

Article

Tourism, Recreation and Wilderness: Public Perceptions of Conservation and Access in the Central Highland of Iceland

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Abstract: Protected area establishment can be a source of land-use conflicts. National parks are particularly prone to such conflicts as they tend to cover large, sometimes remote, areas, involve many stakeholders, and often constitute an important venue for both tourism and outdoor recreation. Identifying potential conflict issues at an early stage is crucial to prevent further escalation and preserve public support for conservation. This article presents the findings of a nation-wide survey focusing on the establishment of the Central Highland National Park (CHNP) in Iceland, with the aim of identifying such points of contention. The results show that while the establishment of the CHNP enjoys broad public support, concerns over access restrictions are the most common reason for opposition. The majority of respondents support limiting the number of visitors to the area, which can hardly be implemented without conflicting with public access rights, deeply embedded in local culture and uses. In this remote area, access facilitation through road and accommodation development, however, appears very divisive, either seen as providing increased opportunities for the general public to enjoy the area or as threatening the authenticity of travel experiences in a wilderness destination, and paving the way for further developments. It is argued that refraining from building up roads is the most diplomatic way to limit visitor numbers without seriously impairing travel freedom, therefore preserving the wilderness qualities of the area while meeting users' expectations. Ultimately, this study highlights the importance of public opinion research and stakeholder consultation when planning and managing tourism and outdoor recreation in wilderness settings.

Keywords: national park; outdoor recreation; tourism; public participation; land-use conflicts; wilderness; Iceland



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1. Introduction

Protected area establishment has commonly been a source of conflicts [1,2], which can reduce public support for nature protection and compromise conservation goals. A key factor in addressing such potential conflicts lies in an early identification of points of contention, and in efforts to better understand stakeholders' viewpoints [3]. In Iceland, the country's uninhabited Central Highland (CH) has been a venue for several land-use conflicts during recent decades, mainly in relation to a growing energy sector, tourism development, outdoor recreation, and nature conservation [4–6]. Currently, the CH is being considered for the establishment of a national park by the Icelandic government [7], which would then become the largest in Europe, covering roughly three quarters of the CH, corresponding to ca. 30,000 km² or about 30% of Iceland's land surface (Figure 1).

The idea of a Central Highland National Park (CHNP) was introduced to the Icelandic public in 2016 by a joint campaign of representatives of civil society (environmental and recreational NGOs) and the tourism industry. This idea was included in the coalition agreement of the Icelandic government which came into power in autumn 2017 [7]. A

bill to establish the CHNP was subsequently presented to the Icelandic parliament in December 2020. Public opinion towards the CHNP had been gauged three times prior to the present study, indicating quite strong initial support (55–61%, as compared to 12–23% of opposition) with regard to the idea of establishing the park [8–10]. However, the underlying expectations and concerns of the public regarding the proposed park, and in a broader sense on land-use management in the CH, have remained largely undocumented until now. Perception studies undertaken in the area mostly focus on views of foreign visitors, especially in relation to how energy infrastructure might interfere with their travel experience and appreciation of the wilderness qualities of the CH [6,11]. The views of the Icelandic public have so far received limited attention, with only a handful of nation-wide surveys on infrastructure appropriateness and wilderness in the area [12,13], the social impact of energy development in Iceland [10], as well as various stakeholders' perception studies on the CH land uses [14,15] and one study using focus groups to investigate wilderness qualities and attributes in the CH [16]. Following a decade of rapid tourism growth in Iceland, the need for further public opinion research on land-use planning in the CH is crucial to better preserve its distinct characteristics. This is particularly relevant in a context of increased conflicts in wilderness areas worldwide due to growing interest in their use for recreation and tourism development.

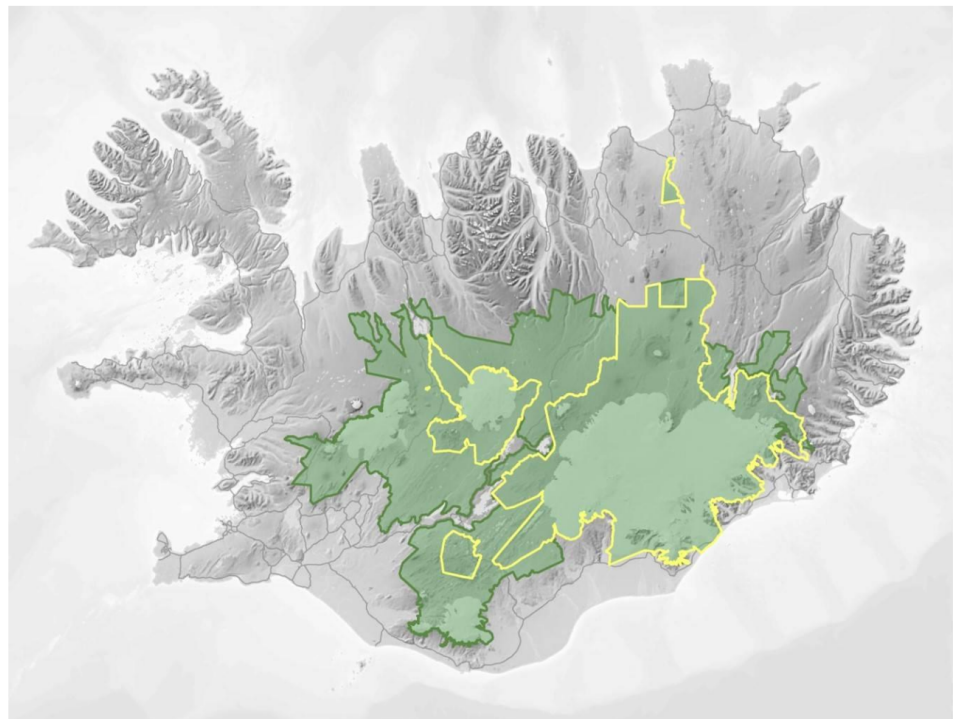


Figure 1. The proposed Central Highland National Park in Iceland (green area) and current protected areas (yellow lines) [17].

This study aims to identify key conflict issues related to nature conservation and tourism management in wilderness settings, by investigating (1) public perceptions of the CHNP, (2) perceptions of management of visitor numbers, roads and accommodations in the area, and (3) exploring the potential connections between the two first issues. This contributes to increased knowledge and understanding of the linkages between conservation conflicts, access management, and wilderness quality, based on the case-study of the CHNP in Iceland. The paper is organized as follows: In Section 2, the background on conservation conflicts in the CH is outlined, emphasizing the important role of participatory approaches and social research in their resolution. Sections 3 and 4 present the study area and the methodological framework of the study, respectively. Section 5 presents the results, providing first an overview of opinions on nature conservation and tourism

management issues; then focusing on underlying perceptions toward the CHNP, and road and accommodation development in the area. These findings are discussed in Section 6, and management implications are drawn with regard to access management and nature conservation, before presenting conclusions in Section 7.

