

In 1999 I travelled to Iceland to document a number of the country's glaciers from the air. Back then, I thought of the glaciers as beyond human influence. They were awe-inspiring and exhilaratingly beautiful. They seemed immobile, eternal. I was struck at the time by the difference between the human scale and the scale of geo-history. For me a glacier or a rock seem solid, but on the geological scale, rocks and glaciers are constantly in motion.

This summer, twenty years later, I went back to photograph the same glaciers from the same angle and at the same distance. Flying over the glaciers again, I was shocked to see the difference. Of course, I know that global heating means melting ice and I expected the glaciers to have changed, but I simply could not imagine the extent of change. All have shrunk considerably and some are even difficult to find again. Clearly this should not be the case, since glacial ice does not melt and reform each year, like sea ice. Once a glacier melts, it is gone. Forever. It was only in seeing the difference between then and now – a mere twenty years later – that I came to fully understand what is happening. The photos make the consequences of human actions on the environment vividly real. They make the consequences felt.

This August, I joined a group of people to commemorate the passing of Okjökull, the first glacier in Iceland to vanish entirely as a result of human activity. It was a humbling experience. A plaque laid at the site bears an inscription, drafted by the Icelandic writer Andri Snær Magnason, that poses a question to future generations: 'We know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it.'

I hope that we have now reached a turning point. We have a responsibility towards future generations to protect our remaining glaciers and to halt the progress of global heating. Every glacier lost reflects our inaction. Every glacier saved will be a testament to the action taken in the face of the climate emergency. One day, instead of mourning the loss of more glaciers, we must be able to celebrate their survival.