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Doing Fieldwork at Home:

Enchanted Spots in Strandir Area

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Abstract

Doing fieldwork in one’s own community can be both interesting and complicated. In such research it is always important to be aware of one’s position, both within the community and with regards to the research project. In 2013, we researched stories of álagablettir (Eng. Enchanted Spots) in the Strandir area, Iceland. These enchanted spots are places in nature on which some form of prohibition or enchantment applies, often related to stories of the supernatural, such as hidden people. The article focuses on the methodology of the research, examining both the advantages and complications that can arise when doing fieldwork in one’s community. Mediating the findings of such research back to the community is extremely important. One should not do research on the people of a certain community, but rather with them. Such mediation can also offer an interesting continuance to the project.

Keywords

Fieldwork, Methodology, Enchanted spots, Iceland, Folklore

Introduction

When I agreed to research enchanted spots and cursed places with my father in the summer of 2013, I did not realise that it would include waking up at 7 AM on Sunday mornings, walking more than I had done in the whole year before combined, or struggling through beaches filled with angry arctic terns protecting their young. Those were, nevertheless, some of the many adventures I experienced that summer whilst doing fieldwork.

In the summer of 2013, in collaboration with my father (a folklorist and the co-author of this article) I did research on *Álagablettir* (Eng. enchanted spots) in the Strandir area, our local community. Enchanted spots are places in nature on which some form of prohibition or enchantment applies, often related to stories of the supernatural, such as hidden people (Gunnell 2018, 27-42).[1] The aim of our research was to create an exhibition in a local museum (The Sheep Farming Museum), where stories of these enchanted spots would be told, as they often relate to farming and how farmers interact with the landscape.

Although the main fieldwork for this research was conducted roughly ten years ago, we recently published a book in Icelandic about our findings, reflecting on the material

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[1] On hidden people, see, for example, Gunnell 2007, 111-130.

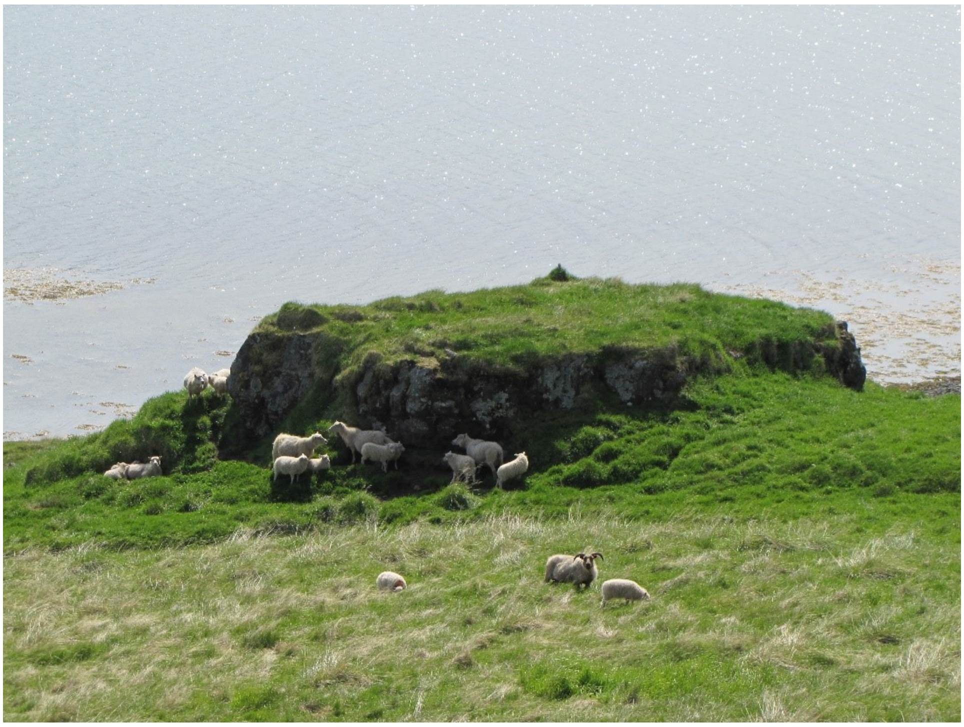
(Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir and Jón Jónsson 2021). In this article, the focus will be on the methodology of the research, examining both the advantages and complications that can arise when doing fieldwork ‘at home’. We will also highlight the importance of mediating such research back to the community itself and discuss what must be kept in mind when doing so. First, however, it is important to put our research in context by delving a bit further into the ideas and stories of these enchanted spots.

