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Wilderness as Tourism Destination: Place Meanings and Preferences of Tourism Service Providers

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Abstract: The increase in wilderness use for nature-based tourism has complex implications for wilderness management. Tourism service providers play an important role in shaping tourism development trends, which can have an impact on wilderness. This stresses the importance of studying their perceptions and preferences regarding wilderness management. This study explores the meanings wilderness areas contain for tourism operators, the relationship of these meanings with wilderness management and development preferences, and the potential of place-based approaches to contribute to wilderness management. The study is based on 47 semi-structured interviews with tourism service providers offering services within or near the Icelandic Central Highlands, known for their vast, high-quality wilderness areas. The findings emphasize the importance of place meanings assigned by tourism service providers in shaping wilderness management preferences. The study highlights the usefulness of place-based management approaches, which can help identify potential conflicts between tourism and wilderness preservation, select proactive measures to minimize tourism's impact on wilderness quality, and thereby facilitate sustainable tourism practices in wilderness.

Keywords: wilderness; tourism; tourism service providers; management preferences; stakeholder inclusion

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1. Introduction

Wilderness and pristine natural areas keep becoming scarcer [1,2], stressing the importance of their preservation, sustainable use, and management. Such areas are of high interest to various land uses, which impact the natural environment in multiple ways [3,4]. Globally growing interest in nature-based tourism and increasing visitation to wilderness areas result not only in environmental impacts but also in increasing pressure for tourism infrastructure developments, which degrade wilderness quality [5,6]. Thus, tourism in wilderness areas threatens the quality of the very resources the tourism industry relies on [7]. Such a situation points to the tourism 'resource paradox.' On the one hand, tourism uses natural resources to attract visitors, but on the other hand, it can also degrade the natural environment. Accordingly, it is a delicate balance, as the industry must strive to preserve these resources' quality and ecological integrity while still using them for their business [8–10].

Tourism service providers are essential in shaping tourists' relationships with nature destinations. They participate in setting tourism trends, guiding tourism demand, directing tourist flows, and shaping their impacts on the environment and demand for infrastructure developments. In this way, tourism service providers contribute to co-creating and changing places. Therefore, knowledge of their wilderness management and development preferences and the meanings driving them can help identify causes of potential conflicts between nature-based tourism and wilderness preservation and opportunities for successful coexistence of the two [11].

According to wilderness mapping conducted by Kuiters et al. [12], Iceland contains around 43% of Europe's wildest areas. Most of them are in the uninhabited interior of the

country [13–15], which is usually called the Icelandic Central Highlands, here also referred to as the Highlands. Icelandic nature is the main attraction drawing international visitors to the country, not least the wilderness in the Highlands [16,17]. The tourism industry has become the largest Icelandic export sector and contributes significantly to regional development by providing job opportunities [18]. Thus, it is an important stakeholder in the discussion on wilderness management in Iceland.

This study focuses on the perceptions and preferences of tourism service providers operating within or at the border of the Highlands. As shown by various studies [5,19], the perceived suitability of type and level of use in wilderness highly depends on place meanings assigned to specific areas by stakeholders. As defined by Cheng et al. [20], place meanings "encompass instrumental or utilitarian values as well as intangible values such as belonging, attachment, beauty, and spirituality". They are highly subjective, complex, and intertwined, created through direct and indirect human encounters with places [20]. These meanings can be created on a micro level by individuals and on a macro level by stakeholder groups [21] and are shaped both by the physical environment of a geographic setting, as well as by social and cultural processes and human interactions with the setting [11,22]. Meanings are at the core of the concept of place [23]. Already in the 1970s, humanistic geographers (e.g., [24,25]) described place as a space imbued with subjective meanings and values. Knowledge of the meanings assigned to places is essential in understanding people's relationships with places. Therefore, in this study, to better understand drivers of tourism service providers' preferences regarding the management and development of the Central Highlands and their compatibility with wilderness preservation, the place meanings they assign to the area are investigated. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

(1) What place meanings do tourism service providers assign to the Icelandic Central Highlands?
(2) How do these meanings relate to the management and development preferences of the Icelandic Central Highlands and wilderness?
(3) How can knowledge of place meanings contribute to wilderness management?

Unique natural environments, such as wilderness areas, constitute a strong competitive advantage of the country as a tourism destination, since they are difficult to imitate by competing places [26]. Ensuring their preservation is essential for maintaining Iceland's image as a nature-based tourism destination. Besides facilitating identification of potential conflicts, deeper insights into the place meanings assigned to wilderness areas by the tourism industry can aid Iceland's branding and help maintain its brand equity.

2. Tourism in the Wilderness of the Icelandic Central Highlands

Tourism is profoundly shaped by the visual consumption and narratives of symbolic meanings of tourism places [21,27,28]. The tourism industry's portrayal of wilderness typically emphasizes the physical landscape characteristics, such as the picturesque nature, the absence of human structures, and the remoteness from human presence [29,30]. Experiential characteristics also play an important role. Visits to wilderness areas contain the elements of excitement and surprise, awakening visitors and making them fully mindful of the surrounding environment [31]. Wilderness experience is associated with the sense of freedom, adventure, and solitude [4,30]. Thus, wilderness areas in Nordic regions are characterized not only by relatively low environmental carrying capacity due to high fragility of their ecosystems, but also by low social or perceptual carrying capacity, related to visitor expectations and preferences [32,33]. This raises questions regarding limits to growth for wilderness tourism [34].

