Perception of nature located within the themes of migration and tourism

Nature-based tourism depends on the natural environment and how humans experience and interact with it. Therefore, the perception of nature is of particular interest when it comes to the interaction of humans and the natural environment in the tourism setting. People try to make sense of the processes and the dynamics of their surroundings. First of all, the environment can be understood in many ways (cf. Attfield, 2003 in Holden, 2008) as follows: a) the surroundings, b) the objective system of nature (e.g. mountains, rainforests, etc.), and c) the perceived surrounding (e.g. providing a sense of belonging). This classification already shows that the environment is more than the physical location; it also has emotional, mental, sensory, and cultural aspects.

From a sensory perspective, Lund (2013) resonates the arguments of Ingold (2011) when she argues that the environment and especially nature is not a passive being, but rather it emerges as one engages with it through physical means (Lund, 2013). It is the engagement with the environment that shapes our perception of it. The natural environment
can be seen as an embodied experience within us and the fabric of our society (cf. Ingold, 2011). This embodiment emerges out of the activity of dwelling and the experience of natural factors (e.g. weather, temperature, food, and building materials) and so where the body becomes a part of its environment and the mind copes with unclear separation of the self and the environment.

Yet, due to the interpretation of the surrounding by sensory means and the mind, it can be argued whether or not a real environment exists (cf. Holden, 2008). The experience and perception of nature becomes embodied and envisioned, dependent on the pre-conditions of the visitor. These pre-conditions can be seen as filters through which the experience of the environment is filtered. These filters are based upon the visitor’s own experiences, memories, and the values transported within society. Specifically, the background of the individual is of importance because it is rooted in the culture and society of the individual, and it shapes the interaction and interpretation with each aspect of the human and non-human environment (cf. Abt, 1989). The networks formed by different individuals also influence their perception of themselves and the world around them (cf. Marten, 2001). It is, in fact, these embodied, envisioned, and experienced environments within the individual that create the perception of the place within its environment. This makes tour guides interesting for this study because working in nature-based tourism means being in nature and being exposed to the forces of nature, as well as engaging with the landscape and other people.

Often, tour guides are not native to the host community they are working within. Therefore, migration is an important influencing aspect on the diversity of perceptions because it influences how and with what magnitude changes within the natural environment are perceived. How we value the changes is dependent on many factors. These factors can include aspects of temporality (exposure to changes, long or short exposure), economy (dependency on the natural environment for income, or ownership), and history (memories of places, and stories). Therefore, the perception of nature can be different among individuals. How one experiences or perceives nature is dependent on the cultural values transported between and embedded in individuals. But as culture is in constant flux and dependent on the shared interaction of members
of society with the environment, so the perception of nature is in flux as well. Tourism is an interesting factor for the study of perception of nature because of the intersection of many different perceptions within the theme of tourism. Guiding is an important occupation in tourism and it addresses manifold questions related to sense of place, safety, migration of people, as well as the translation of land and culture (cf. Zillinger, Jonasson & Adolfsson, 2012). Tour guides are important in understanding the dynamics of the interaction of humans with nature and with each other.

Research on tour guides provides insight into the perception of nature by visiting people, but also into the chronological changes within nature. The knowledge gained is essential in tourism management in order to be able to tailor the products towards the needs and desires of the customers. This is important, especially at the point of consumption in sensitive areas, such as protected areas. This chapter will deal with the imagination of place and people, and put the guides into the focus of tourism research. This focus can help close the gap in our understanding of the dynamic processes in tourism and support the ongoing discussion in Icelandic tourism. Still, tour guides are not identified as important stakeholders in the decision-making process of protected areas and tourism projects because they do not fulfil several important stakeholder classifications (cf. Mitchell, Agle & Wood, 1997; Reed et al., 2009), even though this chapter will argue for their other values.

Aims, scope, and research questions

The research focuses on the case of tour guides at the Skaftafell area of Vatnajökull National Park and seeks to explore how they see their own role in tourism and protected area management. The aim is to increase the understanding of the role of tour guides for the protected area policies and to explore whether or not tour guides would be important for public participation processes of the Vatnajökull National Park. It is of particular interest to answer the question of how tour guides relate to the current development in tourism and their perception of nature, themselves, and tourists around them. This research will not examine in depth the issues of migration; however, it is part of the discussion. How
perception is influenced by migration, or how it differs between different
groups of tour guides will be touched upon. To study the perception of
nature among tour guides, the study in Iceland involved a journey to
listen to tour guides talk about how they see the environment within
which they are guiding and how they experience the changes over time.

