla is supposedly long overdue<sup>8</sup>. Katla differs from most other Icelandic volcanoes with there being settlement quite close to the volcano.

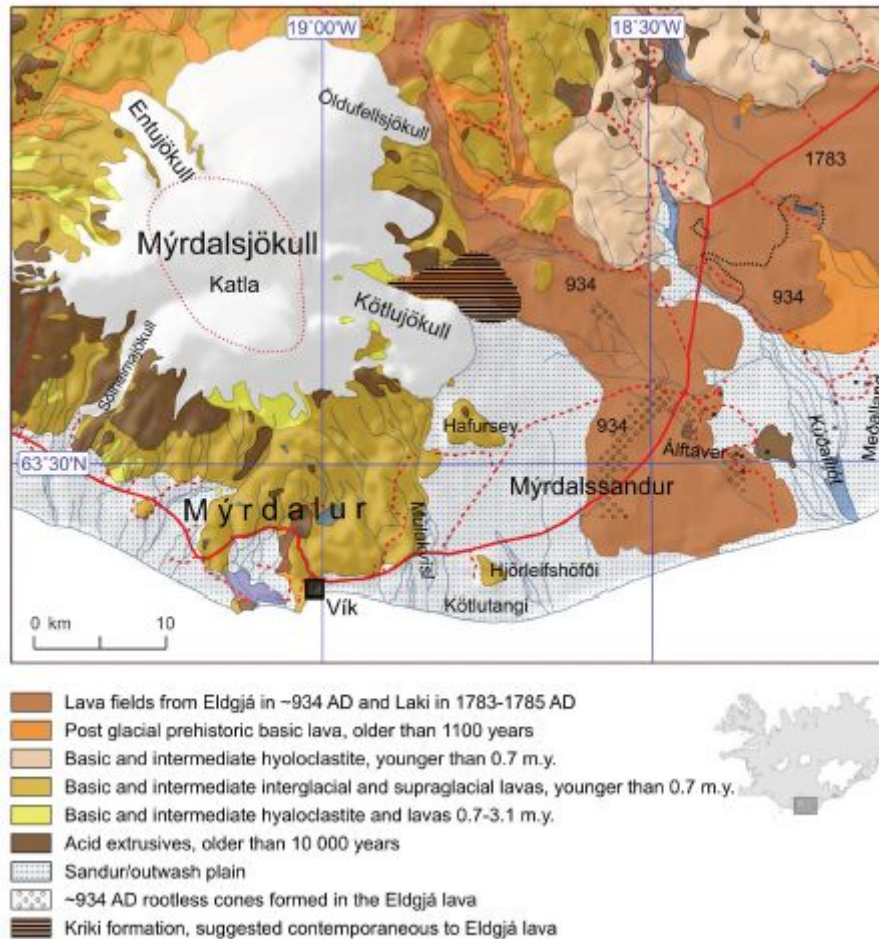


Figure 2 (Jóhannesdóttir & Gísladóttir, 2010)

Vík is not in a direct flood path of a jökulhlaup since the village is protected by mountains on all sides except the one towards the sea. Still people in the lower parts of Vík<sup>9</sup> will have to evacuate if an eruption has started. The reason for this is a bit intricate; the huge masses of water from the glacier might bring so much sludge, mud and ash that it can make part of the sea floor collapse. If this happens, the major shifting of water can cause a tsunami that will hit

<sup>8</sup> See appendix 1 for complementary description of the geology in the area

<sup>9</sup> As well as in some other parts of Myrdalur.

the lower parts of Vík – the red zone (Guðmundsson, 2007). The term red zone designates the most unsafe area of the village. The evacuation of the whole area should be completed within 45-60 minutes; this is supposed to be enough time to have cleared the red zone, since they think they will have the warning approximately two hours before a tsunami might hit. There is a problem with analyzing the behavior of Katla though, and this makes her a bit more difficult for the scientists, the experts, to understand than many of the other active volcanoes you find in Iceland.

Katla is part of a volcanic zone that covers the southern part of Iceland.<sup>10</sup> Most of the other volcanoes are calm until they are getting close to an eruption, then the earthquakes start. These earthquakes are not necessarily big, but they come more and more frequent and create enough indications to make the experts forecast an eruption within a certain time limit. Katla behaves a bit different. When scientists claim that Katla is Iceland's most active volcano it is not based on eruptions, but the fact that Katla never rests. According to scientists, Katla may have more or less active periods, but she is never completely calm (despite what people in Mýrdalur might think). Additionally the last big eruption happened before the scientists had any measuring devices to help them follow and interpret the behavior of the volcano, ergo the experts are not completely sure how to read and interpret Katla since she does not follow the patterns of other volcanoes.

Living next to an active volcano is quite a serious matter, especially if the scientists are not sure how to read and interpret it. Living at the foot of Katla, the feeling of risk still seems to be foreign to the locals.

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<sup>10</sup> See appendix 2 for a map of the volcanic zones of Iceland.

## A readers' guide

**The first chapter** gives the reader a general introduction to the thesis and presents the main focus and the geographical and geological context. **Chapter two** presents my theoretical positioning. **Chapter three** contains a methodological discussion about a rather long and winding road to find my place in the field, including thoughts on the techniques I used, in addition to general field work reflections.

In **chapter four**, I will introduce the reader to everyday life in Mýrdalur and from an emic perspective probe further into the “absence” of the volcano Katla in everyday life. **Chapter five** will investigate how not necessarily Katla, but rather nature<sup>11</sup> in general, plays a significant role and pervade the life of the people in Mýrdalur. I will give a concise overview of how the Icelanders' understanding and construction of nature changed over a rather brief period in recent Icelandic history, transforming it into a national symbol. The Icelanders, the locals, are expected to know how to behave in and deal with this nature which influence today's social construction (or lack thereof) of risk. **Chapter six** contains a discussion on how to theorize risk and risk perception practices based on the ethnography presented. In **chapter seven** I will try to sum up my main points throughout this thesis.

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<sup>11</sup> As in natural environment.





## 2 Theoretical outline

A hazard is known as “an act or phenomenon that has the potential to produce harm or other undesirable consequences to humans or what they value” (Committee on Risk Characterization, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, National Research Council, 1996, p. 215). Furthermore, that which pose danger to people or what they value, are given meaning through the concept of risk and;

Descriptions of risk are typically stated in terms of the likelihood of harm or loss from a hazard and usually include: an identification of what is “at risk” and may be harmed or lost (e.g. health of human beings or ecosystem, personal property, quality of life, ability to carry on an economic activity); the hazard that may occasion this loss; and a judgment about the likelihood that harm will occur. (Committee on Risk Characterization, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, National Research Council, 1996, pp. 215-216).

The risk concept is a much discussed one. The word has changed both its meaning and use throughout time, and the concept is still defined with variations (Lupton, 1999). Risk is a frequently employed concept concerning natural hazards. Environmental risk cover risk related to extreme weather, flood, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions (Lupton, 1999). Environmental risk represents, in other words, a type of risk that is latent in our surroundings or in the environment you find yourself at a specific time. As probably was the case for many of my informants, risk may not necessarily be perceived to its full extent until after the hazard has struck. The following text will deal with theoretical discussions concerning risk and the perception of risk.

Risk is a relative quantity. Some would argue that certain risks are calculable, but for the ones affected, it will still be relative. It depends on *if* and *how* risk is perceived and what is at risk. Drawing on Lupton (1999), I too will make use of a distinction between a technological and sociocultural perspective on risk, which yield a division between objective and subjective risks. “Subjective” in this case, is not meant as something personal or private, but simply explains that the view is based on opinions rather than formal analyses (Teigen, 2001). The technological perspective has what Lupton has named a “realistic” view on risk, meaning that risk levels, to a certain degree, can be found through probability calculation (Lupton, 1999).

This perspective is accordingly most popular and used in technical and natural scientifically approaches to risk, where the focus is on identification, calculation and probability of risk, as well as how it can be eliminated. Followers of this realistic perspective would argue that risk is an *objective danger*, meaning that the risk exists and can be measured independently of social and cultural processes. Nevertheless *subjective danger*, or rather *subjective perception of risk*, uses the same way of evaluating risk by looking at what can go wrong; how serious the consequences are and how likely they are to happen (Teigen, 2001). Even though both objective and subjective perspectives use the same basic principles to evaluate and reach a conclusion, the subjective, intuitive, evaluations of risk in our daily life will not necessarily coincide with objective evaluations (Teigen, 2001). The realistic view does not deal with how societies and people perceive risk, it excludes the subjective perspective and perception; how risk (or rather safety in, objectively speaking, risky areas or situations) is socially constructed.

Constructionist approaches claim that nothing can be seen as risk in itself. What we see as risk is a result of historical, social and political ways of understanding a phenomenon. This constructivist approach is quite extreme in denying the existence of *any* “objective danger” and putting all the importance on how social and cultural processes has formed and created risk (Berger & Luchmann, 1966). A little less extreme constructionist approach is shown by Lupton who says that risk *can* be seen as an objective danger, but at the same time it cannot be seen isolated from the social and cultural processes (1999 p. 35).

The sociocultural approach can, according to Lupton, be split into several different theories.<sup>12</sup> The perspective that I will make use of in this thesis is the cultural/symbolic perspective developed by Mary Douglas, paying particular attention to the way in which local people construct risk knowledge in the context of their everyday lives. Douglas talks about risk as a socially constructed interpretation of danger,<sup>13</sup> although she also recognizes that there can be a *real* danger (Douglas, 1992, p. 29). According to Douglas and Wildavsky the social form of a society will be of importance for which risks people will worry about. This would be connected to the different characteristics of social life, which brings forward different responses to the risk. “The choice of risk and the choice of how to live are taken together.

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<sup>12</sup> The cultural/symbolic perspective developed by Mary Douglas, the risk society and reflexive modernization perspective brought forward by Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, and the Governmentality perspective on risk, which is based on the work of Michael Foucault (Giddens, 1990) (Beck, 1998) (Foucault, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> The selection of what one consider dangerous consequently is a result of cultural construction rather than objective facts (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982).

Each form of social life has its own typical risk portfolio.” (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982, p. 8).

To Douglas and Wildavsky, culture often represents shared values and opinions among a group of people (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982, p. 9). It is these values and beliefs that make the basis for the opinions and behaviour of people in a society and finally *their way of life*. “Cultural bias” in Douglas’ terms is referring to shared values and beliefs while social relations are defined as patterns of interpersonal relations. When these two definitions are combined, we can talk about a *way of life* (Thompson, Ellis, & Wildavsky, 1990, p. 1). According to Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) people choose which dangers are possible to combine with the kind of life one is living and depending on how a society is organized, certain risks will be avoided, while others might be accepted. A shared feeling of dread stems from shared values, which also leads to compliance in which risks to fear. Culturally constructed risk can be used as guidelines for how to relate to danger and to maintain the borders towards danger.

An earlier separation between uncertainty and danger seem to have lost its importance in modern language and according to Douglas, this has resulted in the disappearance of good as well as bad risks (Lupton, 1999) (Douglas, 1982). What these writers fail to take into account is that risk *is* also connected to possibilities, as well as freedom. As Bernstein (1996) has talked about, we should be careful bringing the natural science’s view on risk into risk relations in our daily life. Humans are actors and not risk processing machines. This gives us freedom, freedom to make our own choices. Following, a phenomenological approach rather focusing on risk perception through interaction with others became increasingly popular (Lupton 1999).

I would like to finish up this theoretical outline with an introduction to Robert Paine, a cultural theoretician who has been especially occupied with the paradox that risk perception seems to be non-existing in situation connected with extreme danger. In Paine claims that within all transaction concerning risk, you will find that social and cultural processing is important; how people *adjust* to risk. In some contexts it will be useful to overreact, while in others it will be better to down play the reaction to the risk. Following, people are themselves active actors of their own situation according to Paine (2001). This way of looking at risk differs from the position that Douglas and Wildavsky was arguing for; that people could

manage excellently without knowing the risk they were facing, simply because they were following social rules telling them what to ignore (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982)

Paine talks about the distinction between risk and danger, risk being something we construct amongst us, while the danger is what is “out there.” Risk belongs to the calculations we perform to find out about the danger. This gives us several options: we can continue our lives as planned, continue our lives in a “risk-adjusted” version, or we can move away from a place that is exposed to risk.

If we follow Paine’s condition on risk being culturally constructed, we also have to approve of a situation in a cultural context and with a cultural logic where emphasis is put on *non*-construction of risk. Is this that is happening in Mýrdalur? Paine’s No-Risk thesis will represent the main analytical perspective during the discussions in chapter six.

### 3 Methodological considerations

*We come from a place where we count the days  
until nothing, until nothing, until nothing*

*We are running down the streets in our underwear,  
we are running up the hill it's over there  
'cause nothing ever happens here...*

*Where everyone keeps off the grass  
No littering, no loitering  
No nothing, no nothing, no nothing  
(FM Belfast, 2008)*

The society I came to in Mýrdalur appeared to me to be somehow introvert, at least to outsiders and newcomers like myself. Locals often seemed to keep to themselves without socializing much with others.<sup>14</sup> I wish to give further insight into these experiences through my “arrival story,” the meeting with my host family and the society overall. Reflections concerning my role in the field will be discussed, as well as the methodological techniques that I made use of. Finally I will end this chapter with some thoughts about field work as a method.

#### Arrival to field site

*Whilst sitting on the plane crossing the Norwegian Sea I experienced an internal fight of feelings; melancholy and contentment, of finally going back to the island with this attractive force on me. At the same time I was extremely nervous about what was meeting me. This time I would not be drawn into a “happy bubble” with other exchange students who were just as eager about getting to know new people as I had*

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<sup>14</sup> Consequently the “frustrated” lyrics from the Icelandic band FM Belfast above, describes the Icelandic countryside very well in my opinion.

*been. This time I was supposed to get to see the “real” Iceland and get to know “real” Icelanders, because truth to be said, I had not really talked with that many Icelanders during my previous stays there. Of course I had exchanged polite phrases with the people working in the grocery store next door to where I had been living. I had dealt with an angry house lord and had several discussions with Icelandic teachers at the university, but I still had not really gotten to know any Icelanders properly. This time I would not even live in Reykjavík, which would probably have made it easier, socially speaking. No, this time I was going out to the countryside, “upp í sveit”, which also among Icelanders is talked about as “the real” Iceland. I was supposed to live there, amongst glaciers and volcanoes you cannot even see from Reykjavík.*

It was not my first time in Mýrdalur. Being a famous tourist spot, and also a village you had to pass to get to Europe’s biggest glacier; Vatnajökull, it was one of the places I had visited last time I was living there. Though it was known for its beauty through movies, fashion- and tourist magazines, I could not claim to have really experienced it, since it had been rainy and cloudy both times I had passed by. But the beauty, as it was true beauty in my eyes, was to be revealed to me. During my field work I spent hours walking around in the varying landscape surrounding the farm I was living at.

It had been kind of a puzzle to find a place to stay in the area since I neither knew someone from- nor someone with connection to the area. My original plan had been to live in the small village Vík, but my few encounters that I had managed to make with people there, seemed to vanish in thin air. After some good thinking I remembered that when me and my friends had travelled around Iceland a few years before we had stayed at something called “Farmhouse Holidays” or “Ferðaðjónusta Bænda.” Iceland and the Icelandic countryside had become more and more popular with tourists. Along with this, the need for hotels and guesthouses around the country increased. As a result, more and more farmers across the country have built guesthouses, hotels, opened camping sites, built cottages for rent and so on, and many of these are organized in “Farmhouse Holidays”. Some internet searches later I had found a rather small guesthouse a little outside Vík. I first contacted the family through email and told them about my project there, and luckily they wanted me to come. We made a deal where I would pay for my stay with helping them out in the guesthouse and at the farm. I considered this my best option since I hoped that the small guesthouse would create a closer

relationship to the family as well as provide me with some freedom, since I was there first and foremost to do fieldwork. I hoped the disadvantage of this farm being a little outside of Vík would offset the positive aspects of actually becoming a part of a family's everyday life and getting to know them. Hopefully it would also lead me to getting to know others in the area.

The first meeting with members of the family took place a couple of days after my arrival. I had decided to stay some days in Reykjavík to take care of practical tasks as opening a bank account and buying a car, before heading for the countryside. I had rented a room in a guesthouse, but when my new host mum, Harpa, heard about this I was soon picked up by and brought home to her daughters. Harpa and her husband Vignir had three children, two girls and a boy, all of them were around my age. Since there was no high school in Vík they had moved from home when they were about 16 years old. Now they were all working and studying in Reykjavík, and the sisters, Sólveig and Svala, were also living together. Svala came to pick me up at the guesthouse and took me to their apartment in the outskirts of Reykjavík, an apartment that came to be my place of sanctuary whenever I needed to escape the countryside. Harpa had also come to Reykjavík to do some errands and she and Sólveig was waiting for me in the apartment. Harpa met me with a warm hug and both she and her daughters struck me as both vivacious and warm people. I was eased, and a few days later I set out for my trip "to the east".

The night of my arrival I had spent twice as much time as normal driving the approximately 17 kilometers from Reykjavík to the farm where I was going to live. It was winter, the weather was bad; snowy and windy, and I did not yet have winter tires on my new bought car. By the time I finally found the sign that lead the way to the farm and guesthouse that was going to be my new home and working place, it was already dark as wintertime in Nordic countries does not bring too much daylight.

The farm itself was found a few minutes' drive off the main road, squeezed up to a mountain as if it was trying to get some shelter. Turning off the main road and looking ahead I could hardly spot a single light from the farm, and looking around there were few other lights to see. I had of course seen the Icelandic countryside before, but right there and then I was struck by the desertedness of the place, something I was to experience even closer a few days later when the winter storms set in and the farm became totally isolated.



Figure 3 The farm - private picture

At the farm I was met by three dogs that were to become an important part of my everyday life, providing me with company on walks or in lonely hours. The importance of animals in your surroundings should never be underestimated. Harpa had been expecting me and I was also introduced to her husband, Vignir. He was a tall, thin man and his handshake stated that he was a working man. Together it was

the three of us that were supposed to form some kind of family unit or at least sharing everyday life for the next half year to come.

## Struggling along

Things quickly fell into place and I got sucked up in the everyday routine at the farm, which I will come back to in chapter 4 to. However, as many other anthropologists may have experienced, I had the feeling of being some kind of an intruder to the family unit. There was a great deal of silence in the house and I was worried that it was because of my presence. Later I have come to realize that the silence was not about me, it was just part of their life. Typical “social” situations, like dinner time, were for instance rather spent staring at the TV than talking to each other. They included me in their daily life, their reality, immediately; it was only me who was so worried about attacking their private territory that I saw this silence as somewhat hostile.