Tourism often leads to the transformation of wilderness areas, where signs of human presence can degrade fragile wilderness resources [7,35]. The increasing use of wilderness for tourism often results in growing demand for tourism services and infrastructure, coupled with crowding, and environmental damage [6,36,37]. Thereby, tourism threatens both the physical and experiential qualities of wilderness. As noted by various researchers [38,39], tourism, while capitalizing on the extraordinariness of places, often leads

to their homogenization. This is particularly pertinent for tourism activities in wilderness areas, where the very characteristics and resources that attract tourists are threatened [8,34]. This can result in a gap between wilderness meanings created by the tourism industry and the actual experiences of tourists. Therefore, it is crucial for wilderness tourism to find a balance between facilitating the wilderness experience and ensuring its preservation for both current and future stakeholders.

The Icelandic Nature Conservation Act Nr. 60/2013 [40] defines "uninhabited wilderness" (óbyggð víðerni) as "an uninhabited area of generally at least 25 km^2 in size or so that it is possible to enjoy solitude and nature without disturbance of human-made structures or motorized vehicle traffic and which is generally at least 5 km away from human-made structures and other technical traces such as power lines, power plants, reservoirs, and built roads" (authors' translation) [40]. According to wilderness mapping conducted by Ostman et al. [15], partly based on this definition and using a differential buffer approach, around 83% of the Highlands qualify as wilderness. Carver et al. [14] used the Wilderness Quality Index for wilderness mapping in Iceland. They identified numerous core wilderness areas within the Central Highlands. Other areas of the Highlands, according to their mapping, fall into buffer and transition zones, along with some non-wilderness areas, constituting a relatively small proportion of the Highlands. Thus, the Highlands contain various places with diverse wilderness qualities ranging on the wilderness continuum [41,42].

Tourism activities in the Highlands often start in more accessible, less wild areas and progressively move into transition zones, buffer zones, and sometimes into more remote wilderness core zones. Currently, the Highlands offer a range of recreational opportunities for visitors with varying preferences, as categorized by the purism scale [43–46]. The purism scale classifies visitors to natural areas based on their preferences and expectations regarding the degree of naturalness, infrastructure, opportunities for solitude, and freedom from restrictions into four categories: strong purists, purists, neutralists, and urbanists. The first showcases the lowest tolerance to human-induced changes, while the latter expresses the highest demand for infrastructure [47]. The Highlands comprise various settings falling into different classes of the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) [48]. The ROS model uses six factors—access, non-recreational uses of resources, on-site management, social interaction, acceptability of visitor impacts, and acceptable regimentation level—to define the opportunity spectrum [48]. The ROS opportunities fall into several classes ranging from primitive to modern [49]. The model provides a framework for assessing consistency between the factors and identifying the most suitable management strategies in accordance with the main objectives of the area. For example, suppose there become inconsistencies between the factors, such as improved access to a relatively primitive area. In that case, the model points out that the improved access may lead to further development of the area, which is difficult to reverse, and can result in a loss of recreational opportunities for more purist visitors [48].

The most accessible areas at the edge of the Icelandic Central Highlands serve as a starting point for various activities and tours into the more remote and primitive areas. However, the growing number of visitors puts pressure on road and tourism infrastructure developments to meet the demands of some visitors and tourism operators. This raises concerns about the impacts of such developments on recreational opportunities and the preservation of wilderness in the area.

3. Place Meanings and Wilderness Management Preferences

Lesslie [42] emphasized that no place on Earth remains untouched by humans. The perception of wilderness and its management is ever-changing and depends on the surrounding context. Different stakeholders perceive and accept the level and type of wilderness use differently based on their values, interests, subjective perceptions, and meanings assigned to it [50].

The complex relationships between humans and places are often approached by employing the concept of sense of place [23,51]. Various definitions of sense of place and its

components exist [52]. However, according to Kyle and Chick [53], they usually focus on emotional bonds people create with places, through direct and indirect experiences in a social context. Stedman [22] stated that sense of place includes place attachment and satisfaction, which are shaped by place meanings. Stedman [22] furthermore emphasized that the physical environment plays a crucial role in shaping the place meanings. When the gap between the physical environment and place meanings becomes too large, changes in the physical environment can result in changes in the place meanings [22,54,55]. Degradation of the physical environment in natural areas due to tourism activities is, thus, likely to change the place meanings assigned to these areas by tourists. Eventually, tourism-induced changes can affect the image of a place or an entire country as a tourism destination [56].

Place or destination image comprises beliefs, ideas, and impressions held by visitors about a place [57,58]. However, more recent research [59,60] points to the complexity of the concept. As emphasized by Anholt [61], place image can be earned, but not invented, and the essence of place branding lays not in its communication, but in its policy supported by strategy, substance, and symbolic actions. Keeping the desired place image requires consistency. As noted by Kotler and Gertner [62], "to be effective, the desired image must be close to reality, believable, simple, appealing and distinctive". For the place to maintain its international image, it is important to preserve the product that it is selling and is known for [63]. In countries and regions where pristine nature and wilderness constitute an important tourism product, degradation of the country's natural environment is likely to result in decreased attractiveness of the destination to the current tourism market segment interested in nature-based tourism. This might require increased marketing efforts and the creation of new tourist attractions for the area to remain a competitive tourism destination [62].

Notably, touristification of natural areas and consequential environmental, social, and economic impacts of tourism change not only the perceptions of visitors, but can lead to changes also in local stakeholders' place meanings [64]. These changes and the actions taken by local stakeholders can ultimately affect the tourism processes in the area [65]. Thus, while tourism participates in creating place meanings for tourism consumption, it also continues to reshape these meanings by bringing changes to places.

