



French Tourists Permanently Scar Icelandic Nature For Laughs

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Words by [Bart Cameron](#)
Photo by Klemenž Geir Klemenžson

“I think that the French should know about this, and I think that hopefully they will also get reprimanded when they get back to France. If there is something about this in the French media, then it’s very important that people understand, it’s actually a healthy reminder for anybody. You don’t go to another country and just say ‘Fuck You!’ right?”

Þór Tulinius speaks these words to me in an exhausted panic. Þór is an outstanding Icelandic actor, but he also works as a tour guide. He reached out to me because, years ago, we contributed stories to Agence France-Presse, the AFP.

What do the French need to know about? The actions of a gentleman named Luc Haudeville, who travelled by ferry to Iceland with two extremely well-equipped Land Rover Defenders, and, like a 1980s Mountain Dew commercial cosplayer, proceeded to drive the Land Rovers over protected areas throughout the countryside, scarring the land and destroying vegetation. He was actually proudly broadcasting the damage on social media before he received his first fine, 300.000 ISK for destroying the landscape.

His response to that fine? Immediately resuming destroying the landscape.

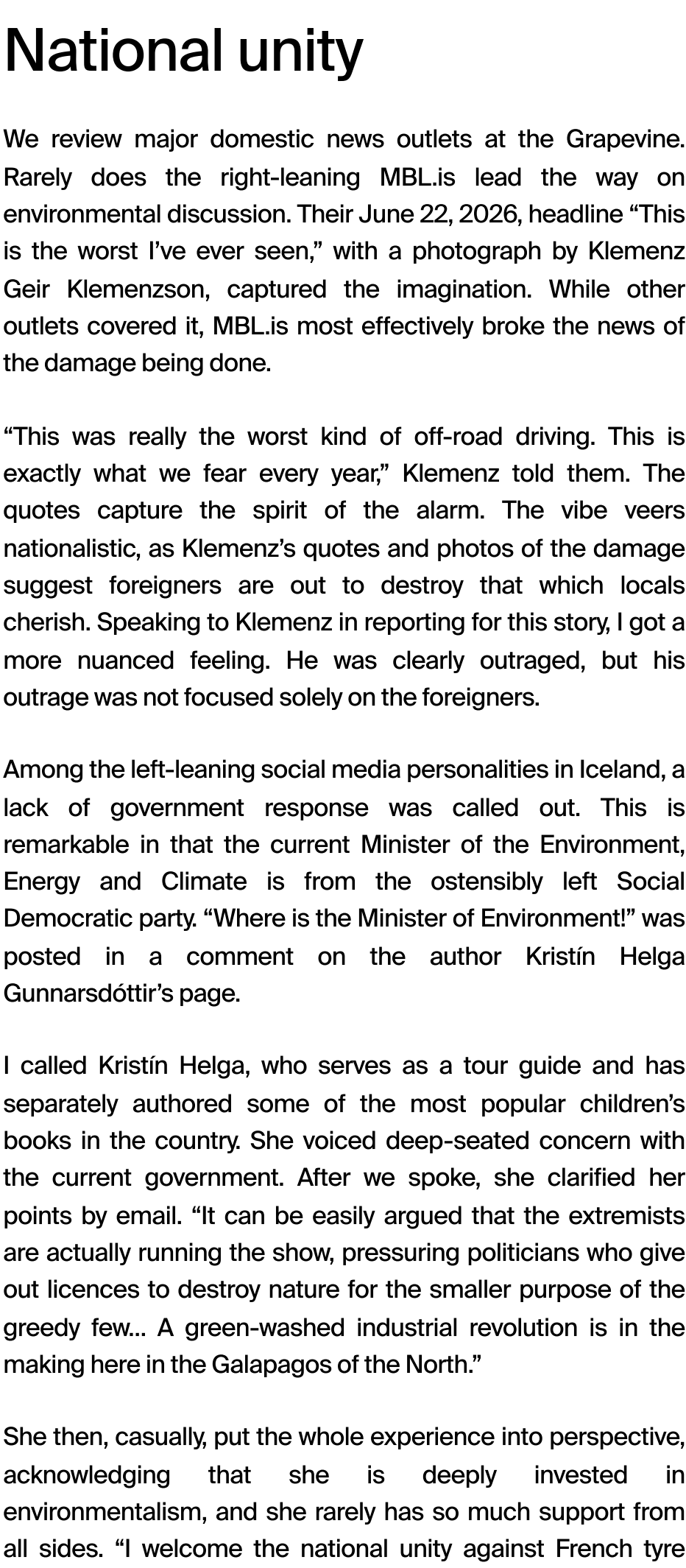
“These are not tourists. They are grizzlies,” celebrated photographer Páll Stefánsson tells me when we talk on the phone about the damage. He is heartbroken by what has been done. “They say they are adventurers. And they document their travelling in unspoiled nature, but they have no respect for nature. I cannot understand this.”