Enchanted Spots in Strandir

Enchanted spots, as noted above, are places in nature on which some form of enchantment has been placed. Such sites vary greatly and include patches of grass, hills and mounds, slopes and hollows, cliffs, and rocks, and even rivers and lakes, however, they have in common the idea that they have in some way been affected by something supernatural (Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir and Jón Jónsson 2021, 23-31). As folklorist Terry Gunnell has noted, “legends directly connected to these surroundings function alongside place names to give landscape depth, history, personality and mysticism” (Gunnell 2018, 27). As he also notes, these stories are some of the most common legends still told in the countryside of Iceland.

Stories about enchanted sites in Iceland are often associated with hidden people (Valdimar Tr. Hafstein 2000, 89-95). Those sites can be big rocks or hills which were believed to be the homes of the hidden people, or specific patches of grass where it is prohibited to cut grass because the hidden people needed it to feed their farm animals. If someone breaks the prohibition, revenge will be sought, and they are punished. The most common punishment being the death of the farmer's best animal (best milking cow or riding horse), although in some cases it can be more severe, such as illness or even death of a family member (Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir and Jón Jónsson 2021, 48-49).

An example of such as legend is the one told of *Kastalinn* (Eng. The Castle) a rock formation which used to belong to the farm Hlíð in Kollafjörður. Hidden people are said to live in the rocks and on top of it grows grass, which it is forbidden to cut, as it belongs to the hidden people. A farmer named Oddur Lýðsson (1852-1937) moved to Hlíð and soon after, in 1914, he decided to cut the grass on Kastalinn. According to the stories, he dismissed the warnings of an old woman, Oddhildur Jónsdóttir, who had been living with him, paying little heed to such superstition. However, he had many setbacks with his livestock that same year. It is said that Oddur was tempted to cut the grass on the site for a second time many years later. The misfortune to then befall him was the loss of a beautiful and promising heifer. The story goes that he made an agreement to sell this fine cow to his neighbour. As he travelled between landholdings on his way to deliver the cow to its new owner, he stopped where he had business with another farmer and accepted coffee refreshment as was customary in the area. The cow was tied to a post during his visit, but when he planned to continue his travels, he found that it had hung itself in the rope. This caused Oddur to suffer a heavy financial loss and he never cut the grass at *Kastalinn* again, nor has anyone since (Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir and Jón Jónsson 2021, 50).



A photograph of *Kastalinn*, taken in the summer of 2013 by the authors. © Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir and Jón Jónsson.

However, not all legends telling of such enchanted spots are connected to the belief in hidden people. Other such places include stories of ancient gravemounds with treasure buried inside, something that is well known in Nordic migratory legends about people who try to break into grave mounds to steal treasure and break a taboo of silence by noting that a close-by farm or church seems to be on fire (Gunnell 2018, 31; Gunnell 2019, 96-97). Other legends connected to such places are, for example, connected to fishing, waters and lakes where it is said that no one will ever drown in the water again nor will there be any fish there, and dangerous traveling roads, which note that 20 people will fall to their deaths when crossing a dangerous canyon there. Most often, according to the story, 19 men have already met their demise in this way, but the canyon is still waiting for its last victim (Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir and Jón Jónsson 2021, 96-97). All these stories, as noted by Gunnell provide a kind of map of how one should interact with the landscape: “what is right, what is wrong, *when* are they right or wrong, and *how* punishment is likely to descend on you if you transgress the largely unwritten moral rules imposed by society” (Gunnell 2018, 27).

It is important to underline that these stories are not specific to the Strandir area, similar stories of enchanted places can be found all over Iceland, although there are more of them in the western half of the country. These stories and beliefs also share many similarities to stories told in neighbouring countries such as Ireland and Scotland, as well as the Nordic countries, which is something that must also be kept in mind (Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir and Jón Jónsson 2021, 32).