Tourism service providers play a crucial role in creating the meanings of touristic wilderness and act as mediators between visitors and places. They furthermore set tourism trends in natural areas and thereby shape the impacts of tourism. However, the knowledge on place meanings assigned by tourism service providers to wilderness areas is currently limited. As Kyle et al. [66] noted, knowledge of place meanings provides a better understanding of why stakeholders value certain settings. Thus, it enables predictions of future tourism trends and potential threats to wilderness.

Moreover, various studies [11,54,67] have revealed that place meanings affect people's preferences related to managing these places. Thus, considering place meanings in natural resource management can facilitate identifying proactive management strategies likely to receive stakeholder support [20,68,69]. This stresses the importance of exploring the relationships between place meanings assigned to wilderness areas by tourism service providers and their wilderness management preferences when tourism activities and wilderness preservation are increasingly combined.

4. Study Area

Iceland is a 103,000 km^2 island with a total population of almost 384,000 people [70]. About 64% of the population inhabit the capital area, and the rest live in villages and on farms distributed along the coast [71]. The Central Highlands form a plateau at 400–700 m altitude in the interior of Iceland and are uninhabited. They cover approximately 40% of the country and are characterized by vast scenic natural landscapes. The area comprises a unique combination of highly diverse volcanic and glacial landforms, geothermal areas, and glaciers as well as wide sand and gravel deserts. It is sparsely vegetated, but some places are vastly covered with moss.

Throughout the centuries, the utilization of the area was mostly limited to summer pastures for sheep, but in the 1960s, the Highlands started to have some economic significance due to the construction of hydropower plants and increased tourism [13,72]. Since then, several hydropower plants have been constructed in the Highlands. Seven of these are in the southern Highlands, in the Þjórsá and Tungnaá Catchment Area, one in the northwest, and one in the northeast of the Highlands. In addition, various new energy projects have been proposed in the area [73,74].

The Highlands were roadless during the first decades of the twentieth century, but in the 1940s, the first cars were driven over Kjölur and Sprengisandur. All-wheel-drive American army trucks were brought to the country during World War II, which provided access to the Highlands as they were able to ford some of the large glacier rivers [75]. Nowadays, most roads in the Highlands are gravel roads and tracks with unbridged river crossings, requiring all-wheel-drive vehicles.

Road constructions have followed the development of the hydropower plants in the Highlands. Among other roads, parts of the two main roads crossing the Highlands—the Kjölur road and the Sprengisandur road—have been improved. Consequently, many scenic natural sites have become more accessible, which resulted in overtourism and crowding in some of them [37]. One of such sites, Landmannalaugar, located in the Fjallabak Nature Reserve in the southern Highlands, is the starting/ending point of the famous Laugavegur Hiking Trail, with another popular site, Þórsmörk, being on the other end of the trail (Figure 1). Some picturesque natural areas, such as Kerlingarfjöll and Hveravellir, located along the Kjölur road are also among the most visited tourist sites in the Highlands.

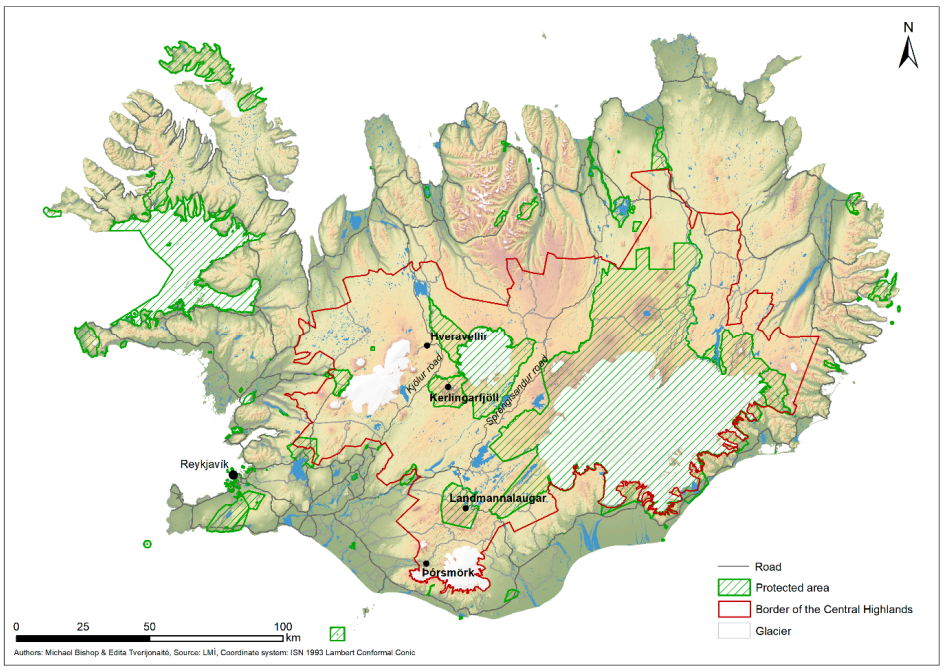

Figure 1. Study area.

Around one-third of the Highlands are currently protected areas such as nature reserves, natural monuments, and national parks. Thus far, no areas have been protected as wilderness in the Central Highlands, even though the Nature Conservation Act Nr. 60/2013 allows that. An idea of establishing a national park covering most of the Highlands has been under discussion in Iceland for over two decades [76,77]. However, when the Minister for the Environment and Natural Resources submitted the bill on establishing the Central Highlands National Park to the Parliament at the end of 2020 [77], it was met with substantial public opposition [78], which contributed to the bill's withdrawal from Parliament. A study by Tverijonaite et al. [79] conducted among travel agencies and

day tour providers operating in Iceland at the time of the submission of the bill revealed that 44% of the participants expressed negative opinion towards the proposal to establish the Central Highlands National Park, while 39.6% favored it. Among the main concerns expressed by tourism service providers were potential access restrictions to the area related to establishing the National Park [79], in line with the general public's concerns [80]. By looking into place meanings assigned by tourism service providers to the Highlands, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the reasons shaping tourism stakeholders' views on establishing the Central Highlands National Park.

