Landscape protection and management in Greece: problems, perspectives, and policies

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Abstract

The recent socio-economic developments in Greece (income increase, rural exodus, urbanization, second homes) and the consequent modernization in all fields of activities (mainly in agriculture, transport networks and infrastructures, tourism) have brought radical changes in Greek landscapes. Traditional urban and rural areas have been deeply transformed by thousands of legal or illegal constructions. New public works – especially transport infrastructures – have a great impact on the large scale physical environment. These changes pose new challenges that must be responded to in an appropriate way. The aim of this paper is to describe the existing situation and to contribute to a critical approach of the main problems that Greek landscape is facing today as well as the possible solutions for its protection and preservation since it constitutes an integral part of the natural and cultural heritage of Greece. In fact, due to Greece’s long history it has become recognized that the country has a rich landscape diversity, which is the result of the interaction between nature and society (traditional patterns of land use and land management) and therefore there is a great need to incorporate it to the national strategy and policy of spatial development. Finally there is a reference to policy matters. Although landscape protection appears world wide as one of the most interesting and important topics of contemporary planning, in Greece, the significance of ‘landscape’ as a policy-relevant issue has not yet been realized – at least to a sufficient extent – by environmental and spatial policy makers at local, regional and national levels. For this reason the paper investigates the possibility and the prerequisites for the formulation of a cohesive landscape policy that has never existed in Greece until today. To this purpose the paper attempts an assessment of all actors involved in order to make suggestions for the establishment of the adequate bodies, services and mechanisms that would help for a new landscape strategy and policy.
1 Greek landscapes: A few observations on the existing situation

In international literature, including the European Landscape Convention (Council of Europe [1]), «landscape» means an area (of a relatively limited size), whose character, as perceived by people, is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors and features. Landscape is the composite work of nature and man, and in how it arises, a fundamental role is played by historical processes (i.e. the history of the specific place). Landscape is also a key concept for transcending sector driven approaches towards the environment. In other words it serves as the unifying element of the environmental and spatial components in a geographical entity (Clementi [2]), and thus, for its inhabitants, determines every aspect of integrated development and quality of life.

In the Mediterranean, and particularly in Greece, a region known for the weight of its immense historic heritage and the fragility of its natural and built-up environment and ecosystems, landscape assumes even greater significance. Perhaps it is not accidental that Grecian and Mediterranean landscapes have been extolled by foreign visitors, travelers, and sojourners in the 18th and 19th centuries (Tomkinson [3]), have been painted and otherwise immortalized by artists and have been extensively photographed and praised, chiefly in the 20th century, by renowned Greek and foreign photographers and writers. One such is French writer Jacques Lacarriere, who, for many years, has traveled widely in Greece and the Mediterranean and has spoken at length of the exquisite landscapes (‘paysages exquis’) of the Greek islands (Lacarriere [4])

Recent change and transformation in Greek landscape, which is the easiest to understand, has ever been linked with the prevailing way that social groupings (through their values, means of production, and technologies) have organized and managed the space around them. The weight of such change lies chiefly in the quality of the outcome, and can be judged in the light of how harmonious it is ecologically, and what sort of balance it strikes between economic and aesthetic considerations, along with the degree to which it is attuned to prevalent social values.