Figure 4 Watching TV at dinner time - private picture

It was when Harpa and Vignir decided to cut a hole in a kitchen shelf to make a “TV-hole” especially for me, so that I too could enjoy the TV while eating dinner, I realised that I was included in their daily life.



Becoming a part of family life also meant getting to know the family, their history, worries and problems. Every family has its own struggles and the family I came to was no exception. Because of ethical reasons I will not delve deeply into this matter even though it had implications for both my experience of everyday life, and field work overall. Still it is necessary to give a brief overview of the context in which I was performing my field work, after all:

The ethnographic text should not be considered as an unbiased analysis of ethnographic data *collected* in the field, but we need to see the empirical foundation of our analysis as a *result* of our presence and position in the field. Our interaction with the field is grounded in previous experiences, and it is our position in the field that creates the ethnographic material we get. (Anfinsen, 2009, pp. 15-16)

Harpa was not in good health, which was something that affected both her own life, and life at the farm. She was in bed greater parts of the day, especially during wintertime when there was less work with the guesthouse. The guesthouse was mainly her sphere of responsibility, while her husband was highly activated by working at and maintaining the farm. They also had another difficulty and “family struggle” that was connected to their situation in this small society. I soon noticed that Harpa and Vignir did not socialize much with others in the area, and I was early on told the reason for this.

Some years before my arrival Harpa had started a company connected to the tourist business in the area together with a neighbor. Other neighbors and friends were also involved in the company as shareholders. After some time, there came to be a big dispute about the future of this business, a dispute that because of economic reasons ended up in court. In an area with approximately 400 people, it is easy to imagine the strain that this caused. The whole society was somehow involved in this conflict that was partly going on out in the open, and partly by speaking badly about each other “behind people’s backs.” People were affected by choosing sides or staying away from it all.

My impression is that this case had been a great strain to the local society, both from what I was told at the farm and what others told me. This dispute may have proved a great entrance into topics related to family bonds or interaction patters in the village for example. However, because of the ethical reasons and the fact that this was not close to my intended focus, I will not be commenting further on the dispute itself. To say that my field work was *not* affected by

this matter would probably be a huge lie though. Harpa and Vignir were not especially social with other people in the society and though people here lived isolated in many ways, as I will come back to later, this seemed to be an extreme situation. Even necessary trips to the local grocery store were avoided because they might run into people who used to be their friends, and now was ignoring them completely. I knew this was not an exaggeration as I had also seen it happen. My plan of having a family in the area who could introduce me to more people had failed, actually my host family lived so isolated that as time went by and I eventually got to know more people in the area, I became *their* informant of the little existing social life in the village of Vík.

## **Local restraint?**

There is little doubt that field work can degenerate in many different ways. A great deal depends on coincidences like where you end up living, who you get to know first, and so on. Some people you are related to voluntarily, others unintentionally. Still they are people who you in one way or another have to relate to. They also relate to you and see your relations to other people in the society, something that gives them a complex picture of who you are, or who they think you might be. A lot depends on how you yourself behave and carry out the field work as well as it depends on where you go and the society you arrive at. As an example, it might have been “easier” to access many people in a short amount of time in a society where warm climate makes people hang around on the street corners.<sup>15</sup> This “hanging around” or *liming* as Hylland Eriksen (1990), among others, has talked about, is not a widespread activity around volcanoes and glaciers in Iceland, neither on the street corners of Vík. If I was to hang around on the street corners of Vík during my first months of field work I would probably have been taken by a snow storm or frozen to death. Not surprisingly the climate both influenced and at times limited social life.

Unpredictability is another aspect of field work. You can prepare yourself as much as possible by reading books, talking to people and even visiting the place, but you can never prepare yourself fully. You can never know how the field will meet you and how you will meet the field before you actually are in the setting of the field work.

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<sup>15</sup> Though there might of course be other difficulties by doing field work in such a society.

Beginning fieldwork in a foreign culture is a bit like diving into an unfamiliar pond in which you suspect there may be underwater hazards. You may examine the surface of the pond at length (and breadth and width for that matter); you may even review the observations of others who have swum in the pond, yet when you leap in yourself, you still have an excellent chance of landing headfirst on a submerged boulder. (Raybeck, 1992, p. 1)

As already mentioned, I knew Icelanders were not the most outgoing kind of people and thought I was prepared for this, but following the lines of Raybeck, I had not managed to fully emotionally prepare. Action is anchored in a set of emotions and is a part of social practice (Hastrup, 1995) and probably affected my behavior in the field, as well as emotions were also a part of the local behavior towards me. Could their emotions and action be connected to history? According to Hastrup, possible causes for this kind of restraint can be traced to the Icelandic history. Hastrup claims there is a strong fear of losing cultural autonomy in Iceland (Hastrup, 1998). This results for example in Icelanders studying or working abroad often rushing back home for what she calls their “chosen exile.” Hastrup continues by claiming that immigrants and refugees are not warmly welcome either. I also noticed when I was wandering around Reykjavík, especially in winter time before the tourist masses started coming, that I could see and hear very few “foreigners” around. Hastrup sees these things as both a sign of a “firm sense of belonging” and the result of a long tradition with both strong distinguishing between Icelanders and others: “an expression of a claim to uniqueness” (Hastrup, 1998, p. 47).<sup>16</sup> Luckily for me though, the old rule about foreigners not being allowed to spend the winter in Iceland was for the most part abandoned in the nineteenth century (Hastrup, 1998).

Why do Icelanders have such restraints against foreigners? According to Hastrup it was because from the oldest times foreigners were known as “exploiters” in the shape of bishops, kings, merchants or pirates. The economy was extremely vulnerable, she adds, as it still is in many ways since Iceland continues to depend on the unstable natural resources of the sea.

This vulnerability marks the self definition of the Icelanders who actually and conceptually protect their remote island in the North Atlantic by insisting on its uniqueness. (Hastrup, 1998, p. 47)

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<sup>16</sup> Durrenberger (1996) has also been discussing this.

The sagas and history can be one example of this. Much of the short history of Iceland, important historical events and information about everyday medieval life are found in the Icelandic sagas, and they are always mentioned with some sense of pride. It gives them a strong connection to their history and seems to be important in their claim for uniqueness. Sahlins (1993) talks about how one locally transform modernity to fit ones previous experiences and Icelanders is a great example of this. Modernity is fitted into both the social practice of memory one has created, as well as into the local history. Ergo, even if the restriction was lifted, the reservation towards foreigners has not completely faded out. On the other hand, there is also pleasure taken in being hosts (Hastrup, 1998) as being a host is increasingly becoming a permanent condition of many Icelanders everyday life as more and more tourists are visiting the country.

Might there even be additional historical information that can account for some of the reservedness I felt in Vík and Mýrdalur? On a second visit, one year after my original field work was conducted, I was told the story about how Vík became a village. For some reason I had never thought about the importance of this matter before. From the old times it was common that Icelandic tenant farmers travelled across the country to special fishing places near the coast during winter time. Vík served as one of these periodic fishing “villages” and with the strong currents and big waves of the Atlantic Ocean towards Vík’s black sand beaches, a lot of men has been lost at sea here. This is also partly the reason why there is no fishing around Vík today, the ocean is simply too strong and heavy, together with the fact that it is not possible to build a proper harbor on the sandy beaches there. Originally the village of Vík was therefore not really a village, but a couple of farms located on the hillside, where one of them today serves the purpose as a guest house.

Vestmannaeyjar<sup>17</sup> are found just outside the coast of Vík. Today, if you want to take the ferry to Vestmannaeyjar, you will have to go to the closest harbor which is about two hour drive from Vík. In the old days though, the people in Vík traded goods with the people in Vestmannaeyjar, and I was told that this was the beginning of Vík as a village. At the beginning of last century the farmer of one of the two original farms decided to start a general store in Vík. This was build close to the hill but still down at what is today known as the “red zone.” People came from around the area to buy necessary goods and maybe sell some of their own products. Most of the merchandise came from Vestmannaeyjar, and products from

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<sup>17</sup> The Westman Islands

Vík were floated out in barrels to bigger boats that could not get up on the beach because of the currents and waves. Smaller boats from Vík could take barrels out and bring new ones in again. Later on this kind of trade was also done with foreign fishing boats that stayed out of the coast of Vík. The trade of course attracted a lot more people from the southern parts of Iceland to come to Vík, and more people were slowly beginning to settle down there. Still, the main population were scattered around the Mýrdalur area. People came in, brought or bought their goods and went away again.

Vík is also located at a place that makes it natural for people going to the east of Iceland, or going from the east to the west, to stop there; as it was some hours in both directions to get to the nearest communities. This is still the case and I think all of the above reasons give possible explanations for why it could be hard to get to *know* people there. In my opinion this might have to do with the fact that since the formation of “Vík the village” has depended on people coming and leaving. It has been a meeting place for people trading or going east or west, but never a place for dwelling, except for the limited amount of people that decided to settle there to live of the service industry. Today, much of the place’s economy is also build on Vík being a famous and well visited tourist spot. Still, most of the people that come there to work in the tourist industry leave after a very short time. Normally maximum one summer is spent in the area. Could this be part of the resistance I felt? I was also coming and leaving.

## **My role in the field**

“The world is always experienced from a particular point in a social space. Moreover, the point from which we experience the world is in constant motion” (Hastrup, 1995, p. 95). Both the point from which I was experiencing and from which others were experiencing me was shifting and it got me wondering who was I; a worker, a tourist, an anthropologist, a foreigner? Which of these roles you hold is obviously an important aspect of the information you get, or do not get. In Vík I probably had all of these roles; I was “everything” except a local.

In my opinion there were several things that caused people looking at me in different ways. First of all, by Harpa and Vignir I was introduced as *their* “vinnukona<sup>18</sup>”, which of course

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<sup>18</sup> “Vinnukona” means something similar to “maid” and would normally cover whatever task someone needed a hand with. It was a normal “title” for girls who came to work at a farm/guesthouse.

could give people certain associations of the family I represented.<sup>19</sup> Following this, the term “vinnukona” also made it clear to people that I was only there for a certain amount of time. They were used to this. People had been passing through the community since Vík was “founded” as a service center, as we saw above. Now, a lot of people come there to work for a summer or shorter period due to the tourism. Then they leave again. I was just one of the crowd leaving when the summer was over. Why would locals invest time and energy in someone who would leave again shortly?

I actually noticed a shift even in the connection to the settled foreigners at the language course when they found out that I was not there permanently. “*Ah, you are not here to stay*” was said with a sigh. I tried to reassure them by saying that I would come back to visit. But that did not seem to help as long I was not going to settle down in the area, and most of them continued to keep a certain distance to me.

For others I was probably seen more as a researcher than a “vinnukona.” As Harpa declared to a neighbor once that made me choke my tea: “*She is here to study us!*” Even though she somehow nailed the purpose of me being there, and even though I had never hidden my main purpose of being there, it still simply sounded brutal. As I was already having problems getting to know people I was worried that this formulation of what I was doing there would spread like wildfire and scare people off. Which it might have done also, but if people were avoiding me because of this, I never found out.

The fact of the matter was that people in Mýrdalur were used to being under some scrutiny. The situation with Katla had been interesting to many researchers before me. Some of them would only concentrate on the volcano and the natural science of the volcano, while others would also focus on the people living there as this was important to risk preparedness projects “enforced” by the state and *Almannavarnir*<sup>20</sup>. In many ways this put me in the same category as the scientists, the experts and the expert systems since I was interested in the same theme. People were used to being exposed to *formal* interviews and had no problem being interviewed by me neither. They were prepared for whatever question I might have about Katla, and when they had answered they patiently sat there waiting for me to ask the next question. Trying to mold this situation into a more informal and soft research method

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<sup>19</sup> Due to moral reasons and responsibility towards the people I was living with, I early on took a choice of not changing my residence.

<sup>20</sup> The Civil Protection Department - I will be using the Icelandic name for this department throughout my thesis.

therefore proved to be quite a challenge at times. And it seemed to be a puzzle for many of my informants, that I was actually more interested in *them* than in Katla itself. Their expectations of what I would talk to them about may have contributed to and enforced my status as a stranger and a researcher. This again made it at times difficult to make an informal setting, which again made it more difficult for my informants to share deeper layers of how they lived and experienced their life. One could say it may have worked like an unfortunate circle.

In Vík I was both a foreigner and a “non-foreigner”. I never heard myself talked about as a foreigner, and I often felt like I was put in a different category than people from outside the Nordic countries, even though they were living there. I was not *really* a foreigner; “*You are just from Norway*” was a statement I heard several times; meaning I was not an Icelander, but at the same time not far from.

Even though I had challenges with finding and connecting with people in informal settings, there were of course people I “cracked the code” with, who I became close to and had casual socialization with. Not surprisingly these people have proved to be some of my most valuable informants. During my repeated visits, also after the field work, I have felt that especially my host family has seen me more and more as being one of them; an Icelander, probably because they claimed to consider me part of their family. The fact that I kept coming back, demonstrate knowledge about, and show a great deal of interest in Iceland and the country’s culture, might have put me in a different category than other “foreigners”. Like I overheard one of them telling a friend that came to visit: “*You see, Anna hasn’t quite got it yet, but she’s just part of the family now!*” On several occasions my Icelandic friends has talked about me as a “half-Icelander” or “Icelander by heart” which I see as some kind of vote of confidence. As time passed by I became something more than “just the outsider.”

## **Methodological techniques**

The main part of the field work was conducted during a little more than six months in 2007, but I have also had several shorter and longer stays after 2007. The investigation was carried out in Mýrdalur, with much focus on the villagers in Vík. I also talked to people in Álftaver,

which is in the direct flood path of a jökulhlaup, as well as scientists at Háskoli Íslands<sup>21</sup> and staff at Almannavarnir.

All of my local interlocutors were settled in the area. Some had lived there all their life, while others had moved there, but no one I talked to had lived there less than four years. The youngest person I talked to was 18, and the oldest in his 70s. I had about 20 semi structured face-to-face interviews with the help of an interview guide, which I loosely followed.<sup>22</sup> Some interviews could last only 30 minutes, others up to two hours. During most of these interviews I took notes.

Everyone was encouraged to share experiences connected to life in Mýrdalur, experiences with the nature and Katla and thoughts about the situation. Many found it difficult to talk about these things though, as long as I did not ask questions. With some I only had one interview, while with others I had further social encounters and/or informal interviews/conversations. *Informal interviews* became very important with people I got to know better as they helped me “build greater report and to uncover new topics of interest” (Bernard, 2006, p. 211).

My participant observation of daily life was concentrated on only a couple of families, where my host family naturally played the most important role. Other reflections on everyday life in the area would often be based on observations in lack of areas to participate. Though my host family’s social status was a bit peculiar, their lack of “being together” with other people in the area still seemed to fit quite well with the other tendencies I observed. Midways in my field work I got to know about an Icelandic language course that was going to be held. Eager as I was in both learning the language better and meeting some new people, I signed up for the course which was held by a school teacher in Vík. The other participants were mostly working at different hotels and were only there for some months during summer, whilst a few of them actually had regular jobs in Vík and had lived there some years. The latter group all spoke Icelandic, which they had had to learn through jobs in the kindergarten or old people’s home, and seemed to be well integrated into the society. Some of them had even married locals and the only reason they were there was that they had never learned the Icelandic grammar or how to write Icelandic. I figured this group would help me approach the society or at least help me understand how things there worked, since they had also come there as

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<sup>21</sup> The University of Iceland

<sup>22</sup> The interview guide can be found as appendix 3.



“outsiders”. To my surprise they related to me in the same way as other locals did; answering questions I might ask them, but not contributing to a conversation. One of the questions I asked early on because I thought I had been missing out on something important was where their meeting place was. I was met with a haughty frown from the girl sitting next to me:

*Meeting place? There is no such thing here! People don't just hang around here.*

*Me:*

*...ok, so you don't go to the coffee house or the restaurant to meet people?*

*Girl:*

*No. The coffee house is only open in summer time and there are only tourists there.*

*Me:*

*So what do you do when you finish work, or in the weekends?*

*Girl:*

*You go home and watch TV! There is nothing else to do here!*

I was stunned. I knew I had come to a small place where pastime activities would be limited, but I had not expected there to be no natural meeting place and *that* little socializing amongst people. In one way it made it easier, because I saw that it was not only me who was kept at a distance; it was just the way it was there. At the same time that it did not help my project. Of course the girl had been over exaggerating a bit. But she had a point.

The coffee house in Vík also had a small museum and I had to laugh when I read these lines on the information wall about the area, its wildlife and people;

When people from Mýrdalur travelled to other places, they were thought to be rather special and quiet. They wore different clothes, they didn't say much and when they spoke they used different vocabulary. Even though things have changed, they are still thought to be different. (Brydebúð-Museum, 2007)

At the time I read those lines I had been struggling with establishing contact with people in the area for some time. Icelanders who I have met later and told where I did my field work has also commented on the people from Mýrdalur being a bit “special” and difficult to obtain

contact with. In the same breath they are talked about as holding stoic calm. All in all Vík seemed to be a very calm, and nearly sleeping until the tourist season and both the foreigners and the new workers coming to the place brought about some life and some thoroughfare at least.

My methodical plans and techniques had to be adjusted accordingly. The snowballing technique was another methodical approach that I made use of to get in touch with people during my first field work. It is a common technique for researchers who are having problems accessing the people they are trying to access.

A population is "hidden" when no sampling frame exists and public acknowledgment of membership in the population is potentially threatening. (Heckathorn, 1997, Vol. 44, No. 2, s. 174).

According to Bernard (Bernard, 2006) in the snowballing technique you will use your first key informants list others in the population and recommend someone to interview. "You get handed from informant to informant and the sampling frame grows with each interview" (Bernard, 2006, p. 193). Even though it was not a hidden population I was trying to access, I was still struggling and this technique helped me get started. I first talked to people in my social surroundings, who would point out other people I could contact. Some I contacted as a result of their position in the society or profession. The existing study subjects recruited future subjects for me from among their acquaintances, and at times several people suggested the same person to contact next. Actually, it was these persons, who many people had suggested I should talk to, who also became my main informants. The samples begin from a core of known elements and are then increased by adding new elements. They are so called on the analogy of the increasing size of a snowball when rolled down a snow-covered slope. Critique against the snowballing technique is that the informants and the sample are not random and not statistically representative of the population under consideration (Marshall, 1998). Bernard (2006) claims on the other hand that there is a difference if you are dealing with large or small populations, and that in a small population of people who are likely to be in contact with one another, which in my situation was the case (Bernard, 2006).