5. Methods

Qualitative research methods were used in this study, and 47 semi-structured interviews were conducted with tourism service providers offering various services within or at the border of the Icelandic Central Highlands. In-depth interviews are highly suitable for research aiming to investigate participants' perceptions of the area, assigned meanings, and their management and development preferences [81,82].

Participants were selected for this study by using purposive sampling [83]. Interviews were conducted with tourism service providers offering services within or near the Highlands. Thus, they constitute a part of the Icelandic tourism industry, which is most likely to be affected by the planning decisions related to the Highlands. In order to have diverse and varied perspectives, this study selected tourism managers who lead companies offering different types of services and tours in or near the Highlands. The companies were also selected based on their size, length of operation, and location of headquarters throughout the country. The companies that were interviewed were day tour providers, travel agencies, accommodation, and food service providers (Table 1). The tours offered by the interviewed companies varied largely and included sightseeing, self-driving, jeep and super jeep, hiking, backpacking, mountain biking, horse riding, skiing, kayaking, fishing, photography, yoga, and sightseeing tours by flight. While the youngest companies had been operating for only a few years, the oldest had been in business for over 40 years. The number of employees in the interviewed companies varied from one, when participants were self-employed, to over 60 employees.

Table 1. Overview of interviewed tourism service providers.

Type of Tourism Business	Capital Area	Rural Areas
Travel agency/day tour provider	19	8
Travel agency/day tour provider and accommodation	-	10
Accommodation/food service provider	-	10
Total	19	28

The interviews were conducted in May–August 2020. Most of them were conducted in person, with a few interviews being conducted online. The length of most interviews fell in the timeframe between 30 and 60 min. At the beginning of each interview, the aims of the project were introduced, and participants were informed that their participation was fully voluntary; thus, they could withdraw at any time. Participants were furthermore informed that all the collected data would be treated confidentially and were asked for permission to audio record the interviews, to which they all agreed. The interviews were conducted in English or in Icelandic, depending on the preferences of participants. During the interviews, the following topics were discussed with participants:

- Characteristics of the tourism company, services offered and their customers;
- Their use of the Highlands for business;
- Main attractions of the Highlands to their customers;
- Values and meanings the Highlands contain for the tourism industry;
- The need for further tourism infrastructure and services in the Highlands;

- The need for road improvements in the Highlands;
- Attitudes towards future management and development of the Highlands.

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and their inductive analysis based on grounded theory [84] was conducted using Atlas.ti 22 software. The interviews were analyzed in several steps. In the first step, open coding was used. Later, related codes were combined into categories, and finally, axial coding was conducted, which allowed the identification of place meanings assigned to the Highlands by the tourism service providers and their relationship with participants' management preferences of the area.

6. Results

6.1. Place Meanings Assigned to the Central Highlands

6.1.1. Diverse Wilderness, Stretching along the Wilderness Continuum

The interviews revealed that the place meanings assigned to the Highlands are centered around wilderness. The area's value for the tourism industry lies primarily in its untouched nature, and the fact that wilderness areas are rare and are becoming even scarcer, especially in Europe, contributes to it. That makes wilderness a precious selling product for the tourism industry and adds to the competitiveness of Iceland as a tourism destination. However, the Highlands contain places with various levels of infrastructure, accessibility, and visitation. As a result, tourism service providers assign different place meanings based on where they perceive the destination to fall on the wilderness continuum.

Furthermore, as noted by some participants, visitors have different ideas of what constitutes a wilderness experience. As described by one tourism service provider, the more purist visitors "just want to go to Iceland not to meet anybody. (. . .) For them, being in Landmannalaugar is the worst experience of their whole holidays, but for other people, Landmannalaugar—it's like THE mountain experience of their trip". Consequently, tourism companies direct different tourism market segments to different places within the Highlands based on visitors' expectations. Notably, interviewed tourism service providers also had different perceptions of the most visited destinations of the Highlands, such as Landmannalaugar. Some perceived these areas as positively contributing to the diversity of the Highlands and providing opportunities for the general tourist looking for a bit of adventure and not sensitive to crowding. However, many others viewed these destinations as overcrowded.

Many participants observed a shift in the tourism market segments visiting the Highlands, whereas there are fewer purists and more general tourists over the last decades. As a result, there has been an increase in demand for comfort among customers, leading to higher visitation of natural areas that have some tourism infrastructure and at least basic accommodation. One participant noted: "People are looking for natural areas that are among the most spectacular, but they also want to be in some sort of comfortable remoteness".

Furthermore, as mentioned by another participant, tourists tend to gravitate towards the more marketed areas they have seen in photos:

> *You always want to see what others have seen, and you always want to take pictures that others have taken, the Instagram effect. It's great, so you can concentrate tourism in spots and they're not spreading too much, but sometimes you have overtourism on one spot and then you have plenty of spots in the close surroundings where there is no one and you have world class views also where no one is.*

This trend further contributes to the division between the most visited areas of the Highlands and more remote places providing opportunities for solitude. Some areas in the Highlands, such as the above-mentioned Landmannalaugar or the famous Laugavegur Hiking Trail, experience crowding and environmental pressure, while other areas are visited only by the most purist visitors choosing the areas off the beaten track with limited or no infrastructure. According to the participants, the proportion of this type of tourist in the Highlands is nowadays relatively small and is growing even smaller.

