



Spatial Indicators for European Nature Conservation



**THE GOULANDRIS NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM
GREEK BIOTOPE / WETLAND CENTRE**

Contract No. EVG1-CT-2000-00019

Deliverable 16

Report on Conflict Assessment

“Tourism development in the broader area of Kerkini Wetland”

Sofia Frantzi

January 2004

The present work was co-funded by the Commission of European Communities and the Greek Biotope/Wetland Centre in the context of the project “Spatial Indicators for European Nature Conservation” agreed to be carried out in the framework of the specific research and technological development programme “Energy, Environment and Sustainable Development” of the 5th Framework Programme, by the Contract No EVG1-CT-2000-00019 between the Commission of the European Communities (Directorate General Research) and the Goulandris Natural History Museum.

This document may be cited as follows:

Frantzi Sofia. 2004. Report on Conflict Assessment. “Tourism development in the broader area of Kerkini Wetland”. Greek Biotope/Wetland Centre. Thermi. 30 p.

Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Current socio-economic and environmental condition of the broader area of Kerkini Wetland.....	5
3. Stakeholders' institutions in Kerkini Wetland	8
3.1 Key organisations / institutions affecting the management of natural resources....	8
3.2 Key organisations / institutions affecting the management of tourism.....	13
4. Tourism research findings in the broader area of Kerkini Wetland.....	16
4.1 Quantitative data resulting from the tourists' survey.....	16
4.2 Local perceptions about tourism development in Kerkini Wetland.....	21
5. Conclusions	30

1. Introduction

In the framework of the project “Spatial Indicators for European Nature Conservation” the need for assessing potential conflicts between the conservation of nature and other activities lead to the production of certain conflict assessment reports. In the test site of Kerkini Wetland the activity chosen to be analysed was the development of tourism.

Interestingly enough, there is no particular conflict between nature conservation and tourism development in the area. However, since tourism when implemented unsustainably may negatively affect valuable ecosystems and nature conservation actions it was decided to explore the relation between tourism development and nature conservation in the area.

The aim of the report is to describe the relation between tourism development and nature conservation and present potential conflicts arising from their implementation.

The second chapter describes briefly the current socio-economic condition of the area, the existing tourism infrastructure and also the environmental issues, and the environmental protection status of Lake Kerkini.

In the third chapter, reference is made to the different stakeholders’ institutions and organisations that affect the management of the natural resources of the area, and also to the various institutions and organisations that are involved in the development and management of tourism.

Moreover, the fourth chapter presents the results of the research conducted in the area aiming to anticipate the attitudes of tourists and local people towards tourism development.

Finally, some basic conclusions are drawn in the fifth chapter.

For the aims of this report, they were used qualitative and quantitative research methods of social sciences, such as questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and participant observation. It must be mentioned that to avoid duplication of efforts part of the data collected in the framework of another FP5 project called “Integrated Management of European Wetlands”, were used and together with the existing experience in the test site formed the basis of a new effort.

2. Current socio-economic and environmental condition of the broader area of Kerkini Wetland

Social and economic data

The broader area of study is defined by the administrative borders of the four municipalities of Kerkini, Sidirokastro, Irakleia and Petritsi and one community of Promahonas. Statistical data for the four municipalities show that the population decreased from 39,694 inhabitants in 1991 to 38,624 inhabitants in 2001. The administration area of the 4 municipalities is approximately 92,176.8 ha.

Occupation in the primary sector of economy ensures a relative wellbeing in the area. It could be divided as follows:

Fisheries: Lake Kerkini is one of the most productive lakes in Greece with many commercial species.

Agriculture: Local people cultivate corn, cotton, wheat, alfalfa and tobacco.

Animal husbandry: Local people raise cattle, sheep, goats, rabbits and pigs.

As most of the rural areas of Greece, the broader area of Kerkini Wetland could not be an exception to the movement of inhabitants to bigger cities or even other countries. The villages have less people in each statistical survey, and those that are left are mostly elderly people. However, the local economy started to show positive signs due to the tourism development during the last few years. Small tourism businesses, like hotels, taverns, enterprises offering recreational activities such as guided tours, appeared especially through the EU Community Initiative LEADER. Generally though, the services' sector is only complementary to the income generated by the primary sector of the economy.

