

**CREATIVE TOURISM IN SMALLER COMMUNITIES:  
PLACE, CULTURE, AND LOCAL REPRESENTATION**  
Edited and with an introduction by Kathleen Scherf

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# Creative Tourism: The Path to a Resilient Rural Icelandic Community

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## Introduction

Many of the peripheral rural areas in Iceland had to undergo economic restructuring following the 2008 world economic crash, further hurting independent fishing families and small coastal communities already made fragile by the individual transferable quota system (Chambers, Helgadóttir, and Carothers 2017; Willson 2016). Transitioning from a predominately fishing economy, many of these rural areas embraced the tourism industry as a path toward economic sustainability and growth. Rural tourism development depends on a wide range of both publicly and privately owned natural and cultural resources, including food and accommodations, visitor and interpretative centres, and goods (Cawley and Gillmor 2008). Tourism is seen as part of the creative industry because of the flexibility and innovative forms of tourism needed to set particular experiences apart from others (Richards 2011). The creative person draws on their creativity and capacities to deal with economic and societal changes, which, in many ways, are an advantage as a form of survival. Innovation, action, and the capacity to deal with change distinguishes the creative person from others (Jóhannesson and Lund 2017; Richards 2011).

Creative tourism destinations offer the potential to enhance the local economy and community livelihoods by producing authentic and creative products for consumption. Over the past few decades the residents of

Húnaþing vestra proactively built a creative tourism product as a strategy for enhancing resilience in their small rural community in northwest Iceland. Using a case study analysis approach, coupled with data collected from observations and interviews, we explore creative tourism in Húnaþing vestra, describing the concept behind Selasetur Íslands (the Icelandic Seal Center) and how it continues to play an integral part in maintaining a novel approach to supporting sustainable cultural development.

## Location and Cultural Context

In the ninth century, Iceland became the last country settled in Europe by people of Nordic and Celtic origin (Reynarsson 1999). The country's physical environment and many of its key historical events, such as plagues and famines, had a critical impact in shaping the life and fate of its communities. The Central Highlands cover about 40 per cent of the country and are uninhabited (Sæthórsdóttir, Hall, and Saarinen 2011), with the majority of settlements found along or near the coastline. During the early years of Icelandic settlement, people were faced with many environmental hardships; these included the effects of human settlement (such as deforestation) as well as natural disasters (such as volcanic eruptions) (Burns 2018). Such hardships were also felt by the community living in the region now encompassed by Húnaþing vestra, in northwest Iceland.

Húnaþing vestra was founded in 1998 after a merger of seven smaller municipalities, with an eighth joining in 2012. Hvammstangi, the most densely populated area, with 573 residents (Statistics Iceland 2019), is the government administrative centre for Húnaþing vestra. *Húnn* in Icelandic means polar bear cub, and Húnaþing vestra is situated in Húnaflói, or "Polar Bear Cub Bay," named after the polar bear sightings mentioned in the region's early sagas. The municipality's emblem is two polar bear cubs (see figure 6.1), while Húnavatnshreppur, the municipality directly to the east, has a mother polar bear as its emblem. Húnaþing vestra covers 3,007 square kilometres (Ráðbarður Sf., personal communication, 24 January 2020) and contains a total population of 1,210 (Statistics Iceland 2019). The cultural diversity of Húnaþing vestra has increased since 2019, such that around 11 per cent of the population now originates from seventeen non-Icelandic nationalities (municipality employee, personal communication, 23 September 2020). Not included in this count are people



who have gained citizenship and those who work in the municipality on a temporary, seasonal basis. After Hvammstangi, the next two most populated villages in Húnaþing vestra are Laugarbakki (population fifty-five) (Statistics Iceland 2019) and Borðeyri (around fifteen people; personal communication with resident, 4 February 2020). Approximately 50 per cent of the Húnaþing vestra population live on remote farms; in good weather, it may take up to forty-five minutes to travel from these locations to Hvammstangi (see figure 6.1).

The people of Húnaþing vestra, through particular community initiatives and engagement at both civil and local governmental levels, have worked at maintaining their cultural traditions and locally grown and produced products (Aquino and Kloes 2020). While there are many examples, one notable one is the Grettir the Strong project, which ran from 1999 to 2010. Aimed at preserving local history and cultural revitalization through the Saga of Grettir, the project successfully strengthened a sense of place and local identity. Community owned and operated, the project aimed to promote sustainable regional development and tourism as a tool for economic revitalization through community-based tourism. The project focused on using community assets for the preservation of local history and traditional storytelling and to sustain local pride. Similarly, the Icelandic Seal Center is a community initiative aimed at sustainable regional development, tourism as economic revitalization through community-based tourism, and seal research. The Icelandic Seal Center has used the strategy of an academic-community partnership for conducting research and projects. This approach recognizes the community as a social and cultural entity, and community partners are involved in all aspects of projects or research process (Johnson 2017). Through a partnership approach, the Icelandic Seal Center has helped the local community with the initiation of a preliminary seal-watching management plan at the grassroots level. Despite the lack of an official management plan from the Icelandic government, the community implemented a provisional code of conduct for seal watching on land and by boat, along with limited interpretive signs at seal-watching sites. This underlines how a partnership approach can co-create knowledge and change.