Despite the diversity of the Highlands, the area was also assigned overarching place meanings highly related to wilderness and its attributes, which are described in the following sections.

6.1.2. Extraordinary Experiences

The wilderness of the Highlands meant to the participants opportunities to create extraordinary experiences for their customers in an environment that is completely different from their daily life. One participant said: "It is something that I'd say 80% of people have never experienced in their life and just get astonished and sometimes caught by emotions". In line with that, another participant noted that their customers experience "deep emotional feelings" while visiting the Highlands:

> *This is like a different planet from where they come from. Some people cry, some people have like a religious experience, especially when they are seeing the basalt columns, and they take on all kinds of shapes. There is, for example, an angel right next to the waterfall Aldeyjarfoss which people always see in the basalt columns. Especially the religious ones see it.*

Furthermore, some participants perceived the Highlands as a home to mythological creatures, making the area a mysterious place even more attractive to visit. One participant said: "This for me is where ghosts and elves and outlaw people live and who knows if you will come back".

Some participants emphasized that visiting the wilderness of the Highlands provides opportunities to reconnect with nature, which is highly needed nowadays, when people increasingly live in urban places. Participants stressed the role of vastness for the unique experiences provided by the wilderness of the Highlands. In line with that, they emphasized the importance of keeping the wilderness areas of the Highlands large, as it adds to the quality of the wilderness experience and makes Iceland unique. One participant said:

> *It's unique, it's completely unique to be able to go to the Highlands and travel for… depending on how you're travelling, but if you are hiking, for example, you can hike for days and you don't see another person. That's amazing in Europe.*

Besides the vast scenic natural landscapes, participants often mentioned the contribution of soundscape to extraordinary visitor experiences.

6.1.3. Freedom and Continuous Access

While participants were aware of the threats of tourism to the wilderness of the Highlands, many assigned freedom-related meanings to the Highlands and stressed the importance of having access to the area. One participant said:

> *Regarding tourism, I think that is what people are always mainly thinking about in the Highlands: how to protect it for ourselves, our kids, and the next generations etc. I think it is obviously very important, but we cannot do it at the cost of that no one living today can see it.*

Participants mentioned that visits to wilderness areas raise people's environmental awareness and thereby contribute to their willingness to protect wilderness areas from developments. One participant noted: "Environmental awareness is not being created by putting a fence around nature, because then nobody knows what it's about because they don't have access to it". Furthermore, according to some participants, a certain degree of freedom from restrictions contributes to the wilderness experience in the area.

6.1.4. Exclusivity

The participants of the study pointed out that the remoteness and the rough landscape of the Highlands, with large glacial rivers, makes traveling there quite challenging. Weather conditions can be extreme and unpredictable, so travelers must be well-prepared and knowledgeable about wilderness navigation before they go there. Due to this, relatively

few tourists dare to go there by themselves and buy a tour organized by the tourism companies. These tours are quite expensive due to the investments the companies have to make, and thus, the participants assigned meanings related to exclusivity to the Highlands. Some participants noted that this exclusivity keeps the Highlands even more attractive, benefiting the tourism industry.

One of the ongoing discussions in the Icelandic society is whether to improve the roads in the Highlands, thereby making the area accessible by small cars. Some participants of the study pointed out that road improvements would destroy the feeling of exclusivity and decrease the value of the area for their businesses. One participant noted:

> *If there was asphalt on the road I would not go there. Then if you can go there on a Yaris, I don't think it's interesting, so I always try to sell or go to places where it's difficult to reach because that's really what we are selling, something different.*

Clearly, the road conditions in the Highlands repel some companies from operating in the area. However, as mentioned by one participant offering tours to the Highlands operated by third parties, improving the roads would not benefit their company: "the only selling point for the Highlands is 'go there, you'll see fewer people'. (. . .) So having more people there would definitely not make it more sellable for us". This underscores the exclusive, niche appeal of the Highlands, where exclusivity and a sense of being away from mass tourism are highly valued by tourism service providers.

6.1.5. Future Opportunities

The interviews revealed that participants perceive the Highlands and their wilderness areas as containing various opportunities for emerging tourism trends and for tourism in the future. As an example, one participant explained that tourists increasingly desire to achieve personal growth during their travels:

> *There is a lot of talk that has been going on for two—three years now about transformational tourism. Transformational guiding techniques have been a very popular topic in my environment, so the purpose of a trip is not just sweating and working out but to really push people to go towards the inside and open up their senses for nature.*

According to this participant, with increasing speed and stress in our daily lives, the demand for this type of tourism is very likely to keep growing. People are increasingly likely to seek mindfulness, meditation, disconnection, and peace and quiet during their time off. Wilderness areas provide the perfect settings for that. Similarly, another participant mentioned that some areas of the Highlands would be highly suitable for slow travel, which is a more sustainable way of travel and is increasingly gaining importance in light of climate change. Such tours, however, are currently not easy to sell since people are often in a hurry. But if one succeeds, "you have much happier people afterwards".

Some participants stressed that future nature-based tourism will likely look different from today's due to rapidly developing technologies. One participant suggested that cars and busses might become not the only way to travel through the Highlands in the future as, for example, electric bicycles are becoming more and more popular:

> *If we are going to build more roads, we should be building bicycle roads. Now we have electric bicycles, and with electric bicycles today, you can bike up to 100 km a day so, bicycle roads, bicycle huts and charging stations. Why not? With an electric bike you can cross the Highlands in three days easily.*

Thus, preserving wilderness areas is likely to result in more varied opportunities for tourism in the future.

