

Bearing witness to the scale of the climate crisis

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In August 2019, I took part in a unique and tragic ceremony to mark the passing of the 700-year-old glacier *Ok*, northeast of Reykjavik, Iceland. *Ok* covered 15 square kilometres 100 years ago, but in one short century it had melted away entirely—the result of the human-caused climate crisis.

About 90 of us walked together up a rocky path to the site of the missing ice—now just a bare mountaintop. We made the last five minutes of the trek in silence. And when we stopped, Oddur Sigurdsson, a geologist who first declared the glacier dead in 2014, read out a death certificate.

Remarks followed by [Andri Snaer Magnason](#), a writer; [Cymene Howe](#), a Rice University anthropology professor who made a documentary about the glacier; and [Gudmundur Ingi Gudbrandsson](#), Iceland's environment minister. Iceland's Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir and former Irish President Mary Robinson also attended.

We sang together, and a group of children placed a plaque at the site, knowing we were creating a new tradition and hoping it might mark a turning point for the planet we all share.

The inscription on the plaque, by Andri Snaer Magnason, addresses future generations. “*Ok* is the first Icelandic glacier to lose its status as glacier,” it reads. “In the next 200 years all our main glaciers are expected to follow the same path. This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it.”

The glacier melt series 1999/2019

In 1999, I photographed a number of Iceland's glaciers from the air—after years of hiking to them while visiting family.

As a child and young adult, I took Iceland's natural environment for granted as something eternal and separate from the world in which I had grown up, in Denmark. Iceland was nature and Denmark was culture, and I thought of these glaciers as beyond human influence. They were awe-inspiring and exhilarating. To me, they seemed immobile and eternal—though in geologic time, of course, they move continually.

The photos I took of the glaciers from land invariably disappointed me, so I shot new images from above to capture their scale. At the time, I didn't think to write down their coordinates or the altitude of the plane. I wasn't planning to go back, and environmental issues weren't uppermost in my mind.

Twenty years later, I returned to photograph the same glaciers from approximately the same angle and at the same distance. I juxtaposed the 1999 and 2019 images to create a new artwork, “[The glacier melt series 1999/2019](#),” which bears witness to a degree of change for which I was wholly unprepared. All the glaciers have shrunk considerably, and some are difficult to find. Comparing those photos side by side make the consequences of human actions on the environment painfully and tangibly real.

These photos, I hope, will help drive action at the scale and speed needed to ensure that—rather than mourning more vanished glaciers—future generations will come together to celebrate their survival. Every glacier lost reflects our inaction. Every glacier saved will be a testament to the action taken in the face of the climate emergency. The international community must act now.

[Olafur Eliasson](#) is a world-renowned Danish-Icelandic artist and a UNDP Goodwill Ambassador.



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