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Preservation and Politics: A National Park in North Cyprus

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Introduction

Since August 1974, the Mediterranean island of Cyprus has been divided along ethnic lines. A coup organized by the military junta then ruling Greece led, five days later, to an invasion by Turkey, citing obligations under the treaties of 1960 that gave the island its independence. Peace talks have been held intermittently since, sometimes aiming for an overall solution to the “Cyprus Problem,” sometimes aiming to build confidence between the two sides by making incremental changes to the status quo. But, although a solution within the context of the island’s membership of the European Union seems likely, the area that Turkey took control over, the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (TRNC), remains unrecognized by the international community.

The political (and geographical) isolation of north Cyprus meant that tourism was slow to develop. Prior to 1974, hotels had sprung up around Famagusta; lured by the promise of sun, sand, and sea (and possibly sex), and by the falling price of air travel, northern Europeans were increasingly prepared to spend their summer vacations on the island. With the division of the island, the industry migrated southwards, to Greek Cypriot-controlled areas, creeping slowly but inexorably along the southern coastline. Concerns have been expressed over the speed of development: Saveriades (2000) has attempted to estimate the social carrying capacity of the Ayia Napa/Protoros region in the south.

The Karpas Peninsula

The Karpas Peninsula, the panhandle at the northeastern end of the island, is a land apart: a peripheral area, distant from the major towns of Cyprus (see Scott 1999). The wild, haunting beauty, the remoteness, the flora and fauna are all features that attract a certain type of visitor. In spring, the lowlands turn first green, as the grass benefits from the winter rains, and then cascade with color as flowers grow to maturity. Lizards sun themselves on rocks. The rare Audouin gull breeds on the rocky islets off the tip of the peninsula. Of supreme importance are the green and loggerhead turtles. Some 30% of the Mediterranean population of the green turtle, and 10% of the loggerheads, choose to nest on north Cyprus’ beaches (Phillips 2001; Godley and Broderick 1995).

The rapid departure of much of the Greek Cypriot population produced an interesting side effect: domestic animals were set free by fleeing farmers, leading to a population of feral donkeys (now estimated at some 250), and an unknown number of feral pigs. The villagers who farm the area see the donkeys as a menace that devours their crops. It was once suggested that licenses could be issued to foreign hunters to cull the herd; however, there is little kudos to be gained from boasting that one has shot a donkey, and so the idea was quickly dropped.

The cultural environment of the area is also rich. Strabo, in the third century BC, count-

ed one settlement, Aphendrika, as one of the six most important cities on the island. Today, several remains of Byzantine churches survive. Other churches also bear mute testimony to a time when the population was much greater.

The only inhabited building in the last 20 km of the peninsula is the monastery of the Apostle Andrew, formerly a place of pilgrimage for both Greek and Turkish Cypriots; prayers to the apostle were said to be particularly effective in healing the lame. Several times during the 1990s, organized tours of Greek Cypriots were able to visit the monastery on the Apostle's Feast day (30 November).

Today the Karpas is more lightly populated than at any time in recorded history. Most of the Greek Cypriot population left after the de facto partition of the island. Although the Vienna Agreement of 1975 recognizes their right to stay, until recently conditions imposed by the Turkish Cypriot authorities have made life difficult for the dwindling Greek population. In 1960, the population of the area was around 8,000; with the departure of all but some 450 Greek Cypriots, the population today is less than half that. The remoteness of the area discouraged settlement: many of the new Turkish settlers who made their way to Cyprus after 1974 left after only a few years.

To prevent excessive and inappropriate development, there has been support for turning the area into a national park. As the Cyprus problem edges towards a resolution, a novel political aspect comes into play: the declaration of a park could be a way of restricting the right to return of the Karpas' former residents.

The one large village, Rizokarpasso, once home to 3,500 Greek Cypriots, has the feeling of being a semi-ghost town. A new mosque was built in the 1990s on a hill overlooking the church, but many of the houses formerly occupied by Greeks are abandoned. There are few economic opportunities for residents: the main activities are animal husbandry and farming, with a small amount of fishing, quarrying, and bee-keeping.