The Icelandic Seal Center serves as the gateway to seal tourism and research for visitors who want to learn more about seals. The centre has four

emphases: a seal museum and gift shop (established in 2005), a research centre (established in 2007), a visitor information centre (established in 2012), and a travel agency (Seal Travel, established in 2016). The Icelandic Seal Center successfully lobbied the government in 2007 and 2008 to create two specialist positions for its research department: one to lead seal research in partnership with the Marine and Freshwater Research Institute, and the other to lead tourism research in partnership with Hólar University. In 2019, the research department added a naturalist position with a specialization in birds, in partnership with the Natural Institute of Northwest Iceland. The rationale was that bringing specialized people to the countryside could make a positive impact on local communities, build human capital, and also raise the profile of seal protection and sustainable wildlife tourism. This has come to fruition as the small population of Húnaþing vestra benefits from the specialists who now live in the area and have integrated with the community, establishing friendships and creating families.

Seal Travel was established by the Icelandic Seal Center to help strengthen a network of local tourism operators with a focus on nature, culture, and wildlife—and connecting these local operators to the regional, national, and international markets. Working closely with the community has the effect of creating active participants in authentic tourism experiences. After the creation of the Icelandic Seal Center, seals and seal-watching tourism was more widely recognized as an asset by the community, and the center continues to build the tourism industry in Húnaþing vestra after the Grettir the Strong project.

## Size Matters?

The number of people in an area has a significant impact on a community's sustainability, resilience, and creative potential. For the purposes of this chapter, we conceptualize sustainability and resilience as separate but related terms in which sustainability is focused on mitigation and conservation and resilience entails a more adaptive and innovative approach (Burns 2018). Following Lew et al. (2018), we argue that both sustainability and resilience should be considered in development models for all communities.

For smaller communities, population numbers are critical to ensure sufficient quantity of resources can be pooled together and assets built to maintain a viable society. Larger communities—found in cities and urban areas—have more resources and more opportunities for full-time employment. The perception of life in these communities is often one of abundance. In contrast, living in a smaller town or in rural areas often has associated stigma linked to perceptions of poverty or lack of education and cultural refinement by others from larger areas. Smaller towns and rural areas, marked by lower population density, are also more vulnerable because of their remoteness from the cities or the capital, where much of the development policies are written. Additionally, they are more vulnerable to outmigration as young individuals and families move to larger cities for work or education. Consequently, smaller communities face greater challenges in terms of their capacity to both mitigate and adapt, and thus face a greater imperative to embrace creative strategies to cope with change.

In Iceland—as in many areas around the world—the perception persists that because larger settlements have more people, they have more qualified people, whereas smaller communities lack education/talent and skilled people. And yet, although many rural areas may have a lower percentage of highly educated people, this does not necessarily mean that rural people are unknowledgeable or untalented. Less tangible assets such as local knowledge of natural and cultural history, artistry, traditional handiwork and farming practices, and food preparation are important for community development as they add to the understanding and value of local resources. The art community is also filled with knowledgeable, creative, and talented people, and many are found in smaller remote areas of Iceland. For example, the Icelandic Textile Center in the town of Blönduós (population 867) has a well-known artist residency program. Seyðisfjörður (population 673), in the Eastfjords of Iceland, is known as the “arts village” and holds the yearly LungA Art Festival. Hvammstangi is home to Eldur í Húnaþingi, an annual community and arts festival that attracts national visitors, and Handbendi Brúðuleikhús, an international puppet theatre company. In 2019, Leikflokkur Húnaþings vestra, Húnaþing vestra’s theatre company, was chosen for a national award and performed at the National Theatre in Reykjavík (Ingilínardóttir 2019).

The stigma toward rural areas is a sign of a power imbalance vis-à-vis larger urban areas that ascribes a greater legitimacy to scientific knowledge over local knowledge. Smaller towns and rural areas are then further impacted because of political imbalances due to unequal access and power in management and decision-making (Chambers 2016). Exclusion from management and decision-making processes, even if unintentional, leads to tensions and mistrust, which further adds to political disengagement (Flannery, Healy, and Luna 2018). The Icelandic Seal Center, however, aims to address the need to manage human-wildlife interactions in tourism settings to ensure positive outcomes for all stakeholders—wildlife, local communities, and visitors. The centre works with both landowners and the local government to develop policies for the protection of seals and best practices for seal-watching tourism through local knowledge and scientific knowledge along with interdisciplinary and intersectoral research (see Aquino, Burns, and Granquist 2018; Burns et al. 2018; Granquist and Hauksson 2019; Granquist and Sigurjonsdottir 2014; Þorbjörnsson et al. 2017).