Tour guides in the broader social context

To begin this journey, it is important to turn to the question who tour
guides are and why they are of importance. It is said that tour guides
have been around for as long as humans have existed, and their role has
always been regarded as vital to ensure safe and informed travels. With
the emergence of tourism as an industry, the demands on guides have
multiplied, to provide entertainment, information, and safety (cf. Ap
& Wong, 2001; Cohen, 1985). The role of a tour guide is important
in tourism for the industry as well as the consumer of the product.
Tour guides embody various roles and responsibilities, which form
a complex and dynamic environment. In order to understand and grasp
this environment, it can be helpful to turn to Abt (1989) and his view
that the self is unconsciously related to four realms (oneself, community,
spirit, and matter). Jónasson (2005) has similarly used similar four
realms by describing the self with regards to intrapersonal, interpersonal,
suprapersonal, and transpersonal dimensions (see Figure 1). Using this
framework can help to analyse the situation of guides by using a four
dimensional approach because it helps to capture all aspects of life.

To locate the perception of nature by guides, the following chapter
is divided into discussions about the current tourism system in Iceland,
the role of guides, the interaction with tourists, and their role in the
network of tourism.
Tourism industry in Iceland

On a global scale, tourism is one of the most important industries, creating one out of eleven jobs (UNWTO, 2013). Iceland is no exception of that development and represents an interesting example as it shows a tremendous increase in the number of foreign visitors and in the growing economic importance. In the year 2015, the amount of foreign citizens travelling through Keflavik International airport and via seaports was about 1.3 million (Icelandic Tourism Board, 2016) (see Figure 2). Tourism in Iceland has become an important economic sector (Boston Consulting Group, 2013; Icelandic Tourism Board, 2015b). The tourism industry in Iceland is currently in a state of rapid expansion and utilisation, leaving questions about the future of the industry as a whole, the people working in tourism, and the visitors. Even though tourism is important for the Icelandic economy, the significance of tourism is generally shadowed by issues of seasonality and migration of workers
Figure 2 Development of number of foreign visitors to Iceland (airport and seaport) – years highlighted: 1995, 2005, and 2015

Tour guides in nature-based tourism: Perceptions of nature and governance…

(cf. Marcoullier & Green, 2000; Seaton, 2010). This is of particular importance because many workers in the tourism sector are only seasonal workers and due to the fact that working in tourism does not always need professional training, done by young Icelanders or migrants.

Currently, there is discussion about the risk of rapid environmental degradation due to increased tourism in Iceland (Árnadóttir, 2014; Fontaine, 2014). Tourism in Iceland is mainly nature-based tourism, so it is important to consider the sensitivity of the natural environment as it influences the future of the tourism industry. Even though there is concern about the environmental sustainability of tourism in Iceland, there are also examples where Iceland is portrayed as less developed and naïve. Gunnarsdóttir (2011) highlights this as she says that Iceland is “a place that waits for tourists to explore” (Gunnarsdóttir, 2011, p. 539). The attitude of tourism in Iceland is portrayed as playful and less developed because it is characterised by “the strong interest tourist’s show in gazing at, playing in and enjoying nature.” (Sæþórsdóttir, 2010, p. 29). Currently research is conducted on the experience of tourists and the state of the natural environment (Sæþórsdóttir, 2013; Ólafsdóttir & Runnström, 2013; Schaller, 2014) and on the perception of local communities (Huijbens & Bjarnadóttir, 2015; Market Media Research, 2015). But it appears that a better understanding of the direct interaction between the consumer and the front line of tourism is still missing. In addition, research about the role of guides, their perception, and vision is limited in Iceland. Conducting research on guides and their perception of nature is of importance as it provides a deeper view into the matters of environmental and social changes, as they have longer and more repetitive exposure to an area over time. Guides can be seen as returning visitors to an area which provides the option of having a deeper experience of the area and the changes happening within it over time. In addition to this the guides add to the discussion about tourism in Iceland because they also provide the possibility to give feedback on management actions with regards to tourism in sensitive areas. All this is important for the current discussion of the current state and future development of tourism in Iceland and even beyond.
The role of tour guides

First we turn to the guides themselves and the fact that they are an essential part of the tourist industry. Cohen (1985) described two streams of origins of modern tour guides: pathfinders and mentors. The pathfinder is the guide providing access to an area, whereas a mentor can be seen as providing translation and interpretation of information. Dependent on the environment and the type of tour, these two roles can overlap, but these roles always inherit instrumental, social, interactional, and communicative functions (Cohen, 1985). These roles and functions open up a dynamic environment in which guides operate. Guides are in direct contact with tourists, interacting and working with them, the customer. As part of this direct contact with the customer they provide information and safety during the tour. Because of this it comes as no surprise that Ap and Wong (2001) describe them as front line players, working in a challenging environment.