When looking for these stories and places, we went through four main archival databases which might include stories of enchanted spots:

1. Published in folktale collections, mostly collected in the late 19th and early 20th century.[2]
2. Place-name archives at the Árni Magnússon Institute, where all the place names at specific farms are documented along with an explanation or origin story for the name, where possible (mostly collected between 1930-1980 in the Strandir area).[3]
3. The sound archives at the Árni Magnússon Institute which contains a large store of sound archives from all over Iceland. Many of them have now been made available in an online database: www.ismus.is. This material was collected in the mid-20th century by various people from the Institute and the state radio who travelled the country to collect various kinds of folklore material such as legends, wonder tales, songs, rhymes and so on. Most of the interviewees were born around and before 1900.[4]
4. Questionnaires sent out by the National Museum of Iceland, asking people in Iceland about various aspects of their lives past and present. This source material is invaluable and provides great insights into the lives and minds of the people who answered them.[5]

At the beginning of our research, we looked through the material found in these archives, noting down places which could be categorised as enchanted spots. We then set out to visit all of them, conducting interviews with the farmers and taking photographs of the places. However, during our research, it soon became clear that some of the stories connected to these places are only found in oral tradition and had never been documented. When speaking to the farmers in the area they would point us in the direction of more places, telling us stories they had heard when they themselves were younger. Occasionally, we also showed new inhabitants enchanted spots on their farmland which they were unaware of.

One explanation why so many of these stories have not yet been documented might be that people thought that they did not have any relevance for others than the farmer at the time, and some of the stories are also relatively short. Sometimes they are not really stories but could be categorized as what Carl Wilhelm von Sydow called “dites” or belief statements, which only note that specific places cannot be harvested or ruined, or else something bad will happen. Terry Gunnell has called such statements ‘potential legends’, as it refers to oral tradition and could be taken further into a legend format if the informant is encouraged to explain (Gunnell 2018, 28). This is something that we often saw, when speaking to our informants, who when asked about a place which was simply noted as an enchanted spot in the archives, could tell more detailed stories and legends in relation to it.

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[2] More information can be found on *https://sagnagrunnur.com* an Icelandic legend database, which contains information on 10,110 published legends from 19 published legend collections, although only a small portion of those legends focus on enchanted spots.

[3] Database over those files is now available online on the webpage www.nafndid.is.

[4] See, the online database, https://ismus.is.

[5] See, the online database, https://sarpur.is under the category *Þjóðhættir - svör.*

In the last years, the number of residents in the rural parts of Strandir has declined greatly and valuable information and stories about people's cohabitation with their environment has already been lost. It is also clear from our research that the threat of losing such important knowledge increases as individual farmers discontinue their work, farms are abandoned, or change hands. There does seem to be an element of chance as to whether knowledge is conserved for future generations, with some sites in Strandir only mentioned one time in one source and others only being found in oral tradition. This depends among other things on how interested in folklore material for example the writers of the place name archives were, whether or not they would dismiss such stories or include them.

Doing Fieldwork at Home

Doing fieldwork is important when researching people's connections to specific spaces and places. It was important for us to visit each of the enchanted spots to get a better idea of how they were situated in the landscape, as well as where they were located, in relation to the farmhouse itself, keeping in mind how the current farmers interact with these places today. The context is important and would not have been accessible to us outside the field. During our fieldwork, we met the current farmers, spoke to them, and conducted loosely structured interviews. We usually showed up unannounced but always received a warm welcome, something that might have been affected by us being a part of the community and familiar with all the farmers beforehand. Usually, we would walk with our informants from the farm to these enchanted spots, when they were close to the farmhouses, hearing their stories on the way and at the place itself. As has been noted by several scholars, such walking interviews are an ideal technique for exploring issues around people's relationships with a specific space (Jones, Evans and Ricketts 2008, 2). Being in the place offered a better understanding of their relationships to the place, as in some places the farmers had taken specific care of their spot, even fencing it off, to make sure that it would not be ruined. Something that could become clear at the place but is impossible to know whether or not it would have come up in an interview. In other places, the contradictions between what was said and what was then seen in the place itself was also interesting. In one place, where it was forbidden to mow the grass from a specific spot, the farmer said that he did not believe in those stories, however, when we approached the spot, it was easily recognizable, as it was the only place in the field that had indeed not been cut.

A photograph of an enchanted spot, taken in the summer of 2013 by the authors. This particular spot is the burial site of the settler of the farm, grass cannot be taken from it nor can it be ruined in any way © Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir and Jón Jónsson.