What we usually call landscape deterioration, abuse, even destruction, expresses transmutation towards an imbalance that may result from rapid changes which fail to provide the necessary leeway for the ecosystem or geo-system to adapt adequately. The post war era in the Mediterranean and Greece may be regarded as such a time of precipitous change and consequent imbalance of the overall spatial – ecological system. The result is equally visible in urban and rural landscape, where contrasts become more glaring: unregulated quarrying and mining, slapdash rural and forest road constructions, denudation, incendiary fires etc. are the main types of intervention which cause ecological, functional and esthetic problems to Greek landscape. It is not accidental that this situation is often likened to an ‘indecent assault’ or ‘rape’ perpetrated on Greek nature.
Equally disturbing are the buildings and advertising constructions which form large unified ‘fronts’ or ‘thickets’ (actual ‘billboard habitats’) alongside motorways and major automobile routes (corridors) which ‘clutter’ the Greek countryside with undesirable ‘furniture’ and useless ‘objects’ (see photographs 1-6). Let it be noted that – and this is true all over the world – (CPRE [5]) that it is not always major assaults or interventions of large scale projects that prove harmful. The slow but steady accretion of smaller alterations on coasts, plains and mountains may ultimately bring about greater damage and spoilage, having an unexpected impact on the character of roads, traditional settlements or generally extensive rural areas. This is a more ‘subversive’ and ‘imperceptible’ deterioration of the environment and landscape.

On the other hand, the renewal of built-up areas and urbanization, the exploitation of landscapes as a source of economic growth and the conversion of rural and agricultural practices or even the development of communications infrastructure, led and still lead to a significant landscape change. This transformation, without precluding some continuity, does not however allow us to conceive of Greek landscape as the locus of ‘normal’ development, one which continues to preserve traces of the past and withstand oblivion. More precisely, significant landscape changes occurred during the past few decades in Greece, especially in the urban landscape. In Athens and Thessaloniki in the 19th century, just as in most

Towns and villages, the built-up environment was renewed with the use of reinforced concrete, whilst urban and rural areas that conserved their historicity became rare and no longer representative of the Greek way of building and housing. In this sense visions of national heritage and concepts about landscapes, conditioned as they are by an ‘assumption of permanence’ prove inadequate in describing and representing modern Greek landscape.
Photographs 1-3. Examples of ‘advertising or billboard habitats’ on the Athens - Thessaloniki national motorway.
Photographs 3-6. Examples of ‘advertising or billboard habitats’ on the Athens - Thessaloniki national motorway.
2 Elements for the formulation of a landscape policy in Greece

Landscape protection mechanisms in Greece can under no circumstances be considered adequate. Even though there are several provisions in urban and physical planning legislation concerning landscape, pertinent issues are regulated indirectly on the occasion of relevant objectives and policies. For instance – in theory at least – it is possible to exercise architectural control on building construction in a number of specific cases (such as in traditional settlements, historic town centers or other special zones) through special committees (Urban Planning and Architectural Control Committees). There is also provision for the designation of landscapes of special natural beauty, found in Law 1469/50 and Presidential Decree 161/D/84. Nevertheless, though hundreds of areas have been so designated, no appreciable material outcome has resulted, while the process for the declaration (designation) has been reduced to inertness – or has been blocked – after the enactment of Law (1650/1986) ‘on environmental protection’. Indeed, this framework law ‘on the environment’ stipulates the incorporation of all categories of protected areas under one unified process and for this reason requires that already declared landscapes be designated anew under the new procedure: this has yet to be accomplished despite the efforts of the competent authorities.

Thus at present, the legal provision most immediately concerned with the environment is paragraph 4, article 18, chapter IV (protection of nature and landscape) of law 1650/86 ‘on environmental protection’ mentioned previously, which pertains to the criteria for the designation of, and the protection principles for the protected natural features, protected landscapes and landscape elements. An important detail: since its inception in 1986, this legal provision has never been used for the purpose it was established! The most comprehensive mechanism for protection is therefore patently inadequate and this is related to the inherent problems and general ineffectiveness of environmental, urban and physical planning legislation and policies in Greece. For that matter, when proper implementation is lacking, the existence alone of an institutional framework does not constitute a substantial and effective policy, which can only be judged by the specific results obtained.

A well articulated and specific landscape policy must be an organic set of principles, operations and actions achieving logical cohesion and effecting a concerted outlook such as in raising awareness of, and alerting citizens to its necessity (if this necessary and crucial step has yet to be taken). It must secure the development of adequate infrastructure and know-how for its elaboration, implementation and support, must promote clear goals and strategy, along with organizational and administrative structures and mechanisms, economic tools and means, programmes and implementation plans.