6.2. Preferences for Managing and Developing the Central Highlands

6.2.1. Sustainability, Demand for Comfort and Wilderness Preservation

Participants' management and development preferences of the Highlands were strongly shaped by the described place meanings assigned to the area and the diversity of

places that the Highlands comprise. Notably, sustainability issues and potential tourism impacts on the wilderness character of the Highlands were taken into consideration by most participants when discussing preferred future developments in the area. However, the perceptions of whether and how certain developments can impact nature, wilderness, and tourism varied greatly among the participants, resulting in various development preferences in the Highlands.

Some participants stressed the importance of protecting the natural environment of the Highlands from further damage. Among the mentioned main environmental threats in the Highlands were infrastructure developments related to renewable energy harnessing, overgrazing by free-roaming sheep as well as tourism and outdoor recreation activities, including damage due to off-road driving, trampling, and infrastructure developments. Regarding tourism impacts on the natural environment, one participant suggested the following measures: "Control the traffic, make sure it also lasts for coming generations. It cannot be like a short-term profit, Disneyworld, absolutely not".

Participants also emphasized that wilderness preservation is essential for ensuring a high-quality wilderness experience for their customers, which cannot be found in more developed areas. One participant said: "You cannot have too much civilization. People are paying for some rough, they are paying for some timeless, they are paying for some experience".

Furthermore, as noted by another participant, preserving wilderness areas is of high importance internationally since such areas are becoming scarce, especially in Europe:

> *It's the last remote place in Europe, we can find a little bit like that in Norway, but not so strong. So, I think it's something that not only Icelandic people, but everyone should protect and try to not destroy more than it was. Of course, I understand that people want to do business with energy, also with tourism, but it would be a shame.*

Some participants mentioned that sustainable management of tourism destinations in the Highlands might require limiting tourist numbers. According to one participant, such measures need to be selected based on the characteristics of each area as well as the subjective perceptions of visitors:

> *You have to think about the physical landscapes or how many people can walk this path without the path degrading or stop at this point without that point degrading. But then secondly, it's the social impact, so how many other tourists can you take before you think it's not interesting anymore?*

However, as mentioned by some participants, increasing preferences for comfort among visitors result in growing demand for tourism infrastructure and higher pressure on the natural environment from tourism developers, especially in the most visited areas of the Highlands. As one participant listed: "We've had multiple proposals of accommodation resorts, such as in Kerlingarfjöll, Hveravellir or even right by the boundary of the Central Highlands in Þjórsárdalur". According to the participant, such developments are likely to lead to future road improvements in the area: "There's no point making a large accommodation resort in Kerlingarfjöll if the area is as remote as it is today".

6.2.2. Roads of the Central Highlands

As revealed by the interviews, roads play an important role in shaping the access of the Highlands and, thereby, the place meanings assigned to the area by tourism service providers. Consequently, decisions related to the development of roads, bridges, and other infrastructure improving access to the Highlands were perceived as highly important by most participants of the study. However, participants' preferences related to such developments differed greatly depending on their perceived impacts on the natural environment, wilderness experience, and tourism development in the Highlands.

Many participants preferred the roads in the Highlands to be kept in their current state. They emphasized that road improvements to and in the Highlands are likely to result in environmental degradation, increased crowding, and reduced opportunities for

solitude and remoteness, which are essential for the wilderness experience and would cause a decline in the overall wilderness quality of the area. The participants preferred to preserve these qualities and, therefore, were against road developments in the area. One participant said: "The concentration of tourism should rather be at the coastline, and the Highlands should be for people seeking more space, fewer people, and the access should not be too easy". This was supported by another participant stating:

> *I think most people that come to visit Iceland, they will talk highly about the experience up in Fjallabak, for example. Because they needed to cross rivers, they needed to do difficult dirt roads, they needed to climb big hills on their 4 × 4 s. So, I think it's more of an experience to have the roads as they are now than make them better.*

Road developments would especially impact the experience of the most purist visitors engaging in wilderness backpacking activities in the area. A participant offering such tours in the Highlands stated:

> *I'm trying to sell something that is very wild, so if I bring people where they can see cars or infrastructure, whatever they are, it's not really in the contract (. . .), when you are hiking with a big backpack and not so far you see a car that crosses this sand desert that you will cross—you will hike one day, and you see a car just driving through this place and in some minutes.*

Furthermore, as mentioned by several participants, paving the roads could negatively impact horse riding tours in the Highlands, which currently use some of the dirt roads in the area.

Some participants viewed bad roads as part of the experience but preferred them to be better maintained to ensure that the surrounding nature is not damaged by visitors driving off-road to avoid potholes on the roads. One participant said:

> *They can fix the roads where it can damage nature because people are going off-road. But I think one of the charms is that it's a slow travel because the roads are bad and I think it's okay for the roads to be bad because that's the part of the experience, but they shouldn't be the way that something like nature gets damaged.*

Other participants mentioned that better road maintenance is also needed to ensure the safety of vehicles and their passengers. According to some participants, paving the roads of the Highlands might result in safety issues since tourists will be likely to also drive on the paved roads in winter months when they are officially closed and no services are provided in the area.