An important observation is that in many cases members of the same household practise professionally more than one occupation. For example, someone can be both logger and cattle raiser. This phenomenon takes place quite often at the local level. People are involved professionally with more than one activity in order to supplement their main income. Based on the changes that have taken place to the natural environment and to the management of the natural resources, someone could well argue that some activities turned from main to supplementary occupations or they were replaced by new occupations. For example, fishery used to be the main and unique job but the decline in fish production forces people to be involved with other occupations such as building constructions for example and practice fishery only for leisure. Additionally, logging used to be a main job for many households but nowadays, it is regarded as supplementary job and replaced either by farming and cattle-raising or by other activities.

Tourism infrastructure

The increased tourism development in the area lead to the construction of new lodgings, something that can be seen as a positive sign since Lake Kerkini is evolving to an

autonomous tourist destination. Obviously the daily visit in a place can not generate substantial income. The excessive stay of visitors is desired both from hotel owners and other professionals of the area. Actually they prefer less visitors staying longer periods of time, than more visitors staying shorter periods of time.

The accommodation units currently operating in the area include “Oikoperiigitis” in Kerkini village, which can accommodate twelve people in rooms and forty-five people in a guesthouse. In Lithotopos, there is the hotel “Erodios” which can accommodate fifty-five people. In Vyroneia there is a lodging of fifteen beds and a smaller one exists in Petritsi. In Sidirokastro, operates the hotel “Olympic”, while just out of the town there is the hotel of Sidirokastro’s spa. In Poroia there is the traditional hostel “Viglatorias” and two really small hotels, “Panorama” and “Belles”. Finally in Agkistro, there are two small hotels, “Agkistro” and “Hamam”.

The existing accommodation units are not enough to cover the demand, especially during peak times. This increasing demand will probably lead to the construction of new accommodation facilities.

Concerning restaurants, there are around plenty of taverns in the area (officially twenty-five but actually more), with most of them being in Kerkini, Lithotopos and Ano Poroia villages.

Institutional framework for environmental protection of the area

Kerkini Wetland is protected through national, international, and European legislation.

International Conventions: Ramsar Convention.

European Legislation: Directive 79/409/EEC, Directive 92/43/EEC.

National Legislation: Law 1650/1986 “For the protection of the Environment”, Law 2742/1999 for “Physical Planning and Sustainable Development”, Law 3044/02 for the Establishment of 25 Management Bodies, among which is the Management Body of Kerkini Wetland.

Changes in the natural environment

There have been major changes in the local environment at the area of Kerkini most of which are directly related to the building of the new dam in 1982. This was a big project that affected the natural environment a great deal as it allowed the lake’s water to reach a maximum level of 36 m above sea level, 4 metres higher than the previous dam. The annual water level range is now 5 metres. This influenced many aspects of the natural landscape. The most important effect was the damage to the riparian forest and the decrease of the aquatic vegetation including large beds of reeds and wet meadows due to the increase at the depth and duration of flooding. During the first years from the new works a large bed of white water lilies grew in the lake covering an area of 325ha. However, continuous rise of the water’s maximum level in the early 90’s caused the water lilies to decrease. By mid 90’s the area that they covered was no more than 50 to 80ha. The riparian forest was also exposed to water for more time than the trees could

cope with. As a result in the 90's the forest area had diminished by more than half, down to 325ha compared to the 700ha that it occupied in the early 80's. Scientists admit that cormorants nesting on the forest also cause some damage to the trees. The above changes have meant large-scale damage to the birds' and fish habitats and have resulted to the reduction of various birds and fish species' populations.

Logging of the forest by residents of the nearby villages has also been mentioned as one of the reasons for the forest decline. Destruction of the lakeside vegetation is also attributed to buffaloes and cattle grazing uncontrollably. Grazing space next to the lake is not enough to support the needs of the big number of sheep and goats present at the Kerkini area, especially during the summer. The result is overgrazing that doesn't allow the re-establishment of reeds and other vegetation and is considered one of the reasons for the declining vegetation.

Hunters also mention that natural habitats for animals have decreased in the mountains due to intensive logging and road building activities.

