

Greece: Towards harmony between Anthropos and Nature^[1]

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The climate and the landscape of Greece –and its surrounding areas of the North-eastern Mediterranean– are mild. Mt. Olympus towers the country at 2917 m, temperatures may drop at -10°C in parts of Greek Macedonia and there are at times violent storms in the Aegean, immortalised in Homer's *Odyssey*. In general, however, climate is temperate, landscapes retain a diverse character and moderate scale and nature has been –and remains to some extent– rich in biodiversity and resources.

Ancient Greeks deified nature, associating gods and other lesser sacred figures –such as satyrs, nymphs and nereids– to specific natural elements. Thus Poseidon was venerated as the god of the sea and Artemis as the goddess of wild animals and hunting, while the river god Acheloo was portrayed with the head of a bull and the tail of a serpent. Classical Greece was doted with sacred places –mountains, groves and sources. Temples were built in places of incredible natural beauty. Water in particular, in all its forms, from lakes to rivers, from sources to wetlands to the sea, was considered particularly sacred and was deeply respected until our days. Small rural societies managed natural resources with knowledge and respect. Thus, through philosophy and practice, Ancient Greeks faced nature and the gods associated with it not in awe, but with familiarity.

There were of course instances of violent human interventions, such as the drainage of the large Copais lake by the Mycenaean in the 13th century BC for cultivation, the depletion of certain forests for wood needed in building military fleets or for agricultural purposes, the impact of frequent invasions and wars, but these occurred mainly during periods of political power concentration.

Once the Eastern Roman empire became Christianised, many of the elements of classical Greek philosophy were incorporated in the teachings of the new religion, while Neo-Platonism played a key role. Classical temples were replaced by Byzantine churches built in towns and villages, but also in secluded places, well-integrated with nature. Monasteries were founded in magnificent landscapes, as on the Meteora megaliths, Patmos Island, and the Mt. Athos peninsula. Hermits resided in isolated caves in the Vicos Gorge of Pindos or on the rocky shores of the Prespa lakes.

In the Orthodox Christian Church the notion of nature as God's Creation became widely accepted. This implied the sanctity of nature, while humankind (Anthropos) was encouraged to use its resources but manage it wisely as its shepherd for the glory of the Lord. Water was incorporated in the rituals of the Church in baptism and the 'aghiasmos' (blessing of the waters).

Thus, until the 20th century, the inhabitants of the Greek peninsula and the Aegean Islands lived mostly in harmony with nature, and their culture was inextricably related to it.

The situation changed dramatically in the past century. Faced with great poverty and a stream of destitute Greek refugees from Asia Minor, especially after 1922, and with support from Western countries, a vast programme of agricultural intensification was started, leading to a massive drainage of wetlands, and signalled the beginning of an era of development priorities. The ravages caused by the Second World War and the ensuing civil uprising, pushed the country back to poverty and necessitated afterwards new efforts. In spite of the financial contribution of the Marshall Plan, development remained slow and its impact on Greek nature limited. An important side effect was the abandonment of many rural areas and the concentration of population in the large urban centres. Landscape transformation rates dramatically

increased after the entry of the country in the European Community in 1981, due to the massive inflow of funds, most of them directed to heavy engineering projects, often constructed with total disregard to the natural environment and cultural heritage.

Thus, in contemporary Greece, a country of considerable affluence^[3], the links between people and nature have been severed. Urbanisation, especially in the coastal zones and the islands, is spreading uncontrolled. Rivers are being dammed with negative impacts on downstream wetlands, but also heavy damage to mountain landscapes^[4]. Water bodies have become heavily polluted from industrial and domestic wastes and agricultural runoff. Aquifers are being desiccated by legal and illegal pumping of water, mainly for irrigation (which accounts today for 82% of freshwater consumption). Mountain vegetation has been depleted by clear cutting, forest fires and overgrazing, leading to soil erosion and siltation problems. Overfishing, the use of destructive methods (such as trawling and dynamiting) and pollution have decreased dramatically marine life resources. Biodiversity is on the decrease. But perhaps the most dangerous is the rupture between anthropogenic works –that are part of contemporary culture– and nature. For many people, the totally urbanised environment of concrete, steel, glass and tarmac, with nature represented in the form of scraggly trees in dusty parks and squares, seems to be their preferred choice^[5].

Yet there are positive signs. The large cities are abandoned during weekends and vacations by most of their inhabitants in search of a more pleasant environment. Young people express strong dissatisfaction with the choices made by the older generations and claim for a better and different quality of life. More and more, they get involved in grass roots environmental movements. The government itself, motivated by public discontent, but also by the tightening environmental legislation of the European Union, has started taking –albeit timidly– measures to adopt sustainable guidelines for economic activities and to safeguard the still rich cultural and natural heritage of the country. Civic society, through many non-governmental organisations spread throughout the country, is maturing, has a stronger voice now and is starting to influence decision-making.

Most important though is the growing understanding by people that the cultural and natural heritage is interconnected, that it needs integrated management and a conservation approach and that it constitutes one of the major comparative advantages of the country in the global arena, even on the economic level.

So there are signs, there is hope that the new generations in Greece can find their identity through a balance between innovation and their natural and cultural heritage –that a new harmony between Anthropos and Nature can be established–, before it is too late and the losses become irreversible.

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3. Per capita income was 12,798 euro in 2002 according to the National Statistical Service.
4. The cases of the Messochora dam on Acheloos River and the Thissavros dam on the Nestos River, due to insensitive design and construction, are characteristic.
5. Athens, the congested and heavily polluted capital of Greece, includes more than 40% of the population of the country and about 70% of its economic activities.