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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
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Specific File

Conservation of the Akamas Peninsula (Cyprus)

**Report of an on-the-spot appraisal undertaken
for the Council of Europe
(24th – 25th January, 2002)**

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*Secretariat Memorandum
Prepared by
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Introduction

Concerned by the reports on the tourism development that was taking place or was planned in the Akamas Peninsula and in particular (a) the Council of Ministers policy decisions on the extension of the tourist zones in the area and on “mild development” elsewhere in the peninsula and (b) the applications for large hotel licenses in Asprokremmos and Ayios Georgios, Peyia, the Standing Committee of the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats at its 20th meeting in 2001 proposed an-on-the spot appraisal of the situation. This appraisal was held on the 24th – 25th January 2002.

The main objectives of this visit were:

- ❖ To assess the situation particularly with reference to the actions that had to be taken following the resolution No. 63 (1997)
- ❖ To identify the main impacts on the area with regard to the forms of tourism development occurring in the area
- ❖ To meet with the key players and parties concerned

The Terms of Reference for this report are to examine and report on the following aspects with regard to the Akamas Peninsula:

- ❖ The pressure exerted by existing tourism infrastructures on marine features and communities and on landscapes in particular the nesting beach turtles;
- ❖ The planned tourism activities or developments liable to have significant environmental consequences, especially in the surrounding of the Limni, Lara and Toxeftra beaches;
- ❖ Other factors and activities with a potential impact on biodiversity;
- ❖ The socio-economic situation;
- ❖ The co-operation between all parties and institutions concerned;
- ❖ The state of progress of work concerning the creation of a national park and the designation of sites for the Natura 2000 Network;
- ❖ The best way to provide an adequate protection status to the Limni beach.

This report examines the above aspects taking into account the recommendations made by Prof. Lescure in his report, following a visit to the area in 1997, the Recommendation No. 63 (1997) taken by the Standing Committee at its 17th meeting, the Conservation Management Plan prepared by the World Bank and the Recommendations on Sustainable Tourism Development of the Council of Europe.

Programme of visit

The two day visit commenced with a visit to the Akamas Peninsula and the various localities and villages in the area. Ms. Myroula Hadjichristophorou from the Ministry of Agriculture, Natural Resources and Environment took us around the areas which were threatened by development, both existing and proposed. In the afternoon we had a meeting with the muhktars of the main villages of Ineia, Pano Arodes, Kathikas, Neo Chorio and Drousheia. The following day we had a meeting with Ms. Antonia Theodosiou and other officials of the Federation of the Environmental and Ecological Organisations of Cyprus. A short meeting was also held with Mr. Christododoulos Christodoulou, Minister for the Interior followed by a meeting with Mr. Nicos. Georgiades, Director, Environment Service in the Ministry of Agriculture, Natural Resources and Environment. In the afternoon a meeting was held with Mrs. Artemis Coudounari -Yiordamli, Director Cyprus Conservation Organisation and Mr. Melis A. Charalambides, International Relations Officer, Cyprus ornithological Society.

I would like to thank all the above for their assistance and valuable comments during the meetings held. These were important to understand better the situation and problems in the Akamas area.

Pressures from existing tourism infrastructures

The existing tourism infrastructures on the southwestern and northeastern borders of Akamas have had a significant impact on the coastal landscape with developments right on the coast. Peyia is developing tourism facilities based primarily on hotels development, second homes and retirement tourism. Although the impression got is generally one of a well planned layout with low density developments surrounded with open green spaces, nonetheless the rate and scale of development going on needs to be controlled to avoid decreasing the quality of the area and extending the development along the coast.



During the visit a new hotel was seen being constructed right on the coastline in Coral Bay, Peyia. Since the visit was carried out in January, which is not the main season for tourism, it was not possible to see all the pressures on the area, particularly the turtle nesting beaches, as a result of tourism activity on the beaches. Nonetheless, it is obvious that the negative impacts are significant considering the scale of some of the existing developments particularly the Anassa hotel with its 400 beds.