## Addressing the abstract

Through field work preparations we are taught different ways to ask questions; asking concrete instead of abstract being one example. This became very obvious to be, since the problems I addressed in a way was abstract; all except three villagers did not have a concrete experience of how an eruption from Katla would be, therefore it was also difficult to answer what they thought about it. Talking about scientific facts and what to do if or when something happened, was no problem. However trying to find out what they *thought* and *felt* about the situation, a situation that they had no presumption to be describing was difficult. How can one also grasp bodily experiences without making it abstract? Experience is an element of the past, but also an outcome of the future.

It did not take long until I learned the usefulness of rephrasing my questions about their relationship to Katla, to being questions about nature instead. As mentioned above I learned that the conversations and interviews I had with people became softer and more delicate, uncovering more nuances if I started out by focusing on nature rather than Katla. Katla normally turned out to be a natural part of follow-up questions. Most people simply did not seem interested in talking about Katla and there could often be a great deal of silence in the interview settings when Katla was mentioned. But after warming up to the interview, thoughts about Katla and their situation appeared.

I expect discussion to arise concerning the knowledge I gained about peoples' views and perspectives on living so close to Katla. Is this to be looked at as constructed knowledge founded on unnatural interaction since part of this knowledge come from more or less formal interview settings, where some might argue that I *made* people talk about something they did not normally talk about? Without a doubt the semi structured interviews were often of good help since I was concerned with a topic people did not talk about. My response to this kind of critique would be that as an anthropologist there will always be a touch of constructedness to our analyses. It is true that some of the interviews conducted was too formal considering the desired participant observation in anthropology, still, some of these proved to work as some kind of gate openers to more informal interaction with people later on. Even in places more open to participant observation and informal interaction with the members of a society you find the anthropologists asking questions. When the social arena for interaction is lacking, you find yourself in a void if you would not be allowed to ask these questions. Hastrup also claims that when you are pursuing a knowledge project that "(...) transcends the lives of

individuals. In any fieldwork, this means keeping up a certain pressure on the “informants” to have them say what they think” (Hastrup, 1995, p. 123). According to Hastrup there has to be some kind of symbolic violation of the informants:

One cannot learn what is systematically hidden in any culture or biography by mere presence; one has to exert a kind of violence to make the informants talk about themselves. (Hastrup, 1995, p. 142)

While acknowledging the importance and often necessity of asking and “violating” the informants I will however like to emphasize the importance of silence and of what was not said. As Hastrup also states, and I agree with her; “Silence is packed with meaning” (Hastrup, 1995, p. 123).

We do get important information by asking questions, but it is not the whole picture. These questions and the awareness they bring about was possibly not part of the local life. We should be careful about insisting on articulation because people might have good reasons for being in lack or evasive with words (Hastrup, 1995).

Jóhannesdóttir and Gísladóttir (2010) are two Icelandic researchers who have also done investigation concerning vulnerability and risk perception in Álftaver and Mýrdalur. Their investigation was done through in depth interviews carried out in one month where they had had no prior contact to the people interviewed. The work of Jóhannesdóttir and Gísladóttir is important for the purpose it is written; to reveal thoughts about risk that might help the national authorities in mapping knowledge about Katla, risk and preparation plans. This might help improve the “education” of locals, from a realistic point of view. However the method used for obtaining this information is based on this “enforced” focus on Katla through interviews and fails to reveal *how* little focus, talk and thoughts there really is about Katla in their *daily life*, as will become obvious in the following. It is here we find the strength of anthropology; the importance of participant observation and a long term field work is invaluable when it comes to reflections on how people conduct their *everyday life* in relation to risk.

In so far as one’s lived experience enables or inhibits particular kinds of insight, however, the analysis of experience is a legitimate framework for our observations and reflections towards a more general scope of understanding. (Hastrup, 1995, p. 125)

## Field work reflections

As an anthropologist doing field work, you should also reflect upon your own method. How you gather the information you need to be able to write the anthropological text, which is often the main goal for the whole study and field work. Unlike certain other social sciences, emphasis is, as known, put on qualitative rather than quantitative research methods, and with main focus on participant observation. Almklov (2006) talks about the idea of the anthropological method built on a reflecting presence, and how this reflexive self-control is portrayed realistically in anthropological texts. Almklov argues that this relationship between being both reflective and present is paradoxical, and that participant observation in itself is paradoxical in that it may prevent a spontaneous participation. Still this does not mean that he is arguing for participation *without* observation. Bernard has also emphasized the intricate act of participant observation:

Participant observation involves immersing yourself in a culture and learning to remove yourself every day from that immersion so you can intellectualize what you've seen and heard, put it into perspective, and write about it convincingly. When it's done right, participant observation turns fieldworkers into instruments of data collection and data analysis. (Bernard, 2006, p. 344)

Some researchers have criticized quantitative research for focusing too much on special units, for example household and heritage, and that units in themselves are not unproblematic (Almklov, 2006). Finn Sivert Nielsen (1996) is one of them, and he claims that this entification would mean that one has to know the relevance of counting these specific units, conditions and the relationship between them beforehand if it is to make sense. Almklov (2006) is of the opinion, and I tend to agree with him, that this critique, or skepticism, should rather be on collecting data altogether. One cannot necessarily *know* what the data is, and how the bits and parts that *is* data should be restricted beforehand. This restriction is central in fieldwork where "bits of experience is cut out of its local context and taken home"<sup>23</sup> (Almklov, 2006, p. 39). Instinct and intuition seems to play an important role here for the anthropologist.

The capacity of agents to be the source and originators of acts is known as the concept of agency. Weber suggested that qualities like consciousness, reflection, intention, purpose and

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<sup>23</sup> My translation

meaning, which are all features of human rationality, are what distinguish acting from mere behavior (Rapport & Overing, 2000, p. 1). Hastrup makes a clear point “that agency is not merely located in the mind, and that expressions of inner experiences are not reserved for words” (Hastrup, 1995, p. 81) and goes on by claiming that “most cultural knowledge is stored in actions rather than words” (Hastrup, 1995, p. 82). This becomes prominent when people do not talk (about certain things). However, there *is* meaning embedded in silence. Silence again, may make the instinct and intuition of the anthropologist even more valuable.

Instinct and intuition is of course a part of the anthropologist itself, and there has been much discussion in anthropology of how much one should include oneself in the written text and analysis. Because of the amount of silence concerning Katla I *have* chosen to include some personal experiences and reflections, because it was these that made me *understand* the silence and cultural knowledge to a much greater extent. Maurice Bloch has talked about the way an anthropologist experience through participation in the daily life of the informants; It is often through non-verbal practice, and Bloch claims that what one often do in the field is to look for facts or special assertions that confirm what one already knows because one knows how to effectively live with these people (Bloch, 1991, p. 194).

After having lived in Mýrdalur for a while I also found it difficult to ask why locals did not worry about an eruption from Katla. Why should they be scared when I did not even worry myself? When talking to, or interviewing people in the area I knew there were questions that I felt I should ask, but at the same time I knew they would have no good answers, and I understood why they did not. I knew, in the same way as them, that an eruption would have serious consequences for the small society. I knew that the communication system might not work, that everything would be black and I had no guarantee that there would not be an eruption during my time there, still I was not worried.<sup>24</sup> We had the same information available; facts about Katla, what would happen,<sup>25</sup> where to go, and in some cases I even knew more about the volcano and the area than the locals, still I did not worry! Katla was there, she existed, but she was difficult to relate to. Most people told me they did not think about her, but even me, who thought about Katla all the time since she was such a big reason for me being there, did not quite manage to relate to her. And for sure I did not want to move

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<sup>24</sup> I could rather relate to the young people telling me that they did not want to *miss out on* the eruption. What if Katla erupted just after I left?

<sup>25</sup> To the degree that it is possible to know these things.

away from Mýrdalur because of her.<sup>26</sup> Still I kept searching for these words from the locals that would help me confirm what I already knew or felt myself. How could I expect my informants to be able to tell me why they were not scared when I did not even manage to explain it myself? I did not worry about an eruption in the same way that the people in Mýrdalur did not worry about it.

This kind of insight that can be achieved by immersion and participation is perhaps the primary argument for the anthropological method, and the principal argument against the idea of fieldwork as data collection, at least in environments where a practice oriented expertise is important.<sup>27</sup> (Almklov, 2006, p. 41)

I have now given you an insight into these different areas that were of importance to my agency in the field and the field's agency towards me, so to speak. The history of the place and the social status of my host family were of significance for my field work and my methodological techniques were consequently affected. Still, retrospection of my time in Mýrdalur and thorough reflection of the methodical approach has made me understand that there were certain constraints in the interaction, or in my opinion lack of it, amongst people in the area. These constraints told me that the introversion, or rather silence and "keeping to oneself," were just a part of their everyday life, as I will be showing you in chapter 4. Furthermore, methodology will pervade this whole thesis; lurking between the lines. In many ways, the themes I have raised in this chapter have laid the foundation for discoveries that the rest of this thesis is based on.

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<sup>26</sup> A house in the red zone would probably not have been my first choice, but this was due to the risk of material damage, not a feeling of danger. And if someone had offered me a place to stay in the red zone I would not have refused. Even if you live outside the red zone, you can still be affected by the evacuation if you are not in your home when Katla erupts.

<sup>27</sup> My translation.





## 4 Everyday life and nature

*I like living in Vík, because nothing ever happens here. But that means that bad things do not happen either!*<sup>28</sup>

In this first chapter of my main section I wish to introduce you to everyday life in Mýrdalur and at my farm. I will from an emic perspective deal with my host family's and other locals' risk perception, or rather the lack of it; an important element being the silence about Katla in their everyday life.

### Everyday life in and around the Red Zone



Figure 5 Vík seen towards east and Mýrdalssandur  
– private picture

The small community Vík is found on an open space towards the sea. The houses in Vík are kind of clinging together at the flat part of the village; this area is called rauða sveiði - red zone. Most of the houses here are rather small, often only one floor. The older the house, the smaller it is. It is in the red zone you find the oldest houses in the village.

Uphill from the red zone there are more houses. These are newer and

bigger, some with two floors. Most of the houses are built in concrete or of corrugated iron as is a very typical building style in Iceland. Some of the newest houses are built with wood and timber. This is a rather expensive building material since timber has to be imported to Iceland. Windows tend to be small and with limited possibilities to be opened. Probably because it

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<sup>28</sup> From an interview with an Icelander who is not originally from the area.

protects them from being wrenched open by the wind. Windows are normally closed and doors locked. Some of the houses have a terrace, but they are rarely used.

The village church rests on a crag a little above the village. The villagers laugh of having a "natural path" from an earthly life to heaven; You start your childhood years in the school down by the sea in the red zone, a little uphill from the red zone you find the old people's home, a bit further uphill is the church and at a higher level rests the cemetery. "Then heaven comes next" is the local saying.

In the village you find everything you need for living a normal, comfortable life: a grocery store, a bank, a library, an elementary school, a tiny gym, a swimming pool, a hairdresser, the police, the municipality building, a post office, a café, a gas station, the medical center, the old people's home, a garage, and a shop that holds absolutely everything; from clothes to gifts to painting and fake nails. In addition one also finds the local knitting factory with a connected souvenir shop for tourists.<sup>29</sup>



Figure 6 A street in Vík – private picture

If you drive around in Vík on a normal spring day it would probably hit you that you do not see people out in the streets. If you do see anyone it is very likely they are tourists. In summer time the tourists actually outnumber the locals.

The villagers are not out in their gardens, even when the weather allows it, and they do not go for a walk, just to get some fresh air. When they need to go to the grocery store most would normally use the car even though the store is just 50 meters away. There are nearly always cars outside the gas station, often due to the tourists passing by. I sometimes wondered if the gas station was the local meeting point, because of the cars outside, but there were normally very few people inside.

The villagers in Vík have very few common arenas for meeting. They greet each other with a "hello" in the grocery store, but do not necessarily stop to chat. They do not meet in the coffee place, they do very little sport together and they do not seem to visit each other at home very

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<sup>29</sup> See appendix 4 for a street map of Vík.

often either, at least not from what I observed and experienced. But then again, why should they? Their need for social interaction may be covered after an eight to ten-hour working day with the same people as you might socialize with in your spare time.

Life at the farm was very quiet and calm with not much happening. A new day followed the pattern of the previous; Vignir woke up quite early, went to feed the sheep before he came back in to eat his breakfast and listen to the news on the radio. Then he headed out again for some maintaining business, either it was the sheep house, fences or a tractor that needed some fixing. After a few more hours he came back in to have some lunch, rest in the sofa next to the big living room window where he listened to the radio a bit more, chatted and cuddled with the dogs, looked at the view and weather and normally took a little nap. After the short nap, he headed out again. To my observations Vignir might just be the prototype Icelandic farmer; calm, quiet, tenacious, stubborn and hard working. His days were normally not stressful, but time was not wasted since there was always something that needed to be done, and he went about with his business with a steady progress. He was a worker, not a talker.

Harpa had no regular schedule as long as there were no guests in the house, and due to her health problems she often slept far into the day. When she woke up, she came to the kitchen and sat down at her regular space. The kitchen was not big, but it was there everybody gathered most of the time. The living room, that also held a big dining table, was only used for big family dinners or when people you did not know that well popped by. From her space in the kitchen Harpa seemed to have everything she needed to keep her occupied during a day within reach: her computer, the TV, the guest house reception, her most important books were in the book shelves there, and the kitchen table where she could do her Sudoku and write and manage the reservations in the guestbook. She was also in charge of the cooking in the household. Harpa's everyday life was grounded in the kitchen and the kitchen was the heart of the house. Unlike Vignir, Harpa was quite talkative. She was originally not from the area, and was not always as fond of the quiet and "loneliness" of the countryside in Mýrdalur.

I started my day early as well, as I was prepared for whatever task Harpa or Vignir would put me to. For the first few months, before the tourists started arriving, there was very little to do though. After eating breakfast and trying to make some conversation with Vignir, I often ended up just sitting at the kitchen table for a few hours, trying to make sense of yesterday's news paper, cuddling with the dogs or watching some foreign soap opera.

When Harpa got out of bed, we normally chatted for a while, tried to analyze whatever dreams we might have had during the night, if there was any work that needed to be done, or sometimes just sat there together in silence. Sometimes I would take my car and go to Vík, but early on in my field work these trips did not bring much to the table since there was no one to be seen and because I was yet to figure out my methodical tactics.

Since it was wintertime when I came to Mýrdalur, the weather additionally put a spoke in the wheel for my exploration of the area. Even though the main road was not far away, it was no point trying to plough the farm road as the wind would close it again in a few minutes. After all there was also no *urgent* need to go anywhere. I tried to activate myself, searching for information on the internet and learning the language. Last but not least, as a true Icelander; I watched TV with my host family. For a long time this felt like a massive waste of time, but still: “as a contextual framework, it is a setting in which even the absurd has meaning or purpose.” (Almklov, 2006, p. 46).

In the beginning of the field work I tried to “lay low” for a while. I followed my plan of just being present in the field and see where that would lead me. I was becoming closer to my host family and falling into their everyday routine and flow, at the same time that I was always on “alert” somehow. If anyone as much as mentioned a word that sounded a little similar to “Katla”, my ears were almost popping out of my head. This was somewhat confusing at first, since the Icelandic word for “to call”, *kalla*, is pronounced in the same way. The fact was that Katla, the volcano, was never even mentioned. Not unless someone asked why I had come to Mýrdalur. Even then, it was my pure presence that brought the topic to the table. “*Ah, so you are interested in Katla? She is nothing to talk about!*” said an old man who was visiting the farm one day, and as time went by I was collecting more and more statements similar to this from the people I met. As more or less all my informants told me, Katla was not a conversational topic. My host family would sometimes talk to me about Katla and willingly answered all my questions, but I had the feeling they did this more out of politeness towards me than anything else. Their everyday life and conversations never evolved around Katla.

One day I got the task of cleaning out the food storage next to the kitchen. It was quite a small room, but it had shelves from the floor to the roof. All the shelves and even the floor were filled with bags of food: canned food, bag soup and pretty much all kinds of food and drink with a long expiration date. As I started to go through everything piling up on the floor, I said in a joking manner: *You have so much food here, are you preparing for a war? Or if Katla*

comes,” was Harpa’s quick, but serious response before she continued reading her book. It was the first and one of the very rare glimpses I got, that made me think that the awareness of Katla and her presence where lurking there somewhere in the back of people’s heads, even though they did not talk about her.

**“It is important that everyone is safe, so we practice”**

*I guess I will have to leave my house since I live in rauða svæði [red zone], but I don’t think about it until björgunarsveitin [the rescue team] knocks on my door.*

Even though the locals did not talk about Katla, people in Mýrdalur were, at times, forced to relate to her in some way. One example of this would be the evacuation rehearsals. The school had and still has annual evacuation rehearsal, so does the local rescue team<sup>30</sup>, and every few years there is a big evacuation rehearsal that includes the whole community. These are run by the local police and rescue teams together with Almannavarnir.

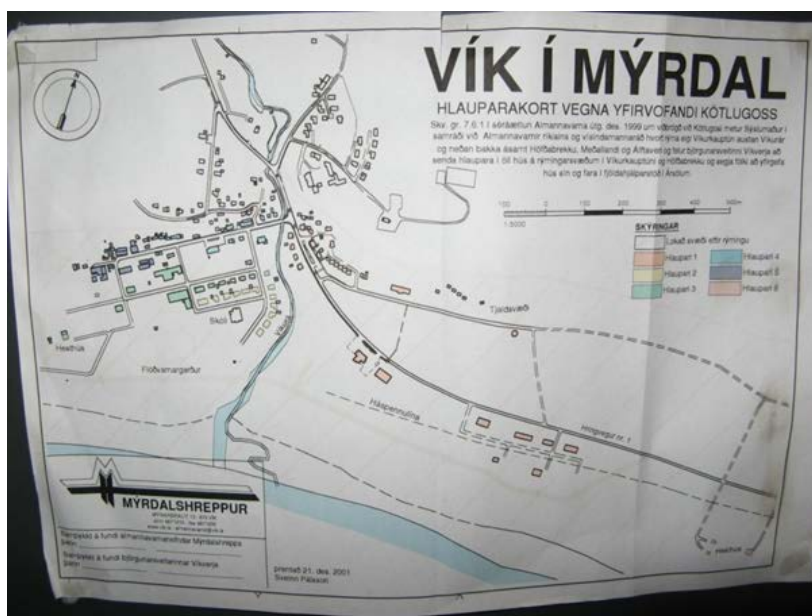


Figure 7 “Runner’s map” Plan of evacuation, who goes where – private picture

During a future Katla eruption the houses located in the red zone has to be evacuated due to the risk of tsunami hazard. The residents in Vík are told they have 30 minutes to prepare before evacuating to the evacuation center found on higher ground. They are all supposed to be notified of an eruption by a text message sent to their mobile phone or

<sup>30</sup> Björgunarsveitin

a recorded message called through to their landline. Members of local rescue teams will ‘sweep’ the area to ensure everybody has abandoned their houses.