A smaller proportion of participants, however, believed that some road improvements in the Highlands would benefit tourism and the environment it relies on. They often preferred one of the main roads, most often Kjölur but in some cases Sprengisandur road, to be paved and all the other roads kept in their current state to preserve the experience of the area. Notably, participants living and running their businesses close to the northern end of the Kjölur road preferred this road to be improved, while participants running their businesses close to the northern end of Sprengisandur road preferred the latter to be upbuilt and/or paved. One participant stated:

> *Some people were talking about too many tourists, I think that's just nonsense. It's not too many tourists. They are just too many in one place or in few places. (. . .) I think it would help if we would connect the South and North better by one better road.*

Some participants supporting road improvements in the Highlands thought that paving the main Highland roads would increase visitor safety. One participant stated that some more visited parts of the Highlands, such as the area around the Kjölur Road, should be 'sacrificed' by improving the road: "A big part of the guests visiting Iceland are not to be trusted in the wilderness context. They don't prepare for the Iceland travel, they don't do research, so let's give them Kjölur road". Participants also pointed to adverse environmental impacts related to gravel roads, such as dust or off-road driving, to avoid

potholes. They stated that paving them could reduce these impacts. Some also noted that improving the roads to the Highlands would ensure access to scenic natural areas for everyone, including disabled and elderly people. One participant said:

> *Some of these people feel like they should have the same rights as others, to go to see the nicest things you find in Iceland. Obviously, you cannot make easily accessible roads on wheelchairs to all the natural wonders we have, but on some of them it is very easy to do it, and we can make the most of it to make it.*

6.2.3. Tourist Accommodation

The interviews revealed that most participants preferred limited and basic tourist accommodation in the Highlands, such as mountain huts, since this type of accommodation better suits the area's character.

According to many participants, larger and more luxury tourist accommodation should be provided on the outskirts of the Highlands and in the lowlands. At the same time, in the Highlands, smaller mountain huts should be present where needed for visitors engaging in outdoor activities. One participant said:

> *Lowland is already changed, (. . .) it's farmland everywhere, and there are houses, accommodation services and food. Up in the Highlands—that is untouched area—we take people to show them the untouched, we teach them about it (. . .) and let them enjoy it with us and respect it, and then we go back to civilization for services.*

Keeping larger and more luxury tourist accommodation in the country's lowlands, according to the participants, would allow the preservation of the wilderness qualities of the Highlands and opportunities for extraordinary experiences, which are of high value for the tourism industry. One participant said, "If it gets too fancy, the magic will be gone". Another participant furthermore stressed that simple and primitive tourist accommodation is an integral part of the experience in the area: "It should be low class, see it is an experience to the Highlands. If you want luxury you can go somewhere else". Similar attitudes were expressed regarding other types of tourism infrastructure: "When service centers are built all over the place, it loses some of its charm".

Participants noted that, currently, most tourists preferring luxury travels enjoy the Highlands during day tours. Such tourists generally visit more popular, more easily accessible destinations of the Highlands, such as Landmannalaugar. As noted by the representative of one company offering luxury tours, their customers are happy with staying in luxury hotels on the coast and visiting the Highlands during day tours to experience the area's nature. Building luxury hotels in the Highlands might financially benefit their company, however, as stated by the interviewee, "we wouldn't want to sacrifice the naturalness of the Highlands for a little bit more of a profit". Furthermore, some participants pointed out that it is economically not viable to build hotels in the Highlands. This area is only accessible for a few months per year and receives almost no customers in the winter.

A few participants had a different opinion and thought that constructing small-scale but luxurious infrastructure along the main roads of the Highlands would not impact the wilderness experience. They argued that it would allow visitors who prefer more comfort to stay in the area overnight. One participant said:

> *Today there are more and more people coming and many people do not want to stay in a tent. They need some sort of quality accommodation and why not offer it to them also? And if you go to Kerlingarfjöll, you have a hotel with proper rooms, but you can experience in the evening, if you go up the hill, you have nothing around, so that is something that people really want us to book, and I could see more hotels like that in the Highlands.*

They, however, stressed the importance of good design of tourism infrastructure, which should fit each specific area.

7. Discussion and Conclusions

7.1. Wilderness Place Meanings and Management Preferences

This study focused on the relationships between place meanings assigned by tourism service providers to the Icelandic Central Highlands, characterized by extensive wilderness areas, and their management preferences. The study sought to contribute to understanding the value of employing place-based approaches in wilderness planning.

In line with previous research stressing the importance of place meanings in shaping natural resource management preferences [11,20], this study showed that the investigation of place meanings ascribed to wilderness provides a better understanding of the factors shaping wilderness management preferences among tourism service providers. Thereby, it helps identify the causes of potential conflicts between tourism and wilderness preservation.

As this study revealed, the Icelandic Central Highlands contain different place meanings for the tourism service providers based on the high diversity in their settings. Different areas of the Highlands vary in the level of tourism infrastructure development and services offered, attracting different visitors. Consequently, in accordance with previous studies [85,86], the findings of this research suggest that the Highlands attract a diversity of visitors ranging on the purism scale and having different preferences as well as perceptions of what constitutes wilderness [47]. While vast Highland areas can be defined as wilderness [15] and are mainly visited by low numbers of purists, some of the most scenic, more developed, and accessible areas are becoming increasingly popular among general tourists and experience high environmental pressure and demand for further infrastructure developments [37]. Thus, the areas of the Highlands vary regarding their position on a wilderness continuum and their wilderness quality index [14], which results in different place meanings assigned to different parts of the Highlands among tourism service providers.

Despite that, the Central Highlands also contain overarching meanings ascribed by tourism service providers, strongly related to the wilderness of the area. The participants perceive scenic natural Highland areas as providers of extraordinary experiences for their customers, allowing them to reconnect with nature. They are viewed as places where people can feel free from crowds and their daily worries. While participants stress the importance of continuous access to the Highlands and keeping them open for people to enjoy, the area is also perceived as a provider of exclusive experiences due to its remoteness and relatively difficult access. Furthermore, it is seen as containing various opportunities for tourism in the future. Wilderness areas of the Highlands thus contain both utilitarian and intangible values and meanings for tourism service providers, which are sensitive to landscape changes and human impacts.