In Iceland, this “big versus small” tension is felt most strongly in the northern part of the country. Here, settlements are often smaller than those in the southern part of the country and farther away from Iceland’s capital, Reykjavík, where the majority of the country’s population lives and the majority of political decisions are made. For example, in 2018, Landsbankinn, an Icelandic financial institution with its main offices in Reykjavík, decided to shorten its hours and downsize their staff in smaller rural communities. Consequently, in addition to the shorter banking hours, the five full-time positions in Hvammstangi were reduced to two full-time and one part-time position. In the same year, VÍS, an Icelandic insurance company, closed all its offices in smaller rural communities in order to become more “digital.” Businesses closing or scaling back hours have been met with heavy criticism because this disproportionality affects employment in rural areas (Einarsdóttir 2018). Rural municipalities argued that businesses that provide services for the entire country but locate their main offices in the capital region fail rural areas when they terminate the employment of people from the countryside (Húnaþing vestra 2018). To protest the closures, many municipalities are changing insurance companies (Kristjánsson 2018).

Two-thirds of the Icelandic population live in the Reykjavík Metropolitan Area, which has a population of 222,776 and a land area of 1,007 square kilometres. The total area of Iceland is about 103,000 square kilometres; thus, about 64 per cent of the population lives on 1 per cent of the total land area. The population of metropolitan Reykjavík is nearly twelve times larger than the second-largest settlement in Iceland, Akureyri, with a population of just 18,769<sup>1</sup> (Statistics Iceland 2019). Given Akureyri's size and urban status, it can be argued that it should be called a city. However, to many in Iceland, it is still considered a town (Iceland Magazine 2015), possibly because it is often compared with Reykjavík.

In Iceland, as in Europe more generally, the distinction between cities, towns, and villages varies widely. For example, distinguishing urban from rural areas is often based on the level of services available and the potential employment for people living in the surrounding areas, as well as population size (Konijnendijk et al. 2006). Size matters because the growth, or decline, of communities in general changes the mixture of residents, available housing, provision of services, and diversity and availability of jobs (Richards and Duif 2018). Urban areas are typically more densely populated, while rural areas tend to have lower population density (Konijnendijk 2003). In other words, if a settlement has community services, potential employment, and is more densely populated, then it earns the status of urban. Dennison and Ogilvie (2014) define cities as “settlement(s) with urban status and a population over 10,000. Small town = settlement(s) with urban status and population 2,000–10,000. Village/rural = settlement(s) lacking urban status and/or with population under 2,000” (656). Using these definitions, both Reykjavík and Akureyri would be classified as cities and the Municipality of Húnaþing vestra (with a population of approximately 1,200) would be rural. However, in Iceland, “settlements with more than 200 inhabitants are considered urban” (Benedikz and Skarphéðinsdóttir 1999 quoted in Konijnendijk et al. 2006, 98).

The concept of large versus small becomes important when residents perceive the value of their community in comparison with others. Drawing comparisons with other communities within their nation, and with cities in other nations, may affect their perceptions of the value of their own community, with the result that they might place a higher value on cities

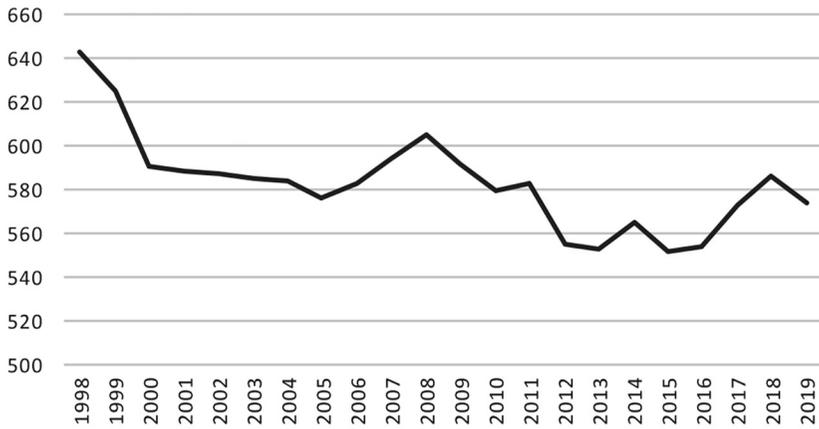
over rural areas. As the former mayor of Húnaþing vestra told the authors in March 2018,