3. Stakeholders' institutions in Kerkini Wetland

3.1 Key organisations / institutions affecting the management of natural resources

The stakeholders in Kerkini wetland cover a big range of both official and unofficial institutions. This is partially explained by the fact that Kerkini wetland gives the opportunity to people to be involved with a big range of activities, like fishery, logging, hunting etc. Each of these activities is controlled and supervised by many different bodies. Some of their duties overlap, some others do not but the point is that there is a big variety of different bodies which operate at different levels - i.e. local, regional, national, etc. - and are involved in one or another way with the management of the natural environment. Some people argue that the major problem of Kerkini Wetland is that there are too many institutions involved with the management of the natural environment. All these institutions cause a big confusion. The most important of them are mentioned below.

Municipalities-Communities

Municipalities and Communities have an important role at the local level in relation to the management of the wetland. The Municipalities include Municipal Agencies, which are also interested in development projects in the broader area of Kerkini wetland. A national reform for local authorities all over Greece in 1998 turned the old local authorities which were the Communities and the Community Councils into local Municipalities. Based on this plan, all the local villages were administratively unified under the administration of a common municipal authority. There are 4 Municipalities and 1 Community which are involved in Kerkini wetland's management. They form the Association for the Protection and the Promotion of Lake Kerkini which was until recently the main body involved in the conservation of the wetland.

These authorities are the Municipality of Kerkini, the Municipality of Sidirokastro, the Municipality of Irakleia, the Municipality of Petritsi and the Community Council of Promahonas. The Promahonas Community is not included in any local Municipality mainly because of the long distance between this village and the local Municipalities. Geographically speaking, Promahonas village is a very crucial and strategic place because it is found closer to the Greek-Bulgarian borders. Even though it is far away from Kerkini wetland, it is very close to Strimonas river. Its role in the management of Kerkini wetland is mainly related to the silt that Strimonas river brings to the lake. In the past, it contributed with a dredge boat to the cleaning of the bottom of Strimonas river and at the same time, it secured that the silt would not reach the lake.

The four Municipalities have created Municipal Agencies, which are mainly interested in development projects. Some of these Agencies are also involved in various ways to the management of the natural resources of the area. These Agencies are the Municipal Development Agency of Kerkini (E.D.A.K.), the Municipal Agency for Local

Development of Neo Petritsi (D.E.T.A.N.P.) and the Municipal Agency for Culture, Development and Tourism in Irakleia (D.E.P.A.T.H.). The last one took the initiative to fund the operation of the Office for the Promotion of Ecotourism in Lake Kerkini for which more details will be given in the next chapter.

Prefecture of Serres / Prefecture Departments

This is the main institution that operates at prefecture level. The Prefecture is the official representative of the state at the prefecture level. The Serres Prefecture includes a series of departments, services and offices that are related to the management of natural resources in the broader area of Kerkini wetland. Administratively, the Prefecture is divided in the following departments: Department of Agriculture, Land Reclamation Service (DEB), Veterinary Department, Department of Communications and Transportation, Tobacco and Cotton Department, Department of Land Distribution, Department of Town Planning, of Environment and of Land Planning and the Industry and Market Department. A Tourism Committee belongs to the last Department, special reference to which will be given in the next chapter. All these Departments are divided in sub-departments, services and offices. The prefecture has also created a development agency called Development Agency of Serres (AN.E.SER.). Due to its relation with tourism development more details will be given in the next chapter.

Ministries

Different ministries are the points of reference at national level. There are two Ministries, which are directly involved in the area's management and to which people regularly refer. These are the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works. Rarely do local people refer to the role of other Ministries, as they are not directly involved in the management of natural resources.

The Ministry of Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works is administratively divided into General Directorates and Directorates. The Directorate mostly involved in Kerkini area is the General Directorate for the Environment, which is subdivided into the Directorate of Environmental Planning. Between the different sections that this Directorate includes, the most relevant with Kerkini wetland is the Natural Environment Management Section. The General Directorate and its sub-departments are responsible for all the issues that deal with environment and environmental planning all over Greece. They also get funding from the European Union to conduct several projects in relation to the issues that they are interested in. For example they used funding from the Operational Program for the Environment of the 2nd Community Support Framework of the European Union.

