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Authors: Valaoras, Georgia, Pistolas, Kostas, and Sotiropoulou, Helen Yombre

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Ecotourism Revives Rural Communities

The Case of the Dadia Forest Reserve, Evros, Greece

Georgia Valaoras
Kostas Pistolas
Helen Yombre Sotiropoulou

Mountains of the Mediterranean have been inhabited for centuries, and mountain villages have served as havens from pirates, disease, and oppressive invaders. These villages are characterized by difficult but enduring subsistence economies that have grown and declined in cyclical patterns, each time adjusting to population growth and abandonment as a result of war or famine. In Greece this pattern changed decisively in the 20th century. Throughout the century 80% of the population shifted from mountain villages to the lowlands or emigrated to the United States, Europe, and Australia, resulting in the massive abandonment of rural mountain areas. As depopulation increased, leaving only aging grandparents, schools and health services were closed, and forests recolonized the slopes traditionally kept open as grazing pastures for sheep and goats.

The village of Dadia in the Rhodope mountains has experienced a reversal of this trend since the 1990s, thanks to major efforts by conservation organizations, the government, the European Union (EU), the private sector, and the local population to introduce ecotourism in the area. Thus, a remote mountain region with a rich history and unique cultural and natural diversity has become a model of successful nature conservation and economic revival.

Socioeconomic change and loss of biodiversity

The Thracian village of Dadia is situated in the southeastern foothills of the Rhodope Mountains in the border region of Bulgaria, Turkey, and Greece. Here, settlements were subject to extreme isolation because of postwar restrictions (after the Second World War and the Greek Civil War), such as limits on travel and land ownership, as well as constant military border controls. These conditions may explain why some of Greece's richest natural areas are found in such border areas. Unique forest habitats with a rich variety of birds of prey, whose nesting and feeding sites stretch widely over the floodplain and delta of the Evros River, are found in this area. This varied landscape once consisted of continuous mixed forests of oak and pine, alternating with limestone cliffs and clear streams, blending into the reedbeds and marshy vegetation of the vast Evros River delta. Despite ill-conceived changes in this landscape, a remarkable number of important species, now internationally recognized as endangered, continue to breed and feed in the wild, including the 4 species of vulture known to European habitats and 200 other bird species, as well as a rich variety of reptiles, amphibians, and small mammals.

In the postwar years, with funds from the World Bank, large segments of the natural forest were uprooted and replaced with monoculture plantations of rapidly growing pine, ostensibly to provide revenue for local communities from logging. As part of the policy of industrializing agriculture, smallholdings of cultivated plots were combined into large farming units; this destroyed natural hedges and clumps of trees, which served as nests for eagles (Figure 1) and a habitat for smaller birds, rodents, foxes, and other creatures of the fields and meadows. A final, decisive blow to the traditional mixed agrarian



FIGURE 1 Thanks to the establishment of the Dadia Forest protected area, the golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) population has recovered. (Photo courtesy of WWF Greece, Kostas Pistolas)

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FIGURE 2 Traditional Sarakatsaniko sheepfolds are built in a semicircular shape with southern exposure to receive sunlight and protection from the north winds. These structures are being used again as a result of the revival of the area. (Photo courtesy of WWF Greece, Kostas Pistolas)



FIGURE 3 The Dadia Ecotourist Center includes 20 guest rooms, a coffee shop and restaurant, an information center with a permanent exhibition of flora and fauna, and a small shop with local products and information related to nature conservation. (Photo courtesy of WWF Greece, Kostas Pistolas)

economy that coexisted with wildlife was the decline in grazing. Nomadic tribes were forced to settle after 1950 and could no longer support the large herds that had traveled up and down the mountain slopes of the Balkans for centuries. As a result, flocks decreased, and so did the opportunity to feed on stray, sick and old animals, depriving birds of prey of a vital food supply. The use of agrochemicals also helped to hasten the decline of the agrarian economy.