In Iceland, we are one of the smallest nations in the world. Okay, big country but very few people. We have the smallest capital. But still . . . sometimes [people in Reykjavík] do not trust small towns around the country for projects. And I can't understand why somebody living in the smallest city . . . does not trust anybody in a smaller town [for projects]. (Guðný Hrund Karlsdóttir, interview with authors, 14 March 2018)

Hvammstangi, as the administrative centre for the municipality, has a variety of services, including the state maternity office for the region, a playschool (ages one to five), a grade school (grades 1–10), and a distance upper secondary school, medical clinic and hospital, drug store, market-place, and sports centre. Hvammstangi also contains a variety of businesses, including a restaurant, gas station and café, craft store, coffee shop, wool factory, museum, two mechanic shops, a world-class puppet theatre, and the Icelandic Seal Center. Other businesses are scattered throughout the municipality and along the Vatnsnes peninsula, where seal watching occurs. The maternity office is just one example that the former mayor of Húnaþing vestra, Guðný Hrund Karlsdóttir, uses to demonstrate the capital area residents' lack of confidence in bringing government offices to the countryside: "I remember how the discussion was. A lot of people said that there was no way that you can have a good office here or anywhere in the countryside. Especially in Hvammstangi because we would never find qualified people. Silly!" (interview with authors, 14 March 2018).

Declining population in rural areas such as Húnaþing vestra, and northwest Iceland in general, has been a concern for some time. For example, while the total population of Iceland more than doubled from 71,000 people in 1890 to 194,000 in 1965, across the same years the rural population plummeted from 89 per cent of the country's total population to less than 18 per cent (Stone 1971). Factors attributed to this decline in rural areas, which had a major impact on the social landscape of Iceland, include the increasing importance of Reykjavík and Akureyri as business, administrative, and political centres, better transport routes, and new

Figure 6.2. Resident population trends in Hvammstangi from 1998 to 1 January 2019.



Source: Statistics Iceland 2019.

shipping technologies (Willson 2016). Since the early 1900s, commercial fishing moved from coastal farms to fishing communities (Kokorsch 2017), and by 1920 about 44 per cent of Icelanders lived in rural areas (Willson 2016). Although Hvammstangi has recently seen a revitalization of businesses and services, its population has yet to recover to the same level as 1998, when it had a population of 642 (see figure 6.2). Similarly, the population density of the Húnaþing vestra municipality has been maintained at around 1,200 since the year 2010 but has never reached the year 1998 population number of 1,412 (Statistics Iceland 2019). It is in this context, that of a small rural community grappling with depletion of population and services, that creative tourism has come to the fore.

### Creativity as a Form of Resilience

Different definitions of creative tourism tend to vary in terms of their particular emphases; however, the concept usually includes “participative” and “authentic” experiences that allow tourists to develop their creative

potential and skills through contact with local people and their culture (Richards 2011, 1237). A creative tourist can be seen as “the active co-creator or co-producer of their own experience” (Tan, Luh, and Kung 2014, 248). As an emerging creative tourism destination, Húnaþing vestra has harnessed tourism as a form of resilience, using it to create and build capacity for adapting to change and to events that negatively impacted the community and its members’ livelihoods.

Burns (2018) describes Húnaþing vestra’s capacity to adapt as mirroring that of wider Iceland, where, since settlement over a thousand years ago, communities have survived and thrived despite extreme weather events, frequent volcanic eruptions, plagues, and famine. However, more recent times have brought new and different challenges for Húnaþing vestra. For example, the introduction of fishing quotas across Iceland in the 1980s dramatically reduced the viability of Hvammstangi’s fishing industry, along with other small fishing communities around the country. In the mid-1980s, sheep farmers suffered huge financial losses when most of their livestock were culled because of *riðuveiki* disease (known in English as “scrapie”). The introduction of dairy quotas in Iceland in 1980, and the subsequent increase in intensive farming practices, also had a lasting impact on the number of dairy farmers in the country, again inadvertently affecting smaller independent family farms. Between 1995 and 2007, the number of dairy farms fell by nearly half, while dairy production across the country more than doubled (Bjarnadottir and Kristofersson 2008). Dairy farmers able to stay in the business experienced an increase in their production because of growing demand caused by tourism (Arnarsdóttir 2015). The dairy factory in Hvammstangi closed in the late 1990s because of government restructuring, and the loss of jobs negatively impacted the community. As Gudrun Kloes, former tourism officer for Húnaþing vestra, explained, “We also lost a very good cheese. It was known all over the country, all over Iceland, ‘Hvammstanga oustur.’ It had a blue stamp on it [that said] ‘Hvammstanga.’ You could just walk in and buy it from the [dairy] factory” (interview with authors, 18 May 2018). Having a nationally recognized product made within your community can instill a sense of pride among locals.