2. Background

2.1. Land-Use and Conservation Conflicts

Protected areas are a robust tool for land-use management, spatial planning, sustainable development, as well as for nature conservation. The pursuit of conservation goals and the concurrent arbitration of land-uses can, however, lead to the development of conservation conflicts, for example, occurring when different parties hold strong views on conservation objectives and one (or more) of them tries to assert its own interests at the expense of the interests of others [3,18,19]. Soliku and Schraml [20] (p. 143) point out that in developed countries, such conflicts commonly revolve around the inability of locals to “enjoy the emotional, recreational and cultural benefits they derive from protected areas because of restricted access usually borne out of inadequate consultation with local people who have an interest in P(rotected) A(reas)”. This might in particular be the case for national parks as they often cover large areas that are valuable for outdoor recreation and tourism, and indeed have a dual, sometimes conflicting, mandate of preserving nature while also providing or guaranteeing public access to nature. Nordic countries may be especially prone to such conflicts as the public in these countries has traditionally been granted substantial access rights (“everyman’s rights” [21–23]) which can easily become more constrained, as, for example, suggested by the reasons behind local opposition which prevented the establishment of Kiruna National Park in Sweden [24,25] or Käsivarsi National Park in Finland [26,27]. Park restrictions can also impact landowner rights or community livelihoods, usually resulting in strong local opposition [28]. Due to these diverse potential sources of opposition as well as the general need for stakeholder involvement, a common response on the governance level is the use of co-management or decentralized structures [29–32]. In parallel, increased attention has been devoted to the role of protected areas in rural development, especially in regard with tourism [33,34]. Yet, such measures imply certain trade-offs between conservation and development goals [35–37], which need to be clearly recognized and discussed to address potential conflicts between stakeholder groups [38]. Increased popularity of natural areas for outdoor recreation, along with increased accessibility to the world’s remaining remote and wild areas, further contributes to disputes between tourism development and nature conservation [39,40].

2.2. Participatory Tools for Conflict Resolution

It is generally accepted that stakeholder involvement and participatory approaches are fundamental components in land-use management and decision-making [41]. Their application to the field of protected area governance has, for instance, long been strongly encouraged by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) [42–44] and seen as essential to resolve conservation conflicts [45]. According to Reed [46], the claimed benefits from such approaches can be divided in two categories, i.e. normative and pragmatic. Normative claims focus on the benefits for democratic society, citizenship and equity (e.g., active citizenship, public trust in decisions, fairness, social learning), while pragmatic claims focus on the quality and durability of decisions (e.g., adapting to local contexts, meeting expectations, anticipating negative outcomes, transforming adversarial relationships). While there is evidence that some of these claims can be fulfilled by stakeholder involvement, there is a risk of disillusionment when this is not the case. It is therefore important to be aware of the limits and weaknesses of participatory processes, such as status quo bias, privilege reinforcement, consultation fatigue, and delays of action. López-Bao et al. [47] stress the need for being proactive, managing expectations, and bearing in mind that a broad public interest may not be properly represented, potentially leading to a “tyranny of a minority”. Others argue that concessions required by a broader

social acceptance undermine the capacity to meet conservation goals [48]. Consequently, the outcomes from participatory approaches are highly dependent on the socio-economic context [49] and on the quality of the process in which they are embedded [50]. Other factors for success include the willingness of parties to engage and compromise [3], and trust [51], both in an interpersonal and institutional setting. This highlights the need to create environments or forums where stakeholders are empowered and encouraged to seek shared solutions with their adversaries, in a non-threatening context [52]. This can be challenging to achieve in the case of conservation conflicts, often revolving around the establishment or management of protected areas [1,53], as power imbalances can put stakeholders in a defensive mindset. Public participation is thus critical in land-use management and likewise an important process in sustainable development [54,55].

3. Study Area

The Central Highland (CH) of Iceland, as officially defined, covers about 40% of the country's land surface (Figure 2), including vast and dynamic landscapes shaped by the interplay of glaciers and volcanoes [56], constituting an outstanding venue for nature-based tourism and outdoor recreation [57]. This large and uninhabited area overlaps 21 municipalities (representing in total 8.4% of the country's population [58]) and was originally delineated as the boundary between private rangelands and common grazing lands [59] for a regional plan [60], that was later incorporated into Iceland's first National Planning Strategy [61]. About 86% of the CH area consists of public land [62].

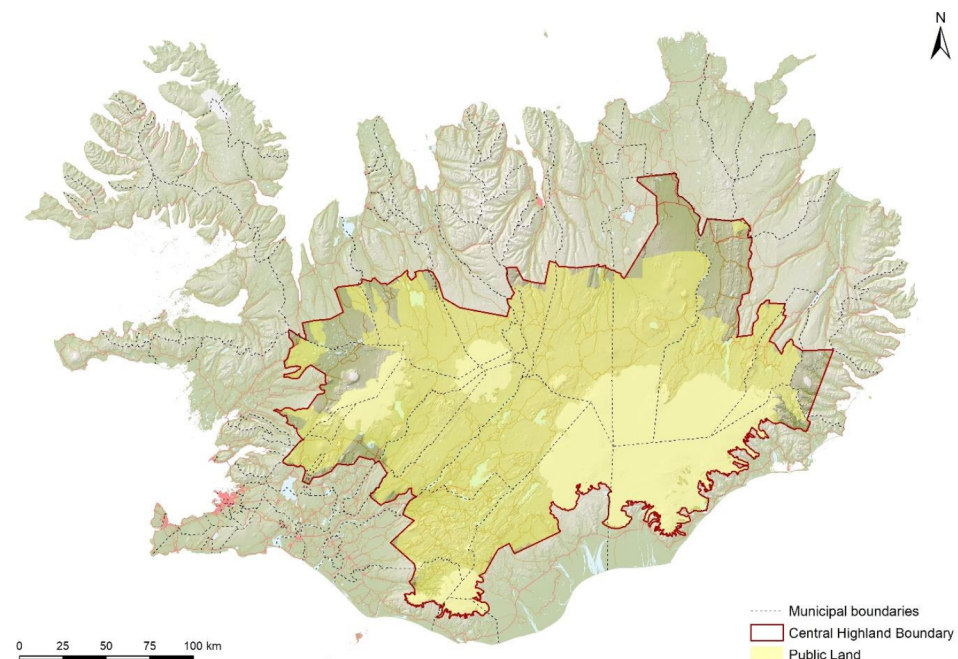


Figure 2. The Central Highland of Iceland as delineated in the Regional Plan Source: [60].

