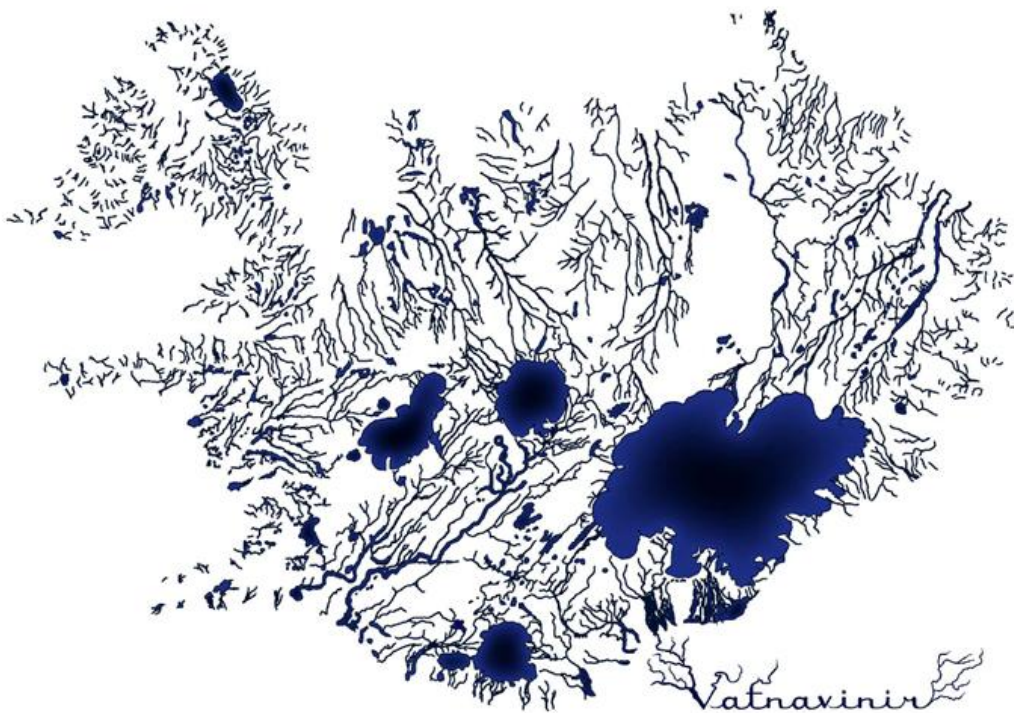


## PROFILES

### Vatnavinir, Friends of Water: Responsible Tourism

Capitalising on Iceland's unique geography, with its abundance of water and geothermal energy, multidisciplinary design consultancy Vatnavinir (Friends of Water) has created a strategy to bolster the country's tourism while minimising its impact on the environment.

Having recently won the 2011 global award for sustainable architecture by Locus Foundation under the patronage of Unesco, Stylus met with architects Sigrun Birgisdottir and Olga Gudrun Sigfusdottir to discuss their vision.



### Industrial Development

During the summer of 2008 The Kárahnjúkástífla Dam, the largest dam in Iceland, was constructed to feed power to the aluminium industry in the east of Iceland and develop jobs in the region. Despite being built in the name of the boosting the economy, the dam has been criticised for having devastating effects on the environment, such as flooding a prime wildlife region in the country.

In response to the effects of such a large-scale construction and with the hope of reversing a trend of non-sustainable and homogenous development in Iceland, Vatnavinir was born. A multidisciplinary team founded by nine people from different disciplines including architects, designers, philosophers and artists, set themselves a challenge: to find a balanced solution that allows for social and economic growth without forsaking environmental sustainability.



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ARTICLE REFERENCES

[Vatnavinir](#)  
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### Vision Thread



### The Rice Show

CULTURE / 02:00 / 21 JUL 2011

Known globally as 'The Rice Show', the Of All The People in All The World project is an installation and performance that uses grains of rice to... »



### 24-Hour Climate Reality

11:00 / 21 JUL 2011

It's been four years since the release of Al Gore's environmental film documentary An Inconvenient Truth, and now he is back with a new campaign -... »



### Health on Track

11:00 / 20 JUL 2011

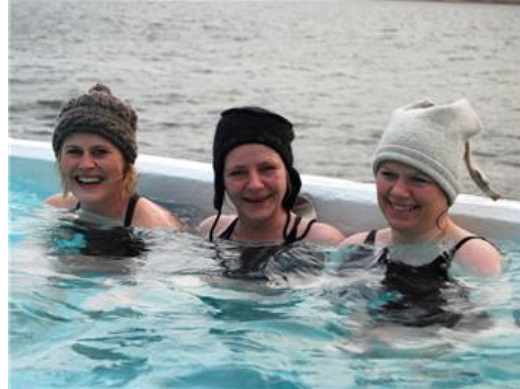
San Francisco-based audio accessories developer, Jawbone, has unveiled a wristband called Up that works in conjunction with a smartphone app to... »