Iceland’s changing economy, coupled with the loss of some locally made products in Hvammstangi in the 1980s and ’90s, may have impacted

the perception of value, thereby contributing to a loss of community pride. Locally made products help reinforce a sense of place, build local identity and distinctiveness, and create a connection to the local community based on assets (Holtkamp et al. 2016); in turn, this builds pride (Aquino and Kloes 2020). Connection to place is important because it helps communities understand their assets and build a sense of pride, which, we argue, is linked to resiliency. Tourism more generally has used geography and a community's sense of place to connect visitors to the local identity via natural and cultural assets. Richards and Duif (2018), for example, describe placemaking as a “process of setting the available and potential resources of a place in motion by giving them meaning for the many actors who can use them to improve the quality of place” (17). In the following sections, we discuss how the community of Húnáþing vestra engaged with the many actors who saw the potential to nurture a sense of place using their natural and cultural assets to improve the quality of place. This led to creativity as a form of resilience in which tourism was used to enhance the local economy and community livelihoods by producing authentic and creative products for consumption within the tourism economy.

### Tourism, Resilience, and Creativity in Húnáþing Vestra

Resilient communities are known for their creativity (Roberts and Townsend 2016), and creative people are often resilient. As the events in the 1980s and '90s, mentioned above, threatened the economic viability of small remote communities in Iceland like Húnáþing vestra, the country was simultaneously experiencing an increase in international visitors. Consequently, many rural families turned toward tourism as a coping strategy. This initially led to a boom in farm tourism (Jóhannesson and Huijbens 2010). Icelandic fishermen and farmers, already accustomed to supplementing their seasonal income (Arnarsdóttir 2015), found ways to harness tourism to their advantage. According to Hrafnhildur Yr Viglundsdóttir, the first managing director of the Icelandic Seal Center, “if you want to still live in the community and live on your farm you just have to find a way to do that” (interview with authors, 26 March 2018). For example, after suffering the loss of their sheep livestock because of scrapie, the farmers at Dæli in Húnáþing vestra needed to supplement their income. Out of necessity, and motivated by their interest in tourism, in 1988

they opened their farm as a guesthouse, which in addition to providing accommodation, included a restaurant, horseback riding facilities, and a tourist information centre. But the community did not stop at small-scale, individual-family-based farm tourism.

As outside visitors' interest in an area grows, increasing tourism provides rural residents with the opportunity to explore creative routes to enhance community resilience. Born in part from a desire, and perceived need, for competition, and associated with differential branding, tourism ventures sprung up across the Icelandic countryside with a distinctive, creative, and alternative flavour. Examples from northern Iceland include the Museum of Icelandic Sorcery and Witchcraft in Holmavík,<sup>2</sup> unique for being the “home of the necropants”; the Icelandic Sea Monster Museum in Bildudalur<sup>3</sup>; the Museum of Prophecies in Skagaströnd<sup>4</sup>; and the Icelandic Seal Center in Hvammstangi,<sup>5</sup> which welcomes visitors to the “Land of Seals.” All these locations have in common a fragile economy and potential social dislocation as a consequence of the economic downturn and outmigration. They are also the result of a shared public will to save their respective communities: a joint community vision to offer tourists something unique that will draw visitors to their area. Their success is due to the determination, and creativity, of the community members.

### “Welcome to the Land of Seals”

Today, a sign in the shape of a seal at the turnoff to Hvammstangi via Route 1, which circumnavigates Iceland, welcomes travellers to the “Land of Seals,” where several locations along the Vatnsnes peninsula allow access to harbour seal colonies. This includes one of the largest seal colonies in northwest Iceland, located near a rock formation called Hvítserkur, or “White Shirt,” which has become a popular tourist attraction.

The Icelandic Seal Center was established in 2005 by a group of local residents who recognized a growing interest in seal-watching tourism but who also wanted to develop sustainable community tourism in Húnaþing vestra. However, the concept of the Icelandic Seal Center began brewing in the community a few years before its creation. According to Hrafnhildur Yr Viglundsdóttir, the first managing director of the Icelandic Seal Center, the area was by this point already gaining notoriety as the

best seal watching location in Iceland. . . . People have been seal watching there since the 1960s and '70s. There had been a very active tourism officer there called Gudrun Kloes. . . . She is one of the idea makers of the Seal Center and one of the first people [who] worked with the idea with the people. And she started applying for funds for Svalbarð to make a walking path there. And then I think more and more people got into it . . . especially people from the Vatnsnes peninsula. (interview with authors, 26 March 2018)