Regardless of land ownership, the “every man’s right” (*i. almannaréttur*), also found in other Nordic countries [23], grants the public a set of basic rights to move across, rest and feed oneself on uncultivated land, while ensuring minimal impact and disturbance [63]. These rights are believed to contribute to residents’ quality of life [64] and are deeply embedded in local culture and uses.

With no permanent settlement, a harsh climate and limited infrastructure [65], the accessibility of the CH is limited. Motorized vehicles played a key role in making the area more accessible to the public and for early forms of tourism in the late 1960s. Today most roads in the area are classified as country roads (*i. landsvegir*) [66] which generally only allow for summer traffic and require high ground clearance, all-wheel-drive vehicles to drive across unbridged rivers and rugged terrain. Other tracks and winter traffic usually require

specifically modified vehicles—so-called “super-jeps”. Due to such remoteness and lack of visible anthropogenic signatures, as well as the free play of natural processes [56], the area is often associated with wilderness, both among the Icelandic public [67] and foreign visitors [11,40,68,69]. However, some roads in the area have been “upbuilt” (i.e., raised above ground), limiting puddle formation and snow accumulation, and either maintained as gravel roads or paved, enabling, in both cases, a much broader range of vehicles to access the CH. In this paper, we will use the term “upbuilt” to refer to roads of this kind. Roads of any kind, even the dirt roads or tracks most commonly found in the CH, are a perennial source of conflict with regard to wilderness designation and management [70].

Most of the existing upbuilt roads and other large-scale infrastructure have been developed for the energy sector, with 64% of Iceland’s electricity supply being provided by hydropower reservoirs within the CH [71]. Some of these otherwise low-income municipalities [72] overlapping with the CH receive substantial property tax revenues from power plants located within their boundaries [73], providing financial incentives for further development of this kind. Other infrastructure, such as buildings, roads, and bridges, is for the most part related to the use of the area as a summer pasture for state-subsidized sheep grazing [74] and for outdoor recreation and tourism [65,68,75]. Since its early stages in the late 1960s, hydropower development in the CH has triggered substantial environmental conflicts [5,76,77], and is by many perceived as incompatible with nature- or wilderness-based tourism [6]. Over the past two decades, the increasing economic viability of tourism in Iceland has strengthened its position as an alternative to further development of energy utilization in the CH [78]. Nevertheless, tourism development can also jeopardize the distinctive features of the area which contribute to wilderness experiences, as improved access changes visitation patterns and visitors’ behaviors [79], leading to more demands for comfort and services as visitor numbers increase [69,80].

To effectively preserve these values and features, efforts to map wilderness attributes in the area have been made [75,81–83], and the preservation of wilderness is now included both in the Icelandic Nature Conservation Law [84] and in the National Planning Strategy [61]. However, the National Planning Strategy has been criticized for the co-presence of contradictory goals, making it subject to interpretation [39], and providing for substantial access and accommodation development in the area which have been incorporated in local planning documents [85–88]. Furthermore, pressure for developing the area has emerged from diverse sources [89–95]. Currently over a third of the CH has protected area status, with Vatnajökull National Park (which alone covers nearly 15% of Iceland) and several nature reserves. Initially, Icelandic national parks were on average much smaller and concentrated around main tourism sites, attractions, and iconic landscape features. Inclusion of vast ice caps, expanses of deserts, lava fields, and barren lands under the national park designation is a much more recent development and indicates a shift in the focus of Icelandic national parks, from a visitor management prerogative to a more holistic purpose. This coincided with environmental conflicts related to hydropower development, especially in the northeastern part of the CH [77,96,97], from which emerged early ideas for a CHNP. Such unresolved land-use conflicts are one of the main challenges to the park’s establishment, as these dormant conflicts tend to be revived by discussions on nature conservation [98]. While the idea of establishing a national park in the CH has been shown to enjoy strong public support [8–10,99], the introduction of an actual parliamentary bill to this effect in December 2020 sparked substantial debate and criticism [100], which illustrates many of the aforementioned conflicts [101]. A nation-wide survey conducted at that time revealed 45% of public opposition to the bill and 34% of support [102]. Yet, within that same survey, the idea of such a park still retained more support than opposition, as in four other surveys conducted around that time [103–105] (Figure 3).

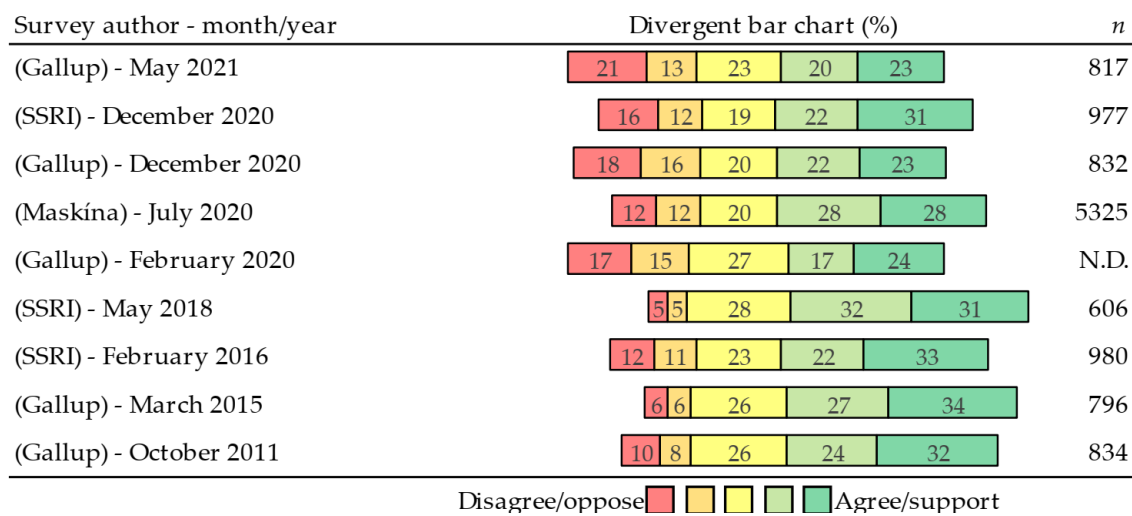


Figure 3. Overview of all nation-wide surveys on the idea of establishing a National Park in the Central Highland Sources: [8–10,99,102–105]. Note that the December 2020 survey from Gallup also included a separate question about the bill that was introduced in parliament, which was opposed by 45% and supported by 34% of respondents.