Knowledge and organization therefore constitute the fundamental priorities of such a policy. For this purpose it is necessary to adjust the administrative structure of competent ministries by, for instance, setting up a ‘landscape unit’ (department or directorate) which by the way would not require much by way of economic resources. The formation of a “Landscape Observatory” would also be significant
when congruent to, and connected with the more general “Spatial Planning Observatory” stipulated by the law but yet to materialize (L. 2742/99) on Spatial Planning and Sustainable Development). Such a body is necessary for the knowledge it will generate and for the role that it would fulfill of providing advisory support to governmental and other decision making bodies.

It is also needful that landscape policy be organically linked with so-called ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ policies: for the environment, for the protection of natural and cultural heritage, for urban and physical planning, for rural development (forestry and agriculture), for tourism, to cite but a few examples. In such a context it is of the utmost urgency to secure the substantive implementation of the European Landscape Convention in tandem with the relevant provisions of the European Spatial Development Plan (ESDP) pertaining to cultural landscapes (ch. 3: Policy Aims and Options) (ESDP [6]).

In view of these considerations, a wide-ranging synergistic effort and collaboration is necessary between all relevant professional organizations and scientific associations. Such a coalition must include among its numbers bodies from the three major stakeholders who constitute a tripartite partnership on the basis of the recently launched conception of ‘spatial governance’.

a) The competent bodies of Central Administration (Ministry of Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works, Ministry of Culture and other jointly competent ministries) as well as national associations of local authorities of the first and second tier (Central Union of Municipalities and Communes of Greece, Union of Prefectural Local Government of Greece).

b) The relevant faculties and departments of higher education institutions - Universities and Polytechnics - (Architecture, urban and spatial planning, geography, environment, agriculture, forestry, fine arts, archaeology, photography).

c) The relevant scientific associations (Technical Chamber of Greece, Geotechnical Chamber of Greece, Association of Greek Urban and Regional Planners, Association of Greek Architects - Hellenic Union of Architects, Association of Archaeologists, other Non Governmental Organizations)

3 The first appropriate steps

Many say that landscape protection in Greece at present is tantamount to the declaration of a war against ugliness whatever its form. But this must not be construed as a war conducted through interdicts and prohibitions, but rather as a struggle to see sensitivity prevail along with the prudent management of space and the environment through appropriate regulations. From the institutional and social viewpoint, given the inchoate situation of landscape policy in Greece, wherever it is impossible to effect ‘spectacular’ and impressive moves, some specific initiatives are required to open up the way ahead, by effecting the first steps towards establishing a policy. As such, we might consider the following among others:
a) The elaboration of a Charter (Declaration) for Greek Landscape by a working group, to be set up by representatives of the stakeholders in the tri-partite partnership, whose symbolic and semiotic value is extremely valuable.

b) The integrated and substantial (rather than merely formal) implementation of the European Landscape Convention through the full incorporation of at least its main provisions in Greek Law. Such harmonization must be effected in tandem with the implementation of other pertinent Conventions such as the Granada Convention on Architectural Heritage, ratified by Greece by Law 2039/92, the Biodiversity Convention, ratified by Law 2204/94, the Unesco Convention on the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, the incorporation of Community Directive 92/43/EED (NATURA2000 Network) etc.

c) The establishment of an initial mechanism for monitoring and studying landscape such as a Photographic Observatory which might be a part of the wider Landscape Observatory mentioned earlier, as an organic department thereof. The setting up of such an organizational scheme might occur through the implementation of a special project with joint financing from national and community funds (in the context of community initiative INTERREG, or the third Community Support Framework) and with the participation of the stakeholders of the tri-partite partnership, who would assume the initiative for elaborating and submitting the relevant proposal to the competent authorities. Already, in the Operational Programme for the Environment of the Ministry of the Environment, Spatial Planning and Public Works, there is a first – albeit slight – budget line for actions to restore the environment in vulnerable and sensitive areas.