The Ministry of Agriculture is the main institution at national level to control and supervise agricultural issues. The Ministry cares about the development of the agricultural sector in Greece and uses funding from different E.U. programs such as "Agricultural Development and the Development of the Countryside 2002-2006", "Fishery Program 2002-2006", "LEADER plus" etc. The Ministry of Agriculture runs a project in collaboration with AN.E.SER called "Reform of Serres Countryside", which

aims to the implementation of development projects in the area and to the integration of the natural resources to the development of the whole area. The Ministry is divided in 9 General Directorates among which, two are of great interest for the management of the natural resources of Kerkini area. These are the General Directorate of Fishery and the General Directorate of Development and Protection of Forests and of Natural Environment.

Associations

This category includes a big range of Associations, which operate at different levels and adopt multiple roles. It may include Agricultural Associations (Fishing, Logging and Cattle-raising Associations), Hunting Associations, Ecological Associations, Cultural Associations, Unions and Federations of many local Associations, the Association for the Protection and the Promotion of Lake Kerkini which was so far the main body involved in the conservation of Kerkini Wetland, the Management Body of the Kerkini Wetland which has been recently formed and will take care of the overall supervision and management of the natural resources etc.

The Agricultural Associations form the Unions of Agricultural Co-operatives. The Unions of Agricultural Co-operatives are based on municipal level, which means that they control all the Agricultural Associations, which are included within the limits of different Municipalities. All the local Fishing and Logging Associations are regarded as Agricultural Associations because the Greek legislation does not distinguish Agricultural from Fishing or Logging Associations. The Unions of Agricultural Corporation belong at prefecture level to the Union of Agricultural Co-operatives of Serres which is based in the town of Serres. This means that all the local Agricultural Associations of Serres Prefecture were united into one main body, which is the Union of Agricultural Co-operatives of Serres.

As far as Kerkini area is concerned, there are three such Unions, which are the Sidirokastro Union of Agricultural Co-operatives, the Rhodopoli Union of Agricultural Co-operatives and the Irakleia Union of Agricultural Co-operatives. Although the Unions have a wide level of operation, their participation in the management of the natural resources runs on a daily basis. They are involved with the management of the forests, of the mountains (through the Logging Associations), of the lake (through the Fishing Association) and of the fields (through the Agricultural Associations).

The Hunting Associations include the Hunting Association of Rhodopoli and the surrounding villages called “Belles”, the Sidirokastro Hunting Association “The Goddess Artemis” and the 6th Hunting Federation of Macedonia and Thrace (K.O.MA.TH.)

The Cultural and Ecological Associations include the Cultural, Ecological and Athletic Association of Kerkini, the Folklore Association “The Macedonians”, the Educational Ecological Centre of Kerkini wetland in Megalohori (which is currently inactive), the Akritohori Cultural-Athletic Association, the Limnohori Cultural Association, the Lake Kerkini Wetlands Protection Association in Lithotopos (which is also currently inactive) and the Lithotopos Cultural Association.

Information - Educational Centres

In this category can be included the Information Centre of Kerkini Wetland which due to its special role concerning tourism in the area, will be further described in the next chapter and the Environmental Education Centre of Kato Poroia.

The Environmental Education Centre of Kato Poroia is one of the 19 Environmental Education Centres established by the Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs all over Greece. This office administratively belongs to the National Youth Foundation. The criterion to establish the Centre at Poroia is the proximity to the wetland. The aim of the Centre is to organise various programs and activities in relation to the natural environment and more specifically, to educate and sensitise pupils, teachers and the public on the environmental protection and the right use of the natural resources. They have also created educational material on these issues and they promote the research in the area. The Office is mainly addressed to schools all over Greece. There are halls of residence where pupils who visit the Centre can stay and also a restaurant. Around 30-35 pupils, including the teachers who accompany them can stay in the Centre.

The Environmental Education Centre has organised seminars concerning the various forms of environmentally friendly tourism, and also cooperates with research centres in research projects concerning environmental education and ecotourism in the area.

Services

This category includes institutions, which have more specific roles, they usually belong to wider institutions and their duties are restricted to specific roles.

The Police Station is found at Kato Poroia. Among its duties is to control every kind of illegal activity, which runs in the area. The police station is indirectly involved with the management of natural resources since within its duties is to control illegal fishery and every kind of illegal activity which is related with the natural environment.

