

Tegan Billiot

The Lowlander Center

Iceland Post-Travel Report

6 June 2018

On May 27th, Savannah Ancar and I travelled to Reykjavik, Iceland, to participate in the NAACP Coastal Youth Climate Justice Delegation to Iceland, also known as Linkages Across the Sea Level Rise Continuum. Five youth delegates participated on this trip.

Savannah Ancar represented the Grand Bayou Tribe in Louisiana. Rodney Woods, Jr. represented



Delegates from left to right are: Kristen Brown, Antonio Green, Tegan Billiot, Savannah Ancar, and Rodney Woods, Jr. *Photo by Jasmine Bazinet-Phillips.*

Thibodaux, Louisiana. I represented the Pointe-au-Chien Tribe in Louisiana. Kristen Brown represented Hawaii, specifically Ewa Beach, and Antonio Green represented Gulfport, Mississippi. I appreciate the Lowlander Center for making my experience in Iceland possible and recognize that the best type of learning is experiential.

What I liked about this trip were the two days we spent on full day tours and the time we spoke with Petur Halldorsson, a leader with an Icelandic environmental youth group. We participated in the Southern Coast Tour on Tuesday and the Golden Circle Tour on Wednesday. We learned the history and impact of what we saw through the perspective of Haukur Simonarson, our bus driver and tour guide from Hawkbus Travel.



The pipelines (left) transport the energy to nearby communities from this edge of the large geothermal power plant (not pictured) outside of Reykjavik, Iceland. *Photo by Tegan Billiot.*

On the Southern Coast Tour, we saw cleaner sources of energy, a glacier, and the land and lakes where that glacier once stood. We saw one of the world's largest geothermal power plants. Geothermal power is the main energy source for a majority of the island. The particular plant we saw provides the city of Reykjavik and the surrounding areas with more than 90% of the power consumed. We later learned that although geothermal power is cleaner than the

burning of fossil fuels, it still poses a risk to the air quality which negatively affects individuals with respiratory issues such as asthma and bronchitis. When we exited the bus for a clearer look at the facility, I immediately and distinctly smelled sulfur in the air. Although I am uncertain as to what emissions cause or worsen respiratory issues, I can easily understand how the high levels of hydrogen sulfide in the air could pose a threat to the people who live there. The smell nauseated me, and I could not eat the bread I bought from a nearby café that cooked using geothermal kitchens because of the lingering scent. This memory serves to remind me how the people who live there are probably quite used to the smell and likely do not recognize the scent as a cause for concern unless they have respiratory issues already.

Also on the Southern Coast Tour, we walked around a glacier in Myrdalshreppur, Iceland. I witnessed how far the



Due to global warming, Icelandic glaciers (right) melt and shrink slowly exposing land and creating new lakes (left). *Photo by Tegan Billiot.*

glacier has receded in the last sixty years. A valley of land and small lakes exists where a tall glacier used to reside. Seeing how much glacier melted during that time reminded me of how much land has been lost in my community in the last sixty years. Although I did not personally witness the gradual change, I know what it looks like now in comparison to the stories my grandfather and other tribal elders have recounted. That kind of loss is indicative of man-made

climate change.



Youth delegates pictured with Petur Halldorsson from Young Environmentalists. *Photo by Jasmine Bazinet-Phillips.*

We only had the opportunity to meet with Halldorsson from the Iceland's Young Environmentalists organization once, on Thursday night, and he was the first and only individual we spoke with who had research-based knowledge on climate change and Iceland's efforts to save the environment. He explained the relative quality of each type of energy source and tried to help us understand why

solar and wind powers operate the cleanest for the environment in comparison to geothermal, hydro, and fossil-burning sources. The Young Environmentalists work to bring awareness and change throughout Iceland in favor of a cleaner, healthier environment. Halldorsson and his peers are currently trying to create an arctic youth alliance for climate change. I admire their understanding that combating sea level rise and climate change requires a global effort.

In Iceland, I learned more about the relative safety of various sources of energy, how the island is gaining land over time, and how to better be an activist in my community. As aforementioned, geothermal power affects individuals with respiratory issues. Halldorsson taught us that the renewable sources of solar and wind powers are best for the environment in terms of usage. Clean energy is renewable and does not harm the environment through its use.

In an article assigned by the NAACP Environmental Climate Justice Program (ECJ) fellows, we learned Iceland is gaining land each year. Iceland grew over two tectonic plates – the North American plate and the European plate. These plates are diverging, or moving apart. As they move apart, magma rises through the boundary, hardens, and forms approximately three to five inches of land per year. Additionally, each year as the glacier melts revealing land underneath where water does not collect, the island loses weight that allows it to gradually rise from the sea water. I still do not know how, or even if, these phenomena impact Iceland directly other than the change in habitats for animals that may live on or near glaciers, but I do understand that these occurrences directly increase sea level rise which has an indirect affect on my community in south Louisiana.

The NAACP ECJ fellows mainly strived to teach us how to be activists when we returned home. We spent a great deal of time learning how to create action plans, who we should contact for change to occur in the communities we live in, and why we should recognize the power each of us holds to accomplish the seemingly impossible. This trip was a leadership retreat as well as a climate change seminar. From what they taught us, I was proud of my tribe for its accomplishments in already performing many of these tasks.

I thought it was an important trip to be part of because my experiences – what I saw and our conversations with the Icelandic people – cannot be taken away from me. Following what I have seen, no one can tell me that global warming or climate change is not real. That knowledge is not blind faith. Although it never was due to how I have witnessed sea level rise in my own community, I can say with much more confidence how these phenomena exist.



Three different perspectives I captured of the Seljalandsfoss (waterfall). *Photos by Tegan Billiot.*

Since our return on June 2nd, I would like to thank the Lowlander Center for sponsoring Savannah and me on this trip. I believe the delegation deserved to have indigenous voices present, and you provided that. My sincere hope is that our experiences impact the beliefs of others to help spread the awareness of sea level rise and call to action those who may have an impact on the future.