

COAST Westfjords case study report

by Maria Wilke



Figure 1 The harbour town of Ísafjörður in the Westfjords (all photographs by M. Wilke)

1. Context

The Westfjords are a particularly rugged and remote part of Iceland, attached to the mainland only by a thin stretch of mountainous terrain. About 6000 people live in the small communities that are dotted in the sheltered fjords at the flanks of steep cliffs, right by the sea. The region's largest town is Ísafjörður, with roughly 2600 inhabitants. People in the Westfjords have always had to be resilient and innovative to survive the harsh climate and the challenges that floods, avalanches, winter storms and the rugged terrain continue to bring to this day. The towns in the Westfjords have been established as fishing and whaling stations and have long since been dependent on the resources of the sea.

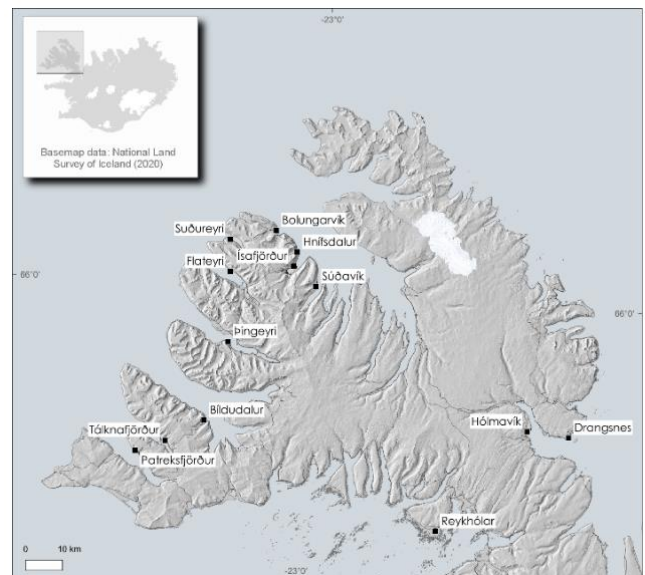


Figure 2 Geographical location of the Westfjords in Iceland (E. Pagneux, 2022).



Figure 3 The harbour of Ísafjörður.

Today, small scale fisheries, trawlers, angling boats and aquaculture still count among the most important industries. Tourism has recently been booming with cruise ship landings increasing every year. The fjords are getting ever busier and draw the attention of different industries. This is why Iceland has recently begun to mandate coastal and marine planning with the objective to facilitate sustainable use of the fjords and environmental protection of vulnerable areas with the [Act on the Planning of Ocean and Coastal Areas \(2018\)](#) (Landsskipulagsstefna, 2016).

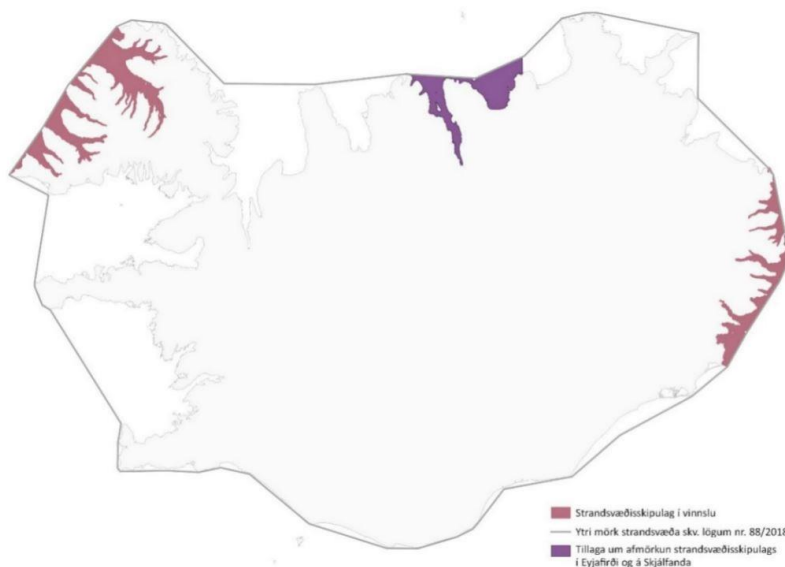


Figure 4 Areas to undergoing coastal and marine planning in Iceland (Hafskipulag, 2019&2021)

