

Iceland national day

Seafood, sustainable energy and aurora borealis

Iceland celebrates 70 years of independence

Hannes Heimisson
AMBASSADOR OF ICELAND

Today, June 17, is not only our National Day, but also the 70th anniversary of our independence and the establishment of the Republic of Iceland. The National Day celebration is a family event and the Icelandic population has every reason to be in a festive mood today. Celebrations will be held all across the country and include events such as parades, concerts, exhibitions, sporting events, dances and fireworks.

Icelanders have a reason to be proud of their achievements since gaining full independence in 1944. We moved from being one of the poorest countries in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century to being among the leaders in the U.N. Development Index. Central to our development has been our natural resources in the sea and underground. We have led the way in establishing sustainable management of marine resources and we have harnessed Iceland's abundant hydro- and geothermal energy.

Here in Japan, the 70th anniversary of the independence of Iceland provides an oppor-

tunity to reflect on our long-standing friendship.

Strong political ties

Japan has been an important and longstanding trading partner since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1956. We have a long history of shared values and regard Japan among one of our strongest global partners. Our political ties have never been as strong, which is reflected in bilateral ministerial visits and increased international cooperation across various fields. The establishment of a new Japanese Embassy in Reykjavik with a resident ambassador this year is a good example of this. We have also developed close relations in the fields of education and student exchanges. Our people are fascinated by each other's cultures, with Japanese being the second most popular foreign language taught at the University of Iceland, after English.

The Arctic is another important area where we have common interests. Iceland very much welcomed Japan's admittance into the Arctic Council as a permanent observer last year. Iceland's economic progress and well-being has for centuries been shaped by the natural riches and climatic conditions of the north. For that reason we have vested inter-



Above, Snaefellsnes is a peninsula in western Iceland and home to fishing villages.

Right, the Krafla Power Station, located near the Krafla Volcano, is Iceland's largest geothermal power station



estment in the favorable development of the Arctic. Iceland and Japan also share the same vision of cohabitation and cooperation in the Arctic on the basis of the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Our nations may be distant neighbors, yet they are like-minded and share many characteristics. We are islanders with seafaring traditions and strong cultural identities marked by centuries of isolation. Our nations are regularly reminded of the forces of nature such as frequent earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. We have also become experts in harnessing the richness of nature through sustainable fishing and the use of geothermal resources for producing hot water and electricity. We also appreciate soaking and relaxing in natural hot baths.

Our most important export to the Japanese market is seafood, for which Iceland enjoys a reputation for high quality, a key point as Japanese are among the most discerning seafood consumers in the world. The most popular seafood items are *graluda* (*karasugarei* in Japanese), or halibut; *karfi* (*akauo* in Japanese), or haddock; *capelin* (*shishamo* in Japanese), or smelt; mackerel (*saba* in Japanese); and salmon. Icelandic Japan, one of Iceland's leading

seafood companies, has been the biggest operator in this market for decades.

We are also very proud of the success of Icelandic eiderdown in the Japanese market. This is a unique natural product, which has become quite popular in Japan. The prestigious Nishikawa Sangyo company has been a successful importer of this important Icelandic product for years.

Geothermal utilization

Iceland and Japan have also been strengthening their collaboration in the field of geothermal energy. Japan is now looking at new ways to integrate renewables into its energy market, something that presents both challenges and

rich opportunities. Iceland and Japan will be close partners in this endeavor, as we have a common duty to address climate change by means of promoting clean energy and initiatives toward a clean energy transformation around the globe. We believe that Japan can draw an important lesson from the Icelandic experience in utilizing geothermal resources, which dates back more than 80 years. In 1930 the first building in Reykjavik, a primary school, was connected to district geothermal heating. Today 98 percent of the energy used in Iceland is green and sustainable. The benefits for the economy are enormous. Last year our total economic ben-

efit from using sustainable geothermal resources for district heating instead of fossil fuels equaled 6.5 percent of Iceland's GDP.

Tourism is another sector which has grown substantially in the past few years. Tourists from Japan are very much welcome in Iceland. They love to visit during the winter months to enjoy the wonders of the aurora borealis (northern lights), the beautiful scenery and untouched wilderness.

Trade, cultural exchanges and tourism are all powerful forces to bring the people of Iceland and Japan together and as ambassador I look forward to seeing these links grow ever stronger over the coming years.



Sigurdur Ingi Johannsson, minister of environment and natural resources and minister of fisheries and agriculture of Iceland (left) meets with his Japanese counterpart Yoshimasa Hayashi on Feb. 18 in Tokyo. EMBASSY OF ICELAND

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