All of the houses in the red zone are equipped with a “home abandoned” sign they are supposed to leave hanging at the front door, so that the rescue teams do not have to go inside to check the houses. The sign also holds a checklist telling the villagers what to do before they leave the house.

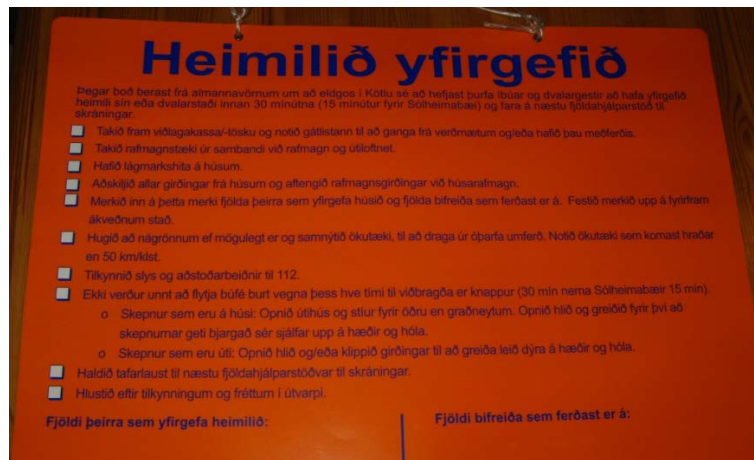


Figure 8 “Home abandoned”-sign to put on the front door – private picture

All over Iceland there are local rescue teams that are organized through The Icelandic Association for Search and Rescue (ICE-SAR)<sup>31</sup>. The rescue teams would be called out if someone for example has had an accident, if a car got stuck in a river or if someone is lost on a glacier. Their missions are varied and they are very much connected to hazards from nature. The members of the rescue teams are volunteers and their work and ability to offer quick assistance, since the teams are spread all over the country, is important.

The rescue team in Vík had 80 members, whereas 30-40 of these were quite active. They had weekly meetings where they were maintaining their equipment and vehicles, or they were out rehearsing some rescue mission. One of the jobs of the rescue teams in Vík was to help clear the area in the red zone, and the members were assigned to different tasks and

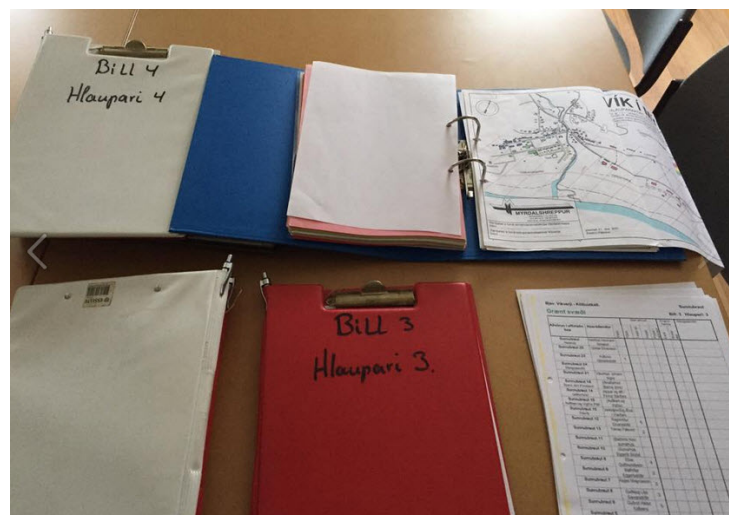


Figure 9 Check lists and maps for the different “runners”

different areas to sweep. The leader of the team, Finnbogi, went through all the details of the evacuation with me one day, and was putting special emphasize on the importance that

<sup>31</sup> Slysavarnafélagið Landsbjörg

everything ran smoothly because of the *extreme danger* of the situation. Still, Katla continues to be a non-topic in terms of risk, also among the members of the rescue team in between rehearsals. Finnbogi went on to tell me that he himself lived with his family in the red zone, but he had no problem with that. He was prepared for a tsunami to come and take their home, and when I asked what he thought about that, he just shrugged: “*It is no different that when you’re driving a car, you might crash...*”



Figure 10 Head quarter of the rescue team – private picture

Some of the young people I talked to, especially the ones who were in the rescue team, showed more eagerness or excitement about experiencing an eruption. Even though the young locals told me they did not worry or care about Katla, at the same time they did not want to *miss out* on an eruption. Birna, a girl in her early twenties, told me:

*... living so close to a volcano your whole life, it would be exciting to actually see it erupt at some time, but at the same time, if something bad would happen, then you wouldn't want to experience it. And since you can never know this beforehand you kind of feel both these things at the same time. Still, it is like you don't want it to happen while you are away. For example, when I was in school in Selfoss, I wouldn't want it to happen then...*

Birna was not a member of the rescue team, but often came along with her boyfriend to their weekly meetings. The members of the rescue team may have had other standards about facing risk than other members of the village. When talking to Finnbogi about the dangerous situations that the volunteers sometimes met on their missions, he did his best to try and make it sound as casual as possible:

*Our members are not sent on missions that push them into dangerous situations...but almost. It is important that everyone is safe, so we practice, but we always try to help. If we are called out, and maybe the weather is horrible, but we always want to go there to see if there is anything we can do.*

Judging from popular spare time activities among some of the rescue team members, and of the rescue rehearsals they joined, this group was not among the most risk avoiding part of the population.

In Vík there were only three people still alive of the ones who had experienced Katla in 1918. I talked to two of them, a quite old couple. Brynja and Hjalti were just children when Katla erupted, but still they remembered it very vividly and Hjalti told me his experience of the eruption:

*I remember I run up on the small hill behind our farm, and there we could see the huge cloud of ash and steam going up from the glacier. (...) We could hear rumbling from the column and see lightening in it as well (...). Later on the ash started falling and it became completely dark. It got so dark that you could not even see your hand if you held it up in front of your face. You hear people today, especially young people, talk about that they would like to experience an eruption from Katla. They think it sounds exciting, but they do not realize that there is nothing exciting about it!*<sup>32</sup>

Hjalti continued by talking about that he was not scared or worried about an eruption, also in 1918 life had continued as normal, but he did not think that an eruption was something to be eager about.

### **Ingimundur á Mýrdalssandi<sup>33</sup>**

During a conversation with another couple in Vík I got a remarkable story that just backed up the feeling I had; people in Mýrdalur did not waste any energy neither worrying nor thinking about Katla. This elderly couple became important informants to me both because they were some of the few people in Vík I go to relate to in a very informal way, popping by for coffee or had a chat with in the grocery store, and because the man, Ingimundur, was an experienced member of the rescue team. Ingimundur had been a member of the rescue team for more than 50 years and he had also been the leader of the team. Ingimundur was retired but very energetic and young at heart, and he was still active in the work the rescue team did. It was obvious that his knowledge was reckoned valuable and that the younger members were happy he still joined them. Ingimundur claimed to be more interested in nature than the average

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<sup>32</sup> My translation, as the talk was done in Icelandic.

<sup>33</sup> Ingimundur on Mýrdalssandur



Icelander and often went on trips to the highland with his wife, or he would go hunting or fishing. Since he had been working so long in the rescue team he had had to learn some things about Katla and the natural environment in Mýrdalur. But despite being very fond of nature, he had never been very interested in geology of the area and Katla. As we saw in the introduction to this thesis, even though Ingimundur's own mother had experienced the eruption in 1918, it never even occurred to him to ask her about how it had been.

Before Ingimundur retired he sometimes had to go to the closest community east of Vík; Kirkjubæjarklaustur, to do part of his job there. This meant that he had to cross Mýrdalssandur, the area where the jökulhlaup will come. Before you start crossing Mýrdalssandur you first meet a big warning sign for the area you are about to enter, and a little later a barrier, which is normally open. If there is a sandstorm or if something is going on with Katla, the road is closed and the sign warns about the danger.

*Ingimundur:*

*One time when I had to go to work in Kirkjubæjarklaustur I was called when I was far into the sands. The alarm had gone off and there was a danger that Katla would erupt. I was the leader of the rescue team at this time and I was responsible for the evacuation. I was of course driving in the worst area if Katla actually erupted! I just told them that there was not much I could do...I had already come quite far on a road that had already been closed, so I just had to continue driving to Kirkjubæjarklaustur. I managed to cross and went to work as normal. When I was going back in the evening I was also in the middle of the sands when the tire of my car punctured. I stopped, changed the tire, and it was just when I had gotten into the car again ready to continue driving that I remembered: Katla was maybe going to erupt today! Hehehe...this says something about how little we worry about Katla here.*

At this point his wife Hildur joins the conversation: “*We never think about Katla here, if we did, then we couldn't have lived here.*”

## **Summing up**

Throughout this chapter I have given you a taste of how everyday life in Mýrdalur takes place and I have tried to show how little Katla seems to occupy the minds of the people living close to her. I early on got the impression from people I talked to that Katla was just *not* a part of their life. I repeatedly came across statements or stumbled into conversations that reflected little importance of Katla in their daily life; Katla was a non-topic and issues concerning Katla were treated with silence.

## 5 “Nature is everywhere here!”

*Katla? No, I don't worry about Katla. But were you here last week? I thought I wouldn't find my way back home in the storm, and I was just visiting the neighbor! Nature is everywhere here! We have the weather, we have the sea...and yes we have Katla, but she just comes when she comes.*

The elemental forces *did* play quite an important role in how my field work was conducted at times, and I got a quick and thorough introduction to the presence of Icelandic nature in everyday life, not only for me but also for the people I was living amongst. As mentioned we were actually weather-bound to the farm for some periods of time. This gives you some perspective of the place you are at and, as my informant stated above, the nature was without a doubt omnipresent. If one were to start worrying about something, there would be more daily events, like the weather, one could worry about instead of worrying about Katla. As my informant Freyja once told me:

*The weather controls you and it can be annoying sometimes, but it is part of being an Icelander and living here.*

In this chapter I will give a brief overview of how the Icelanders' view on their own nature changed and their views and understanding of nature today. Following, I will try to investigate how nature overall plays a significant role in the life of the people in Mýrdalur and how locals try to do their best to live in accordance with their natural environment. Katla is part of this nature, but not necessarily their main focus. I will deal with the locals' reality communicated to me, to other newcomers/foreigners and amongst each other - something that was done through stories and myths,<sup>34</sup> but mostly through silence. Taking this a bit further, I will show how the locals (insiders) know how to<sup>35</sup> behave in and deal with nature as opposed to newcomers and tourists (outsiders).

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<sup>34</sup> This can be tied to a social (collective) memory, as e.g. Connerton (1989) has discussed. It has long been known that human memory is neither necessarily accurate nor reliable. Sometimes the memory seems to be “erased” while other times it is simply just altered.

<sup>35</sup> Or should know how to.

## Local myths and nature

### The witch in the volcano - Katla

*Arnar: Have you heard the story about how Katla got her name?*

*Me: No, is there a story?*

*Once it happened that the Abbot of the Monastery of Þykkvabæjarklaustur in Álftaver had a housekeeper whose name was Katla, and who was an evil-minded and hot-tempered woman. She possessed a pair of shoes<sup>36</sup> whose peculiarity was, that whoever put them on was never tired of running. Everybody was afraid of Katla's bad disposition and fierce temper, even the Abbot himself. The herdsman of "the monastery farm, whose name was Bardi, was often dreadfully ill-treated by her, particularly if he had chanced to lose any of the ewes.*



*One day in the autumn the Abbot and his housekeeper went to a wedding, leaving orders with Bardi to drive in the sheep and milk them before they came home. But unhappily, when the time came, the herdsman could not find all the ewes; so he went into the house, put on Katla's magic shoes, and sallied out in search of the stray sheep. He had a long way to run before he discovered them, but felt no fatigue, so drove all the flock in quite briskly.*

*When Katla returned, she immediately perceived that the herdsman had been using her shoes, so she took him and drowned him in a large tubful of curds. Nobody knew what had become of the man, and as the winter went on, and the curds in the tub sank lower and lower, Katla was heard to say these words to herself: "Soon will the waves of milk break upon the foot-soles of Bardi!"*

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<sup>36</sup> Also referred to as pants.



*Shortly after this, dreading that the murder should be found out, and that she would be condemned to death, she took her magic shoes, and ran from the monastery to a great ice-mountain, into a rift of which she leaped, and was never seen again.*



*As soon as she had disappeared, a fearful eruption took place from the mountain, and the lava rolled down and destroyed the monastery at which she had lived. People declared that her witchcraft had been the cause of this, and called the crater of the mountain "The Rift of Katla"*

All the villagers I talked to knew this story.<sup>37</sup> It had obviously been passed on to children and newcomers. The elementary school in Vík was decorated with colorful images inspired by the myth.<sup>38</sup> A myth is often talked about as a symbolic narrative explaining how the world, or parts of it, as well as humankind came to be in their present form. In addition, myths have been connected to the personification of inanimate objects and forces (Kirk, 1998). This tradition is rather old and according to some thinkers, the ancients worshipped natural phenomena such as fire and air, gradually coming to describe them as gods as well as describing natural events as acts of gods (Kirk, 1998). The myth about Katla does not personify the volcano as a god, but tries to explain how this volcano came into being and why this natural element behaves with such fierceness.

Myths differ a lot in both morphology and social function (Kirk, 1998) and the social function of this myth seemed to be of no importance, neither religiously nor ritually. Still the volcano was personified as an unpredictable woman or a witch. This personification was fully integrated into the language, and everyone I talked to referred to Katla as “her” and “the lady.”<sup>39</sup> That is why I am also referring to the volcano Katla as “her” instead of “it”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> With some variations.

<sup>38</sup> As shown above.

<sup>39</sup> It is worth mentioning though that Katla is a feminine name.

<sup>40</sup> Volcano being a neutral noun

throughout this thesis. The fact that the volcano has been given a female name fits the traditional view that Ortner, among others, has talked about: Women are seen as closer to nature than men (Ortner, 1974).<sup>41</sup> Following, women are seen as untamed, wild and uncontrollable, and they represent danger (Eriksen, 2001, p. 162). Hastrup has argued that in Iceland this is almost the other way around. Women find expression inside the social (Hastrup, 1990, p. 276).<sup>42</sup> The myth about Katla seemed to be of amusement, and none of my informants said they believed the story, though some of my informants said: “...*but you better not make Katla angry.*” It seemed like the myth was one way the locals could communicate the unpredictability of Katla to children and newcomers without having to frighten them or make someone worry. *After all, there was nothing to worry about.*

## **Krukkspá**

In addition to the myth introduced to you above, there were not many myths or folk tales I came across that was linked to Katla, but several of my informants told me about a prophecy that was known as Krukkspá. This prophecy is supposed to have been brought forward by a prophet (Krukkur) known as Jón Krukkur. Nobody knows exactly when this prophecy came into being but some date it back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Krukkur often went from farm to farm telling people about his prophecies and many of them are said to be surprisingly accurate. The Krukkspá about Katla was that Katla, as we know her today, would cease to exist and move out to sea. This was what Jón Krukkur said would happen if a jökulhlaup from Katla would reach a place called Meðalland (shown on Figure 2.). During the eruption in 1918, this was exactly what happened. Several people seem to put faith in this prophecy since there have been two big eruptions out in the sea when it statistically was time for Katla to erupt again. In 1963 an underwater eruption that created the new island Surtsey started, and only ten years later the eruption in the same group of islands, Vestmannaeyjar, started on Heimaey. Both of these eruptions were seen as proof for some people that Katla had moved and would not erupt again. It is first and foremost adults who know of, and believe in this

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<sup>41</sup> There is usually more seismic activity around Katla during autumn, and some informants referred to it as Katla's period, giving the volcano further female characteristics.

<sup>42</sup> Social organization of life contains both male and female aspects, while women in many ways have been excluded from the men's wild (Hastrup, 1990). The rescue teams can be a good example as they could almost be seen as a men's club “fighting the wild outside the fences.” This may have changed during the later years as women also have become part of the rescue teams. Younger girls often participated in rescue missions, while older ones were typically assigned to the “office jobs” like accounting and so on.

prophecy, and far from everyone. But most adults I talked to had heard the legend and some believed in it. Some had only heard the name of the prophecy but did not know the content and most young people I talked to had never even heard about it.

There was only one exception of the ones I talked to; Saga, a fairly young woman, who *strongly* believed in Krukkspá. She said she did not believe that Katla would erupt because she was raised to think that this prophecy was true. Saga lived in the red zone in Vík, and would have to evacuate with a possible eruption. She did not worry about this though, since she did not think it would happen. I asked her if she had made an evacuation plan for the household, as the ones living in the red zone are encouraged to do, and she eagerly answered:

*No, I haven't, because I don't think it will happen, but if it happens I know what to do! I just have to grab my contact lenses, unplug all electricity, take my phone and hang the sign on the door.*

Even with a total conviction that this would not happen, Saga knew exactly what she would do *if* it happened - better safe than sorry.

## **Icelanders and nature**

### **- in a historic perspective**

The well-rooted image of Iceland's premodern human ecology is of a population struggling to survive in an inhospitable environment, pursuing European-style farming too near the Arctic and some highly active volcanoes, always on the margin of survival. It has been a "thousand years struggle against ice and fire" (Þórarinnsson 1956) and a "millennium of misery" (Tomasson 1977) in a "beautiful nightmare" of a place (Griffiths 1969). (Vasey, 1996, p. 149)

The Icelanders' good relationship with their natural environment has not always existed. When the Vikings going to Iceland first met their new country, a demanding nature was facing them. Much of the land was covered in ice and they learned to discover that they had to relate to earthquakes, and even volcanic eruptions, creating a hostile and difficult environment to be living in. The fields and much of the land overall, were covered in lava with sometimes

only a thin layer of soil or moss atop, ash would cover the soil in periods, and occasional floods from the glaciers were also a threat. They realized, that much of the land was basically not very well suited for agriculture, which functioned as substantial economy for the country up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Kalland & Sejersen, 2005) (Pálsson, 2006). The new Icelanders even had to go through famines and plagues as a consequence of ash chute from volcanic eruptions (Francis & Oppenheimer, 2004). When the first settlers came to the island there were trees to be found, but these were eventually chopped down and used as fire wood and building material (Lacy, 1998). Before the settlers arrival there were almost no animals on the island, and the introduction of the grazing livestock together with the harsh climate and volcanic eruptions, made it hard for the soil, when there was any, to regain its fertile conditions. Because of this, the vegetation had a hard time growing back (Lacy, 1998) (Magnússon, 1977). Traditionally though, Iceland *was* an agricultural society, and despite the wealth found in the ocean surrounding Iceland, farming was favored over fishing. Fishing was done in wintertime when the tenant farmers of the wealthy farms across the country gathered in seasonal fishing villages around the coastline, Vík being one of them. The money they earned normally ended up in the hands of the already wealthy farmer while the tenant farmers, often risking their lives at sea during the winter storms, stayed poor, as it was just one of the ways for the tenant farmers to pay for their smallholding (Gunnell, 2004). The fish was nevertheless, in addition to farming, the basic pillar of the Icelandic economy; after all it was the abundance of land and abundance of fish that had been the most important reasons for settling in Iceland.

