

Rewilding Iceland's forests

The northern country has been barren since the Vikings razed its trees – but a dramatic resurrection is in progress

Words / Delle Chan
Illustration / Chervelle Fryer





Looking at Iceland today, it's hard to imagine that a millennium ago much of its raw, rugged terrain was covered with lush greenery.

Back then more than a quarter of the country was dense, birch forest. That is, until the Vikings stepped ashore at the end of the ninth century. They razed the forests to build houses and develop pastures, and the land has never quite recovered.

While Iceland's stark lunar landscapes look pretty dramatic today, this scalping has been causing problems for local people ever since. The dearth of trees means timber has been in short supply; and the lack of protective plant cover has led to soil erosion and desertification, making farming a thankless task. On a more fundamental level, Icelanders haven't been able to access green spaces and the myriad recreational opportunities they bring.

The Icelandic Forest Service (IFS) has been attempting to remedy this situation with an impressive plan for afforestation – replanting the trees the Vikings removed. “Our motivation is to reclaim the native birch wood, develop a utilisable forest resource – our own timber – and combat soil erosion,” explains director Throstur Eysteinnsson.

Since the 1950s, the IFS has planted more than 100 million trees across Iceland – from the native downy birch that the Vikings largely destroyed, to larger and faster-growing exotic species like the Sitka spruce, lodgepole pine and Siberian larch.

These are cultivated as saplings in greenhouses and nurseries across the country before being

replanted in lowland regions such as Hekluškógar, around two and half hours' drive east of Reykjavík in the south of the island.

It hasn't exactly been a walk in the park. “We've faced many challenges over the years, perhaps the greatest of which was convincing the locals that trees can grow in Iceland,” Eysteinnsson says wryly. The 2008–11 Icelandic financial crisis also halved the number of trees being planted yearly, from six million to around three million.

Fortunately, efforts have now been boosted thanks to growing environmental concerns, and the country's attempts to mitigate emissions.

“Last year, the Icelandic government decided on several initiatives to combat climate change, one of which is to greatly increase afforestation in the coming years. As such, our funding has been raised by about 100 million krónur [€723,000], and we hope to boost planting by about 30% in 2020,” says Eysteinnsson. “Carbon sequestration by trees and in soils is real, and we can offset much of Iceland's carbon footprint by afforestation.”

Currently, just 2% of Iceland is covered by forest or woodland. It's a long road back to the large-scale coverage of the ninth century, but Eysteinnsson says that the IFS aims to up the current figure to 4% by 2050, and then to 8% by 2100. “Why stop there?” he asks. “In a land without forests, trees are needed for the multitude of benefits they bring.” skogur.is

Norwegian flies to Reykjavík from seven locations. Book flights, a hotel and a rental car at Norwegian.com

Other restoration projects



Coral reefs, Florida

The Florida Reef Resilience Program brings together federal and state agencies, non-profits and universities to monitor and sustain the health of the 10,000-year-old reefs. frfp.org



Wetlands, Essex

Once a haven for wildlife, England's Essex coast is being restored through the Wallasea Island Wild Coast Project. It harnesses breaches in sea walls to create intertidal habitats. rspb.org.uk



Horses in Iberia

In Portugal's fire-prone Côa Valley, the non-profit Rewilding Europe is introducing wild horses, whose grazing habits create mosaic landscapes that act as firebreaks. rewildingeurope.com