The first public meetings with the wider community concerning the concept of the Seal Center began in April 2005. Gudrun Kloes indicated that it was difficult for the community at first to recognize their assets as a tourism destination: “They would just say, ‘the north wind,’ ” essentially meaning that they could see no assets other than the cold north wind for which the area is known locally (interview with authors, 18 May 2018). However, Hrafnhildur Yr Viglundsdóttir explained that “there were some [assets] . . . and people connected with farming [and] connected with the peninsula . . . [and] people that were generally interested in seeing tourism grow in the area [began to realize that] this was something that was completely unique. Nobody else had focused on seals around Iceland. So, I think people saw a big opportunity to be something that could be a boom” (interview with authors, 26 March 2018). This marked the start of the community working to establish seal-watching sites along the peninsula and, correspondingly, encouraging other local businesses to engage with tourism. As the number of tourists began to rise, a number of businesses emerged to service the growing tourism market. The Icelandic Seal Center has had a positive effect on the community by helping to increase tourism to the area, which has also led to the revitalization of Hvammstangi, the Vatnsnes peninsula, and the Húnaþing vestra municipality.

Tourism in Húnaþing vestra and Hvammstangi focuses on seals, other wildlife (mainly whales and birds), and equine tourism, which are all easily recognizable in the region’s place-marketing. A seal-watching boat, *Selasigling*, began operating on 25 February 2010 with a focus on seal and other wildlife watching (Sealwatching n.d.). Other businesses established along the peninsula include a restaurant, a café, and a handicraft market.

In 2012 the Seal Center also took on responsibility as the region's Tourism Information Center. Since 2013, accommodation built specifically for the tourism industry has been increasing; this includes the Hvammstangi Cottages (in 2013), Hotel Laugarbakki (in 2016), and the Hvammstangi Hostel (in 2017), adding to other farm stays, hotels, and Airbnbs within the municipality. The growth of many businesses has been a direct effect of the successful "Land of Seals" place branding.

Visitors to the Icelandic Seal Center are directed to designated seal-watching locations or other areas of regional interest. They can also visit the museum and learn how Icelanders have interacted with seals over time. The centre is a fifteen-minute drive from the closest seal-watching site and it aims to promote the development of tourism in the region through research and collaboration with tour operators and entrepreneurs; to promote the transfer of knowledge between the scientific community and society; to inform tourists about responsible seal-watching methods and viewing locations; and to develop environmental policy. The centre is managed and staffed by local residents and continues to co-operate with the community in its activities, which include an annual seal count and public lectures. It also co-operates with landowners and other businesses operating seal-watching sites. The Icelandic Seal Center has had a spill-over effect thanks to these collaborative efforts. Sharing information and research (locally and internationally), community capacity building (local lectures, workshops, and consultation), and connecting local tourism entrepreneurs to regional, national, and international markets (through Seal Travel) has helped to both diversify the local economy and build confidence in the tourism industry of Húnaþing vestra, nationally as well as internationally.

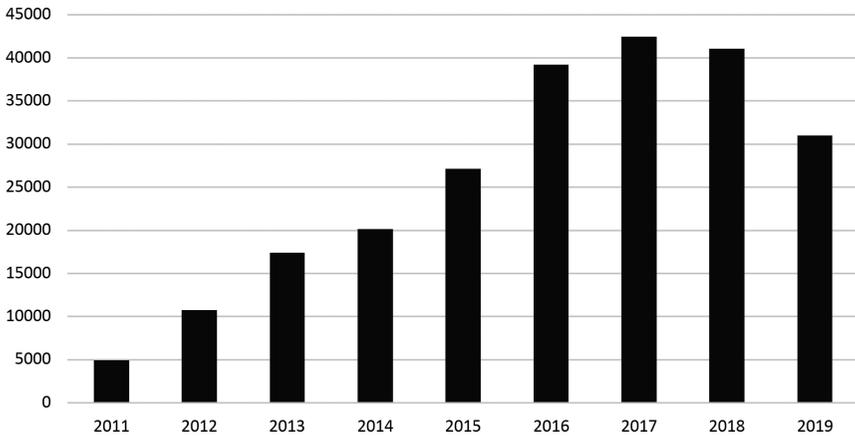
The growth in tourism businesses across Húnaþing vestra and the introduction of new and expanded services in Hvammstangi and Laugarbakki has led to a revitalization of the community. As shown in figure 6.2, resident population numbers in Hvammstangi were falling prior to the establishment of the Icelandic Seal Center. Shortly thereafter, these numbers rose slightly, before falling again, but they have now returned to almost the same as they were before the centre's establishment. This is apparent, for example, in the return of youth and families to the municipality because of the growing diversity of and opportunities for jobs. Young

people who originally left the community to pursue higher education or better employment opportunities began to return and apply for jobs “that were suitable for their education” and experience (Gúðný Hrund Karlsdóttir, interview with authors, 14 March 2018). Young families have also returned, searching for a more rural setting in which to raise their children, with the possibility of paid employment in their field of training. Vercoe et al. (2014) refer to the process by which urban residents move into rural areas, often in search of idealized lifestyles, as “exurbanisation.” In Húnaþing vestra, this pattern of returning community members, and the arrival of new ones, has helped to stem the tide of outmigration from the region.