4. Materials and Methods

To assess the opinion of the Icelandic public towards the proposed CHNP, a quantitative nation-wide survey was designed and implemented. The survey was first tested in a pilot study [106] carried out in 2016, targeting recreational users of the CH through the main associations of outdoor recreationists in Iceland. Its results highlighted the high importance of the CH for the respondents and revealed that the most serious threats to the area, as viewed by the respondents, were unsustainable tourism and energy development. Despite these threats, their opinion on the establishment of a national park in the CH were clearly polarized. As the answers were collected with a convenience sampling approach, participants with strong opinions were more likely to take part in the study (so-called volunteer bias [107]) and thus contribute to the polarized distribution of the opinions. It became clear, therefore, that a randomized, nation-wide survey would be more appropriate to investigate and understand the opinions of the Icelandic public regarding the proposed CHNP. Furthermore, to explore whether the opinions of the main users of the area differed from others. In addition to nature conservation as such, it was considered important to document public opinion on the desired level of tourism development in the CH, as tourism has been identified as potential threat to the area. In light of previous studies on carrying capacity and perceived crowding within the most popular destinations in the CH, it was also deemed relevant to investigate whether the public would want the number of visitors to be limited in the area. Another important aspect for the planning and management of wilderness destinations such as the CH is the desirable level of development of tourism infrastructure, especially in sparsely vegetated open landscapes where visual impacts can interfere with travel experiences. In the CH, two projects involving large accommodation resorts and one concerning road development have retained public attention over the past few years, making it directly relevant to survey respondents' opinion on whether roads and accommodation facilities should be further developed in the area or not. As the CH is a popular venue for tourism and outdoor recreation, it was important to ensure that opinions of domestic users were documented and accounted for. To this effect, recreational data were also collected for contextualization purposes, to compare the opinions of users of the area with those of non-users, and in anticipation of future research on specific recreational segments.

4.1. Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire consisted primarily of multiple-choice and opinion-scale items to reduce the time needed to fill out the survey, along with few open-ended questions to enable respondents to provide further details or feedback on the topics, as well as on the survey itself. Conditional jumps were used to increase the efficiency of the survey and preserve respondents' interest in the topic, resulting in between 17 to 30 questions per respondent, depending on the answers provided. This was used to collect additional data on recreational profiles of the users of the area, such as the number of visits, seasonality, average length of stay, visited areas, and pursued recreational activities. Opinions of respondents were documented using opinion scales from 1 (Strongly Disagree/Oppose) to 5 (Strongly Agree/Support) on four main issues using the following statements:

1. There is a need for limiting visitor numbers in the CH.
2. Roads in the CH should be upbuilt.
3. There is a need for increased accommodation in the CH
4. Do you support or oppose the establishment of a national park in the CH?

Follow-up multiple choice questions were used to further document respondents' opinions on each of these items. The use of conditional jumps here also permitted to create a somewhat "safer" environment for respondents in line with their opinions. For example, supporters of the CHNP were asked about advantages of the project, while opponents would be asked about its disadvantages. This choice was motivated by previous experience with the pilot-study where conditional jumps were not used, inviting respondent to more self-criticism, which could be related with less constructive comments and perceived by some as a bias as it could have a different meaning, once taken out of its context.

4.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The survey was implemented by the Social Science Research Institute of the University of Iceland, using a randomized nation-wide panel of 1500 members. Each member received an individual link, preventing multiple completion or further distribution of the survey. The survey was open for four weeks, between April and May 2018, and three reminders were issued. The response rate was 46%, that is 693 valid answers collected in total. The data were weighted to compensate for under-represented socio-demographic segments, allowing for statistical inference, and delivered as CSV and SAV files for the analysis. In total, 51% of the respondents were female and 49% were male, 64% resided in the capital area while 36% lived in the countryside, and 68% of the sample claimed to have already been to the study area while 32% had not done so.

Data analysis was performed using XLSTAT and PSPP. The first step in the analysis consisted of producing frequency and contingency tables with weighted data. Bivariate analysis was conducted using chi-square tests of independence on the opinion scale data arranged in contingency tables [108,109]. To ensure that the tests' assumptions were met, categories were merged (i.e., 3-point scale instead of a 5-point scale). Correlations between opinion scales were performed, using Spearman (r) on unmerged categories.

5. Results

5.1. Tourism Management and Nature Conservation in the Icelandic Central Highland

The results reveal a broad level of public support (63%, versus 10% opposed) for the establishment of a national park in the Central Highland of Iceland (Figure 4). As regards tourism development and management in the area, most respondents (65%) agree that the number of visitors in the CH should be limited. Opinions of respondents are, on the other hand, quite evenly divided concerning development of roads and of accommodations.

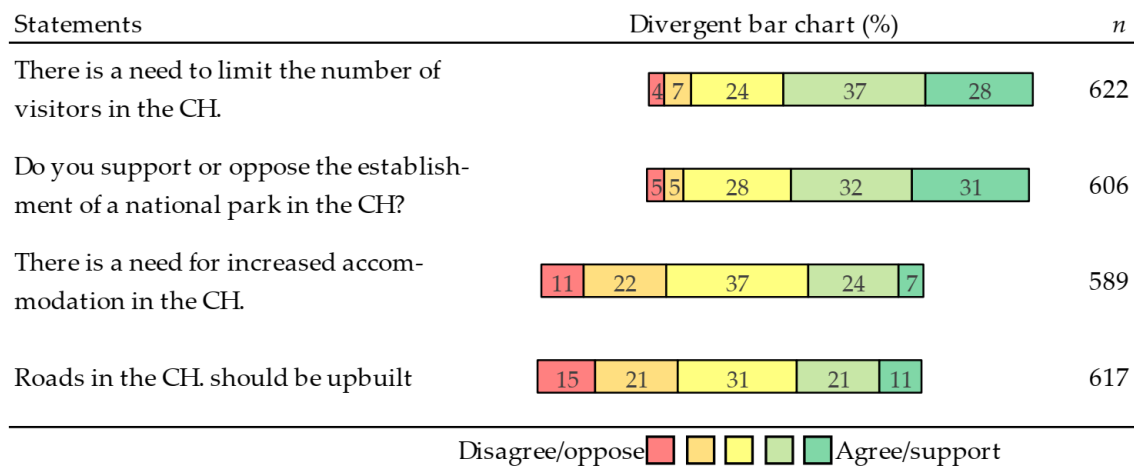


Figure 4. Opinions on nature conservation and tourism management issues in the Central Highland.

Statistical analysis reveals that the opinions on road and accommodation development are positively correlated ($r = 0.319$; $p < 0.001$; $n = 561$ —Table 1), meaning that those in favor of upbuilding roads tend to also support increased accommodation and vice-versa. Similarly, opinions towards the CHNP are positively correlated with opinions on the need to limit visitor numbers ($r = 0.219$; $p < 0.001$; $n = 564$). Opinions on the need to limit the number of visitors are negatively correlated with opinions on the need for increased accommodations in the area ($r = -0.255$; $p < 0.001$; $n = 571$) and on whether roads should be upbuilt ($r = -0.254$; $p < 0.001$; $n = 580$). The opinions on the establishment of the CHNP are neither correlated with opinions on accommodation ($r = -0.054$; $p > 0.05$; $n = 551$) nor on road development ($r = -0.034$; $p > 0.05$; $n = 567$) at a statistically significant level.

