

In search for the Greek landscapes: current trends and future concerns

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Summary

Although an important sector to invest and develop operational guidelines for sound national strategic plans, landscapes are a source of fundamental, yet barely studied, knowledge about sustainable management techniques. The growing destruction of the Greek landscapes mainly by urbanisation, large infrastructure construction works, intensive agriculture, mass tourism, unsustainable industrial development and most recently by the climate change impacts, exacerbated by indifference from the majority of the Greek political sector (as demonstrated by the inordinate delay in the ratification of the European Landscape Convention) made the need for immediate action imperative.

Given that the concept of sustainable development is elusive, it is necessary to find ways to protect the environment and at the same time improve the welfare of human communities whose wellbeing is most dependent on ecosystem services. The significance of landscapes as sources of knowledge, inspiration, local pride, collective memory banks, local development, cultural exchange, etc, cannot be ignored on the way to sustainability.

While it is well accepted that conserving landscapes has become a pressing requirement, various concerned stakeholders tend to ignore the previously mentioned issues and fail to communicate and co-ordinate their actions in an efficient and effective manner. Perhaps, this is due to the fact that landscapes reflect the complex human motivations interacting with nature. Clearly, there is a need for an integrated approach that can take into account the existence of such elements and their own particular conservation requirements and incorporate them in strategically planned programmes and sustainable management techniques.

Abstract

Greece's culture and invaluable natural heritage have remained inextricably linked throughout the passage of the centuries. In addition, landscapes today are key elements of many innovative spatial policies and of international conservation and management practices. Greek landscapes encompass a wide range of significant and diverse components, which can be seen as invaluable sources of life, as well as an exceptional socio-cultural record of local communities. In that sense, the significance of landscapes in terms of both socio-cultural and environmental values is indisputable; yet, ample evidence shows that

much of Greece's development practices have been unsustainable resulting to a series of irreversibly damaged landscapes.

The conservation and management of Greek landscapes raises many sustainability issues in terms of strategic planning, suitable good practice examples, knowledge management, elaboration of further action schemes, etc. This is because little effort has been made to explore, map and monitor the value of the country's landscapes in the pursuit of sustainable development. The problem with 'landscapes' as a topic is that it is dynamic, with ever-increasing inputs of information. An integrated approach to sustainability management is needed to cope with the issues of Greek landscapes, e.g. awareness of the relevant issues, efficient decision-making, building consensus/participation and effective governance.

Undeniably, the promotion of the protection of the Greek landscapes through sound scientific research, public awareness strategies and encouragement of the participation of both the public sector and expert entities is a widely recognised need. This paper discusses the effects of Greece's development process on its landscapes and suggests ways for their efficient and integrated management. Taking all the above in mind, it is not difficult to infer that there is still a lot to be achieved. The authors believe that many of the existing gaps in the sustainable management of landscapes can be bridged through the review and promotion of ways to monitor sustainability trends locally.

1 The conservation and management of Greek landscapes

There are several interrelated factors, such as geomorphology, environment, culture and socio-economic aspects that can influence the structure of a landscape. Any consideration of landscapes, though, should neither focus just on special or designated areas nor should it refer only to the countryside. Further, it is people's perception that turns *topos* into the concept of landscape. Similar cognitive processes are central to the notion of landscapes. Consequently, people value landscape for many different reasons, which are not all related to traditional concepts of aesthetics and beauty (Council of Europe, 2006).

Greek landscapes share most of the qualities of the Mediterranean landscape, but their distinctive texture should not to be sought only in the listing of typical ingredients of the visible landscape. Rather, it can be found in the continuum of time as inscribed by the passage of the various peoples, whose diachronic interaction with the environment resulted in a distinctive physical reality. The Greek landscapes have been a stage on which issues of social relations, production, and reproduction have all been played out over generations. Physical and human-made structures, have acted as important social supports connecting individuals to their past and future (Rackham and Moody, 1996).

Since the 1950s, the demographic character of Greece experienced a decisive alteration as great numbers of inhabitants migrated from the rural areas to the main urban centres, leaving irreparable marks on the landscape as a result of growing urbanisation, imbalanced development trends and lack of comprehensive planning (Doukellis, 2005). From that point onwards Greek landscapes suffer by much neglect, misuse and in many cases irreversible

destruction: desertion of remote rural landscapes through abandonment of traditional activities, intensification of agriculture, uncontrolled land use changes and subdivision, illegal construction, partial documentation of historic landscapes, loss of the natural, aesthetic or cultural landscape character, landscape homogenisation, and total lack of protection measures.