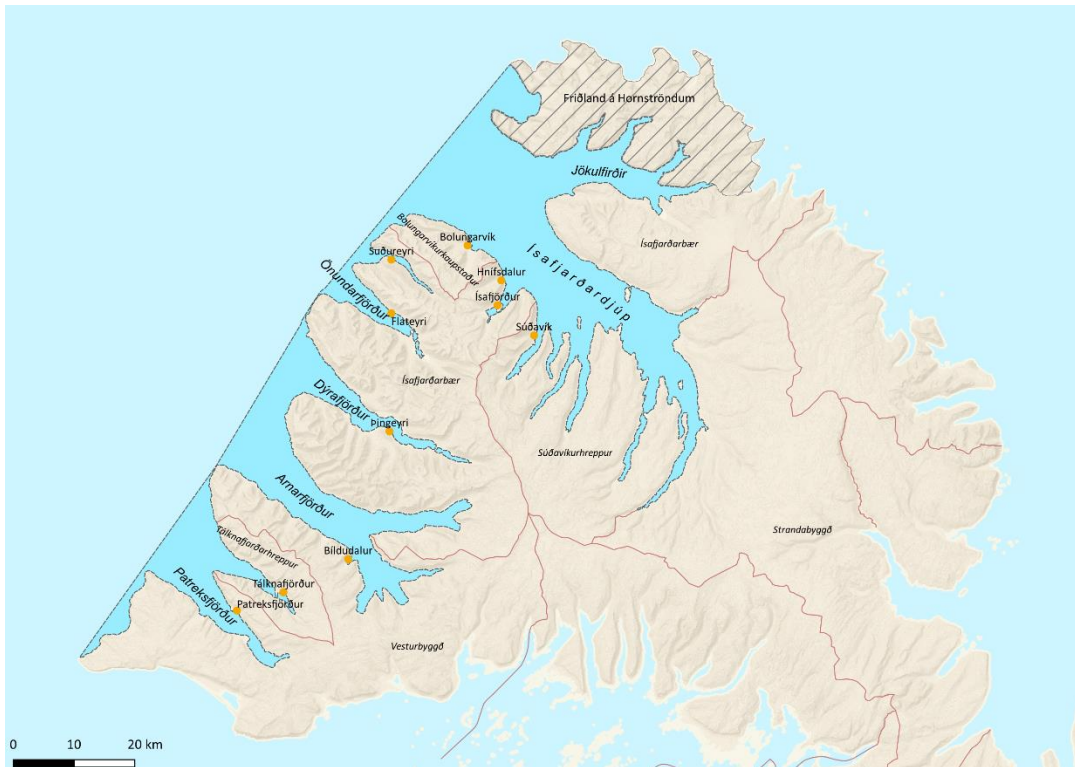


Figure 5 The area of the pilot coastal and marine plan in the Westfjords (Hafskipulag, 2019).

Here is the [video introducing the Westfjords case study](#) (footage by Svarmi, editing and narration Maria Wilke):



2. Research Questions & Objectives

- I. What is in Iceland's unique context and what are the challenges of environmental changes for coastal and marine planning?

- a. Establishing the governance and environmental context in which the recently launched coastal and marine planning endeavours operate
- II. How does participation work in Iceland's coastal & marine planning process and how can it be facilitated?
 - b. Assessing how the process of coastal and marine planning in Iceland works
 - c. Establishing the scope and depth of public participation as well as barriers to participation
- III. How does participation in Icelandic coastal and marine planning compare internationally – what are lessons that can be learned abroad and adapted?
 - d. Compare and contrast participation in Westfjords of Iceland with Troms/Norway

3. Data collection and community engagement

a. Participation study Westfjords

The main case study work was undertaken in the community of Ísafjörður in the Westfjords of Iceland between September 2020 and April 2022. Participant observation in the target community was undertaken in order to develop trust and gain local knowledge about marine and environmental issues, public debate and the ongoing planning process. As a result, numerous casual conversations were had, unstructured interviews were conducted, and observation field notes were gathered. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were scheduled to gain a deeper inside into planners', stakeholders' and community members' views and activities in participation and coastal and marine planning. In addition, a public online workshop was held open to local inhabitants, planners and stakeholders alike. This meeting was meant to be held in person and had to be re-arranged to an online format due to coronavirus protection measures. The meeting was at the same time meant as a way of engaging the community with coastal and marine planning, as an information event, and as a platform for discussion of relevant issues.



Figure 6 Flyer for public meeting in the Westfjords.

Over 70 transcripts were recorded, transcribed (software: Otter.ai) and coded (software: MaxQDA) from the Westfjords case study.



