

Wired Icelanders seek to keep remote peninsula digital-free

September 6 2018, by Egill Bjarnason



In this Thursday Aug. 9, 2018 photo, hikers during an early morning trek on the southern part of the Hornstrandir peninsula, in Iceland. Residents and outdoor enthusiasts in northwestern Iceland are communicating their desire to keep internet access out of the country's Hornstrandir peninsula. (AP Photo/Egill Bjarnason)

The passenger boat arrives at the bottom of Veidileysufjordur, a short inlet with a long name, to drop off backpackers for a multi-day trek. A

weather-beaten group that's completed the trip waits to board, eager to get back to a part of Iceland where they can reconnect with the world via Wi-Fi.

By boat, that will take about a half-hour. No roads lead to the Nordic country's northernmost peninsula, a rugged glacial horn that reaches for the Arctic Circle. Making a phone call requires walking up a mountain for a cell signal so weak, clouds seem capable of blocking it.

But [internet service](#) soon could be reaching the Hornstrandir Nature Reserve, one of the last digital-free frontiers in what might be the world's most-wired nation. The possibility has most hikers, park rangers and summer residents worried that email, news and social media will destroy a way of life that depends on the absence of all three.

"We see a growing appreciation for the lack of online connection," Environment Agency of Iceland ranger Vesteynn Runarsson, who patrols the peninsula's southern end on his own. "Looking to the future, we want to keep Hornstrandir special in that way."

The area has long resisted cell towers, but commercial initiatives could take the decision out of Icelanders' hands and push Hornstrandir across the digital divide.



In this Wednesday Aug. 8, 2018 photo, hikers and local summer residents prepare to board the Hornstrandir passenger ferry connecting the remote peninsula, only accessible by boat, to Iceland's northwestern region. Residents and outdoor enthusiasts in northwestern Iceland are communicating their desire to keep internet access out of the country's Hornstrandir peninsula. (AP Photo/Egill Bjarnason)

Companies such as Elon Musk's SpaceX are racing to deliver high-speed internet service to every inch of the world by putting thousands of small satellites into low Earth orbit. Their success would have global implications, bringing the benefits and downsides of internet communication to places that are off the grid because of poverty or war, or where internet access is reserved for the wealthy.

That's also true for sparsely populated communities and far-flung destinations in Canada, Russia, Alaska and elsewhere in the vast Arctic region, where broadband service generally is prohibitively expensive.

Yet in Iceland, the prospect of constant connectivity has called up an old debate on whether Hornstrandir's wilderness should stay unwired.

Despite or because of its remoteness, Iceland ranks first on a U.N. index comparing nations by information technology use, with roughly 98 percent of the population using the internet. Among adults, 93 percent report having Facebook accounts and two-thirds are Snapchat users, according to pollster MMR.

Many people who live in northwestern Iceland or visit as outdoor enthusiasts want Hornstrandir's 570 square kilometers (220 square miles), which accounts for 0.6 percent of Iceland's land mass, to be declared a "digital-free zone." The idea hasn't coalesced into a petition or formal campaign, so what it would require or prohibit hasn't been fleshed out.

The last full-time resident of the rugged area moved away in 1952—it never was an easy place to farm—but many descendants have turned family farmsteads into summer getaways.



In this photo taken on Aug. 8, 2018, a family from England pitches tents at the Hesteyri campground on the Hornstrandir nature reserve, Iceland. Residents and outdoor enthusiasts in northwestern Iceland are communicating their desire to keep internet access out of the country's Hornstrandir peninsula. (AP Photo/Egill Bjarnason)

Alexander Gudmundsson, who vacations in the home where his great-grandmother grew up, doesn't have to look far down the family tree to see the effect of digital devices: his teenage daughter refused to come to Hornstrandir this summer because it would mean not having online access.

"But once the kids are here, all they do is play outside," Gudmundsson said.

Northwest Iceland's representative in parliament is less sentimental about the value of isolation. Since her election last year, Halla Signy

Kristjansdottir has urged the Ministry of Transport to fund [cell towers](#) for the safety of sailors and travelers whose mobile devices currently are useless in and near Hornstrandir.

"I don't see anything romantic about lying on the ground with a broken thigh bone and no cellphone signal," Kristjansdottir said in an interview.

In a written response to the lawmaker, Minister of Transport Sigurdur Ingi Johannsson noted that huts along the hiking trails are equipped with radiophones for emergencies. He defended the absence of digital connectivity in Hornstrandir as a factor in "advancing visitor's experience."



In this photo taken on Aug. 8, 2018, a local ranger for the Environment Agency of Iceland attempts to make a call from the unofficially named Telephone Mountain, in Vesteinn Runarsson, Iceland. Residents and outdoor enthusiasts in northwestern Iceland are communicating their desire to keep internet access out of the country's Hornstrandir peninsula. (AP Photo/Egill Bjarnason)

Police and rescue workers have suggested creating an illustrated map that marks the mountain summits with the strongest signals.

The Environment Agency of Iceland estimates that 3,000 people trek through Hornstrandir every summer, moving from one fjord to the next. Some are rewarded with sightings of the arctic fox, Iceland's only native land mammal. The few structures—abandoned farm houses and a decommissioned U.S. Air Force radar station—were abandoned decades ago.

When The Associated Press visited in August, the travelers interviewed there unanimously favored making the reserve a digital-free zone, though their notions of what that meant varied.

"If phones worked here, I am sure many people would go as far as carrying battery packs to charge their devices," said Mikko Ronkkonen, a hiker from Finland who had just completed an eight-day trip.

When Runarsson, who works as a police officer during the winter, wanted to ask the ferry captain about the next arrival, he took a short cairn-marked trail to the higher ground known locally as Telephone Mountain.



In this photo taken on Aug. 8, 2018, a local ranger for the Environment Agency of Iceland attempts to make a call from the unofficially named Telephone Mountain, in Vesteynn Runarsson, Iceland. Residents and outdoor enthusiasts in northwestern Iceland are communicating their desire to keep internet access out of the country's Hornstrandir peninsula. (AP Photo/Egill Bjarnason)

He walked in circles, as if searching for something on the ground. "One bar. Two bars," he murmured with his eyes fixed on his phone. The bars quickly disappeared as the mountain shrugged off the faint signal.

"Maybe the clouds are interfering," Runarsson said without a hint of frustration. "No phone calls today, I guess."

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