Prof. Lescure in his report remarked that it was deplorable that a project which so disfigures the heritage coastline of the Akamas Peninsula has been allowed to proceed. The activity resulting from the hotel operations are affecting the nesting of the turtles primarily because of a wall of illegal sunbeds, use of jet skis, water skis and other sea craft. The disfigurement of the coastline in this area and its impacts should not be allowed in the other sensitive areas of the Akamas Peninsula, nor in the Limni area.



The illegal development at the Aspros River gorge has not been removed, even though this was one of the recommendations made in Recommendation No. 63 (1997). Besides during the visit we saw clear signs of further expansion (e.g. excavation works). It is important to take immediate action to remove the establishment as was recommended before this expands further causing irreversible damage to the area.

The road between Ineia and Lara is being improved and the completion of this road (as evidently promised to the Ineia community) is compromising the protection of the Lara beach area particularly since this road will attract more traffic - and people - to the area. Parking areas will be needed together with additional facilities whilst this will also increase the pressure for the development (asphalting) of the coastal road between Peyia and Lara. The restaurant at Lara beach is illegal and has not been removed even though this was another issue for action by the Government of Cyprus in Recommendation No. 63 (1997). This has not been licensed by the CTO and has no operating licence. Although the Lara – Toxeftra area has been given protection status, the construction of a tarmac road will, in effect, jeopardize the protection status as a result of the increased activity. Although the road needs to be improved in parts, this should not be turned into a tarmac road, which would generate a level of traffic well above the carrying capacity of this very sensitive area. Any improvements should be carried out after spatial planning and management measures for the whole area have been put into place.

Within Kathikas new tourism development related to the renovation of the existing buildings and the provision of ancillary facilities like the tavernas are a step in the right direction to a new form of tourism which makes use of existing facilities with benefits accruing directly to the local community. This model of tourism should be encouraged and the experiences extended to the other villages. The village of Kathikas also benefited from rehabilitation of properties initiated through the Laona project.

This project started in 1989 and its aim was to encourage the revival of the communities in the area through policies of sustainable development including the introduction of ecological (green) tourism as appropriate. This project has shown that in the Akamas area an alternative form of tourism development exists - a form of tourism that is different from that developed in the other coastal resorts of Cyprus. The Laona project resulted in the restoration of a number of buildings including churches and several private and public buildings aimed at attracting special interest tourism. This form of tourism is in line with the Council of Europe's two recommendations - Recommendation No. R (94) 7 on a General Policy for Sustainable and Environment-Friendly Tourism Development and Recommendation No. R (95) 10 on a Sustainable Tourist Development Policy in Protected Areas.

Impacts of planned tourism development

Although most of the planned developments are within the existing designated tourism zones, nonetheless there is concern that the scale of the developments proposed, particularly those at Ayios Georgios and Asprokremos, are not compatible with the national park status sought for the Akamas peninsula.

The scale of the tourism development proposed in the Ayios Georgios tourist zone, which will consist of hotels and hundreds of villas, at the entrance to the proposed Akamas national park is considered incompatible with the protection sought for this peninsula. The activity generated from such a development will impact directly on the Toxeftra beach and, inevitably spill over towards the Lara beaches. This development so close to the proposed national park will create a demand for additional facilities along the coastal stretch and it would be difficult to control development pressures. The conservation of this area would therefore be severely compromised. The World Bank report proposes the abolition of this zone.

The existing applications for developments proposed in the Asprokremos area at the northern entrance to the park consist of 1612 beds. Although this development is proposed within the tourist zone, the massive scale and intensity of the development proposed would again jeopardize the national park. This development is related to the coastal product and will create significant impacts on the nearby beaches not only in terms of visitor pressure but the depletion of the sandy beach is likely to occur in future once the development is in place, thus losing an important resource in the area.