Figure 7 Westfjords landscapes in summer and winter

b. Húsavík case study

In order to gain a holistic picture of the proposed planning process as well as impacts on communities and their participation, parallel work on the research project [JUSTNORTH](#) in Húsavík presented an opportunity to interview local people there, as well. Húsavík is one of the areas that is envisaged to undergo the same type of planning as the Westfjords and Eastfjords currently (see Figure 3, purple colour). However, the context in Húsavík is slightly different, as it is not a fjord area. Skjálfandi Bay is a wide bay surrounded by mountains and home to many whale species, as well as being utilised for many different marine activities and industries. The advent of whale watching and tourism has put additional pressure on the marine space and as a result, the municipality has requested to be part of future planning efforts. Over 20 interviews were held in Húsavík with community members, local government representatives, marine researchers, captains and whale guides.



Figure 8 The town of Húsavík and Skjálfandi Bay.

c. Eastfjords case study

In order to cover all areas where coastal and marine planning is being conducted in Iceland (see Figure 3), a small case study was also completed in the Eastfjords of Iceland. The planning process here is the same as in the Westfjords. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with community members, stakeholders and individuals involved in the planning process.



Figure 9 Area of the coastal and marine plan in the Eastfjords (Hafkipulag, 2019).

d. Ocean Missions – Marine Science Sailing Expedition

Marine science expeditions are usually the prerogative of invited scholars and researchers. However, Húsavík-based NGO [Oceans Missions](#) launched a sailing expedition programme with the Schooner Opal that invites marine scientists and citizen scientists alike to sail around Iceland (including the Westfjords), gather data, clean beaches, monitor wildlife and raise awareness about marine issues and the impact of ocean science and marine resources. Interviews were conducted on-board, and community members engaged throughout the journey. See the full report on how to utilise opportunities like these for community engagement and capacity building [\(link to report on Ocean Mission expedition\)](#).



Figure 10 Manta trawl for microplastics, one of the marine science activities on board Opal.

e. Bioregional Workshop and Learning Journey Westfjords

Another collaboration was realised with Glenn Page, Global Lead of Collaborative for Bioregional Action Learning & Transformation (COBALT). Not only did his work align with the goals of the COAST project, it also opened opportunities to invite more scholars to the table, work together as a team to see the Westfjords as a system, and to begin to ask questions of governance and of change, involving local inhabitants as well as marine experts. A team around the Westfjords bioregional work was founded that took part in a bioregional workshop led by Glenn and also conducted a learning journey through the Westfjords and to the Arctic Circle Assembly in October 2021. See the full report on bioregioning as a tool to promote sustainable development in remote coastal communities like the Westfjords ([link to bioregioning report](#)).



Figure 11 On the Learning Journey to the Westfjords.

f. Comparative study in Troms/Norway

In order to situate public participation in the new coastal and marine planning process in Iceland internationally, a small comparative study was undertaken in collaboration with NMBU, the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (academic exchange via the ERASMUS+ programme). A case study was conducted focussing on the intermunicipal coastal zone plan of Troms in the North of Norway. An interview was conducted virtually (due to COVID restrictions) with the planning coordinator for the intermunicipal planning process, discussing the process itself and public participation in depth. The results show that Norway is in many ways ahead of Iceland in terms of marine planning and development of marine industries, especially aquaculture. Therefore, many issues and tensions are in principle the same, and similar obstacles have to be overcome in relation to issuing fish farming licences and developing coastal and marine plans. The full results will be published in a research article comparing the two case studies of Troms on Norway and the Westfjords in Iceland ([link to research paper to follow](#)) (see [section 5 Further Dissemination](#)).

4. Results overview

5. Further Dissemination

Several research articles will be published disseminating the work completed in the Westfjords. The planned manuscripts include:

- a. Planning the invisible spaces – Participation in Coastal and marine Planning in the Westfjords of Iceland. This article will be published in a special issue of Climate.
- b. Participation in Coastal and Marine Planning – Perspectives from Iceland to be published in urban Planning for Sustainability. Looking at three case studies: Westfjords, Eastfjords and Húsavík.
- c. Comparative paper looking at challenges and approaches of participation in coastal and marine planning in Troms/Norway and Westfjords/Iceland.
- d. Collaborative paper on bioregional thinking globally with Westfjords as case study.
- e. Article on bioregional workshop and learning journey in the Westfjords of Iceland.

References

Hafskipulag. (2019 & 2021). Coastal Area Planning in the Westfjords. Retrieved from <https://www.hafskipulag.is/strandsvaedisskipulag/skipulag-i-vinnslu/strandsvaedisskipulag-vestfjarda/>.

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