The Forestry Office is one of the key institutions since it covers a big range of issues in relation to the natural environment and the management of natural resources. It belongs to the Region of Kentriki Makedonia. It is on a daily contact with local Logging Associations and it controls their job. Forest guards who work for the Forestry Office control the area, which is supervised by the Forestry Office etc. It buys woods from the Logging Associations and it distributes these woods to the people who get pension from the Organisation of Agricultural Insurance and have special licenses for woods taken by this Organisation.

The Land Reclamation Service of Serres (D.E.B.) is a former service of the Ministry of Agriculture, but today belongs to the Prefecture of Serres. Irrigation of Serres plain and other land reclamation, as well as the mechanising of agriculture, are the main issues the Service deals with. The Service exerts administrative and technical supervision on the General Land Reclamation Agency (G.O.E.B.), as well as on the 10 Local Land Reclamation Agencies (T.O.E.B.) of Serres plain. These “agencies” are organisations of agro-cooperative form, aiming at the exploitation and development of the large irrigation works. Part of this Service is “The Farming Machinery Section of Land Reclamation Service” which is responsible for mechanising agriculture in Serres, provisioning

services, such as technical control, traffic licenses, driving licenses for agricultural machines.

Non-Governmental Organisations

This category consists of organisations, which deal with environmental issues, research centres or universities and university laboratories.

The Ecological Movement of Serres operates since 1995 and is based in Serres. It is a member of the informal shape of the environmental organizations of the North-eastern Greece and of the pan-Hellenic network of ecological organizations. The association has organised various activities during the past such as: launching of a campaign in collaboration with various associations and organising a meeting at Serres in relation to the 'Impacts stemming from the rising of Kerkini' s lake water level", participation in the International Birds Festival organized by the Ornithological society, participation in a pan-Hellenic meeting of environmental organizations and submission of a proposal for the protection and effective management of Greece's water to the to the Ministry of the Environment, provision of first aid to injured birds and their transportation to EKPAZ (Wildlife Hospital), provision of support EKPAZ's members during bird releasing, etc.

The Hellenic Ornithological Society (E.O.E) is the only Greek non-governmental body exclusively concerned with the protection of wild birds and their habitats in Greece. It is a Not for Profit Organisation founded in 1982. In 1993 the Athens Academy presented it with an award for its important work to that date. The objectives of the Hellenic Ornithological Society are: the Study and Protection of Birds and their Habitats in Greece, one of the last remaining natural wildlife sanctuaries in Europe, the Promotion of these aims to the European Union, in cooperation with related European ornithological societies, Informing and Educating the public regarding all matters concerning the birds of Greece, so that all can enjoy their beauty and support their protection. Up to now it has run wildlife projects in the area of Lake Kerkini.

The Hellenic Wildlife Hospital (EKPAZ) was founded in 1984 by a small group of university students in Thessaloniki. Very soon the Centre turned into an organised group of volunteers and they began to co-operate with the Hellenic Ornithological Society. In 1990, the Hellenic Wildlife Hospital became an independent non profit organization established by the same people who were working from the initial stages. However it continues to cooperate closely with the Hellenic Ornithological Society in co-ordinating action on conservation and scientific issues. It is the first wildlife rehabilitation centre in Greece and the first to obtain an official permission from the Greek State to possess, treat and release all species of indigenous wildlife. In 1992 EKPAZ was granted the Athens Academy Award in recognition of its contribution to wildlife protection in Greece. All of the Hospital's activities are based on voluntary work, donations and membership contributions. Up to now it has worked many times in the area of Kerkini, treating injured wildlife species of the broader area.

WWF-Greece was first founded in Athens in 1990. In the middle of 1990s it was recognised legally as a national organisation and it elected its own administrative council. Nowadays, it is composed by 15000 active members. Its main goal is to conserve the

biodiversity in Greece and to prevent the damage of the natural environment by securing the harmonious coexistence between people and nature. WWF is funded by the membership fees and the different donations of people who invest in the protection of the nature. The organisation promotes the integrated management and protection of biotopes and suggests measures of protection for the different plant and animal species. In Kerkini wetland it has conducted many local projects aiming at the protection of natural richness by promoting the active participation of the local community and the creation of alternative forms of economic activities. Among its activities was also the implementation of a LIFE project in the area.