While farming certainly was the primary occupation in the mental image of the local economy, because it sustained the traditional conceptions of the world as centralized around the household, fishing played an equally important role, economically speaking. (Hastrup, 1998, p. 36)

In the fifteenth century, the interest in fishing was growing, but on behalf of society, restrictions were made. Fishing was to stay a marginal activity in the economic cycle of the year. Even though temporary periods in the wilderness of Iceland were necessary, a wilderness that the fishing villages were a part of since it was outside the fences of the controlled space of the homestead, the image of Icelandicness<sup>43</sup> demanded that they should come back to the farm. “They could not remain on the “outside” without throwing their

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<sup>43</sup> The word “Icelandicness” is used by Hastrup among others.



human identity in jeopardy, it seems.” (Hastrup, 1998, p. 38)<sup>44</sup>. The people making these restrictions were the farmers, who of course were afraid of losing permanent access to labor. Nevertheless, even though labor was kept away from the sea, the farming and agricultural area was deteriorating. The fences that had earlier been an important part in separating the wilderness from the controlled space of the infields (Hastrup, 1990), were disintegrating. Old technologies seemed to be forgotten and in result, the Icelandic population reached a level of poverty previously unheard of in the Nordic countries by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. When the Enlightenment finally reached the North Atlantic community, the main task was to start from scratch, teaching Icelanders the forgotten fishing and farming technologies. The development was slow, but as the society was little by little getting back on track, one could see a new trend. Growing yields of hay, and not least expanding fishing made the Icelandic society move towards the modern market-oriented economy (Hastrup, 1998).

Iceland *had* been seen as vigorous and fertile by the first settlers and throughout the Age of Settlement. However, as the population grew, it became more difficult to find good and fertile soil, the fishing was restricted and poverty grew, the nature started to be seen as a trouble maker, as something ugly, something they had to struggle with to be able to survive and live there. During a conversation with one of my informants, Gísli, he started talking about the problem Icelanders had had with noticing the beauty in the nature surrounding them, the same beauty as thousands every year are making pilgrimages to see and experience. Gísli was a grownup man in his late fifties living in the red zone in Vík. He was an educated teacher, with history as one of his fields, and should have known what he was talking about:

*...you know today the nature gives possibilities, but the good relationship to the nature here is not very long [old]. Before, people could not see the beauty. The lava was ugly because it could not be used for anything, and the same with the sand because it was impossible to grow anything there, and the mountains, you know, they were just in the way...you could not grow anything there either and you could not get where you wanted. And people were even scared to go up to the highlands. That was where the volcanoes and outlaws were.*

The fear was connected to the unfamiliar terrain where the volcanoes ravaged, where the landscape gave you associations of being on the moon, and where you would find trolls,

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<sup>44</sup> For an extended discussion related to this, one should take a look at Durrenberger’s essay “Every Icelander a Special Case” (Durrenberger, 1996), which is found in the reference list of this thesis.

hidden people and outlaws<sup>45</sup> (Gunnell, 2004). As Gísli also told me, it has been said that it actually was a play put on stage at the theatre in Reykjavík that helped the Icelanders change their view of the nature. This play was actually called “The Outlaws”<sup>46</sup> and was written by Matthías Jochumsson. It is still one of Iceland’s most popular plays and is continuously shown at theatres. The stage set, or backgrounds, to this play were made by a painter called Sigurður Guðmundsson<sup>47</sup>. The backgrounds were first shown in Reykjavik in 1862 and has been said to completely silence the audience by astonishment and excitement. They had never seen their nature in the way it was displayed to them on stage. They had been struggling with it their whole life, with the rough lava, the mountains, the sand, the snow, the ice and the ocean, and people had not been able to notice the beauty of the nature, only the utility value of it. As Gísli gave me a picture of, nature had somehow only been seen as a troublemaker and Icelanders did their best to try to live with and at times control it. Nature sometimes behaved in unpredictable ways, and it was in general difficult to live *of* it, something they were dependent on doing. How could they then see the beauty in it? But little by little, people became more aware of the beauty in the nature surrounding them.

### **Icelandic views on nature**

Different institutionalized ways of thinking and acting have been related to different concepts of nature, and have been shown to generate diverse cultural responses to environmental risks. (Milton, 1993, p. 11)

From the history of how the Icelander’s view on nature changed, we notice the importance for the Icelanders that nature somehow needed to be managed as a resource, and later on as a national symbol. The problems they had with nature as a resource resulted in seeing the nature as “ugly.”

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<sup>45</sup> The stories of outlaws seem to have been an important part of Icelandic literacy and storytelling. If a man was found guilty of murder, he could be sentenced to full outlawry, which basically was the same as a death sentence (Magnússon, 1977). An outlaw was completely on the outside of the law and of the society in general. Anyone who wanted could attack and kill the outlaw without fearing legal or compensatory consequences, and social ties like marriage, kinship, right to inheritance and succession, were dissolved (Magnússon, 1977, p. 24). Outlaws have therefore always been a part of the Icelandic wilderness, and even entertainment as stories and myths about the outlaws were, and still are, popular.

<sup>46</sup> Original title: “Útilegumennirnir,” but more commonly goes under the name “Skugga-Sveinn.”

<sup>47</sup> Who is also known for designing the Icelandic National Dress.

For a long period of time, the preferred form of productivity was agriculture. The realms of agriculture were found inside the fences of the farm or homestead. These fences separated the *culture* that had been created inside the fences from the *nature* on the outside (Hastrup, 1998) (Hastrup, 1990). The nature (untamed wilderness) was tried controlled and that which had become “culture” (the domesticated nature) inside the fences, was in strong contrast to the nature outside the fences. Outside the fences the nature was “wild.” This was the land where the volcanoes ravaged, where the land was too poor to be cultivated and were outlaws, hidden people and trolls were found, as already mentioned.

Though the dualism between culture and nature is not *that* contrasting today, there are still elements of this belief; as also Pálsson (2006) has found to be a frustrating one. Could one for example see the extended “need” for using super jeeps to access and experience Icelandic nature, as a way of (trying to) control nature?

Today there seem to be a growing interest in environmental issues, for example seen through protests against industrial development in the Icelandic countryside. The increasing tourism is also a reminder of the interest in nature and an interest in taking care of it.<sup>48</sup> I would also claim that there is a growing realization of nature being the place you live *in*, not something you are opposed to. The Icelandic nature itself is often the best reminder of nature not being something that can be controlled. Brydon (1996) claims that the Icelander’s relationship to nature, is a rather special one; On the one hand, the nature is cherished as a beautiful place to be in and a place for spiritual renewal, she says.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, nature is also seen as “a harsh and unforgiving foe in the battle for survival” (Brydon, 1996, p. 39) which certainly demands that one relates in a rational and respectful manner towards it. Furthermore, this duality became an important part of the ideology of Icelandic independence and gave fuel to the national pride of the country. Nature has, in other words become a national symbol (Einarsson, 1996).

Even though nature has become a part of the national pride, Katla did not seem to be of importance to the place identity, as opposed to e.g. the volcano Eldfell<sup>50</sup> on Heimaey; In 1973 a volcanic eruption started on the small inhabited island Heimaey, in Vestmannaeyjar. The eruption, which created the new volcano Eldfell, started a little outside the city and luckily

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. Paternalistic protection (Pálsson G. , 1996)

<sup>49</sup> Several of my informants told me that their main motivation for going out in the nature, especially down to the sea, was for recreational purposes.

<sup>50</sup> Fire mountain

everyone on the island managed to evacuate to the mainland, but the lava following the eruption buried parts of the city, and it took a long time before people could move back to the island. Eldfell clearly has a place in the self-image of people from the Heimaey (both positive and negative). This was part of the theme in Stangeland's dissertation (2004), as well as my personal experience from several visits to, and encounters with people from, Heimaey. The situation may not seem very different than the situation for the people in Vík, but Katla playing such a non-important role for the place identity might have to do with the fact that there are very few people who experienced Katla who is still alive. There is no common or ceremonial memory about her.<sup>51</sup> As Ingimundur said with a smile one day after telling me about the heavy sea outside Vík, that keeps on eating more and more of the land every year: *"It's not only Katla!"* In Mýrdalur there were always more present things to worry about than Katla. The natural environment in the area was of great importance to the locals also because of socio-economic reasons, since their livelihood for a greater part was based on either farming and agriculture or the tourism industry.<sup>52</sup> Following, the weather and the nature was both a resource and at times a threat to farmers and people in the tourist industry as well as the other inhabitants in Mýrdalur.

## Tourism and nature

Several times throughout this thesis I have mentioned that Vík and the surrounding area is a much visited tourist spot, it is probably one of Iceland's most popular.<sup>53</sup> The reason for this is found in the special nature there,<sup>54</sup> and the area has been background in many famous movies and TV-series<sup>55</sup> as well as fashion magazines, but also the fairly simple accessibility from Reykjavík is probably of importance. Being only two-hour drive away from the capital, it is easy feasible for tourists to do a short trip to Mýrdalur, and many do exactly that.

The tourist industry has been growing rapidly over the last decade. My interest in Iceland was triggered by a visit to the country in 2000. Back then it was a quite expensive and unusual place to go to for Norwegians. Iceland quickly gained popularity as a travel destination after

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. Connerton, 1989

<sup>52</sup> Or both in the case of my host family.

<sup>53</sup> After the Golden Circle and Bláa Lónið (the Blue Lagoon)

<sup>54</sup> You have for example Mýrdalsjökull (the glacier) where you can go on snowmobiles or super jeep tours, you have Dýrhólaey, Reynisdrangar, Reynisfjall with its basaltic rock formations, the black volcanic beaches, and the list goes on.

<sup>55</sup> E.g. Star Wars, Game of Thrones and more.

2000 and by the time I decided to move there to study in 2004, many found it an interesting destination to travel to. Since my (first) homecoming in 2005 though, Iceland seem to have been on the tip of every one’s tongue. Suddenly the ticket prices sunk considerably and it became almost “on fashion” to go there for a weekend. Without doubt Iceland has become a major tourist country over the last years and it is now an important part of the country’s economy.<sup>56</sup> According to a journalist in The New York Times (Goreau, 1996) the country does not meet “*the conventional standards of beauty*”<sup>57</sup> with its absence of trees and barren lava fields, among other things, but when tourists are asked the standard question all foreigners face: “*So how do you like Iceland?*” there is one word that is repeated: *Fascinating*.

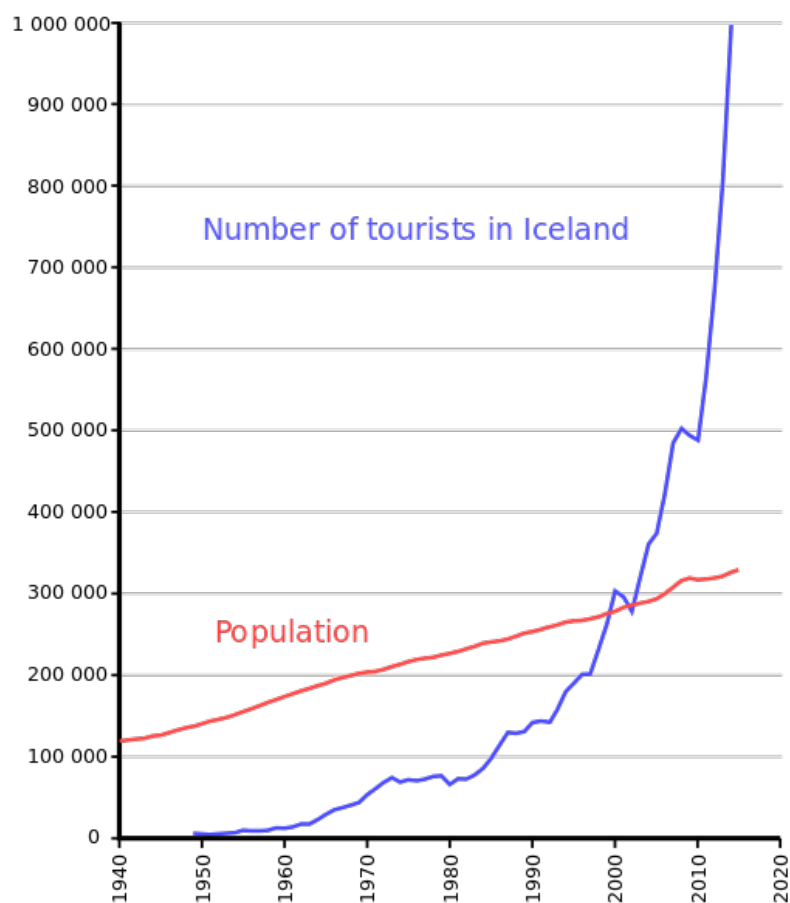


Figure 11 Number of tourists in Iceland (Icelandic Tourist Board data, Statistics Iceland, & Borvan53, 2015)

<sup>56</sup> Even more after the financial crash in the Icelandic economy in 2008/2009.

<sup>57</sup> Leaving the discussion about what, if anything, can be named a conventional standard of beauty alone.

The growing tourism has been giving a “helping hand” in making the Icelanders more aware of their special nature. The nature was definitely one of the reasons I got so fascinated by this country, and although the nature is now being more “exploited” in connection with tourists, I was surprised to see that everything was held as natural as possible. The attractions *are* natural, not man made. Moreover, the tourists are pretty much left to explore the country on their own and to be responsible for their own actions. Many chooses to go on guided bus tours, while just as many rent a car and go around the country on their own. For people having never been in a northern or Nordic country this can be quite an experience and sometimes an experiment; driving on gravel, icy and/or snowy roads and even having to or trying to avoid crossing rivers at times. This obviously ends in bad situations at times, giving the rescue teams more to do, but it also gives tourists a clue about how it feels to be left to the mercy of the nature.

The Icelanders could probably be exploiting the tourist industry much more and much *has* happened over the last years in relation to the tourists industry and Icelandic nature attractions. Still, even at the main attractions, the scene is most of the time kept very natural. To give an example: At Gullfoss<sup>58</sup>, one of Iceland’s most famous, beautiful and not least, most visited waterfalls, the guarding was kept to a minimum. The last time I visited the scene, there were only some poles with a rope pulled through them put up next to the path, and there were no warning signs. People are themselves responsible for their own safety. This seems to be the general rule throughout the country; everyone has to take care of themselves without being told and reminded by signs and protective barriers at all times.<sup>59</sup> Still this theme frequently came up for discussion, both locally and nationally.

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<sup>58</sup> Gullfoss is a designated area in the southwestern part of Iceland, only 120 km northeast of Reykjavík which makes it very popular to visit by people going to the capital. The waterfall is made by the river Hvítá and is 32 metres high (World of Waterfalls).

<sup>59</sup> To me this was liberating, while it was quite a shock to for example all the Americans visiting the country.

## “Why cannot they just use their eyes, take a look around and then use their head?”



Figure 12 Dýrhólaey.  
Reynisfjall and Reynisdrangar in the background  
– private picture

In most cases, it seems to be the choice of the landowner if warning signs are put up or not. This is the situation with one of the most popular sights in Mýrdalur and Vík; Dýrhólaey - translated “Doorway Hill Island.” Dýrhólaey, which used to be the southernmost point of Iceland, is a cape with perpendicular cliffs on the southern and western side while a rock rim with an arch shaped opening through it is

protruding into the sea. The peculiar rock formation is the result of the fight between volcanic originated rock and glaciers, and the hole is big enough for both boats and small planes to pass through (Steindórsson, 2005). The cliff formations are spectacular and the place is a popular sight and bird watching spot as it holds a rich colony of Puffins, as well as other species. On top of the cliff is an old lighthouse, and from the field in front of the house, you can walk out on this special cliff. The only problem is that due to heavy erosion, bits and pieces of the edge now and then falls into the sea. Looking at the cliff from down at the beach, you can see how the cliff is excavated. While standing atop, you cannot know that the ground underneath you is lacking. You can on the other hand see that the ground has fallen down at certain places. Still, the securing of the place has been extremely bad, almost non-existing.<sup>60</sup> There were just a thin rope-fence functioning as some kind of protection, and this was moved further and further inland, and it was normally half-broken. In addition, there were no signs telling you about the danger it actually was to be standing on top, because the landowner of this place did not want to put up signs. The place was quite dangerous to people who did not know how to take care, something I also got confirmed by several of my informants.

There is a common opinion among villagers in Vík that if this place had been in the US, the area would be completely “covered” in signs. Talking to Leifur, a man who arranged snowmobile trips for tourists on Mýrdalsjökull, I had noticed that before going on a trip like

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<sup>60</sup> Subject to it being the same today as the last time I was there.

this you had to sign a paper stating (among other things) that you were aware of the danger connected to the ride<sup>61</sup>: “...we had to formalize it like that, especially after the Americans started coming, just in case something would happen, otherwise they would sue you!”

Svala, one of the daughters at my farm, used to work in her parents guesthouse during the summer holidays and were familiar with the “behavior” of many of the foreigners<sup>62</sup> coming there:

*You know, they just don't know how to behave here, in the outdoors. They take their tiny rental cars and try to cross rivers and then get stuck of course, and björgunarsveitin<sup>63</sup> has to come and pick them up. It is like if there are no signs or warnings telling them what they should NOT do or that they should be careful, they don't think! Why cannot they just use their eyes, take a look around and then use their head? I don't know...but maybe it is different for us who have had this [nature] around us our whole life...*

Clearly, there seems to be a strong belief that there is a difference in the behavior among the ones that *know how to behave* (the insiders: the locals, the Icelanders) as opposed to those who *do not know how to behave* (the outsiders: the “foreigners,” the tourists, and at times the newcomers).

The discussions about tourists, the signs and how to take better care of the tourists, seems to have been going on for some time. On the one hand locals wish that the tourists would know how to take care of themselves, on the other hand many of the locals, especially those in the tourist industry feel a certain amount of responsibility for the tourists entering the area.<sup>64</sup> However, the acknowledgement of the tourist not “understanding” the nature and how to behave in it in the same way as an Icelander seems to be deeply embedded in Icelanders.