2 Facts and trends

The contemporary Greek population lacks a definite and well-developed landscape awareness and conscience, while it continues to adopt aspects of modernity in certain realms of life *a posteriori*, by implanting them on pre-existing cultural particularities and ways of life. There is also a disintegration of traditional environmental conscience and a lack of a sense of the landscape as a common good and as an important aspect for the improvement of the quality of life (Doukellis, *ibid.*). All these, exacerbated by various local interests and decision-making that neglects the importance of landscape, result in an imbalanced planning and policy procedure in favour of unsustainable development.

The key factors that have led to the formation of the contemporary Greek landscapes are distinguished between processes of spatial development and the role of planning and policy responses (Stamatiou, 2003). In addition, the institutional framework –in terms of both existing legislation and guidelines for sustainable spatial development– has proven to be significantly ineffective. Also, there are only scattered provisions in both the Greek general regulatory framework and specific legislative decrees, which leave the management and conservation of landscapes in a *laissez-faire* context (Vogiatzakis *et al.* 2008).

Human pressure on nature is greater than in the past and as such the sustainability impacts of several management works upon contemporary landscapes should not be ignored. The expansion of human activities into the natural environment results in increasing uniformity in landscapes and consequently reduction, disappearance, fragmentation or isolation of natural and cultural heritage.

3 Sustainability and landscapes

The challenges and prospects of assessing environmental gains in relation to economic and social development are imminent. Yet, environmental issues, economic practices and social values can affect the priorities of sustainable planning and conservation strategies. If landscapes are to be seen as a key piece in the sustainability framework, then it remains to be considered what sort of conceptual framework could pave the way. In this respect, the road to sustainability should be a constant learning process through increased participation and awareness of relevant issues (Pearce and Watford, 1993).

The view that an integrated approach to the conservation of landscapes can unveil environmental, economic, socio-cultural etc. benefits has been gaining ground at all levels, although in places it remains the subject of significant controversy. Yet, the important thing is to promote a number of actions, which can play a key role in reinforcing the relationship between local communities –and other interested parties– with their landscapes. An integrated approach can contribute towards this direction. By reconnecting people to their landscapes, conservation efforts can secure greater public support (Chambers *et al.* 2000). Moreover, better understanding of actions and practices can reveal sustainable approaches to the wise use of landscapes.

Without sustainability concerns being integrated and effectively communicated, future development will remain one of the most fundamental long-term issues. The numerous components of complex environments are constantly changing, increasing, therefore, the complexity of the situation (Porritt, 2002). If current knowledge and the real concerns of the stakeholders involved are not incorporated into the management process, then just the experts' views on what the future directions are or should be are unlikely to produce sustainable outcomes. Thus, the need for an integrated framework that could account for whether parameters may change over time, and deal with the possibility that social phenomena may turn out to be inherently indeterminate or unpredictable, is well established.

4 Conclusion

The links between human beings in traditional societies and landscapes have been weakened in the contemporary context, rendering the conservation of landscapes more difficult. However, landscapes are strongly related to the past of these societies, their current concerns and, consequently, their future wellbeing. Yet, the question still remains whether these societies are well aware of the environment's diversity and richness.

Obviously, the task of re-defining and promoting a landscape conscience is a long, but necessary task for Greek society. The previously noted issues are being scrutinised, as the EU applies pressures on its member-states to comply with the existing European legislation, inscribed in an international effort to respond to environmental change and to adopt environment-friendly measures of resource use/protection.

Recent catastrophic events, ranging from forest fires to uncontrolled growth, have adversely affected the Greek landscapes, but have contributed to a rise of environmental awareness among the population. Future planning and policies should also take into account and attempt to make good use of the Greeks' growing nostalgia and need for 'Greece as it used to be' in cultural, physical, aesthetic, ethic, historic and symbolic terms. This growing trend must be merged with contemporary and progressive perspectives of maintaining and using sustainably landscape values and services.

Literature

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