The Greek Biotope/Wetland Centre (EKBY) has its roots in the Goulandris Natural History Museum. The Museum was established in Athens in 1964 as a non-profit institute for research, public awareness, information, and education in the conservation of the natural environment. EKBY has adopted the policies and nature conservation principles of the Museum. It was established in 1991 by the Museum with European Community funding and the support of the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF), following an application by the Greek Ministry of Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works. EKBY is based at Thermi, close to the city of Thessaloniki, where its facilities are located. Its overall objective is to promote the sustainability of renewable natural resources in Greece and in the rest of Europe and the Mediterranean region. During its operation, EKBY has implemented numerous research and actions projects in the broader area of Lake Kerkini. It operates in close collaboration with the Information Centre of Kerkini Wetland, and at the moment it conducts research in the area through projects such as a LIFE-Environment project, two EU funded projects through the Fifth Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development and various other projects funded by the Hellenic Ministry for the Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works.

3.2 Key organisations / institutions affecting the management of tourism

Information Centre of Kerkini Wetland - Association for the Protection and the Promotion of Lake Kerkini

Apart from its central role in nature conservation, the Information Centre in Kerkini is also involved in tourism. It was constructed with money granted from the Ministry of Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works. It operates since 1997 as the base of the Association for the Protection and the Promotion of Lake Kerkini. In the summer of 2003 a Management Body has been formed which adopts a legal status, i.e. legal power, and will be the main responsible body for the conservation of the whole Kerkini Wetland. The Ministry funded the operation of the Centre during the period 1997-1999 based on an agreement that was signed by this Ministry, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Prefecture of Serres, the Development Agency of Serres (AN.E.SER.) and 13 Community Councils (these Community Councils composed the local authorities which existed before the introduction of the administrative reform). At the end of 1999 all the responsibilities for the operation of the Centre were transferred to the Association. In the year 2000 a new

legislation transformed the part of the last legislation that referred to the Community Councils and instead of them, it included the four Municipalities of Kerkini, of Irakleia, of Sidirokastro and of Pertritsi and the community council of Promahonas. The main goals of this Association in relation to the lake, which are also included in its founding legislation, are the environmental protection, the promotion of the area, the information of the authorities and the public on issues of ecological interest and importance, the application of the National and European Projects for the protection of the Lake Kerkini, the co-operation with all the institutions involved in the management of the lake, the operation of the Information Centre, the co-operation with Universities, Foundations and other institutions, the possibility to cover supplementary needs for the protection of the lake etc.

It is clear that the Information Centre, which is managed by the Association, operates at local, regional, national, European and international level since it covers a big range of activities. In the last year the Centre was visited by 14500 people, especially school children and organised tourists. The visitors are also guided around the lake or in the lake with a boat accompanied by trained guides from the Centre. The Information Centre is keeping numbers of visitors, it is informing them, guiding them and contributes to the general promotion of tourism in Lake Kerkini.

Office for the Promotion of Ecotourism in Lake Kerkini

The office started to operate in December 2002 as Office for Agro-Tourist Promotion and Information; after a while it turned its name into Office for the Promotion of Ecotourism in Lake Kerkini. Its main goals are, the development of ecotourism enterprises in Kerkini area, the advertisement and promotion of tourism in the prefecture, the support of various investments in the area, the organisation of seminars, conferences, and also publishing of books, cd-roms etc. in relation to ecotourism in the Prefecture. The operation of this office is mainly based on the promotion of ecotourism activities. For this reason, they need to co-operate with other institutions, businesses etc. at local, regional, national levels. They organise presentations for the groups that visit the area, including visits at various places of Serres Prefecture and not only in Kerkini wetland. They also intend to be in contact with other institutions and businessmen who would like to invest money in the area for ecotourism projects. Nowadays, there are two people working in the office. In terms of financial power, the office faces financial difficulties. The source of funding of the office is not clear. The office was established through E.U. funding through the programme LEADER II. The Municipal Agency for Culture, Development and Tourism in Irakleia (D.E.P.A.T.H.) was the main responsible authority for the establishment of the Office in cooperation with the Development Agency of Serres (AN.E.SER.). It is managed both by D.E.P.A.T.H and the Municipality of Irakleia.

Development Agency of Serres (AN.E.SER.)