Table 1. Correlation matrix between opinions on tourism development and management in the Central Highland.

Variables	1	2	3	4
1—There is a need to limit the number of visitors in the CH. ($n = 621$)	1			
2—There is a need for increased accommodations in the CH. ($n = 588$)	−0.255 ***	1		
3—Roads in the CH. should be upbuilt. ($n = 617$)	−0.254 ***	0.319 ***	1	
4—Do you support/oppose the establishment of a national park in the CH? ($n = 606$)	0.219 ***	−0.054	−0.034	1

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed).

In total, 68% of the respondents claim to have been in the CH, while 32% have never been there (Figure 5). The results show that these two groups, users and non-users, have different opinions on the establishment of the CHNP and the development of roads in the area. The users of the CH are thus significantly more opposed than the non-users in both cases (12% opposing the CHNP, versus 4% of non-users; 41% disagree with the statement that roads in the area should be upbuilt, versus 27%). However, in both latter cases, the level of support does not statistically differ between users and non-users.

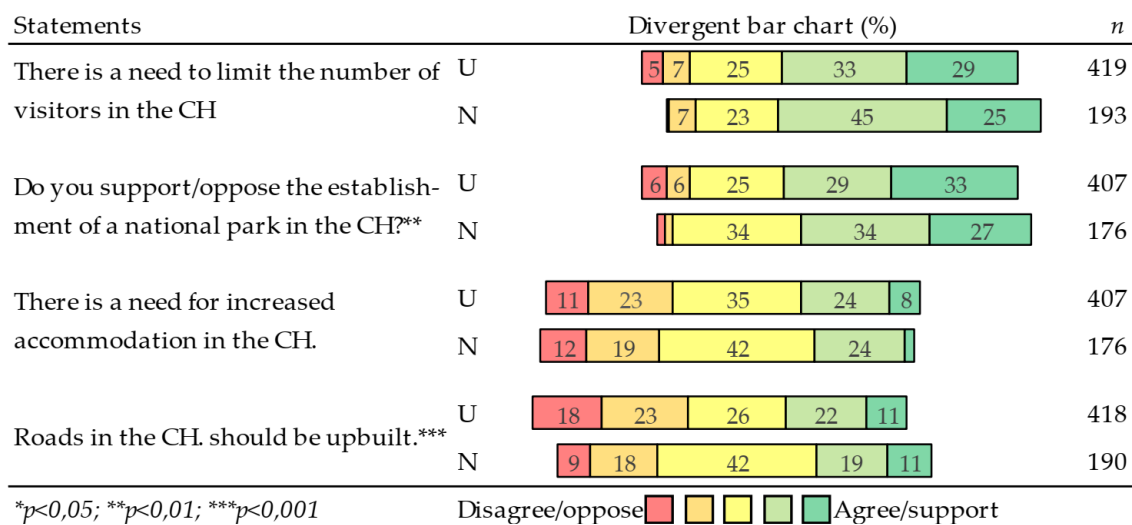


Figure 5. Opinions on tourism development and management issues in the Central Highland among users (U) and non-users (N).

5.2. Perceptions of the Central Highland National Park

When looking at the background variables, the opinions on the establishment of the CHNP significantly differ across age groups and residency (Figure 6). The 18–29 y/o are more indecisive than other age groups and residents of the capital area are more supportive than those living in the countryside. No significant difference in the opinions toward the CHNP was found regarding gender.

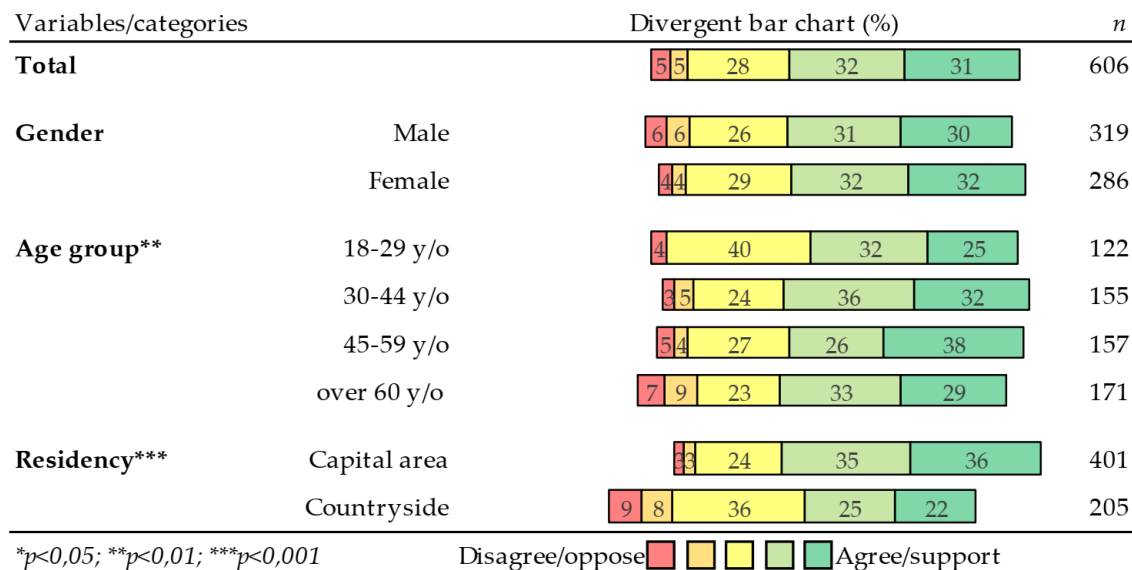


Figure 6. Opinions on the establishment of the Central Highland National Park in relation to background variables.

The supporters of the CHNP consider the main advantages of such a park to be nature protection (78%—Table 2), increased understanding about the value of the CH (71%), and protection of the CH as a whole (70%). These are followed by items related to the facilitation of tourism management and the possibility to require more responsibility from the tourism sector (69% in both cases). Half of the respondents consider that the CHNP would strengthen the image of Iceland as a travel destination (51%) and that it would set limits to further energy development in the area (49%). Other reasons for support include facilitating the collection of fees and increasing respect for and awareness of the CH.

Table 2. Perceived advantages/disadvantages of a CHNP according to those supporting/opposing its establishment.