Guides transform the existing resource of the site (e.g. stories, landscape, food, and services) into goods, services, and experiences that are utilised by the customer. This transformation process elevates the work of a tour guide from a provision of services into a translation of the land and its stories. The translation and interpretation is the centre of the work of a guide, during which a tour becomes an experience (Ap & Wong, 2001). The way and extent to which this is happening is dependent on the guides own cultural background, skills, and information. Dependent on the extent and difference in this inherited skill set, the interpretation can, therefore, differ from guide to guide, but also as an outside factor through the interaction with the customer. This can lead to a different interaction with the natural environment and the people around the guide (cf. Marten, 2001).

The guides’ personal background shapes the experience of the tourists and their interaction with the natural environment. Their professional training and their own story with the land and its people influence their interaction with the surroundings. In addition to this, tourism and guiding is a sector that has a lot to do with migration of workers and seasonality (Marcoullier & Green, 2000; Seaton, 2010). As guides can come from different regions and countries their background and their
culture also influences the way they guide while they interact between the “own” and the “other” (cf. Jonasson & Scherle, 2012). Besides these factors, it is worth mentioning that their perception of their own roles in the social system is similar among individuals of different cultures, especially when the natural environment is of concern (cf. Schaller, Jónasson & Aikoh, 2013). All these influences encompass the challenges guides face are coming from the interplay with nature and society (Rokenes, Schumann & Rose, 2015). Therefore the role of the guide itself is important to understand their reaction to other people, and their actions with the natural environment.

Interaction with tourists

As mentioned, guides are the connection between the host community, the natural environment, and the customer – the tourist. Therefore, guides are not alone in the natural environment because they are with tourists for a specific time (just a few hours, a day tour, or longer tours) and provide during this time services to the tourists and to the land. Guides often visit areas and become familiar with them (due to exposure or training). These destinations can be charged with a diversity of emotions and information, dependent on the personal experience of the guide. This diversity gives a point of differentiation of stories and interaction for the tour. Tour guides share their own side of the story to the different location (Bryon, 2012), which provides the possibility to have a diversity of stories and experiences dependent on the situation. This diversity is important for the tourists and the guide, as not all tours can be the same due to environmental (e.g. weather and accessibility) and human conditions (e.g. motivation of tourists and situation of guide).

The role of tour guides in the tourism network

Tourism can be seen as a network of interaction between different players (cf. van der Zee & Vanneste, 2015); the tourist on one side and the tourism industry as well as the host community on the other. Tour guides can also be seen as the link between two network areas
(cf. Jonasson & Scherle, 2012), which is represented in the node of the network of the host destination and the network of the incoming tourists. Their role is therefore not only to be a mediator and translator, but they can also be seen as gatekeepers for the tourists to the land and its culture (Howard, Smith & Twaithes, 2001). Guides provide the interface between the host destination and the tourists (Ap & Wong, 2001). Being at the forefront of tourism, at the point where the tourism experience takes place, the guides are also safekeeping the tourists and the natural environment in the form of instruction and guidance on proper behaviour. This intervention of habits and the customs with the land and its people is one of the spheres that Cohen (1985) defined as that within which tour guides operate. The role of the guide in the “mediatory-sphere” is of importance when analysing the perception of nature because here the understanding of the visitors and the host destination (the land and its people), and mediation between the two is formulated (cf. Pereira & Mykletun, 2012). The guide is in the position where he/she has the possibility to influence the actions and perception of the tourists. This intervention can be also seen as important when it comes to the subject of glocalisation. Glocalisation in the tourism environment can be understood as guides are at the forefront of the interplay of global (e.g. foreign tourists and the image of Iceland), and local (e.g. the culture and natural environment) (Salazar, 2005). It appears important to address this because it is linked with the personal background of the guide (e.g. migration), their culture, and their decisions affecting their environment, and the expectation, motivation, and images the tourists bring with them about the host destination.