Most of our informants were older men, born in the early 20th century, living on farms where there were stories of enchanted spots. While we would meet both the man and the woman of the house, the men often took on the role of the storyteller and guide. This is in accordance with what Linda Dégh has noted on storytelling, where women's storytelling was often classified as a secondary matter and limited to the realm of the family, the entertainment of children and the communal workplaces of women, while men's storytelling was more public (Dégh 1989, 93; see also Júlíana Þóra Magnúsdóttir 2022 for the situation in Iceland). Something that reflects the social construction of different gender roles in the Western countries of the past.[6] However, this could also be affected by the fact that often the men had grown up on the farm, while the women had grown up somewhere else but moved to their husband's family farm, something that historically is not uncommon in Iceland.[7] The men were therefore more likely to be able to tell us the stories they had heard of these places when growing up, as well as their connection to them as children, as sometimes children are forbidden to play around such enchanted spots. Another explanation might be that the work division on the farm is still a bit gendered, and male farmers more often oversee outdoor tasks such as haymaking or other things that might risk the ruining an enchanted spot. In some cases, we would enter the farmhouse and sit down in the kitchen and talk to more of the household, however, when it came to going outside, most often only the male farmer would accompany us. Perhaps, this gendered labour division also makes it their task to guide researchers around the property, to these enchanted spots located away from the home.[8]

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[6] As various scholars have identified, in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, as a result of increasing democracy and the growth of the bourgeoisie, a shift took place in the Western world with regard to the way people thought about gender roles, meaning that the gap between the genders widened (Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir 2011, 74-75 and 81). This shift had a long-term influence and as a result in many Western countries, women were meant to stay at home and oversee the private space, while men went outside to work and were in charge of the public space. In the rural society of Iceland, however, things were a little more complicated, as the sharp separation between public and private space did not apply. Farms were both home and workplace, and both sexes worked together even though their fields of work tended to be different (Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir 2011, 83; cf. Abrams 2005, 192-93 on gender and power in Shetland; and Laura Stark on gender and power in Finland).

[7] See, Júlíana Þóra Magnúsdóttir 2021.

Here it is also important to note the effect of how well we knew the community. Philosopher Sandra Harding has noted the need for "strong objectivity" which stresses that the researcher must always be aware of not only where knowledge comes from but also their connection to the project, since researchers can never be completely disinterested (Harding 1996, 244). This means that before starting out and drawing conclusions, researchers must always ask themselves exactly why they are engaged in this particular research and consider how their relationship to the project might affect its findings (Harding 1998, 3-4). As Rannveig Traustadóttir has pointed out, researchers never appear out of thin air. They have various backgrounds and are bound to have been affected by their experiences (Rannveig Traustadóttir 2007, 29).[9]

My father was born in 1968 and raised in the area and after moving to the capital Reykjavík to study folkloristics at the University of Iceland, he returned to the area in the year 2000. I therefore lived in Strandir since I was six years old. Although the place is rural, as farms are scattered around the area, it is a small and tight-knit community and it is often said to be the kind of place where everyone knows everyone. At the time in which we started our research I had just started studying at the University of Iceland, but my father was a well-established folklorist and scholar in the area, having worked on various projects and mediation of legends and stories in the past, such as establishing the Museum of Sorcery and Witchcraft which is in the area.

Us being a part of the community was helpful in many ways, however, it could also be more problematic. As folklorists Lisa Gilman and John Fenn have noted 'insiders' often already have the cultural competence and contacts with members of the community, which might make it easier to access information related to the project (Gilman and Fenn 2019, 17). The fact that we visited each of the farms that were connected to stories of enchanted spots, was also important as it saved us from biases in choosing our informants. However, as Jón knew of many good storytellers and folklore enthusiasts in the area, we visited them in addition to those that we met on the farms, to gather further information. In some cases, though, Jón's status as a well-known scholar within the community could prove to be problematic, as some people feared that they would say something incorrect and that they would come across as ignorant. In those cases, it was better for me to approach them, as a twenty-year-old female who had only recently started University. The power dynamics between informants and the collectors is something that must always be kept in mind when collecting folklore material and something that can become especially clear when doing fieldwork at home.[10] Nevertheless, due to our connection to the area and the people, we also felt that we were trusted with the information, something that is extremely important when discussion things like the supernatural which can be perceived as taboo (Söderström 2016, 20; 64-72). People would tell us of their own experiences, it is hard to tell whether or not they would have told anyone else. This is something that always must be kept in mind as it might create ethical concerns about how the information can be used. It is important not to misuse the trust of the informants. In this case, it was from the beginning very clear to all our informants that the information would be used for the exhibition. However, the informants were not placed at the centre of the exhibition but rather the places themselves. The information from the interviews was not directly connected to individual farmers with quotes, but rather used to give a general idea of the story of a place or beliefs in such stories and supernatural beings.