The development proposed in the Fontana Amorosa area is currently, apparently, facing legal difficulties. This area is enclaved by the State Forest with no access if not through the forest itself. The extension of the tourist zone along the northern coast of the peninsula linking the Anassa hotel area with the Fontana Amorosa area has been contemplated. This would result in the total destruction of this important ecological and scenic stretch of coast with the extension of the tourist zone of about 4 km.

This stretch has been indicated as a site of ecological value both terrestrial and marine in the World Bank report. The area from the Baths of Aphrodite to Fontana Amorosa is an area of international importance due to its ecological, landscape and cultural value (representative types of marine Mediterranean ecosystems). This is has already been declared as a Conservation Area, for these reasons, under the Town and Country Planning legislation.

The development being carried out in the Thalassines Spilies area immediately over the caves certainly is a shocking example to be condemned as this has degraded the quality of this protected area. Sightings of the monk seal have been reported on various occasions in Akamas.



Pressures are also increasing with regard to the development of the stretch between the villages and the State Forest and the coastline following the Government's decision in March 2000 to allow 'mild development' along the buffer zones despite their proximity to the areas of outstanding ecological and landscape value. The topography of this area is such that if development is allowed, even if 'mild' the whole landscape of the area will be adversely affected. Development will entail an infrastructure base (e.g. electricity and water supply and road infrastructure) to service the developments allowed, creating more pressure to increase development. This stretch should be protected. Development should be allowed only within the zones as designated in the 1989 Local Plan for the area and the World Bank Report.

The community center at Lara beach, evidently promised to the local authorities of Ineia village, also needs to be reconsidered. The need of this facility is not clear and the structure once built will negatively affect the character and coastal landscape of this area besides creating a level of activity which will exceed the carrying capacity of this very sensitive protected area.

A 2,500 bed development is evidently being planned for the Limni beach area. The development of this stretch of coast will adversely affect the main Loggerhead turtle nesting beach in Cyprus. The level of activity and ancillary facilities to be generated as a result of the scale of the development will undermine any protection measures for the beach and could possibly also wipe out nesting on the entire beach.

Besides the individual development proposed within the Akamas Peninsula and in the vicinity, it is the form of tourism that such developments are aimed to attract that is of concern. The developments proposed follow a model of tourism development that is related to the beach, the sea and the coast. Such a model of tourism development will generate forms of activity along the coast, which, unless controlled and managed can disrupt coastal and marine ecosystems and the turtles that breed along the shores of these areas. The use of sea craft like speed boats and jet skis will also impact the sensitive marine life. The Government should be strongly encouraged to reconsider the development proposed.

The socio-economic situation

The resident population in the area has been decreasing, as in most other villages on the island, and most of the properties in the villages consisted of second homes which were in the process of rehabilitation and renovation. A meeting with the muhktars of the main villages has provided an insight to the socio-economic situation of the area.

At the meeting the muhktars of the villages of Neo Chorio, Kathikas, Drouseia, Pano Arodes and Ineia were present. All were in agreement that they cannot accept a situation where they cannot develop their land for the sake of their kids. Although there is a consensus with regard to the creation

of the national park, this has to be restricted to the 70 km² State Forest land and should not include the private owned land.

The muhktar of Neo Chorio stated that the population in his village has decreased from 1000 people to 240 people and 80% of these are retired. The lack of children has resulted in the closure of the school and soon the church will be closed. The environmentalists have been blamed for stopping development in the area. This has led to young people leaving the villages to seek employment in the main towns as well as overseas. He stated that only by allowing tourism development can this trend be reversed and encourage youths to return to the area. Nonetheless, during our visit of the area it was apparent that the village is now thriving with many new villas and apartments to let, as well as a hotel in the village.

The leaders of the villages are seeing the development of tourism along the coast as the only form of tourism that would generate employment in the area and thus encourage a return to the villages. The Akamas Peninsula offers a rich variety of resources which can be promoted for various forms of tourism which would be more sustainable than coastal tourism which is more likely to exploit the coastal stretch and its beach resources. Such forms of tourism would help to generate more activity within the villages rather than concentrate activity along the coast.