Materials and methods

The data for this research is based on semi-structured interviews with tour guides, working in Iceland. In general, tour guides working in Iceland are not required to have certification as a guide. Many of the guides working in Iceland are Icelandic citizens or have residence in Iceland as a foreign citizen. But there are also guides that work only during the summer in Iceland and are not employed by Icelandic companies. This
makes the collection of possible participants challenging, and because of this it was decided to get in touch with guides working only in Iceland. In order to contact these guides, the Icelandic Tourism Board (www.ferdamalastofa.is) and the Icelandic Tourist Guide Association (www.touristguide.is) were contacted. The Icelandic Tourist Guide Association has, at the time of conducting this study, more than 900 registered members, and it offered to forward the inquiry for participation through their newsletter. All members of the association received certification as a guide by completing some form of professional guidance at an Icelandic institution (e.g. The Iceland Tourist Guide School). The Icelandic Tourism Board provided a list of companies registered in Iceland and suggested two companies operating hiking tours within the Skaftafell area as the most important partners in this study. These two companies operate the majority of market share in Skaftafell and have been contacted with the inquiry to participate in this study. It was important for the study to find a representative sample of tour guides highlighting the development of the tourism industry in the area of Skaftafell, while giving all guides working in this area the possibility to participate. The initial collection of contacts included 13 individuals of whom a total of 10 came forward to participate in this study. Some of the participants in this sample were contacted by the two companies, while others came forward due to the inquiry for participation in the newsletter sent out by the Icelandic Tourist Guide Association. These 10 guides were interviewed during March and April 2015.

The interviews were semi-structured and based on a set of 13 question regarding themes about tourism in Skaftafell (Figure 3). The order of questions was not fixed in order to give an organic flow of the interview. This practice was chosen so that participants could respond freely on aspects that they considered most relevant, while it was possible to maintain that all topics important for the study were covered (Veal, 2006). Each interview took between 40 and 60 minutes and was recorded on a digital recorder for future transcription and analysis. Quotes used in the text are retrieved from these transcripts and are shown in quotation marks. All participants gave their consent for complete access to their contribution. Even though several participants gave permission to be identified, all participants remained anonymous in this study.
The analysis of the transcripts was based on initial and axial coding, drawing out the main themes and terms mentioned by the participants. Deriving from the initial discussion about the self and the perception of the surroundings, the results of the interviews can be divided into four segments: a discussion about the guides themselves, the perception of the visiting tourists, the tourism industry in Iceland, and the perception of the natural environment. The four segments will touch upon issues mentioned by the participants: the role of the guides, the changes of the tourist groups and attitudes, the importance of guides within the industry, and the perception of nature by the guides (see Figure 4).
Results

The following presentation of the data is broken down into two main segments: the participants and the results of the interviews. First, the information and demographics of participants are presented, before diving into the data of the interviews.

Participants

For this research, 10 guides participated and gave their consent to take part in this study. Out of these 10 individuals, nine guides worked in the area of Skaftafell. The representation of males and females were almost equal, and the sample showed a heterogeneous background of the participants with regards to nationality and profession (see Table 1). Only two individuals identified themselves as Icelandic nationals, whereas the rest had either a foreign nationality or identified themselves with more than one nationality. Even though the participants mentioned if they

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Residency</th>
<th>Years as guide</th>
<th>Main profession</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>IS</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>student</td>
</tr>
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<td>02</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F / IS</td>
<td>IS</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>PL</td>
<td>IS</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>glacier guide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>IS</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>guide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>IS</td>
<td>IS</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>guide</td>
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<tr>
<td>06</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>IS</td>
<td>IS</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>MY</td>
<td>IS / US / ARG</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>mountain guide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>PL / IS</td>
<td>IS</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>office clerk</td>
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<tr>
<td>09</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>IS</td>
<td>IS</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>guide</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>IS</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>guide</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own elaboration.
worked in different places before, migration and the effects of that were not part of direct discussion during the interview. However, migration was an issue noticeable between the lines. Besides nationality, it was interesting to see that all participants had Icelandic residency, which was no surprise considering the way the participants got to know about this study. Only one guide mentioned that he had several residencies, which can be an indicator of the seasonality of his employment in Iceland. The number of years the participants worked in the area of Skaftafell was also rather heterogeneous, with only two individuals having worked for more than 15 years in the area of study, whereas the majority worked for five years or less as a guide in Skaftafell. It came as no surprise that the majority of participants identified themselves as guides, whereas the other participants had a diverse professional background.