## **The American and the ocean**

Many of the sights worth visiting in Mýrdalur are close to the ocean, and the ocean here *is* dangerous. The sea can seem quite calm, but all of a sudden there can be a big breaker coming

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<sup>61</sup> Since the snowmobile ride was on Mýrdalsjökull, the danger from Katla was also included on this form.

<sup>62</sup> “Útlendingum” as she usually referred to them as.

<sup>63</sup> The rescue team.

<sup>64</sup> And see that this is not the case; many of them do not know how to behave.



to pull you under, without any warning. One of my informants, Freyja, had grown up quite close to one of the sights, Reynisfjara<sup>65</sup>: *“It is the best cure for a troubled mind to go down to the sea and watch the waves.”* But she also told me that one of the first things she was taught as a child was to respect the sea: *“You should never turn your back to the sea!”*

The conversation with Svala in the previous sub chapter took place shortly after a fatal accident at Reynisfjara. Just next to this black beach there is a mountain consisting of basaltic columns<sup>66</sup>, and there is also an interesting cave formed in the mountain from the sea side. The sight is fascinating indeed, but also very dangerous as it often takes all the attention of the tourists and they forget to keep an eye on the ocean behind them.

The accident hit a group of American tourists. A 70 year old woman was standing close to the sea and was taken by a big wave. Her daughter was standing beside her, and both she and other travelling companions tried to help the woman ashore, but had enough trying to save themselves. The rescue team in Vík was called to the place and it took them no more than 20 minutes to be in place. The team only had a small rubber boat to help themselves with because of the cliffs in the area, and the sea was very difficult to handle. The man leading the rescue operation was one of the veterans in the rescue team, Ingimundur, who you have been introduced to earlier. He was called out since he was the one with most expertise when it comes to rescue operations at sea. He told me about the importance of knowing how to “read” the sea:

*When we were out there, we suddenly noticed something floating at the surface. It was just luck that she was floating and had not been pulled under [as normally happens]. We had to pay attention to the sea to be able to handle very quickly at the right moment. The waves here are difficult, and you have to pay attention to the cliffs. We got her up in the boat, but she was already dead. Even if she was 70 years old, she was in a good shape. She looked like being in her fifties; still she could not fight the sea.*

Only one time before had there been a similar rescue operation. That time it was a man who voluntarily had decided to go swimming in the area but he ended up between the cliffs.<sup>67</sup> The

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<sup>65</sup> “Reynisbeach”

<sup>66</sup> Reynisfjall

<sup>67</sup> He was wearing a wet suit and was an adventurer who had set himself a goal of going swimming in strange places in the world.

locals call this craziness. “Everybody” knows that you do not go swimming at the beach in Vík! Obviously tourists are not part of this “inside-information”; two German tourists also experienced this after making the decision of going skinny dipping down at the beach. The waves kept drawing them outwards, but after a long struggle, one of them managed to swim back in, while his friend continued to be pulled outwards. Fortunately a jeep was coincidentally driving around down at the beach and noticed the naked man running around. To all luck, there was a rope in the car and they managed to draw the other tourist ashore. The story is told with humor and glint in the eye, because most people find the image of the naked man running around at the beach quite amusing; however there is much gravity in the situation. They all know how it could have ended had the car not been down at the beach, and it was easily noticeable in Mýrdalur how the incident with the American woman affected them.

### **“I was supposed to know!”**

The ocean had a special place both for the locals and the tourists in the area. Most of my informants felt a closer attachment to and attraction to the beach and the ocean than for example Katla. Because of this I would argue that the beach and the ocean were more important for their place identity. The locals claimed to use the beach and the view of the sea more for recreation and play, than the mountains. Growing up, they had been taught always to respect the sea and never to turn their backs to it, even when the sea seemed calm. The respect for the unpredictability of the sea was one of the things that separated the locals, the newcomers and the tourists. The locals, especially those you had grown up close to the beach possessed the tools for minimizing the risk down by the sea. They should know how to behave, while the newcomers and tourists could not know better, as we saw above and as the following stories will show.

### **Katharina and the waves**

Katharina worked at one of the local hotels. Some years ago, the people working there decided to have a social gathering in the cave at Reynisfjall to celebrate midsummer night’s eve. They had checked the tide and thought everything was supposed to be safe enough to go there. This was not the case though, the tide suddenly came in very fast and they were all stuck in the cave without any possibility to get out. Only one of the people present was

Icelandic and she tried to call the rescue team, but there was no connection inside the cave. Luckily, they had a rope that they tried to hold between them and go out of the cave, so they could climb up on the mountain. Katharina was the last one to go out of the cave and she and the girl in front of her lost the grip of the rope: *“It was extremely scary, I just felt the power of the sea pulling me out from the land and we were just pushed closer and closer towards the cliffs.”* The other girl who also lost her grip was wearing a red jacket, so the people on land could see her. They managed to throw the rope out to them, and with Katharina holding on to the other girl, they managed being pulled back in, after spending about ten minutes in the ocean. Katharina had never been back to the beach and cave there after this incident, and when she went down to the beach in Vík, she took care of never going too close to the water. She and her colleagues did not dare to tell this story to their managers of the hotel since they could have lost their whole working stock that day.

Katharina told me a story about how nature suddenly can take complete control over a situation. It was a feeling of suddenly losing foothold literally speaking. That time there was only one Icelander present who “should” have had a better assumption for knowing the conditions. However, in this case also the other people, “the outsiders,” kept it to themselves afterwards. True enough it was a scary thought that the hotel could have lost all its employees. Still, just as good a reason for them not telling, I would assume, were based on a feeling of “we should have known better.” In this case the people were locals in the meaning that they were all working there; most of them had not been there for a long time though, so they could partly be seen as tourists or guests as well. Moreover they got exactly the feeling most Icelanders want the tourists to have; we should have known better- or said in another way; “we are responsible for our own actions and should respect the force of nature.”

### **Hafdís og hafið<sup>68</sup>**

More and more often during my field work I talked to people about dangerous experiences they had had with nature. For sure it was not only Katla the people in the area had to relate to. Another informant, Hafdís, had also had frightening situations with the sea. She lived just next to the beach, knew the area and the conditions very well and she had been down at the beach playing with her child:

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<sup>68</sup> Hafdís and the ocean

*We were just down at the beach...you know, playing carefully in the waves and one big one comes and pulls us under, both of us. And we were just so so lucky. I was in shock for days and felt really stupid. You know, I should know this because I am brought up here and I know how, you know, all of a sudden there can come one big wave. You have probably heard about the lady that died here, just one month ago or so. You know, my heart starts pounding when I am thinking about it. That is the only thing that I have been close to [dangers in the nature]. But we managed to get out of it, and I think we have a great guardian angel watching over us because you are not able to control yourself at all. (...) You just fall flat, because it is so powerful.*

The general feeling after hearing this is the helplessness Hafdís had felt in this situation. At the same time there is a hortative undertone throughout the story, directed to herself; she had grown up there, and she should have known better! You just do not let the nature get the opportunity to take control over your life.

## **The Newcomer Syndrome**

My own perspective on risk perception in Mýrdalur before my arrival had been a purely neutral one. I had no idea how *I* would perceive risk when living there myself and I certainly had no intention of going there thinking that their way of viewing risk was a twisted one. I was simply driven by curiosity. Still, I was prepared that the more I learned about the situation, I might start to worry. This did not seem to happen even though the information I got was intriguing. Actually I did not realize how I *really* felt about the issue until I talked to Katharina, the girl telling me the story about the waves at Reynisfjall.

Katharina was originally from another Nordic country, but had lived in Vík for some time. She had had long term jobs there, working both in the kindergarten and in one of the hotels. She had a live-in partner there, as well as her sister who was married to a local. Katharina lived in the red zone of Vík. She did not really think too much about that anymore, but she used to. When she first came, she had been living in the hotel's staff house in Vík, which is also in the red zone. She remembered very well the first time the managers of the hotel came to explain them what to do if Katla erupted; where the sign was and that they were supposed to leave it on the door when the house was empty and everyone had evacuated. "*I was completely freaking out and felt very unsafe!*" she said. In the beginning she used to dream a

lot about Katla because she was so scared about it and the dreams were always like in the information movie they had been showed and it was very scary. She stopped dreaming about it after a while though, but she was still thinking about it, and she had felt much safer in a period when she had been living higher up in Vík. *“I always feel most safe when I am next to the church,”* she said. If she was told that Katla would erupt soon and she had the chance to move away, she would.

*The thought of being here during an eruption, just the fact that all the roads close and you cannot go anywhere is enough for me to leave. I feel scared by living so close to a volcano, but you also get used to it...somehow.*

Katharina was not the only “immigrant” that was or at least had been worried about Katla. I had never had this feeling though, and I actually found it a bit peculiar that I could wake up of an earthquake but still not feel the slightest amount of neither fear nor worry, after all I had never felt earthquakes before. For a short time it made me question the purpose of my interest in the field. How was I supposed to make sense of the Icelanders non-perception of risk when I had none myself? In retrospect I have come to see this rather as an advantage, it brings me closer to the way most locals live their life and perceive their surroundings.

Katharina also unintentionally explained the habituation process to me; almost as youngsters going through a rites de passage where they were told not to talk to others about their experience. In Vík people are not necessary told this directly, but it is a part of growing up in the place. It was peculiar that it was only the “immigrants” that seemed to worry and talk about Katla, but these were also guided to leave the issue. Even though no one would ever tell anyone else *not* to talk about Katla, the first comment one got was: *“We don’t talk about Katla,”* if someone would ask if they did not worry. This sentence was not necessarily simply informative to the person asking the question, but it might also hold commanding qualities; *“We do not talk about Katla.”*

During her first time living in the red zone, Katharina had talked a lot about Katla and her fears and asked questions to the locals. She had never heard Icelanders talk about this as a topic by themselves, but all her questions had been answered. They had tried to tell her that it was not dangerous to live there. After a while though they started to find her continuous

worry a bit funny and tried joking it away. In the end she was told that she had to stop worrying and talking so much about it; *she could scare the children in the kindergarten.*<sup>69</sup>

Katharina told me that she did not really trust the information they got from the experts.

*Katharina:*

*They have these information meetings and practices where they tell us what is going to happen. In the kindergarten we also have this map where they have marked in red where the flood path will be and so on, but I just don't understand how they can know for sure that the flood will come in this river and not in the other one. I just don't really trust it.*

*Me:*

*So do you trust more what the locals say then?*

*Katharina:*

*No, I don't really trust them either because I think they are just too calm about the whole thing. I think I trust more my own feeling about the whole thing.*

(And I think she fears the situation will be much bigger than both locals and experts believe.)

She did not check the monitoring system either: *"If I was going to be doing that all the time, I would be scared to death!"* But she did feel safe that police and the rescue team knew their job; *"They rehearse for this!"* The evacuations rehearsals made her feel very uncomfortable. Last time she did not know about it, and woke up to sirens and the rescue team driving around screaming out that there was an eruption and that people had to leave their homes. *"It gives a very bad feeling,"* she said. Katharina also worried that there should be given more information to tourists because she did not even know how it was supposed to be handled if something happened during the high season. *"Just take the example of when they [the volcanologists] thought it would happen, and we were not even allowed to say anything to the guests!"*

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<sup>69</sup> Jóhannesdóttir found similar "explanations" in her investigation on risk perception in the area; "We don't want to scare the children" (My translation) (Jóhannesdóttir G. , 2005)

For the people living here she thought it was enough information and she also experienced that she got a lot of information when she came. She never heard Icelanders talk about this as a topic by themselves, but because she was very scared about this she asked a lot of questions after she came and they were answered. But if much more information would be given, she thought it would just be more difficult.

## **Summing up**

Throughout this chapter I have tried to show how not only Katla, but rather nature overall influence and at times intervene in the life of the people in Mýrdalur – indeed nature is omnipresent. The way Icelanders look at nature has changed both nationally and locally over the last centuries. The dualism between nature and culture is less contrasting than what it used to be, and Icelanders have learned to see the beauty of their nature. This is also done through the eyes of the growing amount of fascinated tourists that come to Iceland. Still, only the Icelanders, the people on the “inside” truly know how to (or should know how to) deal with and take control over your life in the Icelandic nature.<sup>70</sup> Non-construction of risk being a part of this, risky experiences or situations are under-communicated as well as treated by silence.

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<sup>70</sup> Having experienced danger connected to nature, might make you both closer to nature in that you have experienced its forces, but also more distant in the way that you both respect it and might wish to control it.





## 6 “We never think about Katla here, if we did, then we couldn’t have lived here.”

In the theoretical outline, I made a brief introduction to Robert Paine and his No-Risk thesis. The No-Risk thesis has been an important theoretical basis for me when trying to make sense of the silence and the experience of risk among locals in Mýrdalur. Volcanic risk management has had the tendency to put (too) much focus on hazard knowledge<sup>71</sup> when trying to map risk perception in exposed areas. As has also been seen in studies from Indonesia (Lavigne, et al., 2008) (Dove, 2007), I argue that you have to look beyond the common factors of hazard knowledge<sup>72</sup> to learn about the local’s existing or non-existing risk perception in an exposed area.

In this chapter I will dive a little deeper into the No-Risk thesis and explore what seems to be a non-construction of risk in Mýrdalur. Following theories of risk being socially constructed (Douglas, 1992) (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982), and especially Paine who argues for people being active actors of their own situation, I wish to acknowledge that there will be societies in a cultural context and with a cultural logic where emphasis is put on a *down playing and/or non-construction of risk*.

### The No-Risk thesis

The lacking risk perception by locals from Katla makes a lot of sense in its context. If danger is part of the reality and there is nothing one can do about it, one has to ignore the risk, because it would be impossible to live with it if not (Paine 2001). As Ingimundur’s wife, Hildur, said: “*We never think about Katla here, if we did, then we couldn’t have lived here.*”

Paine’s No-Risk thesis deals with a cognitive suppression of risk, suppression with the goal of stopping the flow of danger going into the risk, to stop the translation of risk so to speak. From the field of psychology, we are introduced to cognitive explanatory models that put emphasis on a person’s estimate of the probability of a certain event to happen. When people

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<sup>71</sup> This can, to a certain degree, be compared to what I call risk awareness in this thesis.

<sup>72</sup> E.g. knowledge of volcanic processes, personal experience of volcanic crisis, time elapsed since the last volcanic eruption, etc. (Lavigne, et al., 2008, p. 273)

are estimating chances and probabilities like this, over- or under-estimates are likely to happen. We know that people have the ability to shut out certain notions of the world; what is possible and not possible, as well as what is dangerous and not.<sup>73</sup> The ones who manage to do this, the ones who continue their life as normal without risk calculations, are the ones embraced by Paine's No-Risk thesis (2001). From this it is easy to draw a line to a point that both Teigen (and the other contributors) in the book *"På den usikre siden, risiko som forestilling, atferd og rettesnor"* (2001), as well as Robert Paine (2001) has made; people might be seen and perceived as risk takers, even though this is not how they perceive themselves.

There are also cases where people emphasize possible consequences independently from the probabilities of something happening. Taking this point a bit further, it is obvious that the common man is not necessarily putting emphasis on the same factors as e.g. experts might do. Connecting this to my investigation, some of my informants shared very strong feelings and beliefs that they would not experience Katla, that she would not erupt, but none of them had ever checked any of the available monitoring systems. Still they were completely convinced that Katla would not erupt. Some explained their strong beliefs through personalized "hobby theories" of Surtsey and Eldfell<sup>74</sup> having "released the pressure" in Katla. Others, like Saga, explained it with Krukkspá.

Although it has been criticized for being too individualistic (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982), it might be worth mentioning the notion "cognitive dissonance". According to the Cognitive Dissonance theory, it is an uncomfortable feeling to be holding contradictory cognitions (like beliefs, opinions or ideas) at the same time. When there is an inconsistency between attitudes or behaviors, a dissonance, people would have a motivational drive to eliminate the dissonance. This is done by changing attitudes, beliefs and behaviors or by justifying them (Festinger, 1957). Larsen (1994) has also talked about cognitive dissonance and how people who experience this will try to reduce it and even avoid situations that would increase it. By adjusting the expectations to the actual situations or possibilities of something happening, for example where cognitions as attitudes and knowledge does not go well together, people could try to avoid this dissonance. This theory could easily be used in situations where people on a daily basis have to relate to risk. To create balance and a feeling of safety, the potential risk

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<sup>73</sup> This means that it should be possible to shut out meanings that other people might have about the No-Risk thesis and the ones who endorse with the contents of the thesis.

<sup>74</sup> The volcano erupting at Heimaey in 1973.

can be evaluated as much less than it, objectively speaking, is. Several writers have mentioned this in connection with people who own risky occupations such as e.g. fishermen or workers in the offshore industry. The people would not have been able to do their job if they were to worry about the potential risk of their occupation every time they were doing their job (Bye & Lamvik, 2004) (Thorvaldsen, 2005).

### **New environment, other risks**

Paine makes the No-Risk thesis relevant through an example from the Peruvian Andes Mountains, where big parts of a village of several thousand inhabitants were taken by an avalanche. Afterwards, the survivors were faced with the option if they wanted to stay and rebuild the village or if they wanted to rebuild their life somewhere else. It might be easy to assume that the better solution would be to move and build a life in a new place, since the avalanche hazard would always be a threat if they stayed in the village. However, people were also experiencing risk with moving away and starting a new life somewhere else. The inhabitants felt more in control of their life and their society by staying close to what was known, and it became a kind of confirmation of their own identity. Michael Dove has found similar responses to the state's attempts of transmigration of locals from the slopes of the highly active volcano Mt. Merapi on Java (Dove, 2007).

In both these cases place identity were important to the locals. Accompanying the place identity confirmation, there was also a *suppression* of risk connected to the mountain (Peru) and volcano (Java) and an *avoidance* of the risk connected to starting from scratch somewhere else. The surviving population had to face risk whatever they chose to do. If they decided to leave they risked losing their personal attachment to a place. If they decided to stay, because there was no other place they felt they could continue their life as themselves, they had to continue living with the risk of experiencing a new avalanche or eruption. Because of this, the ones who stayed had to find a way of continuing their life as it was before the hazard struck; they had to create normality (Paine 2001).

In Iceland's case we can see that something similar happened in Heimaey, Vestmannaeyjar during the aftermath of the Eldfell eruption. In 1973 the small society was suddenly faced with an active volcano that popped up in the middle of the island. During one night, the whole population of the island had to evacuate to mainland. The eruption lasted more than five

months and over 400 houses were destroyed during the eruption (Einarsson T. , 1974). Even though there is a big possibility that the same can happen again, as many as 4/5 of Heimaey's population chose to move back to the island after the eruption had stopped. While the eruption was still going on, the transmigrated inhabitants of Heimaey got firsthand experience with the feeling of risk connected to starting a life somewhere new. Even if they had been forced to leave the island during the eruption (because of evacuation), most chose to move back.