Drouseia is apparently a well developing village, with a hotel, tavernas and many houses renovated with traditional materials, keeping the character of the village. Tourism development around the village is also ongoing in its surrounding tourist zone, with tourist complexes being erected in the village periphery. These forms of development should be examples of the types of sustainable tourism development initiatives that are being, and can be taken up, by the locals to regenerate the villages and avoid depopulation in future.

The development of a rural and agro tourism product still has potential, particularly through the rehabilitation of existing buildings and the development of business to support such a form of tourism e.g. horse riding and mountain biking facilities. This form of tourism as against the coastal tourism proposed will ensure that the benefits of tourism are retained within the local community. There is never any guarantee that with new tourism development along the coast jobs will be filled by locals. However, if the locals themselves invest in their own businesses this would be generating employment and its related benefits directly for the local community.

This is the choice the local villages have. They can either manage their own tourism development of the villages and thus enhance their economic and social position or surrender this control to other developers whose main interest is more speculation of the land along the coast. The 1989 local plan has identified tourist zones around each village, and therefore, new hotel development and related facilities can be encouraged within these zones. Thus the villages can develop both hotel accommodation which would encourage jobs as well as the rehabilitation of existing vacant premises for tourist accommodation similar to the approach adopted by the Laona Project. This approach to tourism development has also been proposed in the study commissioned by the World Bank and should also meet Government's objective to set up the national park covering a broader area of the Akamas Peninsula as well as ensuring the socio-economic development of the villages and their inhabitants.

Co-operation between the parties concerned

From the meetings held during the visit it transpires that the setup for discussion amongst the parties concerned exists through the establishment of the technical/management committee composed of government officials, the representatives of the villages in Akamas, the Federation of Environmental and Ecological Organisations and the Scientific Technical Chamber of Cyprus. Nonetheless, it seems that this committee has only met once and the NGOs stated that during the meeting they were not requested to discuss the proposals made but only to clarify points.

This approach has created more polarization between the sides with Government in between. More commitment should be given to achieving a level of consensus between the parties involved. This will entail some compromise from both sides. However, Government should be aware of its

obligations in defining the starting point for such a compromise, particularly those towards the Bern Convention to which it is a signatory and towards the EU, which it is entering, and its Directives.

This commitment should be directed towards implementing the management measures suggested in the World Bank Report and defining the development opportunities to be taken up by the local residents as well as the protection measures to be set up to ensure the conservation of the sensitive areas. The former would entail new tourist accommodation and related facilities in the designated tourist zones around the villages whilst protection measures in the sensitive areas might include the placing of interpretation panels explaining the relevance and importance of these sites as well as create a management setup to manage and monitor these areas.

Progress on the Natura 2000 sites

During our meeting with the Federation of Environmental and Ecological Organisations we were informed that the submission of the Natura 2000 sites to the EU are close to being finalized. The catalogue of species (flora and fauna) as well as the maps of the sites have been prepared. However, the boundaries of the sites have not yet been finalised. Due to this delay not only Akamas Peninsula sites but all other Natura 2000 proposed sites have not yet been submitted to the EU.

It should be insisted that Government finalises these proposals and proceeds to submit them immediately and thus ensure protection of the main areas within the Akamas Peninsula particularly the beaches at Lara and Toxeftra, as well as of Limni beach. Delaying will jeopardize further the protection status which should be given to these sites

The management of Limni beach

Limni beach should be considered as an ecological continuation of the Akamas Peninsula and protection of this area should be given immediately. This is one of the sites proposed for Natura 2000 and Government should not give any concessions for development in this area and in its vicinity. The following suggestions are being recommended for this beach:



1. the immediate submission of plans for this area to be given the status of a Natura 2000 site;
2. the preparation of a management plan and legislation to manage this stretch and monitor activity which may adversely affect the nesting turtles.
3. Current conservation measures should be encouraged and maintained.
4. The refurbishment/redevelopment of the two buildings adjacent to the beach into a visitor/information center which would give visitors information on the turtles and other ecological information related to this area and others in the region. This center can also be an important revenue generating operation.
5. Interpretation panels can be placed at strategic points to create awareness amongst the visitors of the importance of this site.
6. The jetty needs to be repaired and this could provide a good observation point for visitors to view the nesting turtles, without creating any disturbance. This needs to be done carefully and professionally so that it does not disturb the turtles, avoiding lights in the area and with provision of night sight binoculars for night time viewing.