Results of interviews

Migration was, as mentioned, not the core of the discussion in this research; however, it is an issue for guides in Iceland. Migration of guides can happen on levels from abroad towards Iceland and within Iceland. As the majority of participants in this research had foreign roots, it is important to point out that their cultural background can influence the way nature is perceived and how the interaction with others is shaped. Although many guides said that they worked for more than six months at a time in Iceland, it is peculiar to guides to adjust to a certain working routine and habits in Iceland while remaining true to their own values. Nevertheless, guides shared similar views and perceptions when discussing nature, as deliberated later in this chapter.

Of interest is how tour guides see themselves. Several of the participants expressed their connection to the land because it provides their livelihood. This is either accounted for by the fact that they grew up in Iceland or lived in Iceland for a reasonable length of time. It is interesting to see that even though some of the participants live in Iceland just for the time that they work as a guide, they still feel a connection with the land:

The guides that work on the glacier, I mean these are people that want to be there. (03)
[The change in the nature] it is a big concern. For me personally, absolutely, it is alarming. To see the ice disappears. Because it is my livelihood. (03)

You give [the tourists] a glimpse of you, what you would see, or what you love so much. (07)

Because the fact that most participants expressed their connection with the land, they also feel that they have an important role to play in the interaction between the tourists and the land (natural environment and local community). Of particular interest is that the majority of participants did not plan to work as a guide in the tourism sector, initially. The reason for this can be the fact that being a tour guide is not really a profession that is seen as a lifelong occupation. Interestingly enough, several guides identify themselves as teachers or as embodying an educational role, some even have undergone a degree to become a teacher. This is related to the fact that guides have to be able to translate and explain the experience to tourists. It seems to be something that comes as a normal part of being a guide:

As a tour guide it is pretty much the same as a teacher. I enjoyed teacher and I enjoy being a tour guide. I am explaining the country. Explaining Iceland, and (...) that is what I like. I never get tired. That is very strange. (02)

Applying to [work a guide] was pretty natural to me – because part of it I always been in nature, and always knew how to interpret nature. And kind of analyse what I saw and kind of communicated to the tourists. So it was not a big step for me and it came pretty natural. (05)

Although the participants see themselves as an important part in the interaction, they also acknowledge that their role is more than “just” being the linkage between the customer and the place of visit. When asked about the role of guides in the management of a protected area, one participant expressed that working as a guide also comes with responsibility towards the change in the natural environment and in the tourism industry:

We see what happens there [in the area of Skaftafell]. We deal with most of the traffic. So we are the reason for lot of the traffic. So we can contribute to kind of making it smoother, making it better. (03)
Besides the reflection inside, it is also interesting to see how guides see themselves with regards to their importance for others. Several participants spoke of the power tour guides have but do not always realise. Power, with regards to guiding, is understood by the participants as the power to influence the behaviour of tourists and the power to shape the experience of the visitors. This power is sometimes due to the fact that they do not realise what impact their guidance can have on others around them:

I try to be the good example. You know. When I see trash on the path I pick it up and what ever I see people doing the same of my group. So rather be a good example (...). (01)

You are not only sharing your own passion, but also you are enriching the other. (07)

I always tell this my tourists, ahm, when I need an argument to say “Please, don't go near to the waterfall”, then I usually say: “Think of the others. They would also do it and then we have a big mess here.” (10)

I'm influencing their experience. But anyway, of course, the landscape is usually impressing the people. It depends on the weather and the ahm attractions themselves are having. If I don't sell them the attractions much, they have usually still an impact on the people. Which is usually positive. (10)

The last statement about influencing the experience of the tourists shows how the connection of the guide with the “others” is an important factor in the discussion. Looking at the recent, sharp increase in numbers of visitors, the question remains whether the situation of tourism and visitors was “better” in the past? When asked if tourists prefer a higher service than before, one participant expressed his view on tourism in Skaftafell and how it changed:

They want that more than before. I remember in the old days (,) it was not really (,) rooms clean, and that was all. And well, in the tent, tent. I remember it happened that the tent [gesture – blown away] – the kitchen tent – things like that (02)

(Interviewer) “How does that change make you feel? I mean this change of the old days, you know, were you went more with tents. No body
cared how the service or the rooms were, unless they were clean. (…) How tourism is now?