As seen through several studies, people at the risk of being exposed to natural hazards, do not feel like moving, or they try to move back as soon as possible (Paine, 2001) (Stangeland, 2004) (Lavigne, et al., 2008) (Dove, 2007). People tend to "cling" to the known and the "safe," even if the safe and known in this case might be risk exposed. When the decision is taken, of choosing to live with the risk involved with staying, there is no point in calculating this risk any more.

In Mýrdal the hazard has not yet struck. Katla herself did not seem to play a very important part for the place identity of the locals. Nature overall, on the other hand, was important and most people I talked to felt attached to the place and the nature there.<sup>75</sup> Moving away because of natural hazards was not an option, neither was further risk calculating analysis.

### **It is much worse living in...**

A frequently repeated topic during conversations with my informants and my host family was that there was a much greater risk living other places in Iceland than in Mýrdalur (Vík); Vestmannaeyjar, Reykjanes, Suðavík...the suggestions were many. According to the locals, the people on Vestmannaeyjar were practically living atop a volcano, at Reykjanes the crust was so thin that it could crack open at any time and in Suðavík there were horrible snow avalanches every winter: *"There, people are killed every year by snow avalanches, here nothing might happen for years, or ever!"* Following the lines of Lupton (1999): "Risks that are perceived as familiar or voluntary are considered more acceptable and less likely to happen than those that are perceived to be new or imposed." In other words; Also from this angle, a known and self chosen hazard is perceived to be less risky than an unknown.

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<sup>75</sup> Except the foreigners who had only come there to work for a short period.

## Mýrdalur and the No-Risk thesis

In many ways the people in Mýrdalur seem to be embracing the elements of the No-Risk thesis; their risk perception seems to be almost non-existing, at best fluctuating and low, and only triggered by questions from outsiders such as tourists, Almannavarnir, scientists and researchers as myself. To the extent that risk is talked about, it was outsiders causing it, by asking and/or presenting problems or positions one could take.

My informants said they could not go around thinking about Katla every day, because that would have made them crazy. My interpretation is that this was not a consciously well-evaluated decision one had chosen to take at one point of time, and decided to follow since. It was just a non-existing topic in their minds. That being until someone came along and asked questions. Then they were somehow forced to relate to the topic and had to try to pronounce something. Outsiders presented a disruption to the usual pattern and pushed the insider in a channel of thought where the special circumstances of the community came to light. Like Leifur told me during an informal interview I had with him:

*We don't worry about it. It just happens when it happens. It is not something we really talk about, well **I actually talk about it every day because of the tourists**, but with people here you don't talk about it. Even though it is not like it is a topic you avoid, you **just don't**<sup>76</sup> talk about it.*

On one side, the locals' answers to Katla-related questions reflected that they did not think about her, but the answers also sought to defend *why* they did not, should not or could not think about Katla. One could suggest that the risk perception might be “tacit”<sup>77</sup> somehow. The fact that people managed to pronounce areas where they felt they lacked information about what to do or about how things could be, but still claimed that they did not worry, proved that the risk perception was so built into their lives that was non-existing; there was rather a risk awareness.

One of my main informants expressed this tacit perception very well:

*If we were to go around thinking about the risk from Katla every day it would be no different than you getting into a car thinking for every car you met on the road, that it is a lunatic that would crash right into you! One just cannot live with that!*

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<sup>76</sup> Leifur's emphasis.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Orr (1996) among others.

If you were to think about all the accidents you risk driving or crashing into when you get into your car, then you would probably not be able to drive.

### **Risk perception at the farm**

Naturally, I became closest attached to my host family. Living together made it easier to see how they dealt with Katla, nature and risk. It also made it more natural to pursue the issue. One day the theme was brought up by Harpa, my host mum, who started asking me questions about how *I* felt about risk there.

I had been watching the monitoring of earthquakes in Mýrdalsjökull for some time, and I could see there was an increase in the activity. I shared this with Harpa, and she asked if I was scared. I had to tell the truth, because no, I was not scared, I was just excited! There was some action going on!

*Harpa:*

*Yes, the Icelanders feel the same way, they are rather excited than scared. That is why they are so eager to go and see Hekla erupting.*

Harpa had been very close to the Hekla eruption in 1972, so close that she could actually touch the lava. I was a bit surprised about this since I thought the lava would be too warm to touch, but she said it was not.

*Harpa:*

*...but in the cracks of the lava you could see the red glowing lava inside.*

*Me:*

*I think I might be scared that it would all just burst!*

*Harpa:*

*Yes, I was too. I was furious about my father because I thought he was driving too close to the lava. My brother has a very strong memory about this happening and is just looking forward to the next eruption so he can go and be as close to the lava again.*

I continued by telling her that I had the feeling that most Icelanders were just ignorant about eruptions before I came to Mýrdalur. The fact that some were very excited about it, as the eruptions from Hekla, *that* surprised me. We ended up discussing it for a while and Harpa said she thought it might have something to do with the type of eruption as well, and its “tourist factor,”<sup>78</sup> as she called it:

*Maybe an eruption in Grímsvötn<sup>79</sup> is met with headshaking and indifference because it is too far away from Reykjavik. People cannot rush out of the city to watch the eruption as they can with Hekla, and also the eruption is far in the glacier. All you can see really is the side effects of the eruption, like the jökulhlaup and the cloud and so on.*

*Me:*

*But what about Katla then? Are people also excited about seeing Katla?*

*Harpa:*

*Yes...it is much closer than Grímsvötn for example, and it would be easier to go there for people, but at the same time it is much closer to people in the sense that it can be a danger to people. Maybe a Katla eruption is of a little less interest to people because you don't see the eruption the same way as in Hekla, you don't see lava and things you normally would connect with a volcano.*

*Me:*

*Do you think about the eruption?*

*Harpa:*

*No I don't think about it, I never have. It never even came to my mind before I moved here. But I should think about some sort of evacuation plan concerning the guests. I always try to have some extra food, just in case something should happen with the house full of guests. I always try to have a lot of soups for example, because it is so quick and easy. I used to be with a lot of canned food as well, but for some reason I*

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<sup>78</sup> Other informants also told me that they wanted to experience a tourist eruption.

<sup>79</sup> Grímsvötn has the highest eruption frequency of the Icelandic volcanoes and is situated near the center of Vatnajökull, Iceland's largest glacier.

*don't have that now.<sup>80</sup> But what does that help? The electricity might not work, so if I want to cook something it is not for sure that I have an oven to cook it on. We get too little information about these exact things, about what to do, because we have been told that it is not just to put up a fireplace or something like that either to make the food. It might be dangerous even to light a candle because of the gasses that are released during the eruption.*

*Me:*

*So what do you do then?*

*Harpa:*

*I just don't not know. Maybe you are supposed to work out a plan for yourself in case of this thing, but the fact is that you don't.*

*Me:*

*Is that maybe because you don't like to think about it?*

*Harpa:*

*[Shrugs] I just wish that the people in charge could tell us more exactly about what to do, more practical things about how to behave.*

Having had met with Almannavarnir in Reykjavík, I knew that they wanted to avoid numerous information meetings with the locals. Almannavarnir did not want to force too many “rules about how to behave” on the people. As one of the men at Almannavarnir said:

*We don't want to give them [the inhabitants of Mýrdalur] the feeling that there are a couple of idiots sitting in Reykjavík planning all kinds of unrealistic and impracticable plans and rules that they should follow! They have to feel like they OWN the plan.*

The conversation with Harpa revealed several areas that she had been wondering about how the situation would be. We continued by talking about phone connection as one example.

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<sup>80</sup> She had forgotten that I had thrown a lot of it out when I was cleaning the food storage.



*Harpa:*

*How can you know that the phone connection is going to work, how can you be sure that the messages get to where they are supposed to go? I feel like the whole evacuation is based on communication between people, but when the communication system might not work, what do you do then?*<sup>81</sup>

Harpa still thought that people did not want or even bothered to ask about these things. They were just wonderings, thoughts, not worries. The fact that such “areas of concern” was talked about without a sign of worry but more with a comment that one should perhaps worry a bit more, could also be related to the risk perception being more or less tacit. Their “tacit” perception can in many ways be compared to tacit knowledge concerning the difficulty of verbalizing it. Like the skippers Pálsson (1994) studied, who heavily relied on their tacit knowledge, hunches and intuition in their risky work at sea, the people of Mýrdalur seem to rely on the same in their decision making. “Decision making, then, is based less on detached calculation or mental reflection than on practical involvement.” (Pálsson G. , 1994, p. 915).

## **How realistic is your reality?**

Despite a difference in technological realistic and sociocultural perspectives on risk, neither I nor others, pursuing a sociocultural perspective, can deny the existence of objective dangers. Representing the main objective danger in this case, was Katla.<sup>82</sup> It was, and still is, the task of the volcanologists and Almannavarnir, representing the expert systems, to provide locals in Mýrdal with information about the state of the volcano, what is considered dangerous and how one should prepare. However, despite the possibility for both objective and subjective perspectives to use the same basic principles to evaluate and reach a conclusion, the subjective evaluations of risk in daily life will not necessarily coincide with objective evaluations, as I have talked about earlier in this chapter.

This seems to coincide with the local perspective of reality in Mýrdalur very well. Locals had information from the expert systems<sup>83</sup>; emergency plans, escape routes and available tools for

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<sup>81</sup> And the fact was that part of the SMS system telling the inhabitants to evacuate had failed during the last evacuation rehearsal.

<sup>82</sup> Though other hazards from nature also did at times.

<sup>83</sup> Giddens (1990) has separated between that he calls trust and confidence in expert systems. In the case of Mýrdalur it could seem to be an absence of trust, but is this so? I would say that the people embracing the No-

monitoring Katla themselves. In this way they were offered an objective view of something considered dangerous, but the social construction of risk was, as I have shown, almost non-existent<sup>84</sup>. Theoretical risk awareness, based on the realistic views on danger, existed but very little risk perception. I would like to argue that locals sorted between what they wanted to hear or know about, to make it fit their world view (Paine, 2001) (Giddens, 1990).

The local's lack of danger-interpretation was so persuasive that I through the first months of my field work started wondering if I was in the wrong place. Had I misunderstood the whole situation in the area? "*Katla is nothing to worry about!*" people kept telling me, and made it obvious that they just did not care.

Through studies of risk it *has* been found that people often evaluate risk different than experts. Whereas experts follow the formula of risk being a product of consequences and probabilities, this does not grasp the whole picture of the public.<sup>85</sup> I remembered my old teacher in volcanology talking about Vík and Álftaver, the consequences following an eruption and a jökulhlaup, the possible tsunami and the time frame for an evacuation of the area. Why should people evacuate if Katla posed no danger and people perceived no risk?

After some time in Mýrdalur I went back to Reykjavík to talk to the scientists and simply reflect on the on the whole issue from outside, since I was seriously wondering if I had got it all wrong. I had been drawn into the local reality where there was no risk to worry about, but was this a realistic reality? After all, risk is a relative quantity.

We have to draw a line back to Paine, who placed a distinction between risk and danger; risk being what we construct amongst us, while the danger is "out there." According to Paine one *can* stop the flow of danger into risk (Paine, 2001). If there is no danger in the risk notion of the situation, there is "No-Risk" to worry and talk about.

Some would probably see the locals lack of risk perception as irrational behavior, but rather than putting rationality up against irrationality one has to see what *can count* as rational, meaning that one cannot decide from only an act if something is rational or not.

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Risk Thesis in principle may trust in the expert systems, but in their daily life they behave like they rather have confidence because they do not perceive the risk.

<sup>84</sup> Except amongst some newcomers in the area and outsiders passing by.

<sup>85</sup> Driving a car is a good example of this; it is such a common activity, that most people do not think about the risk you take when you are doing it. Even though the probability of getting into a car accident is much bigger than landing in an air crash, many people would name the risk of the last as much higher (Teigen, 2001).

What is rational depends on the social or institutional setting within which the act is embedded. Acts are rational from the perspective of one way of life may be the height of irrationality from the perspective of a competing way of life. (Thompson, Ellis, & Wildavsky, 1990, pp. 22-23).

The concept of schemas<sup>86</sup> can prove an example of this since schemas can be understood as tacit theories that people hold about the world. The schemas help to make sense of a confusing amount of information. “They help people figure out what they prefer by interpreting new events in terms of old knowledge (Thompson, Ellis, & Wildavsky, 1990, p. 58).” But this mental activity does not stand alone; it is embedded in our social relations and also justifies them (ibid)

In psychology one talks about a division between risk-averse and risk-taking personalities. Even though this view holds ground, it cannot explain though why the same persons perceive risk in some situations but not in others. Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky (1990), claim that the perception of risk is a social process and it can be explained out from how the perception will affect one’s life. Following, the villagers in Mýrdalur do not communicate a high risk perception from Katla in their daily life because it would be unpleasant. What will happen will happen, *if* it happens. Their “trust” in faith makes it possible not to worry about events you cannot control or do anything about (Thompson, Ellis, & Wildavsky, 1990). Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky find it expected that people will try to “bring consistency to their social environments” (1990, p. 266). Individuals will try to find social relations and contexts that match the cultural bias they feel most fit.

## **Risk awareness and risk perception**

Already in the introduction of this thesis I made a distinction between what I have recognized as *risk awareness* and *risk perception* in Mýrdalur. I would, once again, like to make it explicit how I have chosen to use these terms in this thesis, since it has been of significance for my analysis.

The way I understand risk awareness in the Mýrdalur-context can in many ways be compared to what volcanologists refer to as hazard knowledge, but I argue that to be conscious, have

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<sup>86</sup> A schema describes an organized pattern of thought or behavior that organizes categories of information and the relationships among them (DiMaggio, 1997). “Individuals experience culture as disparate bits of information and as schematic structures that organize that information.” (DiMaggio, 1997, p. 263)

knowledge and an awareness about a hazard, is not necessarily the same as apprehending and understanding it *and* grasping the consequences to its full extent. In this case I would say that risk perception is closer tied to feelings, understanding and understanding consequences. I have made this distinction to try to make the dividing line between knowledge, on one hand, and beliefs and feelings on the other, more prominent. I may have knowledge of the sea level changing during the day, but that does not mean that I understand why it changes. As David E. Alexander (2000) has stated, the process of perception is a subtle one:

External stimuli received by the subject are organized in order to recognize and know them, or in other words to make sense of them by virtue of some prior ordering system that is held in the mind and that has been acquired on the basis of past education, training and experience. Understanding this has a great deal to do with perception, as do attitudes, ideas and feelings: in short, perception is a partial and selective process. (Alexander, 2000, p. 77)

The background and history for each individual is unique, but these are directed (and adjusted) by “the common well of shared experience and the tendency to react in similar ways to particular stimuli” (Alexander, 2000, p. 77). In other words the experience of Katla *not* erupting becomes important for how they perceive the risk. I want to make it clear that when I am talking about risk perception, I am talking about it from an etic perspective, not emic, since the people I talked to rarely spoke of risk perception, of feelings, beliefs and understanding.<sup>87</sup> As a young girl I talked to told me:

*I guess I'm supposed to know that there is a risk here, but I just don't feel it. I just don't understand the consequences; it's too hard to imagine when you have never seen it happen.*

In the case of Mýrdalur, there was risk *awareness* in the way that locals had heard the warnings, knew some facts about the volcano and the impact that a Katla eruption may have on their lives, in theory, but there was *no risk perception, no sense and feeling of risk*.

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<sup>87</sup> I am aware of and agree in that this pose a problem with “the “double layer” of perception” (Alexander, 2000, p. 77), since it is not only the perception of the people you talk to, but also the perception of the researcher who is trying to analyze the informants perception, but unfortunately I cannot see how to avoid it in this thesis.

In the last part of my main discussion I wish to show how a mixture of calmness, humour and an action oriented positive attitude towards obstacles helps people in Mýrdalur<sup>88</sup> to maintain the experience of living a “risk-minimized” stable life.

## **”þetta reddast!” – “It will be alright!”**

*“Jæjæ, þetta reddast...”*

*“Well well, it will be alright...”* This Icelandic phrase, that also covers the meanings: *it will be fine, ok* and *everything will turn out good*, is a phrase so frequently used that it has been described as the country’s motto! It does not matter if you have gone bankrupt because of Kreppan<sup>89</sup>, if a snowstorm makes you stuck in your house without electricity for several days, if your car is upside down in a trench because the wind blew it off the road or if your house is hit by a tsunami - *þetta reddast!* This stoic calmness towards any problem you might face and belief that it will turn out fine, is not only fascinating and impressive, normally it is also true. One way or another it will all be alright again. Gísli, one of my informants from the red zone in Vík and previously mentioned in this thesis, lived in the house closest to the sea, still he too displayed a very relaxed feeling towards this:

*My house is the first to be taken, you know [laughing]! But if my house is flooded or destroyed, it doesn’t matter. It is just material things. Besides, we will just get new houses and support from Norway and the other nordic countries, like they did in Vestmannaeyjar [laughing].*

Humor is also an important part of this relaxed attitude. Several of the narratives Stangeland presented in her dissertation from Vestmannaeyjar (2004) showed the same presence of calmness, positive attitudes and humor:

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<sup>88</sup> As well as in Iceland overall

<sup>89</sup> Kreppa is the word the Icelanders used for the Icelandic financial crisis. Kreppan is the definite form of the word. Kreppa is a cognate of “crimp” and even though Kreppa is translated as crisis, most Icelanders I talked to felt like the word “crisis” did not cover the whole meaning. They recognized it as some sort of cramp as well.

*One man to another:*

*What is that up there?*

*The other man answers:*

*Isn't that only an eruption...? (Er það ekki bara eldgos...?)<sup>90</sup>*

(Stangeland, 2004, p. 80)

Humor played an important part of everyday life. It was easy noticeable at my farm as well as when I was talking with informants. Leifur, the man working with the snowmobiles, lived very close to the glacier. Since his farm was so close to the glacier and a glacial river, it was a big possibility that it would be flooded. The scientists had informed the family that they may not have more than 30 minutes from the eruption started to the farm is flooded. This gave them no more than approximately 15 minutes to evacuate:

*Leifur:*

*I really worry that it will happen during night!*

*Me:*

*Is there any special reason for that?*

*Leifur:*

*Yes! Because I am always so bloody hard to wake up! [Laughing]<sup>91</sup>*

Both Gísli and Leifur have their focus somewhere else than with the euption that probably will be present at the situations they describe. Leifur was concerned with how he should be able to wake up, while Gísli wanted to focus on how they could rebuild aft the insident had struck. They were both “action oriented.”