Variables/Categories	<i>n</i>	Percent
Advantages of a CHNP according to those supporting its establishment (<i>n</i> = 367).		
It would protect many areas that are not currently protected.	285	78%
It would increase understanding about the value of the CH.	261	71%
It would protect the CH as a whole.	257	70%
It would facilitate the management of tourism in the CH.	253	69%
It could require more responsibility from the tourism sector.	252	69%
It would strengthen Iceland's image as a travel destination.	186	51%
It would set limits to further energy utilization in the CH.	178	49%
Other.	2	1%
Disadvantages of a CHNP according to those opposing its establishment (<i>n</i> = 55).		
It would reduce the possibilities for public outdoor recreation.	35	64%
It would be very expensive to operate.	31	56%
It would lead to increased centralization from the state.	30	55%
It would reduce energy utilization possibilities in the CH.	19	35%
It would reduce possibilities for tourism development.	14	25%
It would attract too many travelers in the CH.	12	22%
It would reduce wilderness experience in the CH.	12	22%
Other.	3	5%

Likewise, those in opposition were asked about disadvantages associated with the CHNP, among which three concerns stood out. The first relates to the reduction of possibilities for public outdoor recreation (63%), followed by the high operational cost of the CHNP (57%), and its centralized governance (55%). Other disadvantages received lower scores, such as the reduction of energy (35%), tourism development (25%), the risk of attracting too many visitors (22%), or the reduction of the wilderness experience (22%). Other reasons for opposition brought up as concerns were negative experiences with the existing Vatnajökull National Park and that there would be too many rules.

5.3. Opinions on Infrastructure Development in the Central Highland

Opinions in favor of upbuilding roads in the CH involved travel safety in the area (68%—Table 3), having better connections between different parts of the country (58%), and not needing a 4 × 4 vehicle to travel within the CH (48%). Other items received lower scores, i.e., better distribution of visitors around the country (34%) and releasing pressure from popular destinations in the lowlands (28%). Other reasons for support mentioned include managing traffic, reducing off-road driving, diminishing dust pollution, increasing the travel season, and saving on maintenance costs.

Opinions opposed to upbuilt roads in the area are primarily related to the preservation of the authenticity (78%) and experience of the area (rough tracks and river crossings: 70%; wilderness experience: 55%), and to limiting motorized traffic in the area (54%). Only a small proportion of respondents selected the encouragement of longer stays over daytrips in the area (14%). Other reasons for opposition included managing or limiting traffic in general in the area, that it would be too expensive to upbuild roads or that such money would be better spent in the lowlands or where people live.

Nearly a third (31%) of respondents supported increased accommodation in the CH. Their opinions are motivated by multiple reasons, such as: to increase services in the area (50%), to cope with increased visitor numbers in the CH (49%), followed by increased diversification of the accommodation offer (41%). Some respondents considered that this could release pressure from popular destinations in the lowlands (31%) and help to attract wealthier travelers to the CH (22%). Other reasons for support included directing people to places that can withstand traffic instead of camping on sensitive vegetation, being able to book accommodation with shorter notice, and increasing travel safety for visitors.

Table 3. Motivations behind opinions towards upbuilt roads and increased accommodation in the Central Highland.

Variables/Categories	<i>n</i>	Percent
Motivations behind favorable opinions towards upbuilt roads in the CH (<i>n</i> = 198).		
To increase travel safety in the CH.	134	68%
To better connect different parts of the country.	115	58%
To be able to travel in the CH without needing a 4 × 4.	96	48%
To better distribute visitors around the country.	67	34%
To release pressure from popular destinations in the lowlands.	56	28%
Other reason.	14	7%
Motivations behind unfavorable opinions towards upbuilt roads in the CH (<i>n</i> = 224).		
To preserve the authenticity of the CH.	174	78%
Rough tracks and river crossings are part of the experience.	156	70%
To preserve the wilderness experience of the CH.	123	55%
To limit motorized traffic in the CH.	120	54%
To encourage longer stays over daytrips in the area.	32	14%
Other reason.	8	4%
Motivations behind favorable opinions on increased accommodation in the CH (<i>n</i> = 174).		
To increase services when traveling in the CH.	87	50%
To cope with increased visitor numbers in the CH.	85	49%
To increase the diversity of the accommodation offer in the CH.	72	41%
To release pressure from popular destinations in the lowlands.	54	31%
To attract wealthier travelers to the CH.	39	22%
Other reason.	4	2%
Motivations behind unfavorable opinions on increased accommodation in the CH (<i>n</i> = 192)		
To maintain the CH as it is.	126	66%
To prevent mass tourism in the CH.	120	63%
To limit the number of visitors to the CH.	109	57%
To preserve undeveloped travel experiences.	90	47%
To attract visitors seeking a wilderness experience in the CH.	28	15%
Other reason.	2	1%

A similar proportion of respondents (33%) considered that there is no need for increased accommodation in the CH. They overall agreed that the area should be kept as it is (66%). They also wanted to prevent mass tourism in the CH (63%), limit visitor numbers (57%), and preserve the wilderness experience in the area (47%). Other reasons for opposition included: to attract visitors seeking a wilderness experience (15%) and that such development would be unsuitable to the area.

6. Discussion

6.1. Dueling Mandate—National Parks Dilemma in Wilderness Settings

National parks have traditionally had a dual mandate: to conserve the natural values contained within their boundaries, whilst at the same time guaranteeing, and indeed encouraging, public access to highly-valued natural phenomena [110]. These two core roles can easily come into conflict with one another, for example, when pressures of park visitation threaten, or otherwise undermine, the very natural values which are to be conserved. Establishing a national park in a wild and fairly remote area with limited accessibility, such as the Central Highland in Iceland, where tourist numbers and infrastructure are currently limited, highlights the contradictions and dilemmas inherent in this two-fold mandate. Should the area be left undeveloped, to preserve its present wilderness characteristics, or should travel/tourism infrastructure be increased, to allow more people than previously to have access to these essential public benefits?

Another dimension of this dilemma concerns public recreation versus commercial tourism usage. The right of access does not allow discrimination between domestic and foreign visitors, nor between individual travelers and those visiting the area as part of

a tour-group. Limiting access to one group is thus only possible by limiting access to all, even though the motivations for visitation can be widely different. Furthermore, the character of the CH has given rise to a particular form of domestic, motorized recreation which necessitates access to a jeep or other similar 4WD vehicle. The transport network of mostly dirt roads and tracks is unsuitable for standard passenger cars. At the same time, its ruggedness and river crossings offer unique experiences. Developing the road network further would diminish these kinds of experiences, as well as reducing the wilderness value of the area as such. However, such considerations can lead to a certain form of “elitism”, where only visitors who own a large SUV, or can afford to rent one, can enjoy easy access to the natural values of the protected area.