Tourism

In 1986, the Turkish Cypriot authorities declared tourism to be the engine of growth of the economy, with the aim of attracting northern European visitors seeking sun, sand, sea (and perhaps sex). But Turkish Cypriot tourism development has been slow, hampered by poor communications (all flights to North Cyprus must land in Turkey en route, adding time and expense to the journey), the lack of facilities, and the disturbing presence of 30,000 Turkish soldiers. While the south was drawing over 2 million tourists a year (worth 1.74 billion euros, or 15.5% of the Gross Domestic Product and 13% of employment in 2003) the north, with over half the island's coastline, received only 430,000—of which two-thirds were from Turkey.

Gradually, though, helped by government subsidies, more hotels have been built. Mass tourism was centered on the north coast (where Kyrenia had developed as a small resort in the 1960s), and hotels and villas have extended along the coastline there (Figure 1).

The remoteness of the Karpas Peninsula, has, so far, kept it free from any large-scale development. In the mid-1990s, fewer than 10,000 visitors a year were recorded at the monastery. But as suitable sites for hotels are sought, the pressures on the peninsula are

Figure 1. Major features of Cyprus, with main areas of tourism development.



growing. Julie Scott (1999) found that the district office (then located in Famagusta) was abuzz with talk of tourism “exploding” in the Karpas. The large number of attractive beaches makes the area very attractive to develop-

ers. But such development would put considerable pressure on a fragile ecosystem, and destroy much of the beauty of the place.

The negative effects of mass tourism are well-known, but the short-term benefits seem attractive. Living with noisy visitors for a few years reduces the positive feelings locals have to tourists, but prior to their arrival, local communities express strong support (see Akis et al. 1996). Ecotourism would obviously have great potential for the Karpas Peninsula—if properly managed to prevent the degradation of sites there. (For further discussion on options open to the Turkish Cypriots, see Warner 1999.)

North Cyprus has had some success in the development of longer-term tourism. The village of Karmi, in the hills southwest of Kyrenia, has become populated almost exclusively by retired European expatriates. The houses there (abandoned since the Greek Cypriot population was expelled in 1974) are let to foreigners on long leases; initially rents are very low, as it is a condition that the tenant spend money restoring the house. As a means of preserving the houses, and raising revenue for the government, this has been highly successful. Something similar might be appropriate for the Karpas region, if the vexed issue of property ownership could be resolved. However, European Union citizens who have bought ex-Greek Cypriot property in North Cyprus are currently threatened by the possibility of lawsuits brought by the Greek Cypriot owners of the houses and land they have bought.

A small national park and its extension

The tip of the panhandle was placed under Turkish military control in the years after 1974. Visitors needed a permit to go the last 20 km of road. In 1983, when the army left, this area was declared to be a national park. In a sense, this was not a big change: prior to the Turkish invasion, the Forestry Department had been responsible for the area (with the exception of the area immediately around the monastery), and, as with other areas of forest on the island, the Forestry Department’s main concern was conservation.

Interestingly, much of the impetus for further preservation came from outsiders, rather than locals. The Turkish residents of Rizokarpasso could see that a mass influx of tourists would probably benefit them (by raising property values and providing employment opportunities); and Turkish Cypriot and Turkish developers helped reinforce this attitude. In addition, the possibility that one day several thousand Greek Cypriots might return to the

area made rapid development seem like a good idea to them, so as to make money before their return.

The strongest pro-environment voice in northern Cyprus came from the expatriate community. A retired British army major established the Society for the Protection of Turtles, and was instrumental in getting Glasgow University to organize an annual census of turtle nests in the Karpas (and elsewhere along the north coast). The Society for International Development (SID), headed by another retired British army major, and the National Trust of North Cyprus (headed by another expatriate) were also instrumental in arguing for more sustainability in the development process. Among Turkish Cypriots, some interest in preserving the Karpas area developed. A group known as Yesil Baris (Green Peace, but unaffiliated with the international organization of the same name) became concerned with protecting the feral donkeys.