AN.E.SER. was established in December 1994 because of the participation of Greece in the EU Community Initiative LEADER II. The main activity of this Agency is to promote EU programs and other national programs in relation to the development needs of Serres

Prefecture. Among the goals of the Agency are, to contribute to the development of the area, to protect and manage the natural resources, to conduct research, to organise educational seminars, to invest etc. Specifically for Kerkini area, AN.E.SER. secured funds for the construction or the expand of agro-tourist units. In Lithotopos it funded the construction of agro-tourist lodgings and the construction of the Office for the Promotion of Ecotourism in Lake Kerkini. In Kerkini it funded the construction of a centre which includes a hotel and offers various eco-tourist services. In relation to the protection and the management of the natural environment, it funded the Municipal Company of Petritsi in order to construct paths on the mountain and also the construction of the aquarium and of the Botanic garden in Vironeia. The Agency has the general supervision of LEADER II and LEADER Plus initiatives in the whole Serres prefecture. AN.E.SER. is active and involved on a regular basis with the conservation of the natural resources in Kerkini area. It is one of the stakeholders that local people refer to regularly when asked about the institutions involved in the area.

Tourism Committee

This Committee belongs to the Industry and Market Department of the Prefecture of Serres. The main role of the Tourism Committee is to promote and advertise the various places of archaeological, natural, religious and historical interest in Serres Prefecture at regional, national and international level. For this reason, they have published a series of posters, brochures, tourist guides etc. including all the places of tourist importance in the Prefecture. They have also created a cd-rom including a special part for Lake Kerkini. It is interesting that they have published part of this in Greek, English, but also in German and Finnish. According to their sayings, there are many people from these areas who express interest in visiting Serres prefecture and for this reason, they chose to publish the data in all these languages. Lake Kerkini of course plays a great role in the whole process of the promotion of the prefecture and this is the reason why there is so much material published exclusively for this area.

4. Tourism research findings in the broader area of Kerkini Wetland

4.1 Quantitative data resulting from the tourists' survey

A survey was conducted by completing 80 questionnaires with tourists in the framework of the project “Integrated Management of European Wetlands”. The purpose of this survey was to investigate the tourism demand in the area. For the purposes of SPIN project these questionnaires were statistically analysed and the results are presented in the following pages.

The data analysis included descriptive statistics and the inductive method (binomial analysis).

Results of the descriptive statistics

The 80 questionnaires of the survey were filled in around lake Kerkini. Specifically, 21.3% of the questionnaires were completed in village Lithotopos, 25% in Kerkini, 8.8% in village Poroia and a few other were completed in villages such as Megalohori, Vironeia, Livadia, Mandraki, Akritohori, Sidirokastro.

The majority of the interviewees who were visiting the area were men (63.8%).

The mean of the age of the interviewees was 44.3 years (SD 11.7). From table 1 it can be seen that 40% of the interviewees were between the age of 41 to 50.

Table 1: Age of tourists

	Frequency (individuals)	
?20	1	1.3
21-30	9	11.3
31-40	18	22.5
41-50	32	40
51-60	12	15
>61	8	10
Total	80	100

Half of the tourists that filled in the questionnaires live in Thessaloniki and more generally, most of the tourists in Kerkini area come from Northern Greece which sounds reasonable as lake Kerkini is a beautiful and close-by destination. This could be related with the fact that 58.8% of the tourists, visited the area and left on the same day.

Over half of the interviewees (57.5%) have visited the area of Lake Kerkini many times before. The mean of the times that a visitor has come to the area is 10.4 times (SD 8.5).

Many of the tourists had come to the area with company. Only 5 of them came alone. The average amount of members in visitors company was 7 individuals (SD 16.9). Analytically, most of the visitors company had two to five members (86.3%) while 6.3% of the interviewees have come to the area as members of larger groups (over 10 people).

As far as it concerns the other members of the company the average age of the second member of the company was 41.8 years (SD 13.1), the average age of the third member of the company was 27.5 years (SD 20.6 years) and the average age of the fourth member of the company was 25.1 years (SD 21.5).

There are two main routes to arrive in Lake Kerkini. The first is through the national road Thessaloniki-Serres and the second one is through Kilkis. Sixty two point five percent of the visitors chose the first way and the rest 36.3% chose the second way.

Most of the visitors travelled by their own car (76%). Twelve point five percent of the interviewees travelled by touring bus while 3.8% of the interviewees rented a car and the other 7.5% used other means of transportation such as motorcycle or other.