6.2. Understanding Public Opinions toward the Central Highland National Park in Iceland

The proposed national park in the Central Highland of Iceland is huge. If established, it will cover around 30% of Iceland’s total land area, making it the largest national park in Europe. Due to the fact that access to the area has historically been limited and the existing roads are primitive, large areas are still very remote and therefore have a high wilderness value [67]. In recent decades, however, the demand for the utilization of the CH has been gradually increasing, primarily due to tourism, outdoor recreation, and energy utilization, with associated conflicts of interest. This increased use of the CH also partly explains the different attitudes towards the proposed protection of the area. The overall level of support (65% in favor, 10% opposed) found in this study for the establishment of CHNP is in line with results from previous nation-wide surveys conducted in Iceland in the same time period [8–10]. Several other such surveys followed, after the introduction of a first draft of the bill to the public in December 2019 [111], which depicted more opposition to the establishment of the CHNP than before, even if in each survey the support has consistently remained higher than the opposition [102–104]. It is therefore becoming more challenging to distinguish opinions concerning the *idea* of a park from opinions towards the more specific park proposal outlined in the bill. Although useful to monitor potential changes in public opinion, such single-item instruments cannot do justice to the complexities which, arguably, underlie support and/or opposition to large-scale proposals such as the CHNP. In other words, support for the establishment of the park could be rooted in different considerations, with the same applying to opposition. A single “yes-no” instrument will lump different considerations, for and against, together and thus hide the divergence of opinion within each of the two groups.

The results from this study show that participants who support the CHNP have high expectations for the conservation of currently unprotected areas, for increasing understanding of the values of the Highland and for the management of this area as a totality, as well as on the ability of such a park to manage tourism in a sustainable manner and make stricter requirements for tourism companies operating inside it. In other words, support for the establishment of the park is conditional and there are, furthermore, different reasons underlying such support, some concerning nature conservation as such and others more related to tourism management. The legacy of land-use conflicts and the abrupt growth of tourism are likely to be among the main drivers behind these reasons to support the establishment of the CHNP. Interestingly, only half of those who support the CHNP considered limitations of energy development as one of its advantages. This suggests that although the CHNP originates largely in opposition to hydropower developments, the situation is much more complex today than a simple nature conservation versus energy development dichotomy among supporters and opponents, with different views held within each group.

In contrast, the main concerns of participants who oppose the CHNP relate to the reduction of possibilities for outdoor recreation, the high operational costs of the park, and the increased centralized governance that would be induced. These concerns are partly grounded in previous experiences with Icelandic national parks where restricted access conflicts [4] and issues related to funding, fund allocation or governance, have occurred in the past [32]. While restricted access conflicts constitute a common pattern of opposition to

protected areas in developed countries [20], the deep cultural embedment of public access rights (*i. almannaréttur*) could also make Iceland particularly prone to their emergence. Furthermore, protected areas in Iceland are highly dependent on public funding, and most of them have been chronically underfunded and therefore had difficulties in deploying necessary infrastructure to cope with the tourism boom since 2010 [32]. As a complementary source of revenues, the collection of parking fees has been implemented—despite being overall unpopular among locals [112–114] as it tends to conflict with the principle of public access rights. Together, these factors may contribute to the impression that the CHNP would be too expensive to operate. Concerns over park governance might also be rooted in the absence of a regional administrative level with regard to land-use planning, largely performed at the municipal level. Consequently, local stakeholders might worry that the CHNP would dilute local planning mandates by requiring municipalities to work jointly on such planning documents. Here, again, there are multiple reasons underlying the opinion, in this case, opposition to the establishment of the CHNP, highlighting the complexity of the issue.

It is noteworthy in this regard that a significant difference of opinion was found between residents of the capital area (71% in support, 6% opposed) and residents of the rural countryside (47% in support, 17% opposed). This is supported by other surveys [8–10,102,103], demonstrating a consistent pattern of urban-rural difference. This difference remains difficult to interpret, but may have its roots, at least partially, in disputes between the central government and local municipalities with regard to spatial planning, land ownership, and land-use [5]. Inhabitants of local communities bordering on the proposed national park may also feel that areas that have traditionally been considered part of their municipality would be “forfeited” to the state. Ultimately, this is also a highly political issue, with substantial opinion gaps within the political spectrum [8–10,99,102].

A significant difference was also found in the opinions of participants who had visited the CH (users) vis-à-vis participants who had not done so. Thus, 12% of the former group were opposed to the establishment of the CHNP, compared to only 4% of the latter. The ratio of support was, however, almost identical (61% among users, versus 62% among non-users). With the exception of farmers who need to go into the Highland to tend to their sheep, most regular domestic users of the area are recreationists. Outdoor recreation in the CH can take many different forms; some of these activities are motorized (e.g., with jeeps, motorbikes, snowmobiles), whilst others are not (e.g., hiking, mountain bikes, horseback riding). The fact that users appear more opposed to the CHNP than non-users could be partly related to concerns over access restrictions, which are more likely to impact users than non-users. This finding could also be connected to previous restricted access conflicts in Vatnajökull National Park [4], suggesting that concerns about such restrictions would be especially prominent among motorized recreationists.

6.3. Responsibility and Acceptability in Access Management: The Keys for Consensus?

Over the past years, research has provided evidence of increased crowding in some of the most popular and easily accessible tourist destinations within the CH [115]. The findings of this study show that a large majority of participants (65%) agree that the number of visitors to the CH needs to be limited. This is in line with another study showing that the majority of tourism stakeholders in Iceland found it important to limit visitor numbers in the CH [116]. Yet, this is very delicate to implement in the Icelandic context without either conflicting with public access rights [64] or recreational interests, keeping in mind that fears of access restrictions are the most common reason for opposition to the establishment of the CHNP. This stresses the need to find solutions to limit the number of visitors without impairing public access rights, and/or to reconsider policies aiming at increasing visitation of the CH.

Currently, the characteristics of the existing road system and accommodation in the Icelandic CH are likely to be the main limiting factors for increased visitation. This stresses the importance of accessibility as an element of control, over visitor numbers

and related infrastructure development, which could impact the wilderness character of the area [80,117]. Improvement of roads and increased opportunities for accommodation would open the area up to both heavier and more diverse visitation. Here, however, the opinions of participants were mixed; 32% were in favor of further road development (i.e., the construction of upbuilt roads) whilst 36% were opposed to this. The results were similar with regard to further accommodation development; 31% supported this, whilst 33% were opposed. Furthermore, a significant correlation was found between opinions towards road development and towards accommodation development.

A comparison of the opinions of CH users versus non-users revealed that the former group was significantly more likely to oppose further road development than the latter; 41% of users opposed this, compared to 27% of non-users. This is in line with findings from previous surveys on the desired level of road development in the CH [118,119]. This opposition to further road development appears to relate more to a willingness to preserve the authenticity of travel experiences in the area, rather than a management strategy to limit visitor numbers per se. Other studies indicate that opinions on road development depend on: (1) the level of development considered (the more developed, the less desirable and appropriate [83,119]) and (2) the location of the road that is being discussed [116,118,119]. No difference between users and non-users was, however, found with regard to the further development of accommodation.