Yes. (,) I don’t know what to say, actually. (,) perhaps, ah, (,) perhaps some tourists in the group are less interested in Iceland. Some of them now, I see that, ok they go to maybe China, Guatemala, oh – oh Iceland, ok. (…) Some of them are like [“I have not been there, yet”]. (02)

Apparently the view of Iceland among tourists is changing. This change appears to impact also the work of guides. The changes in perception towards travels and trips to Iceland is a reoccurring subject of comment by the participants, but also the change in behaviour of visitors and their knowledge about the place prior to their visit:

Before – it was of course rather wealthy tourists; (…) they were better educated about [the country and environment]. (01)

Tourism has kind of shifted in the past three years. It’s kind of become a little bit too commercial. (03)

Everybody is showing their tip on [social media] or wherever. And people are always comparing their lives, and that was not an issue some years ago. (05)

In particular, the attitude of tourists towards their trip and the environment is something that seems to have changed over recent years. Many participants expressed how the attitude and emotions of tourists have changed over the years. It would appear that the visitors are becoming less interested, less knowledgeable, and more relaxed about their own experience in Iceland:

(…) the behaviour of tourists towards nature is getting more and more disrespectful. And if you tell people this. [Tourists say that something] Like this is just me, just setting aside, bla bla bla. (01)

[Nowadays] some tourists in the group are less interested in Iceland.” (02)

As soon as Iceland became a hype, people just want to check it on their bucket list. (05)

It is interesting to hear that even though the people are less prepared for their experience, the visitors still enjoy their trip despite all the
hardship. The following comment points out that there is an outside system and dynamic that is driving the tourist industry in Iceland, and it perpetuates the machinery of creating images and inheriting images within the people and their expectations of the trip:

I am still wondering what is going on with the people, because usually everyone, like, nobody has a negative view on Iceland and usually people have a super positive ahm exaggerated view on Iceland which is kind of scary, I would say. (10)

This statement is also a reminder that the experience of tourists and guides is embedded in the tourism industry. This system is in constant flux because of the changes that happen from within and outside. The change in numbers of visitors over the last decade is a reminder of the immense pressure tourism has on small and isolated communities. Talking about tourism, the role guides have within it, and the opinion of guides towards the way it is shaped, many expressed a rather negative and complex situation of tourism. Asked about the environmental degradation that follows the increase in numbers of visitors, several participants articulated their concern:

I think tourism has grown quite too fast and I see no strategy, no policy [by officials]. (01)

The problem is becoming that there are more and more people coming and the Icelandic nature is slowly starting to suffer. (03)

I think [nature] is at great risk. Because we have too few signs and too few marked paths and roads and nobody is telling the people “please staying at the road” because we are selling endless freedom. And this endless freedom is what everybody wants to take. (04)

Almost every participant expressed that crowding is an issue that occurs more frequent in Iceland. The increased crowding leads to environmental degradation, and in order to fight the degradation while enabling sites to cope with the current and future influx of visitors, a tourism infrastructure seems to be a solution:

Perhaps [infrastructure] is necessary now. Unfortunately. I suppose so. (02)
If you want to have tourism there, you need to have trails. (...) So it’s a necessary evil in the sense that if you want to protect and have everyone go everywhere and hurt themselves than you need to have that over there. (07)

But some participants went ever further than the need for infrastructure. They described the tourism system in Iceland as a whole as a system that is flawed and in crisis. On the one hand there is a systematic problem within development of tourism, but on the other some participants also expressed that there is a problem with the people working in the industry:

I think, what usually, mostly about mass tourism and this kind of gold digger syndrome is how people stopped caring and they just can not towards stop being people and they become tourists, and areas that need to be worked on and people stop caring about as they just think, it is just lost. (05)

We can’t think about [tourism infrastructure] in a long term. And it is an issue with a lot of these areas. And they get stuck in the very first steps and they are not willing to look 10 years ahead. (...) Because it is just about the first steps – what can I get and where is the money for it. (05)

This tourist … this big boom or whatever it is called, this expansion will not keep going. I think it’s not gonna last that long. I hope. (06)

Is there too many? We all, unequivocally think there’s too many. The guides gonna tell you that. I mean, it’s also our living. That’s what we do for a living. (07)

MY [emphasis by participant] general perception is that we are not putting quality high up on the list right now. And that to me is Icelandic tourism in general. I think we are just looking at the cash that we can make and we just keep turning out. (07)

One issue that appears over and over again in the comments by many participants, is the fact that the tourism system in Iceland and the management approach for the development of tourism is not actively shaping the future of tourism but continues to react to the development in tourism:

(Interviewer) Would you describe the management then rather as reactive than as proactive?”
Pretty much yeah, I would say that is quite accurately phrased. because from what I see so far, everyone can tell you that there are a lot of changes and then past the number of tourists coming in and now that we just being caught with our pants down and just like: “oh wow, what do I do now?” (07)

Formulating more regulations for the management of tourism seems not necessarily to appeal to all participants, even though there is an acknowledgement of positive trade-offs:

I wouldn't have pleasure with [more regulations]. But, when I think about tourism and my tourists, I think it’s maybe good. I have more control over my tourists, it’s more security as well, I have less work to do as a mountain guide when the trail is well marked and well prepared. (10)

When asked about the development of tourism in certain areas in Iceland, the anecdote of one participant is quite telling when it comes to the current development in tourism:

It could refer to my mom all the time. But this is a phrase she used a lot of times: You clean your house before you invite people. But in Iceland it isn't done that way. Everybody is invited before the infrastructure is ready. (05)

Turning towards the perception of nature, the participants were asked to define the term nature and also nature in Iceland. Many of the participants mentioned spatial features, but often emotional terms were used to reflect the resonance of nature within them and the bodily experience the participants have within the natural environment:

Nature (…) you can see it, you can feel it. You can climb the rocks, you can hike some trails, but it isn’t in the same way I mostly experience it. Since it is so touched by people. (05)

Everything is nature. (…) I would say that we see nature everywhere. People are part of nature, like everything is nature. (05)

We are supposed to be part of (nature). (…) Because of the end of the day it’s how you define nature in the first place. If you don't see that we are part of it then it’s just something that you go and visit. (07)
When asked to describe the nature in Iceland, the participants used terms that relate to the emptiness and wildness of nature, terms that are also used in the tourism media to promote and frame Icelandic nature. Another group of words used relate to the emotions that the nature evokes within the participant, when experiencing and being in nature. The interviews have been analysed and all of the terms used to describe nature in Iceland have been collected in one table. Several terms have been used by more than one participant. In order to show the relevance for all participants, a word cloud has been generated by importing the complete table of terms mentioned into online software. This software shows the count of each word by increased font size and thickness. In this word cloud it can be seen that interestingly, the area of Skaftafell, next to the glacier Vatnajökull, gives a view of Iceland being a wild, untamed, and sensitive environment (see Figure 5).

Figure 5  Word cloud created with terms used by participants to describe the nature in Iceland

Nevertheless, it is important to mention that the view of nature is in flux. In particular one participant was interesting, as he expressed how his cultural background and upbringing shaped his first impression of nature in Iceland, and how this changed over time:
Since I’m a mountain guide and since I’m more in tourism, I changed my attitude to watch on nature and it got from – in the beginning, you come from a big city, I lived in Berlin, and you come in a country to a country where you have a lot of nature and a lot of landscape, let’s say it like this, rawness and wilderness, and in the beginning you come with a very typical ahm, how do you call that, the typical romantic view from a big-city-citizen and you romanticise nature itself and you make something really big out of it, you make it bigger than it is, but since I am working now with it, I came more to the fact that nature is always changing, especially here in Iceland.

Another participant expressed his view of Icelandic nature as being more than the features humans can define and experience. His view envisions nature as a living and animated entity:

I tell people that to me glacier is life. It has a different life form, like all has a different life form (...) I just feel like I have that connections with the environment that I am in, because at the end of the day, I am part of it.

But even though nature is expressed in its multiplicity by terms of emotion and bodily experience, it has been mentioned by the participants that they are concerned about the changes of the natural environment. Guides care deeply about nature, one of the reasons is that it is also their source of income, and the growing degradation threatens this. Another interesting aspect is that the guides’ view seems to differ from the perception of nature by the tourists. Often the change in the natural environment is accounted for by the increase in visitors, which is expressed in the following comments as a growing problem:

Because if too many people come, which is now happening, (...) It is, (...) adding a certain threat to nature in its form, or in its original form.

Virginity [of nature] is perhaps going now with too many people.

The problem is becoming that there are more and more people coming and the Icelandic nature is slowly starting to suffer.