Visitation to the Icelandic Seal Center increased from 4,958 visitors in 2011 to 31,019 visitors in 2019, with the majority of visitation in the summer months between May and September. Visitor numbers more than doubled between 2011 and 2012, the year the centre moved to a new building and included a Tourism Information Center. Matching both the growth and decline rate nationally, visitation to the Seal Center increased rapidly between 2015 (27,150 visitors) and 2017 (42,481 visitors) and decreased in 2018 (41,078 visitors) and 2019 (31,019 visitors) (see figure 6.3). On average, since 2012, about 35 per cent of the total number of visitors have paid to enter the museum. Entrance to the museum is free for members of the community and the centre hosts a number of free events for the community at the museum, furthering its relationship with locals.

The increase in visitation to the municipality since 2005 has both directly and indirectly affected services within the community. For example, during the summer season, the one general store in town is open every day with longer hours and a larger selection of items. Opportunities for restaurants and food services, especially during the summer season, throughout the municipality have also increased, with the first restaurant opening in Hvammstangi in 2015. These extra facilities benefit the locals as well as the tourists, as it “it makes it better to live in Hvammstangi to have these services. And we have two car repairs and we have the Brauðtöfan [the bakery], the wool factory [Kidka], and we have Handbendi [the puppet theatre]. . . . We have services that would not be here if we didn’t have tourism” (Gúðný Hrund Karlsdóttir, interview with authors, 14 March 2018).

Figure 6.3. Visitor numbers to the Icelandic Seal Center in Hvammstangi from 2011 to 2019.



Source: The Icelandic Seal Center, reproduced with permission.

## Creative Communities and Community-Based Tourism Development

Creative communities can be a powerful tool for addressing the social and economic needs of a society (Florida 2002a, 2002b; Foster 2009; Markusen and Schrock 2006; Zukin 2010). They can create, or recreate, a place's identity, thereby making it distinctive from other places, which in turn helps to carve out a niche in the marketplace (Richards 2011). Nurturing the arts and culture industries can help to revitalize both economic and social portfolios (Aquino, Phillips, and Sung 2012). For Húnaþing vestra, nurturing a sense of place identity and pride through seals as a form of natural capital helped to increase seal research and wildlife tourism management, entice job growth, develop better services for the community, create interconnections between wildlife tourism and business, attract skilled workers, and create spinoff and supporting businesses similar to

arts-based economic development strategies. As Greta Clough, creator of Handbendi, a world-class puppet theatre based in Hvammstangi, put it,

Creative community is for me . . . the place where everything comes from. The creative community goes beyond just the arts. It goes into everything. It goes into cultivating entrepreneurs, politicians, and . . . the influencers, because ultimately by investing in creative communities . . . you actually invest in the creation of imaginations and ideas and people who can think outside of the box and people who are interested in learning. (interview with authors, 20 March 2018)

The Icelandic Seal Center is an example of community-based tourism development driven by the efforts of community members—both in Hvammstangi and across Húnaþing vestra—to develop and manage their regional assets for tourism. The centre’s board is made up of residents of Húnaþing vestra and regional stakeholders. The decision was made to include local community members to ensure that decisions were made in a community and regional context. The community-based tourism happening here exemplifies that which is community driven—effectively placing the decisions of what should happen or what is preferred in the hands of the community. The Icelandic Seal Center is consistent with the principles of sustainable development, but it goes beyond that to contribute to community resilience, and in that way, is also an approach for diversifying and revitalizing the local economy.

The members of the community who were interviewed for this chapter felt that the performing and visual arts, museums, academia, traditional handicrafts, storytelling, entrepreneurship, and leadership are all part of the creative industry. They also suggested that creativity is interconnected with community development, and that this creativity is the driving force behind the community’s ability to create and produce experiences as a product. The role of creativity in the establishment and maintenance of tourism, and the associated ultimate goal of economic and social development for the region, was consciously and explicitly recognized. For the municipality of Húnaþing vestra, creativity was deliberately used to build a tourism product that could help support other seasonal income and to

assist with the continuation of a way of life and the revitalization of a community. In the words of Hrafnhildur Yr Viglundsdóttir,