Considering the difficulties of limiting visitor numbers in an acceptable manner once access has been provided, it is important that decision-makers in remote and wild areas, such as the Icelandic CH, are aware of the effects induced by further road development. With increased access, growing traffic will put more strain on sensitive areas, previously too remote to be at risk, which may lead to the closing of roads and contraction of the road system along the main routes, thereby reducing the “travel freedom” of motorized users and opportunities for remote motorized recreation, subsequently fueling restricted-access conflicts. As traffic becomes more streamlined along main axes, the authenticity of adventure travel experiences becomes jeopardized, along with the sense of remoteness and solitude of such areas. Pressure from visitation also usually calls for increased demands for infrastructure and services, further threatening the essential components of the wilderness experience and leading to crowd-replacement processes, where solitude seekers give way to more consumerist, service- and comfort-oriented visitors [120]. Access improvement has also drawn heavy criticism from environmental and recreational stakeholders, leading to legal disputes [121,122] or even to infrastructure removal [123]. Refraining from providing further access to the CH would reduce the need for restrictions and rules while meeting the expectations of recreational users of the area. Preserving remoteness would safeguard opportunities to enjoy the CH as it is currently, instead of needing to always go further and further away to experience wilderness and solitude.

6.4. Implications

This study highlights the value of public participation, as well as of participatory research designs, to better understand land-use conflicts related to protected area designation and management. In this regard, the study has shown that using sub-samples of impacted stakeholders is particularly useful to identify key conflict issues which may otherwise be overlooked in nation-wide surveys. In the case study presented, the users of the CH were more opposed than others toward the establishment of the CHNP and also towards development in the CH. With that in mind, the question arises whether the views of actual CH users should, in light of their experience and knowledge, deserve more attention and consideration than those of non-users? As access to recreation is unequal in society [124], being a non-user is not necessarily the product of a choice or lack of interest and can, for example, result from lack of free time, resources, or capacity. However, from a stakeholder perspective, CH users can be seen as having practice-based interests which go beyond the interests of the public at large, even if the former should not supersede the latter. Whilst easy access surely provides recreational opportunities to a greater number of

people, this comes at the expense of wilderness qualities and recreation opportunities as the area becomes more developed and heavily visited. Such trade-offs between development and conservation are well documented in the academic literature and tend to be difficult to resolve in a manner that stakeholders can fully accept. The complex interactions between these two goals are particularly relevant and sensitive in wilderness settings, such as the CH, where visitor numbers cannot be limited through quotas or permit systems; a situation exacerbated by the extremely rapid tourism growth that has taken place in Iceland in recent years, along with an increase in related development pressures, for example, concerning roads and accommodation development. Participatory research designs can contribute in a relatively cost-effective manner to increased knowledge of these complex interactions characterizing land-use conflicts. Identifying sub-components within these conflicts is likewise critical to reach a sufficient depth for recommendations to decision-makers. Based on this case-study focusing on the relation between nature conservation and tourism management in wilderness settings, the key message for decision-makers facing similar situations is that refraining from building up existing and new roads constitutes the most diplomatic way to limit visitor numbers while preserving a certain travel freedom along with the wilderness qualities of the area. By doing so, decision-makers would therefore meet users' expectations and conservation goals.

7. Conclusions

The use of an in-depth, multi-dimensional, nation-wide survey, as presented in this paper, sheds new light on what has long been a highly complex and somewhat contradictory land-use conflict. To sum up, the main findings of the study are as follows:

- There is strong public support for establishing the Central Highland National Park in Iceland.
- Management of tourism is an important component among those who support the establishment of the CHNP.
- Fear of access restrictions through new rules and regulations is identified as the main reason for public opposition to the establishment of the CHNP.
- Public opinion is very divided regarding the development of road and accommodation in the CH and more public consultation is needed to meet public preferences in this regard.
- The users of the area are more opposed to building up roads and establishing the CHNP than those who have never been there.
- There is a strong public support for limiting the number of visitors in the CH.

In light of these findings, it is clear that recreational interests occupy a key role when it comes to public opinion on nature conservation in wilderness destinations. This is supported by the fact that in developed countries, conservation conflicts often revolve around access restrictions [20]. Furthermore, such conflicts have repeatedly occurred in the past in Iceland [4,32], and are likely to be related to the deep cultural embedment of public access rights. As opposed to other contexts where national parks could be associated with a guarantee for public access, in Iceland they may be more associated with rules and restrictions of those access rights. However, this would also suggest that addressing such concerns, by providing more, albeit somewhat constrained, guarantees for recreational uses of protected areas, could be a leverage to secure stronger public support. This would need to be coordinated with recreational users as they qualify as impacted stakeholders [43].

Meeting public expectations with regard to the management of tourism in such a large, remote and wild area is likewise critical. Tourism is clearly perceived as a threat from which the Icelandic CH should be protected, as there is strong support for limiting visitor numbers in the area. However, as such limitations can easily conflict with public access rights, they are very difficult and delicate to implement [64]. In this context, it is imperative to be fully aware that increasing access runs contrary to public preferences for the number of visitors in this wilderness destination, while also jeopardizing the authenticity of travel experiences. This is supported by the fact that users of the CH are much more opposed

to building up roads in the area than others. Yet, these opinions have been shown to vary from one road to another [118] and with regard to the level of development considered [83], more primitive infrastructure being seen as more appropriate. Further research would be beneficial to document public opinions on road and infrastructure developments in wilderness settings and to underpin informed decisions.

It is concluded that access is a key conflict issue with regard to nature conservation and tourism management in vast remote venues for tourism and outdoor recreation, such as the CH. While it is common knowledge that access restrictions in protected areas can lead to conflicts, this study underlines that access provision (e.g., through road improvements) also has the potential for triggering substantial land-use conflicts, as it would enable further development of the area, at the expense of its wilderness qualities. This highlights the importance of remoteness for domestic outdoor recreation in the CH, further supporting the public perception of the area as wilderness [67]. As such, current road conditions in the area constitute a barrier to further development and are therefore crucial in preserving its natural and cultural features. Access development has only rarely been a source of conflict in itself, even if it often functions as a prerequisite for other, more conflict-prone, development projects. Another factor is the incremental and scattered manner in which such development has taken place in wilderness areas worldwide, through multiple small-scale projects as opposed to fewer larger projects, and thereby less exposed to criticism. This silent transition can be seen as a conflict avoiding strategy, operated at the expense of public consultation regarding a long-term vision for these areas and possibly even at the detriment of the public interest. In contrast, documenting public opinion on land-use planning, nature conservation and tourism management is more ethical and democratic while offering a more desirable path for meeting public expectations and better anticipating or even preventing land-use conflicts.

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