Protection, but no alternative income

The importance of the area's biological wealth became known through the efforts of European conservationists. During the 1970s, a joint World Conservation Union (IUCN) and World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) ornithological study of the area identified the important species and their habitats in the Dadia–Soufli–Evros Delta complex. The report reached the highest levels of government in Greece and led to the designation of protected areas in a historic ministerial decision: 7290 ha were set aside as a strictly protected core area with no human access allowed, surrounded by 35,710 ha of buffer zone with limited activities. Activities such as hunting and logging were restricted to halt the decline of wildlife populations. Grazing was considered to be a low-impact activity and was allowed within both areas (Figure 2).

When restrictions were imposed, it was understood by the local residents that alternative income would be forthcoming. But a state-funded wood processing unit at the outskirts of the protected area never started operations because of lack of know-how and operating funds. For almost 10 years the local community's expectations remained unanswered, and frustration often boiled over. Finally, the government took action through an environmental grant (ACE) funded by the European Commission (EC). This program provided for the training of 2 local people as wardens for the nesting habitat in the forest reserve, as well as the establishment of a feeding site in the woods, with an observatory 500 m away that offered a view for visitors. Another feature of the EC–ACE-funded program was the establishment of a visitors' information center and guesthouse for the expected "ecotourists," who were to provide the long-awaited alternative income. The WWF had to provide interim salaries for the 2 wardens in order to maintain their commitment and ensure their continued presence in the area until EU funds could be garnered for completion.

Ecotourism: A new beginning

The WWF–EC–ACNAT project was initiated in 1992 and lasted 3 years, with cofunding from the German insurance company Allianz, to ensure long-term support for

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developing community-based ecotourism in Dadia. The visitors' guesthouse facilities were completed, and an information center was set up (Figure 3), including attractive wall displays, slide and video presentations, guided tours, and a 3D model of the protected area. Regular busloads of visitors could now be escorted to the observatory to view the feeding area through telescopes and binoculars, with interpretation by local eco-guides. In addition, several hiking paths were set up inside the forest area to illustrate the importance of biodiversity. Construction of these paths was one of the many activities organized by the local WWF team for hundreds of volunteers who came each summer. In addition, visiting students and scientists from around the world are taking advantage of this living laboratory for their fieldwork.

Women cooperate to make the area attractive to local people

The groundwork was thus established for wider community involvement in the ecotourism enterprise. A women's cooperative was established with over 35 women of all ages. Training seminars offered by state-funded programs were provided for hospitality and other skills (Figure 4), including preparing and serving traditional Thracian specialties. Young women trained as eco-guides, and as they gained experience and knowledge of the area's biological wealth, they organized programs for visiting schoolchildren from all over Greece (Figure 5).

The women's cooperative was so successful that it was emulated in all the area villages, each place emphasizing its own local specialties. Eventually, the increase in visitors to Dadia began to influence the economic activities of the wider area. Visitors stayed additional days to see other towns and villages of cultural and historic interest: the town of Soufli, once an important silk production center, the fortress of Didimotycho, and the magnificent cathedral in Feres, all signifying the importance of this passage between Europe and Asia dating from the time of Byzantine civilization.

Dadia: A model for Greece and Europe

The success of the Dadia project soon became known in government circles. This was one of the advantages of the EU-funded project: it forced national authorities to pick up speed and skills in the management of the protected area. Dadia's ecotourism attracted further investments from both private and public bodies. EU regional development funds through the Community Support Framework and community initiatives such as LEADER+ or INTERREG were of far greater magnitude than the small amount of funding for nature protection committed at the beginning of the project. More hostels and visitor accommodations were built, the visitors' information center was expanded, and a local monastery was restored, with its former cells becoming lodgings for worshipers and other special-interest tourists. Since the appointment of a permanent employee to manage ecotourism promotion in the Dadia–Soufli Forest Reserve, over 60 international and national meetings, fairs, exhibitions, and conferences have been held in Dadia, with its vibrant local community and exceptional natural heritage.

An important additional source of income was provided to rural families: without leaving home or changing their traditional family roles as caregivers, the women of Evros achieved some measure of independence and contact with the outside world.