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[8] Naturally, there were some exceptions to this.

[9] See also Palmenfelt 1993, 143-167 and Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir 2011, on the idea of "reflectivity" in folkloristics.

However, it is also possible that due to our closeness to our informants we were also too careful in choosing our questions, avoiding topics that we thought might be difficult to discuss for our informants, as we did not want to cause them any distress. Thereby we also made assumptions about our informants based on how well we knew them, something that an outsider might not have, and it is very well possible that such questions concerning more difficult aspects and experiences might have given us interesting insights into these beliefs and stories. As Lisa Gilman and John Fenn have noted, integrating the perspectives of multiple people in research can produce a more nuanced outcome (Gilman and Fenn 2019, 13). From our experience, it is clear that it is beneficial for research of this kind to work with a mixed group of researchers, both from within the community and outside of it.

Mediating Back to the Community

As noted at the beginning, the aim of the research was from the beginning to create an exhibition in the area, on these places and the people's stories. The mediation of the project was therefore intended to be visual and aimed towards the public, both those who lived within the community and had shared their stories with us, but also due to its location in the museum, travellers who were interested in the topic.

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[10] On power relations in collection see, Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir 2020, 17-43; and Foucault 1991, 193.

On September 7th in 2013 (the magical date: 7, 9, 13) the exhibition was opened at the Sheep Farming Museum. On the evening of the opening, there was a short seminar on the project, where we, along with a fellow folklorist Rakel Valgeirsdóttir, gave presentations on the topic.[11] The exhibition was intended as a temporary one but stayed up for 8 years as it was quite popular and had made its way into various travelling books and sites. The exhibition consisted of information on these places, stories, photographs, interviews from the sound archive at the Árni Magnússon Institute, and a map which showed the placement of these spots. Eight places were highlighted especially in the exhibition, those places were supposed to show the range, both in the types of places (from rocks inhabited by hidden people to cursed lakes and waters), and their geographical distribution in the area.

While working on the exhibition, several complications came up. Some of the stories related to the enchanted spots are more complicated and tragic than others, and often, these stories are quite contemporaneous. One such story is the one of *Goðdalur*, a valley where there was an enchanted spot, which according to the enchantment could not be tampered with in any way. In December 1948, a snow avalanche fell on the farm *Goðdalur* and as a result, six people lost their lives. This was traced back to the fact that the farmer, Jóhann Kristmundsson, who lived there was said to have ruined such an enchanted spot when he built a new house for his family ten years earlier. In fact, according to the stories he had not paid any heed to the warnings of his father who asked him to spare the spot. According to legends, his father told him that nothing bad would happen while he was alive, but he could not make any promises after that, and earlier that autumn of 1948 he had passed away. After the avalanche fell on the house, Jóhann the farmer lay in the snow for four days before he was finally found and rescued. Everyone else who were in the house at the time of the accident lost their lives; his wife, their two daughters (eight and two years old), his elderly aunt, her daughter and grandson. The farmer and his wife had three more children who were away for school when the avalanche fell, each of them have described the awful experience of being told the news of what had happened (Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir and Jón Jónsson 2021, 117-124). Two of them were still alive when we opened the exhibition.

This story raised some ethical concerns, about how to include such a tragic accident in the exhibition. It was impossible not to include it, as it is one of the best-known stories of enchanted spots in Iceland and people in the area made such a strong connection between the accident and the ruining of the enchanted spot. This connection is made repeatedly in the sound archives at the Árni Magnússon Institute, and the connection was not only local and made by individuals, but also by the media. While the farmer was still hospitalised after the accident national newspapers published news highlighting this connection. One journalist published an interview with the farmer, asking him whether it was true that the accident was caused by him building on an enchanted spot, something that he agrees to in the interview, the headline of the article reading "Tragedy in Goðdalur: Ruined the Enchanted Spot: Now the House is in Ruins" (N.N. 1949, 5-7). Here, our connection to the community once again had an effect, as it was important to us to frame the exhibition in a way that we, as scholars, curators and locals, were not saying that the accident was caused by the ruining of the enchanted spot, only that this connection had been made by the community at the time. In this regard, it is always important to be aware of how one's choices as a researcher can impact a community and particular people in it. It is important to consider choices such as this one with sensitivity to the social and emotional factors of the people it could affect.