For the Turkish Cypriot government, the declaration of an extended national park in the Karpas held the prospect of both political threats and opportunities. The issue dominating Cyprus politics—the “Cyprus Question”—means that any policy decision is made in the light of its perceived effect on the relative advantages of the two sides in negotiating a political settlement. For the Turkish Cypriots, anything that increases the chances of recognition of the TRNC (and the end of the perceived economic embargo against the north) is seen as positive; anything that seems to lend support to the Greek Cypriot claim to be the legitimate government of the whole island is a negative.

The 1983 decision brought little reaction from the Greek Cypriot government. There was relief that the Turkish army had withdrawn from the monastery, and continuing concern about the plight of the “enclaved” (the Greek Cypriots remaining in the Karpas), but by far the biggest issues that year were the breakdown, amid mutual recrimination, of the Denktash/Kyprianou talks for a settlement, and the subsequent diplomatic push to prevent recognition of the Turkish Cypriots’ unilateral declaration of independence.

For the Turkish Cypriot government, offending a few villagers in the region was probably not significant, but the potential of revenues foregone from Turkish and Turkish Cypriot hoteliers might be significant, should they run out of suitable alternative locations. In addition, having declared tourism to be the economy’s growth sector, taking action that would appear to restrict hotel development appears contradictory.

But declaring a national park would score Brownie points with the world community—a significant consideration for an unrecognized state—and would place the Greek Cypriot government in an awkward situation. In their view, any purported legislation of the TRNC is null and void. On the other hand, to denounce the declaration of a national park as wrong is unlikely to win friends and influence people. Further, some of the plans for the reunification of Cyprus called for “cantonization”: returning the Karpas to Greek Cypriot control, and a return of its former inhabitants. This would have passed any advantages of development over to the Greek Cypriot community, whereas declaring a national park would leave the Greek Cypriots with the embarrassing choice of either validating “illegal” legislation (and upsetting those Greek Cypriots who want to return to their homes there), or of violating the park, to international opprobrium.

One factor strengthening the decision to declare a park is that tourism in the Karpas was

different from that in the rest of the north. Relatively few Turkish tourists make their way there. The Blue Sea hotel, a basic hostel without mains electricity that opened in 1990, caters almost exclusively for foreigners from Western Europe—only 3% of its guests in 1994–95 were Turks. It was clear that these visitors were looking for a different type of experience from the Turkish tourists frequenting the casinos in the Kyrenia region, and from the sort of Western tourist lounging on the beaches of the south. On the other hand, it would be easy for a developer to argue that, given the low economic value of the region (for calculations, see Warner 1995), mass tourism would be an appropriate development strategy.

The status of the park today

The 1997 TRNC Environment Law paved the way for an extension of the park to include more of the Karpas Peninsula. The next year, the Turkish Cypriot government declared 155 km² of the Karpas Peninsula to be the TRNC's first and only national park. This, in theory, provides protection of the Karpas area by limiting development and taking notice of the environmental impacts of any increased activity. In practice, though, it may make little difference. It is noteworthy that the 2001 "Secret Action Plan" for North Cyprus (prepared in Turkey) invests the Forestry Ministry with the creation of the National Park—this over two years after it had been established (*Sabah* Internet edition, 3 January 2001).

The danger is that declaring an area to be protected may not be enough: similar protections have not protected the Akamas peninsula, despite active campaigns from environmental groups there.

And yet there are some grounds for optimism. Ayse Dönmezer, then Turkish Cypriot Minister of Tourism, stressed the need for conservation. "Nature is our biggest resource," she said, speaking in April 2004, adding, "Our responsibility is to future generations. People don't want to see concrete; they want to see nature. In Spain and south Cyprus they have made money, but at the expense of the environment. We don't want to do this." And yet she went on to argue for more investment in tourism in the north, to match the levels of investment and tourist arrivals seen in the south. The ambiguities of the status of the Karpas could be partially by design: if the "Cyprus Problem" is resolved, then it would be relatively easy for the authorities to acquiesce in granting special privileges to friends who wish to build hotels on the Golden Sands beach. The failure to develop a comprehensive management plan for the Karpas makes it all the easier to remove whatever theoretical protections the area has. The temptation to allow use to exceed the carrying capacity of the area is very great. Only constant vigilance by environmental groups will be able to maintain this wonderful landscape for future generations.

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