FIGURE 4 Two members of the women's cooperative preparing a traditional Greek rice-like pasta called *trachana*, made with milk, sour milk, eggs, flour, salt, sometimes with carrots or peppers. Traditionally, *trachana* has been an important source of protein during the winter months. (Photo courtesy of WWF Greece, Kostas Pistolas)

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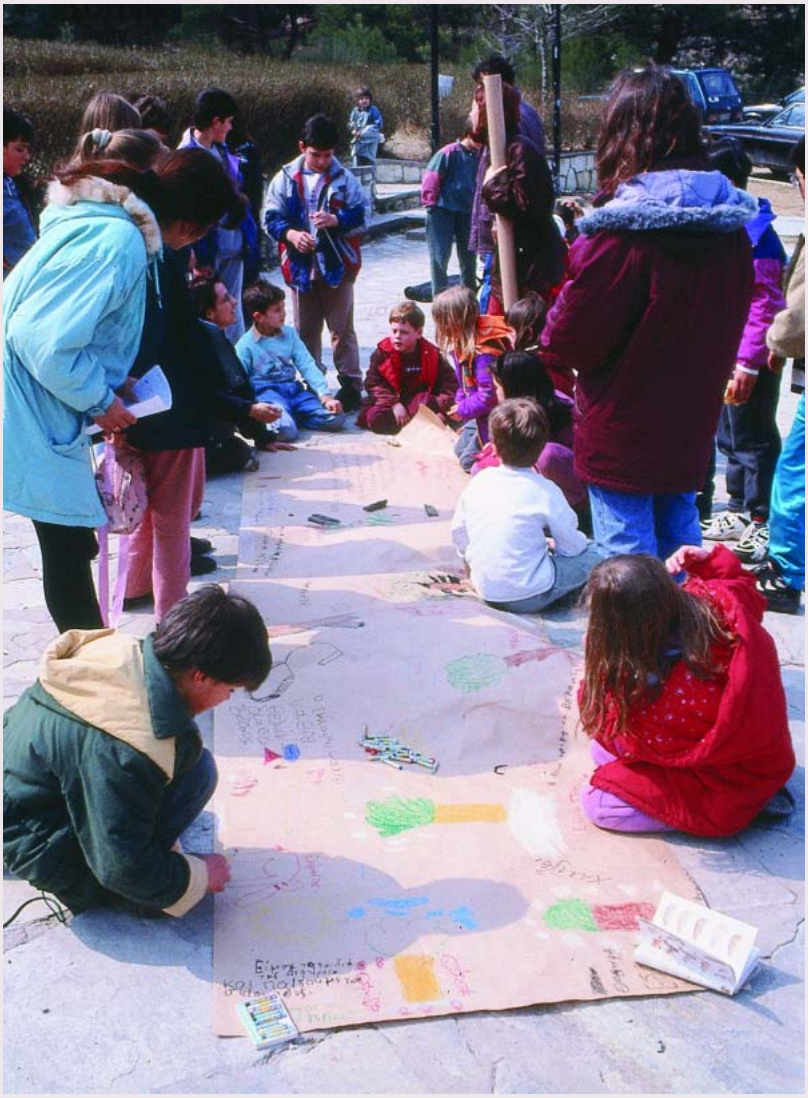


FIGURE 5 Children from schools all over Greece visit the center and participate in environmental education activities developed by the local eco-guides. (Photo courtesy of WWF Greece, Kostas Pistolas)

Reversing a trend common to most of Greece's rural areas, the population of Dadia has grown in recent decades. The demand for family housing exceeds the availability. The conservation of Dadia and associated commercial ecotourism activities have stimulated employment and provided young people with a source of interest and pride. Some young women, who previously had limited access to education or employment outside the immediate family circle, now delay marrying and starting a family to seek training as educators, guides, or managers, or for other new positions, in order to participate more substantially in the Dadia Reserve.