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[11] Rakel has also done research on Enchanted spots in part of the area on which we focused, the municipality Árneshreppur.

The accident shook the whole community at the time, but as was the case with many difficult things in the past, it was not discussed much in the area or by the relatives of the people who lost their lives. It became clear to us that by including it in the exhibition it offered a chance for discussion and perhaps also healing; as many scholars have pointed out, storytelling can be a powerful tool in a healing process (see, for example, Tangherlini 1998, XIII; Lawless 2001). The strong connection to stories of enchanted spots was however vital.

We did make a different decision about a case, where we found a story in which the death of a young boy in the 1950s was connected to the ruining of an enchanted spot. However, this connection between the accident and the belief in enchanted spots was only mentioned once in a folktale collection focusing on such places. Therefore, we thought it was a strong possibility that descendants and family members had not even heard of this connection and that it was therefore too sensitive, so we decided not to include it in the exhibition. Asking such ethical questions of how one's research will affect the community, and the people in it, is naturally important for all researchers, regardless of their connection to the community.

It is always important to mediate research back into the community in which it was collected. In this case, bringing the tradition back to the community stimulates the narrative traditions and its impacts for the community. It also offered opportunities for healing, as mentioned above. In general, it was our experience that people within the community were grateful, both for the opportunity to share their stories as well as to be able to visit the exhibition, to learn about other similar stories, learn more about their environment and home area, and even share their stories with family members, friends, and the younger generation.

The mediation of findings can also have unforeseen benefits for the researcher. The exhibition offered the possibility of further discussions and the collection of more stories and material. After the opening of the exhibition, we received recordings and letters including stories of enchanted spots that we had not heard of before and people who visited the exhibition would sometimes tell us stories, both related to enchanted spots and their own supernatural experiences and connections. This was a pleasant surprise. Naturally, we were not always at the museum ourselves, but as we were also part of the community, people would tell us their stories when running into us, and we collected many stories by the fridge in the grocery store.

It is important to make the results of research of this kind as accessible as possible, something that can be done with various ways of mediation, as had been the case in public folklore for many years. Such mediation projects could include creating exhibitions, writing books, giving talks, making podcasts, documentaries and so on. It is important to note, though, that the collaboration with the community could be taken further than we did all these years ago, for example by including the informants in the analysis of the data and in choosing the method of mediation (see, for example Tedlock, 1987 on dialogical anthropology). The researcher's relationship with the community could also be more interactive, such as the researcher actively responding to the community's interest in topics by producing academically reliable research and presenting it in a way accessible to the community. It is important to keep in mind that returning the findings of research to the community is in increasing demand, often encouraged by institutions and funding bodies.

Conclusion

Engaging in fieldwork can be challenging, yet it is incredibly rewarding. The field is often filled with surprises, and often the advantages of doing fieldwork do not become apparent until it has been concluded. Being able to do work with people in this way is a great privilege, and the opportunity to hearing people's stories should never be taken for granted.

While writing this article the importance of reflecting back on one's research and methodology became clear. A great deal has changed since we conducted our research a decade ago, and certainly there are things we would do differently now. Conducting fieldwork 'at home', introduced a nuanced set of dynamics. It is always important to reflect on one's position, both within the community and in relation to the project itself, and to be mindful of potential biases. Ideally, working with a diverse group of researchers, both insiders and outsiders in the community, is beneficial as it brings varied perspectives and strengths. Mediating the research findings back to the community is of utmost importance, not to do research on a community but with it. This was something that our informants deeply appreciated but could have been taken even further by involving them more in the analysis of data and the method of mediation.

Recommended Reading

For those who are just starting out doing fieldwork, we recommend the *Handbook for Folklore and Ethnomusicology Fieldwork* (2019) by Lisa Gilman and John Fenn, as the book is extremely accessible and includes various exercises which can be helpful. When doing fieldwork at home we found Sandra Harding's articles (noted in the list of sources) on the concept of standpoint theory particularly useful. For anyone interested in Icelandic folk legends and their interplay with the landscape, we recommend Terry Gunnell's article 'The Power in the Place' (2018), Valdimar Hafstein's 'The Elves' Point of View Cultural Identity in Contemporary Icelandic Elf-Tradition' (2000) and Matthias Egeler's book *Landscape, Religion and the Supernatural: Nordic Perspectives on Landscape Theory* (2024).

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