

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

It is both an honour and a privilege to open this conference. The topic of discussion here today, **the Planning and Design of Tourist Destinations**, is of special interest to me, and is probably more important now than ever.

Tourism is Iceland's fastest growing industry. This year we predict up to 800,000 visitors to the country, compared to some 300,000 in 2003. This is an increase of half a million tourists in only 10 years, a huge increase by any standard.

The main reason for this – why the travel industry in Iceland is booming as never before – could simply be that the landscape artist who laid the foundations of Iceland through repeated volcanic eruptions some 60 million years ago clearly knew what he was doing.

Iceland is located on a so-called "Hot spot", like Hawaii is. These are places on the earth's crust which are characterised by extensive volcanic activity. And notably Iceland is not only a geological hot spot, but also a hot spot as a travel destination.

The huge increase in tourist traffic presents new challenges – and tests the ability and creativity of you landscape artists of today and tomorrow.

It has been demonstrated again and again that most travellers visit Iceland to experience the uniqueness of Iceland's natural environment – nature at its most imposing and pristine. And because here the traveller can feel practically alone in the world.

The challenge is clearly that an increase in the number of travellers puts pressure on the most popular tourist attractions; at peak times there are literally chains of buses at Þingvellir and Geysir.

We are very conscious of the risk that if we fail to recognise the risks – with the result that the majority of travellers experience quite another and less enjoyable Iceland than they were led to expect – it can quickly erode the basis of the travel industry.

Which is why it is so very urgent that we proceed with care and do things right – which we can only do with the help and clever solutions of landscape architects and planners.

You – have to help us to follow the lead of that first landscape architect some 60 million years ago, so that we can apply brilliant solutions that show off the original masterpiece to best effect, while at the same time adding attractive and pleasing touches of modernity.

To enable the most popular destinations to withstand thousands of visitors - without being damaged.

To put “new”, million-year-old destinations on the travellers' map.

The landscape architect seldom receives an Oscar for his leading role – that award goes to nature herself. But the Oscar for a supporting role is very definitely on offer, and we have really first-class examples of solutions provided by landscape architects which fit the environment like a glove - while being at the same time a work of art in themselves – both in their practicality and design.

It must be admitted that often and in too many places we have failed to consider the value and importance of design, good preparation and landscape architecture. The good news, however, is that we have realised its importance, and are determined to improve.

I believe that well-conceived design can bring out the quality of a destination without damaging the environment or intruding on the experience and the aesthetic value of the area. I am also convinced that right here in this room there are a number of skilled landscape architects and designers who can do just that and who will, in the years to come, improve the quality of tourist destinations all around the country, something we can all be proud of!

My best wishes to all of you, and I hope you enjoy and profit from your stay in Iceland,