### In.gredients: Packaging Free

05:00 / 19 JUL 2011

In.gredients – the first packaging-free supermarket in the US – will open in Austin, Texas this autumn. The branchchild of environmental conservation... »



### Commons: Compete for Good

03:00 / 18 JUL 2011

New York-based, creative technologist and interaction designer Suzanne Kirkpatrick has developed Commons – a game that helps urban communities to... »

The team works as a think tank, or as they describe it, a: “grass-roots cross-disciplinary discussion.” It considers the natural assets of the country and how to use them in a viable way, promoting Iceland’s nature and creating a platform for job development.

“We are looking at going from one-track large-scale solutions and considering how you can break that down into multiple smaller parts that talk more to the communities in the regions, in the areas that people live,” says Birgisdottir.

[VIEW ALL](#)



## Wellness Country Iceland

Vatnavinir’s integrated concept for its Wellness Country Iceland vision promotes health related tourism and nature conservation. It is creating geothermal centres across the country, to tap into the therapeutic effects of thermal bathing in natural environments.

With tourism on the rise, the team was concerned by the country’s existing approach. As Sigrun explains: “It’s also about diversifying the traffic around the country, we’ve got some catastrophic places like the geysers, where we’re directing 500,000 tourists every year. We have all these buses coming up and environmentally that’s not very sound.”

Vatnavinir’s intent is to create a sustainable strategy about how tourists are directed around the country. By creating more attractions around Iceland, tourists extend their travels and leave lighter footsteps with less impact on the landscape. Multiple attractions also bring economic activity to Iceland’s regions.

The designers identified water sources as a good place to start, particularly as several members of the team had been involved in creating the Blue Lagoon geothermal spa. The Blue Lagoon is designed sympathetically to its surroundings and has become an ecological icon of Iceland. As Sigrun observed “when you Google Iceland, the Blue Lagoon comes up, whilst years ago a picture of a geyser would have been the search result.”





Focusing on multiple small solutions, the team located natural pools and areas of geothermal water, but also considered the importance of pools where water has played an important part in history, such as a pool that was blessed by a bishop in the 13th century. "In our sagas we have stories of our Viking chieftains sitting in pools making huge political decisions for the future, which was the 'hotpot' culture of that time."

As inspiration, a key reference point was Japan, with over 1000 years of bathing culture that has evolved with numerous historically important pools and regional pools that have successfully translated into tourist destinations.

The social dynamic of Iceland's pools is not to be underestimated. As Birgisdottir notes: "Pools are our public places par excellence. We don't have a culture of the market square or the green square or the plaza or the parks as most European cities have... The 'hot pots' are the setting where it is normal to speak to people you don't know – everybody is equal and half naked in hot water. Like the Italian bar or the British pub – this is our social space."





With Vatnavinir's concept, the intention is to promote the local water sources, many of which were currently disused, as marketplaces for small businesses. Each regional pool would have its own character. The concept would bring together individuals and businesses and create new travel networks.

"The design of each place is always derived from what's there – it's about extracting qualities and reusing whatever is in each place," says Birgisdottir. The project is about drawing forth characteristics from each place and enabling the local community to define the identities of their local pools.

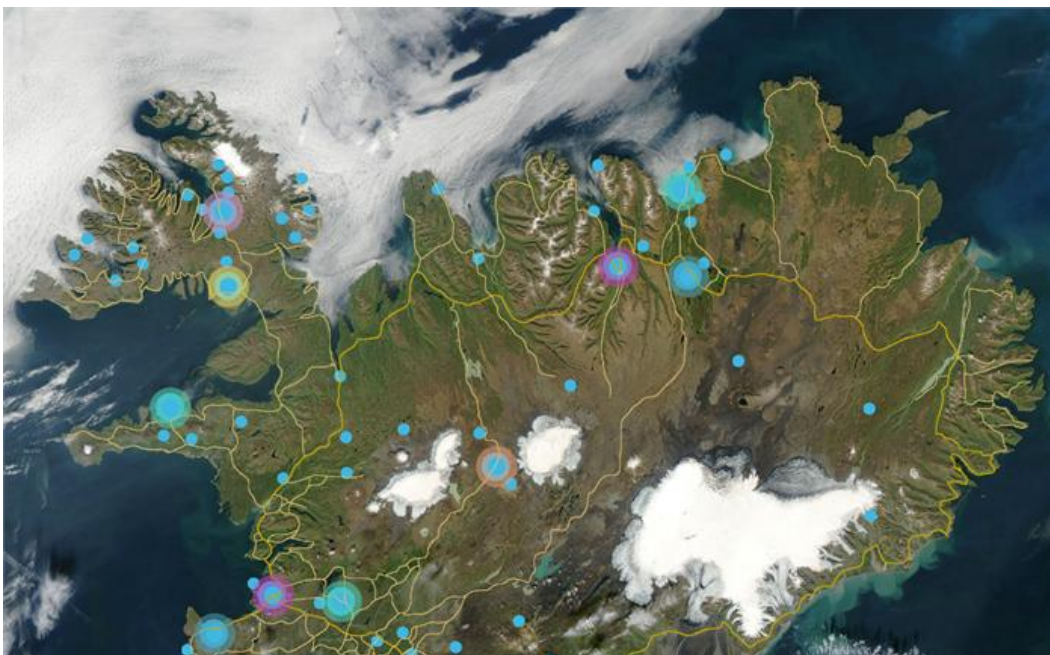
The development is often as much about carefully restoring old sites, protecting and preserving history, as creating new sites that thoughtfully integrate local materials and building styles in harmony with the landscape.