I am used to Iceland to go on this to wilderness that we can use the landscape but there they kind of institutionalised through the national
park term the nature itself and ahm made it in a way less nature and more like a museum. (10)

I think Skaftafell will lose its importance in tourism because they are not catching up with the tourist development and they can’t offer too much ahm spectacular things to see. (10)

Discussion and conclusion

Even though the economic aspect of tourism is positive, tourism in Iceland finds itself at a crossroad, as the continuous growth of tourism leads to environmental degradation and, therefore, threatens the future of the industry itself. On the one hand, the tourism industry perpetuates the image of Iceland as wild and unspoiled nature, a branding that reaches abroad and is carried on by visitors. But on the other hand, at the point of purchase the “tourism en mass” catches up with the reality. This negatively influences the experience of visitors and threatens the future of the industry. The guides in this study expressed their concern about this change in tourism and the perception of nature. On the one hand, because they are the frontline workers dealing with the expectation of the visitors and the reality of the experience, and on the other hand, because they express themselves as being powerless in the decision-making process. Their input in this study can be examined through different lenses: the interaction between guide and tourist, the system of tourism, the natural environment, and migration and culture of the guides.

The participants in this study stated that there has been a change in the type of tourists visiting Iceland. Over time, the individuals visiting Iceland have become less concerned and knowledgeable about the environment they are visiting. This has led to two profound changes among the visitors: people are more concerned with ticking Iceland off their bucket list and with sharing more of their experience online, rather than caring for the delicate environment. This has led to an increase in the number of visitors but also in a degradation of the experience for the visitors, especially the ones seeking wild and untouched nature. The question would remain if this is true for all visitors. The other thing that guides mentioned is the fact that tourism in Iceland is
lacking a clear structure, regulation, and a vision of the possible future of tourism. Participants expressed that the industry is currently trapped in a “gold-digger state”, where the development of infrastructure and regulations appears to run after the galloping increase in numbers of visitors. It seems almost that there is a run for the tourism money and no-one wants to be the last to jump on this train, while ignoring the warning signs of the formation of an economic bubble.

The question remains if proactive management of tourism is still able to shape a prosperous future for tourism while safeguarding the environment and avoiding further degradation and if guides can provide helpful advice. The guides see themselves as being in a position to help on the frontline of tourism to influence the behaviour of the tourists around them to minimise the negative impact. Hearing the story of guides, it can be said that they have valuable insights for the management of protected areas, but do not have the legal stake in it to participate. But participants also mention that tourism system itself is trapped in a loop of perpetuated creation of images about Iceland and the growing consumption of them, which motivates more individuals to visit Iceland. This is seen as a problem because instead of more meaningful tourism in Iceland, there is the notion of more consumption in tourism.

Nature is the livelihood of the guides, and they express their deep feelings and worries for the future degradation of the natural environment. Many of the participants became guides because they care for Iceland and its natural sites. It is of interest that guides express their concern about the changes in the natural environment beyond the area they are offering within the tours. They are often concerned not only about the experience of their group and themselves, but also for the other visitors (current and future). Although they often feel powerless in influencing the habits of tourists beyond their reach and the system of tourism in Iceland, they are a powerful ally in protecting the environment. Most guides see nature in Iceland as a wild and untamed environment, although it has been acknowledged that this view is prone to change over time.

The management of tourism and natural sites would do well to incorporate the knowledge of guides into their decision-making, because by doing so they could tap into their experience and expertise. Many
of them have been working for many years in the areas of interest and know the demands of tourists, understanding the ongoing processes, and the sensitivity of the area. Migration is an interesting issue of tourism and guiding, as it provides a different view on management issues and can help to formulate robust solutions.

With regards to migration and perception of nature, it is of particular interest that the participants appear to see nature quite similarly to each other, even though they come from different cultural backgrounds. Although it can be said that there is not one unified understanding of nature, previous research indicates that individuals can relate similarly to nature even though they are from different cultural backgrounds (cf. Schaller, 2010; Schaller et al., 2013). Tour guides are a specific subgroup of individuals which, in this research, care about the natural environment due to the nature of their profession. Therefore, if research raises similar underlying questions and confirms the hypothesis that if nature is at stake, then guides have a similar appreciation and perception of nature. These guides are of specific interest for research because they are in direct contact with tourists and nature over a long time.

With this in mind, it can be stated that tour guides are important for the management of protected areas because they can not only help to complete the picture of the interaction between people and nature in the tourism system, but also provide knowledge about the temporal changes within this system. Especially because of these benefits, it would be advisable to consider tour guides as key stakeholders in the decision-making process of protected areas, despite the fact that they would not be considered key stakeholders according to possible stakeholder classifications.

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