Tourism and conservation: Some basic principles

Despite its unique characteristics, this example can serve as a model for other important natural areas. The evolution of local community enterprises, the management of ecotourism, and the involvement of women in a women's cooperative demonstrate a number of principles that are transferable:

- The successful combination of tourism and conservation: the level of tourist services developed gradually and is in the hands of the local people. Services have developed at an appropriate scale and do not infringe on the ecological integrity of the site.
- The attraction of visitors from outside the area has provided additional income, particularly supplementary income for women in the cooperative, most of who have families and would not have the opportunity to seek regular employment.
- The basic infrastructure provides incentives for small private enterprises to provide food, accommodation, and other services. This, in turn, has had a multiplier effect by attracting public investments oriented toward ecotourism and rural development.
- Successful partnerships have evolved between the private and public sectors: many groups now have a say in the overall management of the reserve and in ecotourism activities.
- Trust has been established: key individuals (eg, coauthor Kostas Pistolas) liaised between the citizens of Dadia and outsiders, whether scientists, conservationists, or government officials. As a member of the local community, Pistolas was able to communicate to his extended family and neighbors the need for conservation and reorientation of the community toward ecotourism. At the same time, he was a reliable source of information and was able to advise "outsiders" on ways to approach the local people so as to develop trust—the main ingredient needed to engage them fully in this effort.

A timely change

Nature protection and rural development have moved higher up on the political agenda of both Greece and the EU, and these new priorities have been formalized

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FIGURE 6 A panoramic view of the Dadia Forest Reserve from one of the highest points in the area, at 650 m. Ecotourism increasingly helps preserve unique mountain ecosystems such as this one while also offering humans a source of livelihood and recreation. (Photo courtesy of WWF Greece, Kostas Pistolas)

in a number of EU Directives with associated funding mechanisms to assist the less developed countries in the Union. One such measure of support is Agri-Environment funding, which consists of early retirement and setting aside of cultivated areas in the EU that are producing surpluses and require subsidies for farmers. Reforesting abandoned cultivated areas, switching to new environmentally friendly agricultural practices, and preserving local breeds of domestic livestock are among the new priorities that have emerged from modifications in the Common Agricultural Policy of the EU. Naturally, it is desirable to keep the population living and working in rural areas, to prevent additional burdens on the coasts and on large urban conglomerates already growing beyond their carrying capacity. Farmers and their families must somehow be retrained or encouraged to take up new occupations as part of the new main emphasis of the EU on developing rural areas.

One of these new occupations is ecotourism, an obvious alternative for people living in rural or semirural areas that also provides something of interest to the urban visitor in terms of natural habitat. This is precisely the example that has been developed at the Dadia–Soufli Forest Reserve, through the patient collaboration of private and public bodies, women, local community leaders, and conservationists. It has now become a sustainable and self-sufficient alternative to isolation and loss of occupations in rural communities and can point the way forward for other parts of Greece. Moreover, this trend is developing just in time, while the remnants of natural landscape in the forgotten corners of the EU can still be saved (Figure 6). Conservation will preserve not only a rich cultural and historical memory of the past but also the biodiversity of wild and semidomesticated rural landscapes that was shaped over centuries by the coexistence of human activities and wildlife.

AUTHORS

Georgia Valaoras
Asklepiou 14, GR-10680 Athens, Greece.
valaoras@hol.gr

Georgia Valaoras studied chemistry, science education, and environmental management and earned a PhD from Washington University, St Louis, MO. She served for 5 years at the US Environmental Protection Agency and 6 years as director of the WWF in Greece. She currently teaches at the University of La Verne, Athens, and is a consultant for the EU on environmental matters.

Kostas Pistolas
Dadia Soufli 68400, Evros, Greece.
ecodadia@otenet.gr
Kostas Pistolas is a member of the Sarakatsani, an ancient nomadic tribe of southeastern Europe. He is a resident of Dadia and has lived in the forest all his life. He was hired and trained as one of the 2 wardens of the forest reserve through the EC-ACE project administered by the Greek government. He later worked with the WWF in Greece and is currently employed at the Prefecture of Evros in the Environmental Department, in charge of ecotourism activities related to the forest reserve.

Helen Yombre Sotiropoulou
Romylias 2, 14671 Athens, Greece
helen-gober@hotmail.com
Helen Yombre Sotiropoulou, MSc, studied economics, sociology, and regional planning and has done postgraduate work in regional development. Since 1981 she has worked at the Agricultural Bank of Greece in the Division of Research and Planning and the Economics Department. She is concerned with the development of the rural areas of Greece, identifying the training needs for rural development and facilitating the implementation of EU regional development programs to revive and support the rural populations of Greece.

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