## Water Networks

Prior to this project, there was no map of the country's water sources. Vatnavinir's team set about identifying and measuring them as a key attraction for tourism. They measured and photographed all the pools – swimming pools, natural pools, cave pools, rock pools and spas in order to create a conclusive water map of all the surface water in Iceland.

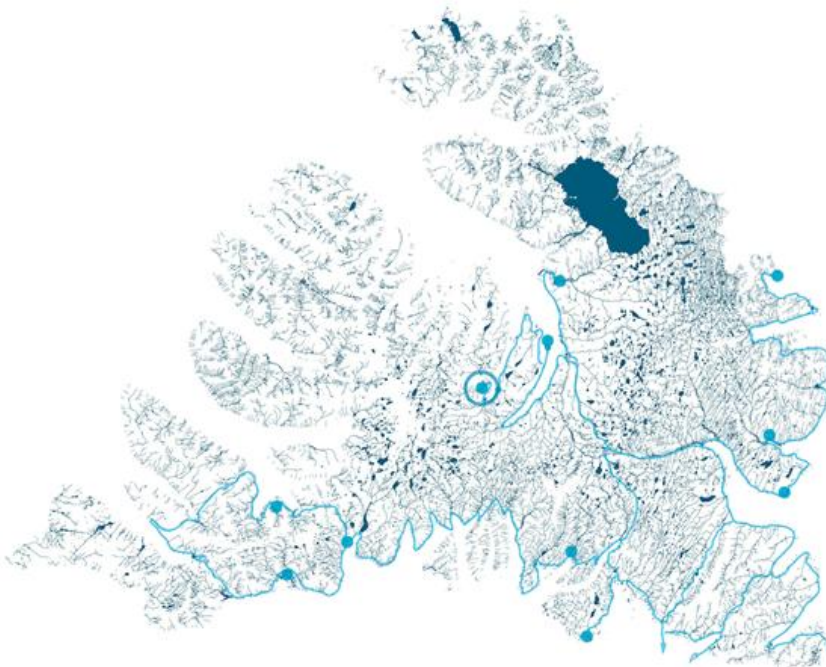
"The map was developed into a framework system of main stations that would act as the attractors for particular regions, like the Blue Lagoon. These would be larger regional centres offering therapies and food. There could also be satellite stations such as the old historical pools, the natural pools or the youth club pools from the 1920s and 1930s which could act as a wider web so people would be encouraged to travel around these areas," Birgisdottir explains.





The Westfjords were marked it out as a prime testing ground for the project. A fishing area in decline, the region attracts the least tourism in the country at just 2.5%. Vatnavinir Vestfjarða (The Westfjords Water Trail) became the pilot project and the first region to receive a grant to fund the work.

Boasting a number of sensitively designed and restored pools that work in harmony with the landscape the project support the local economy through employment, new local businesses, treatment and remedy sales, tours and travel packages.



## A Collective Vision

Each project needs the support of the local citizens whose involvement is essential. From the start, Vatnavinir involved "clusters" of individuals including the caretakers of existing pools and local stakeholders to provide knowledge of the area.

Spurred on by its ideology, the team has been functioning for over two years on "idealistic energy" says Birgisdóttir. However, in order to grow it needs financial support to secure the operational side of translating the vision into working

systems. It also needs funding to “run” the clusters and enable them to become independent.



## Stylus Summary

Friends of Water diversify tourists away from national tourist sites, promoting multiple smaller attractions, the impact of which leaves a lighter footprint on the landscape.

Sustainable development is about considering what is already there. Repair, restore and protect the existing environment before adding to it.

Living in harmony with the environment: Friends of Water consider natural assets to be a source for social and economic development.

### ARTICLE REFERENCES

[Vatnavinir](#)  
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