In respect of the Photographic Observatory it must be emphasized that its contribution and usefulness may prove particularly significant in promoting current perceptions and attitudes regarding the environment and its importance, in connection with national visions, as well as national ‘prejudices’ and ideologies. It is a fact that the literary texts and illustrations which expressed the ‘immutability’ and ‘permanence’ of archaeological sites and historical locations, have by now been converted into records in recollection of mutated landscapes, where locations of national heritage, regarded individually, were cut off from their ‘natural’ environment. The descriptions and illustrations of the 19th century which had indicated the continuity of locations and been expressed through the aspects of antiquity and Mediterranean landscape, aspects as yet minimally affected by modern technology, lost their power of representing Greek landscape. Similarly, photographic references to the past which allow the establishment of a memory of landscape and spatial practices, cannot be restricted to the reflection or revival of what has disappeared but must be activated in order to render the contemporary landscape intelligible.

Thus with the creation of a photographic observatory of modern Greek landscape, it would be possible to represent modern Greece, through establishing a global, synthetic vision thereof to such measure as would, through its representation, render it possible to understand the slow changes and reassessments of landscape, and of how it evolved in the past and through the present. Through photography, and photographic action the visual perception would enrich a scientific undertaking, since it is based on itineraries and reveals elements that geographical knowledge has not dealt with yet.
Sustainable Planning and Development 281

Through the reflections on landscape the inclusion of the various locations would predominate. This would make it possible to point out the spatial articulations with a multitude of synthetic elements which on a larger scale compose the landscape and would not be restricted to the approaches brought to bear by scientific disciplines that would focus on one single and isolated feature among them (architecture, infrastructure, ecosystems, etc.) In this manner, the temporal perspective, through observatory methodology, such as that of noting spatial structure of space, would be able to generate and encourage a historic and geographical appreciation of landscape. Similarly, photography would permit comparisons with older photographs and thus would establish series of photographs that would show the developments, as well as consolidated features, similarities and also differentiations and the diversity of the Greek landscape.

Finally the observatory could constitute a first-off mechanism that would allow the appraisal and knowledge of the Greek contemporary landscape and function as a research tool in regard of the production and knowledge of Greek space (for the use of geographers, physical planners, architects, ecologists). It could also furnish a comprehensive photographic undertaking, able to put together a photographic overall perception, with reflections on the Greek landscape, and to develop a photographic practice by way of not only of documentation but also of an artistic positioning vis-à-vis a range of reflections in respect of space, which would be of particular interest to the art of photography and also to non-photographic researches and explorations. The methods of the photographic landscape observatory and of the DATAR photography mission, or of the French Ministry of the Environment on French landscape, may be used not only as examples but also as points of reference, benchmarks, sources of inspiration (Ministere de l'environnement [7]).

4 Epilogue

The protection and sustainable management of landscape in modern Greece is no luxury. The country is not so much facing developmental problems (raising living and working standards, etc.) as problems attendant on the achievement of development, i.e. problems of quality, brought to bear by economic developmental evolution itself. However, contemporary European and Greek circumstances seem propitious for the promotion of a cohesive and comprehensive landscape policy in Greece. Even the negative situation described at the outset helps to spread awareness of the problem, and this is of course the fundamental prerequisite for any subsequent action. Therefore, in respect of the objective and subjective conditions that must serve as an incentive to action, the time is ripe, so as to coordinate existing isolated efforts, and unite all the fragmentary initiatives currently under way, that had until now proven incapable of creating the so-called ‘critical mass’ required for success. The impetus powering developments in the landscape situation of Greece must not be left to its fate, but must be given conscious and active support in the best possible manner, in order to produce tangible results as soon as possible.
References