

Protesters act elfish

An Icelandic road project is on hold, in part because protesters say it'll harm "wee folk."

Environmentalists in Iceland are protesting a proposed road project near the capitol of Reykjavik because they fear construction would endanger the habitats of elves.

Polls show that more than half of Iceland's population believe in the existence of elves, also called *huldufolk*, or "hidden folk," by the country's citizens. According to folklore, the magical creatures make their homes in far-flung, natural places, such as the swath of volcanic rock on the *Álftanes* peninsula, through which the proposed road would cut. Protesters say that construction would leave elves homeless or killed; it even might destroy an elven church said to be tucked away in the rocky terrain.

This elvish protest isn't the first time mythological beings have been the touchpoint for an environmental protest of a public works project. For the past two decades, protesters in the U.K., Iceland, and other countries have shown an increased empathy with the creatures.

Author Andy Lechter has written about how elves, demons, pixies, and other storied creatures play in ecological uprisings. In a 2001 article for *Folklore* magazine, "The Scouring of the Shire: Fairies, Trolls, and Pixies in Eco-protest Culture," he explained how countries such as the U.K. have seen small mythical creatures act as a rallying point for protesters.

"Fairies have inspired a counter-cultural movement," he wrote. "The 1990s in Britain were marked by large and dramatic public protests against a government-sponsored programme of road-building."

This counterculture, Lechter said, identified with the goodness of creatures like elves and fairies, working against the



Protesters objecting to the proposed construction of a road near Reykjavik, Iceland, are carried away by police. The protesters claim the road, which cuts through protected lava-strewn land, would harm the habitat of elves. Photo: EarthFirst

Some protesters to the proposed road project, claiming themselves to be defenders of Icelandic elves, dressed in elvish costumes.

Photo: Jurjen Berends

evils of destructive, harmful construction companies.

But some Icelanders claim the story overstates or misrepresents the nation's belief in the sprites. While elves, fairies, and other mythical beings tie into stories about the woods, the earth, and all things natural, counterclaims to the idea that elves are the reason for the protests hold that the belief isn't real.

One reporter claims that protesters are concerned about damage to local wildlife and ecosystems, and not really fretting over elves, which are merely a mascot for protesters.

"An earnest effort to conserve some pristine lava has turned into something trite and superficial," says Alda Sigmundstottir, of *The Guardian*.

She may have a point. The lava-strewn lands that the road project would cut



through were declared protected in 2009. Protesters maintain that whether elves dwell in the area or not, road construction would violate the government's own order of protection.

"The story is false," said Benedikt Jóhannesson, publisher of the *Icelandic Review*. "It is probably written by someone who learned about it in a bar." **PW**

Jenni Spinner is a Chicago-based freelancer and former associate editor of PUBLIC WORKS.