Wilderness is a valuable resource for the tourism industry, and most tourism service providers see it is in their interest to preserve it, since it is crucial for the product that the tourism industry is selling. Pristine nature and wilderness constitute an essential part of Iceland's image and substantially contribute to the country's international success as a competitive tourism destination. With wilderness areas becoming scarcer globally [2] and the expansion of nature-based tourism, the importance of wilderness is expected to keep increasing.

Consequently, tourism service providers' preferences regarding the development of the Central Highlands are shaped by their willingness to preserve the area's wilderness and by the diverse meanings assigned to different places constituting the Highlands. Although some tourism service providers claim that the number of purist visitors is declining, and their current customers increasingly seek comfort during their adventures, most service providers prefer to see only basic tourism infrastructure in the area. They perceive luxury accommodation as more suitable in the lowlands, at the edges of the Highlands. This demonstrates their understanding of the development of the Central Highlands as a tourism destination and how it would ultimately harm the resources their businesses rely on. This does though not change the fact that since the interviews in this study were conducted in 2020, the "Highland Base Hotel" at Kerlingarfjöll has been built and a Highland spa is under

construction. According to their website: "The newly built Highland Base Hotel is designed for total comfort. With upscale rooms, luxury suites, and private lodges, it's the ultimate in Highland Base accommodations" [87]. A large resort with a spa in Þjórsárdalur is also in its construction phase. Although it is not within the defined Highland boundaries, it is in unspoiled nature close by. Both these developments contribute to processes transforming the wilderness and its experience in the Highlands.

With regards to accessibility, most participants preferred to keep Highland roads and tracks relatively rough and challenging to drive, since that would help preserve the remoteness and the wilderness experience and prevent mass tourism in the Highlands. However, the preferences regarding the most used Highland roads were somewhat divergent depending on tourism service providers' perceptions of how these road improvements would affect wilderness and tourism in the Highlands.

This study revealed that tourism service providers are aware of the various threats to wilderness, including tourism activities and tourism infrastructure developments. Nonetheless, some of the place meanings identified by this study point to potential conflicts between tourism and wilderness preservation. Tourism service providers view wilderness areas as providers of exclusive extraordinary experiences, at the same time stressing the importance of maintaining continuous access to such areas. However, minimizing tourism impacts on wilderness might require limiting tourism growth in wilderness areas [34]. Thus, such findings stress that the tourism resource paradox is an especially relevant issue in wilderness management, embedded in tourism service providers' place meanings. However, it is often ignored while planning tourism in sensitive natural environments due to the generally non-consumptive nature of tourism [88].

Notably, this study revealed that tourism service providers do not demand major changes in wilderness settings. They value the naturalness of the wilderness areas and limited presence of human-made structures, which are essential for the tourism products they sell to customers. However, with increasing demand for comfort among visitors, tourism service providers guide their customers to areas containing tourism infrastructure. This results in pressure for further infrastructure and service developments in these areas. Furthermore, there is a growing demand for more basic tourism infrastructure also in remote areas, leading to its gradual increase in wilderness. Such a trend of relatively slow wilderness destination change has various implications. Gradual tourism infrastructure developments aiming to improve the comfort and quality of visitor experience are rather acceptable to most tourism service providers. However, they may ultimately lead to a decline in wilderness quality and contribute to wilderness fragmentation. Tourism destinations are dynamic and are constantly evolving [9,35]. When tourism-driven transformations happen in wilderness settings, tourism activities are likely to threaten not only the values important for the tourism industry but also for other stakeholders. Accordingly, the Wild Europe Initiative [89] stresses the need for enlarging current wilderness areas through the restoration and rewilding of buffer zones. Increasing tourism activities and related developments in the buffer and transition zones are likely to encroach further and degrade core wilderness areas, stressing the need for careful management of nature-based tourism.

7.2. Implications for Wilderness Preservation and Management

Wilderness areas are threatened by various human activities, with tourism often being among the main drivers of wilderness degradation [8,88]. Tourism activities and related infrastructure developments threaten wilderness qualities, which are essential for the tourism industry, and thereby reduce recreational opportunities for the most purist visitors [6,36,48]. Furthermore, as noted by Saarinen [3], tourism creates images of wilderness and shapes its use practices. Therefore, various researchers [34,90] have stressed the importance of frameworks and strategies for guiding the development of wilderness tourism. As shown by this study, the inclusion of place meanings into such frameworks is essential for ensuring their effectiveness. Knowledge of place meanings assigned to wilderness areas helps identify effective management strategies that take these meanings into consideration and

therefore are likely to gain higher stakeholder support. As emphasized by Williams [19], the inclusion of place meanings into wilderness management does not deny "the existence of a hard reality 'out there'," but recognizes "that the meaning of that reality is continuously created and recreated through social interactions and practices". Furthermore, as revealed by the Icelandic case of the proposed Central Highlands National Park, freedom- and access-related meanings assigned to wilderness areas can result in stakeholder opposition against nature protection initiatives and thereby hinder wilderness preservation [91]. Thus, addressing these place meanings and related concerns in nature protection plans and strategies is likely to lead to higher stakeholder support for nature conservation. Notably, wilderness areas often contain diverse places ranging on a wilderness continuum and have no fixed boundaries. Therefore, they should not be treated as isolated islands [34]. Tourism processes, among others, connect wilderness areas with other places, pointing to the need for relational and holistic approaches that take into consideration more comprehensive political, social, cultural, and natural processes and networks while planning and managing tourism in wilderness areas to ensure the sustainability of tourism practices and wilderness preservation [34,55,91].

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