The Akamas Peninsula and Sustainable Tourism Development

Should the developments proposed go ahead, it is likely that the Akamas coastal area will become another coastal tourist resort as other localities within Cyprus (e.g. Larnaca, Ayia Napa). The Akamas Peninsula has the resources to attract a different form of tourism and one which respects the fragile capacity of the area.

The experience of the Laona project is an indication that there is scope for similar initiatives which would bring economic benefits directly to the residents whilst developing an economic base which is in harmony with the environmental resources. The tourist markets with interest to visit areas of ecological value are on the increase. The future of Mediterranean tourism is linked to the maintenance and protection of the few remaining environmentally important and sensitive areas to attract new markets in search of different experiences. The coastal tourism in the Mediterranean has decreased as tourists discover other more pristine areas in the Caribbean and in the Pacific and South East Asia. The Mediterranean's share of tourism has decreased and the WTO forecasts that the Mediterranean's share of international tourism will drop to about 22% by 2020 from 30%, which is its current share.

A revival of the Mediterranean can only occur by transforming the image of Mediterranean destinations and therefore transforming the products on offer to generate increased interest into the area. Natural, cultural and historic heritage are those aspects which can revive the Mediterranean tourism along sustainable development principles.

The 1989 Local Plan has provided areas for tourism development within the designated tourist zones. Development within the tourist zones in proximity to the villages should be encouraged rather than encouraging development along the sensitive coastal areas.

Once again Government should reconsider its position with regard to any new tourist zone in the hinterland of Lara. Insensitive development in one area can adversely affect the whole experience sought by visitors to the national park in addition to its direct ecological impact.



Government is also urged to implement the World Bank report which itself commissioned to designate the Akamas Peninsula a National Park. The body responsible for the management of this park will then outline the tourism opportunities which would be encouraged to develop a sustainable form of tourism. The World Bank report gives a number of suggestions and these should be the basis for the formulation of a tourism plan for the area which would look at the development opportunities and the forms of tourist products to promote and market.

The village entrepreneurs need guidance to perceive other forms of tourism than the coastal form which they are currently advocating. In this regard assistance from the Cyprus Tourism Organisation should focus on creating an awareness amongst the locals and encouraging, through incentives an appropriate form of tourism development. The CTO, in cooperation with the body to be set up to manage the park, has an important role in defining the form of tourism that should be developed in this area.

Market research to create a database of the operations in the area is important. It was indicated that the Drousheia Heights hotel was performing much better than the hotels in the Polis area. This was stated by the Drousheia Heights hotel manager. Market research with regard to the tourist markets attracted to the village residences, is also important to determine the contribution of this form of tourism and compare with other forms of tourism particularly those along the coast.

The sharing of experiences between the residents is also important, particularly those who have created successful businesses which have adopted a sustainable tourism development approach. Such experiences may encourage others to follow suit and transfer development pressures towards more appropriate forms of tourism development.

Conclusions

This report emphasised the need to take action with regard to the Akamas Peninsula. The World Bank report should be the basis of any future interventions in the area. The setting up of the National Park should provide the management structure with the tools to ensure protection of the area whilst encouraging appropriate forms of tourism development. Should Government give in to the current pressures this precious resource can be lost forever. This is one of the areas which Cyprus should look at from a national strategic level and particularly since it can encourage a new form of tourism to Cyprus. A form of tourism which would be attracted during the winter season and would not create additional pressures during the summer season and one which would benefit directly the local community and not a couple of land speculators, whose interest is not the development of tourism but the financial gains achieved as a result of the development of their land.