Developing sustainable seal-watching tourism in the Vatnshes peninsula was one of the main goals [of the Icelandic Seal Center], and contributing positively to the community of Húnaþing vestra as well as raising awareness about seals and the necessities of researching seals and protecting seals. . . [W]e also had a clause about empowering the community, creating jobs, and making a positive impact on the economy. . . . Sustainability was always the first emphasis of the Seal Center, which, I thought, was very interesting that [the community] were aware of the importance of sustainable tourism development very early on. So, it was a guiding light for my work. (interview with authors, 26 March 2018)

The Icelandic Seal Center continues to bring both direct and indirect consequences for the community. For example, as Gúðný Hrund Karlsdóttir noted, young people coming to work in specialized jobs brought their partners/families, many of whom also have specialized skills and could further contribute to and shape the community. As tourism grew, it brought opportunities for the service industry to grow as well. Entrepreneurs fulfilling a need created new jobs. Tourism development in Húnaþing vestra highlights the interconnectedness of culture, creativity, and tourism innovation (Frey 2009; Richards 2011).

Since its beginning, the Icelandic Seal Center has actively engaged the community and helped to guide change by fostering public dialogue, to build community capacity and leadership, to contribute to the development of the community's knowledge of wildlife, and to encourage creative entrepreneurship. It has proven to be a powerful tool for community mobilization and activism. In many ways, the Icelandic Seal Center's goals to create healthy communities capable of action aligns with the argument for culture as an economic engine (Creative City Network of Canada 2005). The Icelandic Seal Center's success as a community-based tourism product lies in its capacity for engaging and involving the community from the beginning stages of tourism development planning through to the

continuing maintenance of tourism products. In this case, the Icelandic Seal Center uses community-based tourism as a strategy for diversifying the local economy while also providing greater self-reliance and increasing local services.

## Final Comments

For Húnaþing vestra, engaging with tourism as a form of community development led to the formation of an industry that involves the active participation of its residents as creators of authentic tourism experiences. Residents assumed a proactive role in building resilience through creative solutions, with the Icelandic Seal Center providing a model and path to attract highly skilled and educated people to live in the community and add to its assets, in the process diversifying its skills and further enhancing its creative potential. Establishment of this one centre fostered the uptake of other creative, co-creative, and locally produced products such as the puppetry theatre and businesses such as the seal-watching boat *Selasigling* and Seal Travel. Increased income from tourism has helped to create jobs in Húnaþing vestra, thereby assisting the reversal of problems associated with the rural-urban migration faced by many other small country municipalities in Iceland and around the world.

Húnaþing vestra's resilience is reflected in its community-based approach to developing seal-watching tourism as a product while also leading the way in seal research and protection. Creative tourism destinations offer the potential for enhancing the local economy and community livelihoods by producing authentic and creative products, and this is reflected in how Húnaþing vestra creatively integrated concepts from planning, sustainable development, and community development. It also reflects the fact that building collective capacity and providing tools for community engagement and activism is key to nurturing revitalization efforts. These efforts should go beyond focusing on economic impacts to also incorporate the need for community stakeholder involvement in order to shape the processes and outcomes of revitalization efforts. We argue that this is crucial as community-level redevelopment must have local engagement for longer-term sustainability. Mair and Reid (2010) conceptualize this as "an underlying assumption that long-term benefits of such an undertaking (sustainable community-based tourism) include not only a stronger

community identity and the potential for community members to act proactively in the face of economic, social and cultural change, but a tourism product that is better grounded in community support” (408).

Aquino, Phillips, and Sung (2012) argue that having a sense of place and a strong identity is essential because this becomes the “calling card” for visitors. Beyond the scope of this chapter is a consideration of how residents from Húnaþing vestra identify with the “Land of Seals” branding or how much they feel that seals are a part of their culture. Further research is needed to understand Húnaþing vestra’s community identity and the community’s perspective toward the development, promotion, and conservation of cultural and natural heritage. This chapter has illustrated, however, the ability of locals to guide their desire for tourism development; it has also shown that the Icelandic Seal Center has encouraged the inclusion of stakeholders in community development processes and outcomes. Ensuring community engagement increases adaptive capacity building (Jurjonas and Seekamp 2018), enabling residents to achieve more of what they want for tourism development, as well as the resilience to address challenges.

Ultimately, this chapter provides insight into the fostering of community-based tourism built around the creative industry and resilience. It has demonstrated how talented residents can be proactive in building a creative tourism product and their strategies for continuing and creatively sustaining a rural community in northwest Iceland. The path chosen for and local support given to the Icelandic Seal Center provides a useful case study for other rural locations seeking to engage creatively, sustainably, and responsibly with tourism.

## NOTES

- 1 This population estimate includes Akureyri and the surrounding area (Statistics Iceland 2019).
- 2 <http://www.galdrasyning.is>.
- 3 <http://skrimslis.is>.
- 4 <http://www.sagatrail.is/en/museums/museum-of-prophecies>.
- 5 <http://selasetur.is/en/>.

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