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<sup>90</sup> My translation

<sup>91</sup> His wife nodded in agreement.

## Summing up

The natural sciences have been occupied with talking about risk as something that can be calculated; it is seen as an objective danger and volcanic risk management has put much focus on hazard knowledge as a way to detect risk perception. Social science does not disagree upon the reality of an objective danger, but these calculations say little about the human beings dealing with the objective danger. Following Paine, I would say that people are active actors of their own situation. Furthermore, it should be possible to find regularities that can be helpful in explaining and predicting how people construct meaning, also with living in hazardous areas like Mýrdalur. As long as subjective feelings are similar towards similar things, people's subjective feeling of danger, or in this case rather risk, should make sense (Thompson, Ellis, & Wildavsky, 1990).<sup>92</sup>

The social construction and interpretation of meaning should be a great supplement to the natural sciences view on risk. How a way of life is sustained, as in the case of Mýrdalur, a life where risk perception is low or non-existent, depends on the way that shared values and beliefs are represented and communicated through the social relations in the society. Outsiders' attempts to remind locals about the "situation" bring risk awareness. Still, the silence about Katla and risk due to Katla, as well as the justification of living there because it is much worse living somewhere else, will probably continue to generate lack of risk perception in the area.

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<sup>92</sup> One could imagine that if one of the inhabitants in Vík changes the way he or she perceives the risk from Katla, it will alter his or hers behavior, which in turn might affect the whole society





## 7 “We are doers!”

In this thesis I have tried to show how people in Mýrdalur relate to the risk in a way that makes it possible to live with. Through conversations, interviews, meetings and most importantly; daily life alongside the locals, I got a glimpse of an existence that to a very little extent showed signs of the fact that they lived in the backyard of an active volcano.

People in Mýrdalur were split in the opinion if they thought they might experience an eruption or not. Some found it likely, others were completely sure that it would not happen and could even explained why they thought so through beliefs in Krukkspá, or they had made their own “hobby theories.”

If locals believed it would happen or not, the fact was that they were at times forced to relate to Katla, due to evacuation rehearsals, investigations from scientists, or simply questions from “outsiders” entering the area. In between, Katla was treated with silence.

Some of my informants could address areas of concern, but there were still neither fear nor worry connected to the possible problems that could arise. The concerns were rather expressed as questions “*if this happens...how should we deal with it?*” But it was said with a shrug and did not seem to really bother them.

One of my informants, Freyja, opened up a little more about the possible worries, but she was still sure what she wanted to focus on:

*We don't talk about Katla and Katla erupting, but what to do when Katla erupt, that is what we focus on. It is scary with Katla erupting in the sense that we are as helpless now as people were in 1918. The new technologies does not help us at all, electricity will go away, phone lines. Maybe we talk about what to do when Katla erupts instead of the volcano and eruption in itself because it is too scary.”*

It may seem that Freyja did her best to try and stop the flow of danger into the risk from Katla; treating the theme with silence or by focusing on what to do when it happens, when she was forced to relate Katla. Following, the non-construction of risk became evident.

Locals were all in the same situation and could probably be said to have a tacit, even unconscious, understanding of this context. They did not take more precautions than they

would forget that was what they were doing, as for example my host mum did when she had been hoarding canned food that she kept in the food storage. In addition, in everyday life nature overall outplayed even the unintended attempts from outsiders to remind locals of Katla. In the end daily tasks and daily worries drowned out the precautions one might take.

A woman working at Almannavarnir in Reykjavík somehow assented to this:

*The Icelanders are "doers" because they are so used to having all these things around all the time, so they know how to behave in these surroundings. At the same time they don't want to think about it and maybe they haven't planned what to do. They may not have an evacuation plan or similar. They just do what they have to when they are in that situation.*

Even the ones who did not believe Katla would erupt were prepared for action: *I do not believe that there will be any volcanic eruption, but if it happens I know what to do!*

## **Action speaks louder than words!**

By way of experience, cultural messages literally and metaphorically get under people's skin. (...) ...the motivational link between culture and action is a general feature of the practical knowledge of the world-as opposed to the theoretical project of anthropology. Practical mastery implies constructive use of the body's ecstatic faculties, resonating on the board of the recessive body.

(Hastrup, 1995, p. 93)

I have spent hours thinking about my own perception of risk, before under and after the fieldwork. Bodily experiences in the field may say more than a thousand words. This does not always have to be about not understanding the language at the place you have come to, but like in my case trying to see what my bodily experience of an everyday situation with conspicuous silence could tell me. Furthermore, when living the field you often get hunches

and feelings of an important essence that might be hard to grasp, but more importantly; can be hard to put in words, as for example Håkon Fyhn has talked about (Fyhn, 2010).

As already mentioned in the methodical chapter, Hastrup (1995) has said that the greater part of cultural knowledge is stored in actions rather than words. This becomes very obvious when words are not expressed or even avoided.

*Action speaks louder than words!* In one way this hints to the silence concerning everything that had to do with talk about risk perception; their feelings, thoughts and possible fear. But it also hints to what was the locals' focus on; **the actions that has to be pursued if Katla erupts!** As Finnbogi, the leader of the local rescue team once told me:

*We are doers! We deal with the problems when they arise, but we don't think about them until it is time. We are a very action oriented society!*

It took me a long time to realize that not only stories, but the non-told stories were of importance. Sure, I could *make* people talk about nature, about Katla, ask them questions and force the topic, and sure, *I think* I accessed deeper, "hidden," feelings by doing exactly that. But the everyday silence about the topic is of importance and should be seen as having a purpose. In the introduction of this thesis I raised a few questions regarding the social life of silence. The silence about Katla and the danger connected to her helps to down play the risk. Following Pain, the silence yields a non-construction of risk. The silence prevents locals and especially children from getting scared.<sup>93</sup> It helps the locals maintain a stable life and all in all simply makes it possible to live there.

The headmaster of the elementary school in Vík put it in words in a TV- interview with a Norwegian TV station a few years ago, and I wish to leave the final words to him since it sums it all up:

*Katla comes when she comes. We cannot live like our last day has come all the time. We do not want to create fear or in any way live our lives in that manner*<sup>94</sup>

(TV2 Nyhetene, 2010).

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<sup>93</sup> As we have seen, also newcomers to the area are embraced by this after having lived there for some time.

<sup>94</sup> My translation



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# Appendix

1. Geological description of Katla and Mýrdalur
2. Map of volcanic zones in Iceland
3. Interview guide
4. Street map of Vík



# Appendix 1

## Geological description of Katla and Mýrdalur

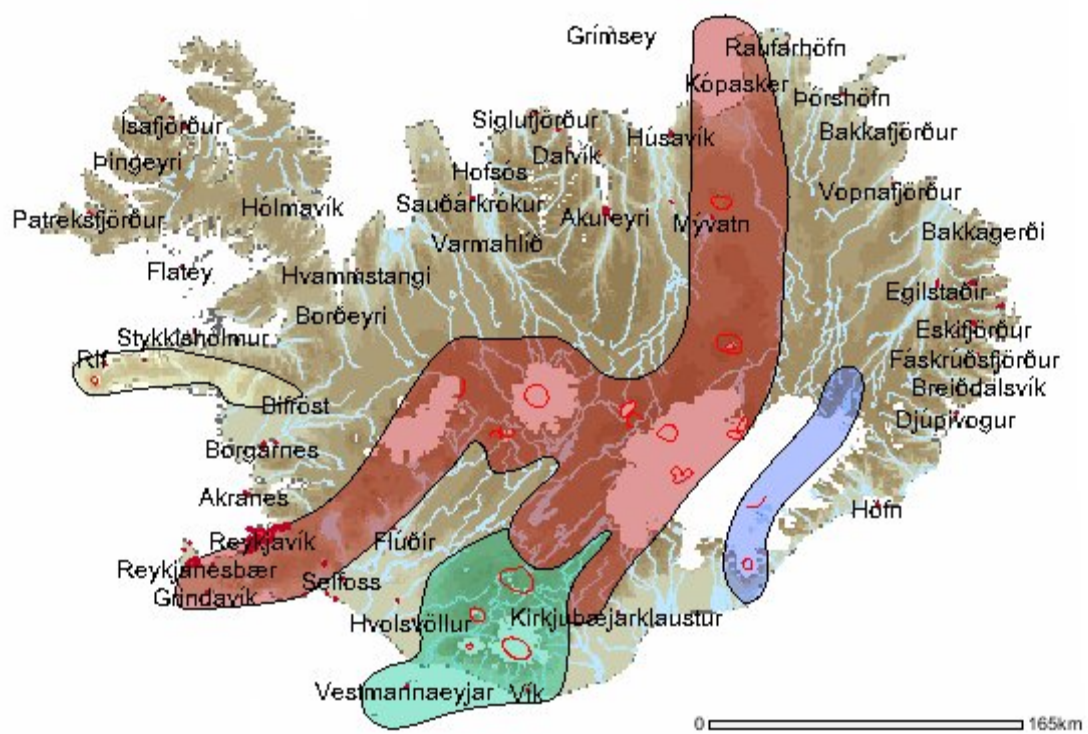
Iceland is created by a hot spot on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, where the Eurasian and North American continental plates are drifting apart (Einarsson P. , 2005). It is the world's biggest volcanic island and has 22 active volcanoes, Katla being one of them.

When a volcano is placed under a glacier, such as Katla, the eruptions often become complicated. In addition to natural hazards like tephra fallout, earthquakes, toxic gas, lightning and possible tsunamis; glacial outburst floods, jökulhlaups, as I have explained above pose an extra threat to the inhabitants of the area. Katla has a huge caldera and the ice covering it is up to 400 meters thick; following, the flood will most likely be big and dangerous (Björnsson, 2002). What makes it even more dangerous is the difference in altitude from the top of the glacier down to the sea; this is quite big and makes the flood go very fast. In most cases jökulhlaups have come on the east side of the glacier, out from the glacial arm that is named after the volcano; Kötlujökull. From here the floods spreads over a huge area and this is the origin of the wasteland of sand throughout Mýrdalssandur. Regular jökulhlaups have washed away everything that has been in the area and have covered the whole area in fine grained volcanic sand. In the old times, i.e. from the settlement of Iceland there are supposed to have been several farms in the area, but these were gradually washed away by these floods. In the times to come there was no use for survivors in trying to settle in the area again and anyway the land stayed unfertile until the next flood came (Local source). Álftaver, as was mentioned above is the only area that has managed to escape these floods even though it is in the middle of the flood path. The reason for this is also to be found in the volcanic history of Iceland. The lava fields from both the Laki eruption and Eldgjá are shown in Figure 2. In addition to lava fields, Eldgjá also created rootless cones just north of what is now Álftaver, and these have proved to work as a protective barrier for jökulhlaups and have saved the farms in the area. The efficiency of these cones are nevertheless questioned nowadays because previous jökulhlaups have built the land higher with sediments and following made the cones lower than they used to be. The protection they used to give might therefore be diminished. The community of Álftaver is in direct impact of the flood, while there are other areas that might be indirectly affected as the next part will show.



## Appendix 2

### Map of volcanic zones in Iceland



The map shows the volcanic zones of Iceland (the areas in blue, green, red and white). Red circles and dots show built-up areas and the red lines shows volcanic craters (Orkustofnun Gagnavefsjá)





## Appendix 3

### Interview guide

- Age, education, work/job
  
- Are you from Vik?  
If no:
  - How long have you lived in Iceland/Vik, and what brought you here (to Iceland and then to Vik)?
  
  - What is your main reason for staying in Vik?
  
  - What did you know the area before you moved here?
  
  - What did you know about the environment (with a nature and climate that can be quite harsh)?
  
  - How is this place different from where you are from/used to live?
  
  - How does the locals' relationship towards nature differ from yours, if it does?
  
  - Were you told anything about the special nature here (and the hazards) before you moved here? (Does Icelanders like to make it sound quite dangerous, but then act as if they don't care?)
  
- Do you "use" the nature? If yes, How?(fishing, hiking, birdwatching, recreation, religious experience)
  
- Do you feel like the nature is important to Icelanders?
  
- How important is nature to you personally and what does it mean to you?

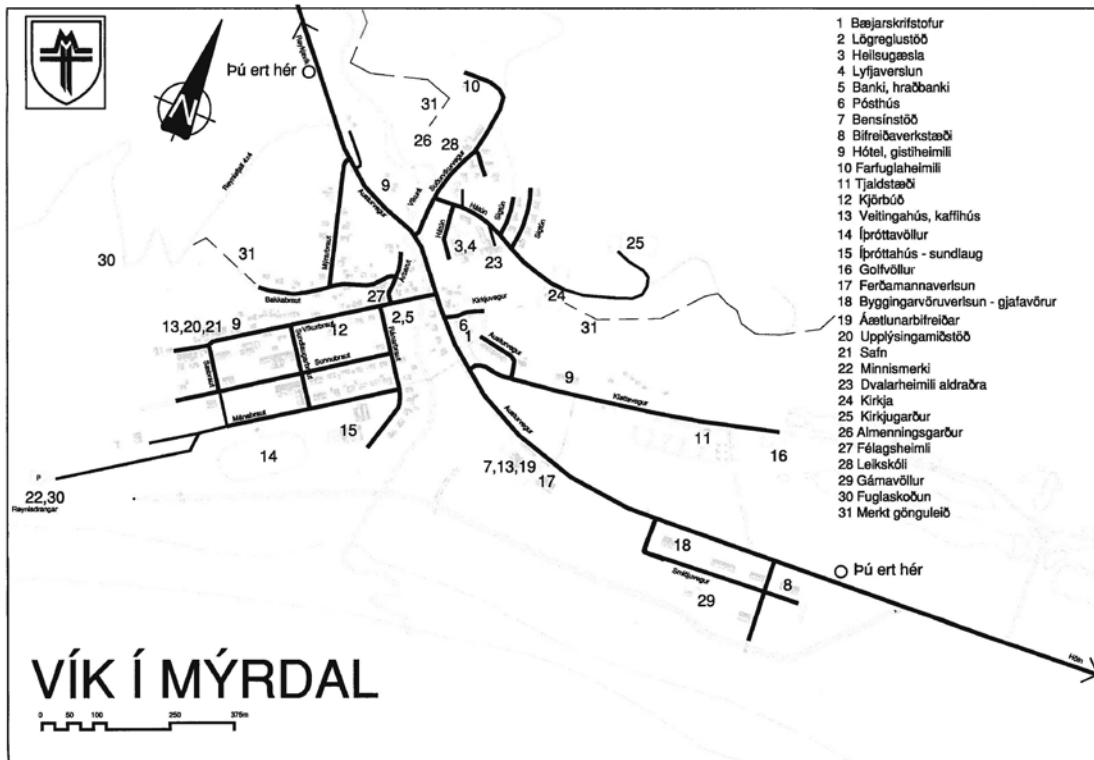
- Do you feel like you have experienced danger connected to the nature in Iceland?
  - If yes, what was this connected to? (wind, volcano, being at sea)
- Have you ever seen or been close to a volcanic eruption, jökulhlaup, other?
- What do you feel about experiencing any of these things/hazards?
- How do you feel about living so close to a volcano (fascinated, scared...)
- People in Vik have to live with the possibility of Katla erupting, how likely do you think it is that you will experience this? How do you consider the risk of this happening?
- Is it possible to explain what you feel about a possible eruption?
  - Do you feel worried/afraid when thinking about this happening?
  - If you are or were afraid in connection to this, what would you be most worried about? (jökulhlaup, lightnings, tsunami, ashes)
- Have you felt the risk bigger or smaller at other times?
  - If yes, why was this?
- Do you live in a red zone?
  - If yes; When you bought/ build your house did you think about that it was in the red zone or not?
  - Are you worried that it will be ruined in a tsunami or other effects of an eruption?
- If no, is it on purpose that you don't live in a red zone?
- If experts said that Katla was likely to erupt very soon would you stay here?

- Are there other places in Iceland that you would not want to live because of hazards from the nature? (where, and why)?
- Do you trust the information you get from the experts in Reykjavik, who are monitoring the volcano?
- To what degree do you think that experts' statements about the situation affect your own attitudes?
- Do you check the different monitoring that is available on the internet (seismographs, chemical composition of the rivers etc.) yourself? Or do you know someone who does that?
- Have you heard of/are you a member of the Björgunarsveitin/rescue team, or know someone who is?
- What do you think about the work of the rescue team?
- Do you feel safe that the police and Björgunarsveitin know their job well enough, if something should happen?
- Do you wish you had more rehearsals in the area about the procedure if something should happen? (or would this make people more uneasy)
- Do you wish that you would be given information about the situation more often?
- Do you think there is too much talk about Katla?
- Does much talk about Katla make you more worried than “normal”?
- Some say that the issue about Katla is brought to speak only when foreigners starts asking questions, do you feel this statement is correct? Or have you heard Icelanders talking about it as well? Were you yourself interested in this issue?
- Do you think Katla makes it more “interesting” to be from Vík?

- Do you know Krukkspá?
- What do you think brings the highest risk to you and/or your family? Volcanic eruption, jökulhlaups, traffic (plane/car), terrorist attacks, fishing at sea, other natural disaster.
- History seems to be very important to Icelanders in general, is historical ties to a place important to you?
- Can this be a reason for people staying in the area even if they were afraid?
- How important do you think the nature is to the tourists coming to Iceland?
- Have you ever worked with tourists in Iceland?
- Do you think tourists in the area are given enough information about the hazards in the area?

## Appendix 4

### Street map of Vík



- |                              |  |
|------------------------------|--|
| 1. Municipality building     | 17. Tourist shop (and knitting factory)      |
| 2. Police office             | 18. Gift shop and shop for building material |
| 3. Medical office            | 19. Bus stop                                 |
| 4. Pharmacy                  | 20. Information                              |
| 5. Bank                      | 21. Museum                                   |
| 6. Post office               | 22. Memorial                                 |
| 7. Gas station               | 23. Old peoples home                         |
| 8. Garage                    | 24. Church                                   |
| 9. Hotel/guest house         | 25. Cemetery                                 |
| 10. Backpacker accommodation | 26. Park                                     |
| 11. Camping site             | 27. Meeting house                            |
| 12. Grocery store            | 28. Kindergarten                             |
| 13. Restaurant/coffee place  | 29. Yard                                     |
| 14. Sports arena             | 30. Bird watching                            |
| 15. Gym/swimming pool        | 31. Marked trail                             |
| 16. Golf course              |  |



For my favorite risk taker and the toughest superhero of them all, Alvida Dís