“In the high north, it is so different from, I don’t know, anywhere else in the world. It’s a very special place, and it’s very important to respect it. If you don’t, you are just a tourist, and you are not welcome here.”

Massachusetts. It takes decades for moss to heal. The sand, when you think it’s just a desert. It’s a tundra. It’s very slow to heal. This is forever, this damage,” Páll explains. He still can’t truly wrap his head around the damage.

Þór gives a more pleasant spin on it. “People are amazed with this country. It’s just that it’s a very, very rewarding job to be a guide in Iceland, because it is so different, and there’s so much spaciousness, and there are so many places that are untouched. The nature is just bubbling with energy. You can really feel when travelling around Iceland that it’s a land or a country being created.”

“Therefore, people have an easy time understanding that you follow the path. You don’t walk on the moss. The country kind of calls upon a certain, certain amount of respect,” Þór goes on, reminding me, and seemingly himself, how tourists usually behave, how they should behave. “But this... I haven’t seen something like this.”



National unity

We review major domestic news outlets at the Grapevine. Rarely does the right-leaning MBL.is lead the way on environmental discussion. Their June 22, 2026, headline “This is the worst I’ve ever seen,” with a photograph by Klemenž Geir Klemenžson, captured the imagination. While other outlets covered it, MBL.is most effectively broke the news of the damage being done.

“This was really the worst kind of off-road driving. This is exactly what we fear every year,” Klemenž told them. The quotes capture the spirit of the alarm. The vibe veers nationalistic, as Klemenž’s quotes and photos of the damage suggest foreigners are out to destroy that which locals cherish. Speaking to Klemenž in reporting for this story, I got a more nuanced feeling. He was clearly outraged, but his outrage was not focused solely on the foreigners.

Among the left-leaning social media personalities in Iceland, a lack of government response was called out. This is remarkable in that the current Minister of the Environment, Energy and Climate is from the ostensibly left Social Democratic party. “Where is the Minister of Environment!” was posted in a comment on the author Kristín Helga Gunnarsdóttir’s page.

I called Kristín Helga, who serves as a tour guide and has separately authored some of the most popular children’s books in the country. She voiced deep-seated concern with the current government. After we spoke, she clarified her points by email. “It can be easily argued that the extremists are actually running the show, pressuring politicians who give out licences to destroy nature for the smaller purpose of the greedy few... A green-washed industrial revolution is in the making here in the Galapagos of the North.”

She then, casually, put the whole experience into perspective, acknowledging that she is deeply invested in environmentalism, and she rarely has so much support from all sides. “I welcome the national unity against French tyre marks,” she wrote to me.

Scarred landscape

In a violation of all decorum, I track down Minister of the Environment, Energy and Climate, Jóhann Páll Jóhannsson, while he’s on vacation. While he has provided comment elsewhere, he understands the magnitude of what has happened.

Within 15 minutes of our conversation, he sends us a formal statement:

“Off-road driving leaves scars on landscapes that can take years to heal. My message is simple: If you come to Iceland, you are welcome to enjoy our extraordinary nature, but you are expected to respect it and follow the rules. If you do not, you are unwelcome here. The current government is working on strengthening enforcement and penalties against off-road driving. Protecting our natural heritage is non-negotiable.”

“So sometimes, it’s not possible to repair. Specifically in vegetated areas.”

The damage, in this case, seems likely to be permanent. We discuss how many rangers are required, using shovels and rakes, to repair damage in the far north, trying to prevent a set of tracks from turning into a washed-out ravine.

“It’s not only tourists,” Þorgerður says. “Icelandic people do it too. In COVID, we had a lot of damage, even though there were not very many tourists.”

“We have been campaigning in London that we should have a highland national park throughout the highlands as a whole. Then we could have more rangers to educate people, be visible, both for safety and to make sure people are not doing those kinds of things. We really think it’s a bigger problem than just some ill-minded people.”

Is it too easy to just target these villains, I ask.

“I think so. It happens almost every year,” she says, taking a breath. “You know that car advertisements are recorded here. Those cars get a licence to drive a little bit off road, but they don’t have a licence to actually show it. Sometimes, they do anyways, to use it as a marketing opportunity.”

We discuss, briefly, the legendary Land Rover Range Rover Sport ad in which a new Land Rover drives the Kárahnjúkar dam. I will later look up footage on YouTube of Land Rovers driving across the highlands. Currently, one is titled “Offroad across Iceland – A True 4x4 Adventure with the Land Rover Defender!” The title and host will change when someone complains, but it will reappear soon enough. The natural beauty of Iceland is clearly an outstanding marketing resource.

We close our discussion on a surprising note. The polite tourists who do damage.

“Sometimes there are tourists who think they are being polite, and they pull to the side of the road. They don’t understand the damage they’re doing. This is maybe a reminder to not drive around cars in traffic. The damage could last years or forever,” Þorgerður explains. “What is going to be most challenging during the eclipse is that even when you come to a parking lot or you’re trying to find a place to stop, don’t just drive into wet grass or moss. You have to be patient.”

French tyre-mark protest

The author Kristín Helga gets the final word. Her final email to me would be published as a standalone, if we had the resources. She writes with profound skill, and the confidence of someone who realises she is on the crest of history.

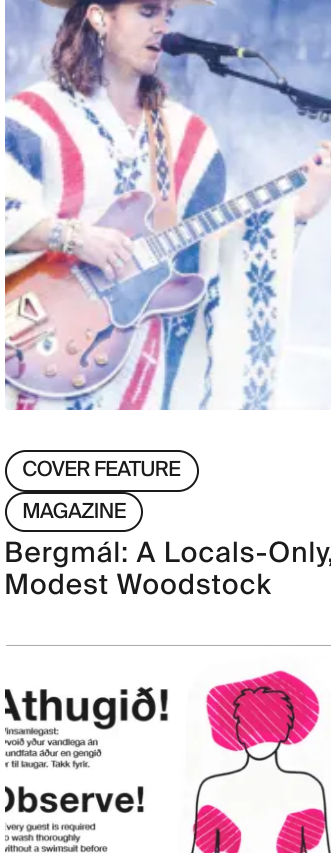
“It is great to see the public all around the island going mad over the French tyre tracks,” she writes. “Even the part-time minister of nature woke up and was shocked and promised strict laws in the future. We wait and see. And I look forward to seeing all these angry tyre-track people when we ask for

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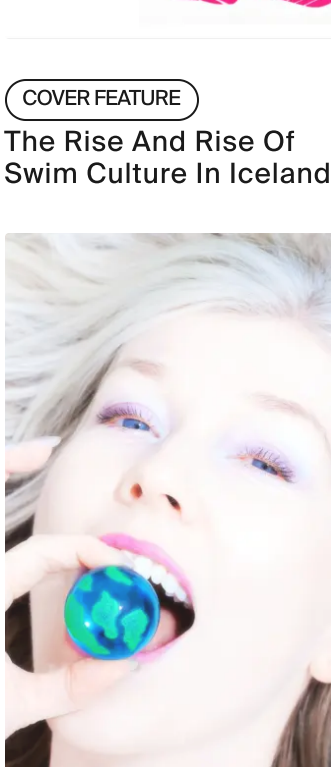
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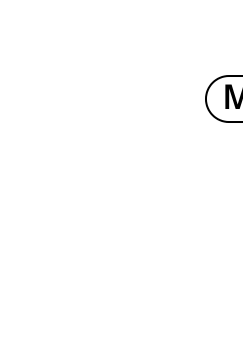
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protection for the fjords against polluting fish factories in the ocean. And when they join us in the plea for the protection of wetlands. And they are so welcome when we ask for mercy for the whales, seals and birds on the threatened-species lists. And when the angry tyre-marks people demand strict regulations for tourism and of course unite in the cry for one strong national highland park, that we so desperately need, we will welcome that reinforcement. All Icelanders are also bound to wake up and call for a strong independent ministry for the environment as soon as possible. And the massive opposition against the French tyre marks is sure to protest the privatisation of electrical production rights in the highlands. There would be a few tyre marks included in those ventures. So that is the bigger perspective.”

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