The main reason for visiting the area of Lake Kerkini, for the majority of the interviewees (71.3%) was recreation. Less visitors (8.8%) arrived in the area to visit friends, 7.5% to visit relatives and also 7.5% for business issues.

As far as it concerns the interviewees' activities during their visit in the area, there will be reference in the activities that a worth saying percentage showed a preference to. So, 6.3% of the visitors went fishing, 27.5% of the visitors did canoe/boating, 17.5% went climbing in the nearest mountain, 15% went horse-riding. Also 12.5% of the visitors attended an entertaining event, and 28.8% visited the information centre to get information about the area. Some of the visitors preferred activities with environmental interest such as bird-watching (37.5%) and picture-shooting (16.3%). Only a few of the interviewees went to a spa (7.5%) or visited the monastery that exists in the area (7.5%). Twenty one point three percent travelled with a group of people for sightseeing in the area and 30% of the interviewees went for a tour. Many visitors (55%) went for a walk and 36.3% enjoyed driving around the area of Lake Kerkini. Only 31.3% of the interviewees referred to a place they visited and such places where the monastery, the lake, the river, the mountain Belles and the Roupel fort. Also only 28.8% of the interviewees bought local products, mainly homemade pastries and meat. Only a few tourists (6.3%) attended a conference during their visit to the area. The majority of the interviewees (86.3%) relaxed from all the anxiety of their everyday living and also most of them enjoyed eating and drinking (86.3%).

More than half of the tourists didn't spend the night in the area but they preferred to return to their home the same day. Twenty percent of the interviewees stayed in a hotel, only 5% stayed in their own dwelling and the other 17.5% spent the night in the house of relatives or friends.

As far as it concerns the money that each visitor spent during their visit to the area, some of the interviewees didn't answer at all because they didn't spend money in the categories they were asked or they couldn't estimate the whole amount or even because they didn't

want to answer. It must be noted that the interviewees were asked to estimate the money they had already spent and the money they were going to spend during their visit. Anyway, taking into account the given answers, it may be mentioned that the average amount of money that a visitor spent for accommodation was 102 €. The average amount of money for transportation to the area was 28.1 € while the average amount of money for touring around the area was 10.3 €. For food and drinks the average amount of money that a visitor spent was 48.6 €. Moreover the average amount of money for recreational activities that a visitor spent was 17.1 € and finally the average amount of money for buying products was 30.6 €.

The interviewees were asked to express their opinion about the way that tourism is organised in the area of Lake Kerkini. The answers were differentiated. Thirty eight point eight percent answered that there is a good organisation in the area whereas 26.3% claimed that there are more things that could be done. Only a few (3.8%) said that they didn't find any special organisation in the area. On the other hand some of the interviewees (27.5%) said that there is lack of organisation and infrastructure in the area.

The interviewees also expressed their impressions about the area. There will be reference to the most important points. Sixty four point seven percent from the tourists who expressed their opinion about transportation said that they have moderate impressions. About accommodation 26.7% of those who answered the question, had good impressions and 56.7% had very good impressions. Also positive, were the impressions about the local food. Forty seven point eight percent of the tourists had good impressions and 43.5% had very good impressions from the food they tasted in the area. Mostly positive, were the impressions from the local products that are being sold in the area since 40.9% had very good impressions and 20.5% had good impressions. The impressions from the infrastructure, maps, guidance were differentiated; 19.2% had bad impression, the same percentage (19.2%) had moderate impressions and 42.3% had good impression from the infrastructure, maps, and guidance they found in the area. About half of the interviewees expressed their impression about the information centre. 15.4% of the tourists that did answer the question had moderate impressions, 20.5% had good impressions and 51.3% had very good impressions. Only a few expressed their opinion about health services (13 interviewees) who had good (46.2%) impressions or very good (38.5%). It is worth mentioning that when the interviewees were asked to express their impressions about something else in the area 17 out of the 80 interviewees mentioned the road's condition and 29.4% of the answers where bad impressions, 41.2% were moderate impressions and at finally 29.4% were good impressions.

The tourists of the survey were asked to make a comment (anything they wanted) about a local issue. As it is difficult to categorise their answers it must be noted that many of them referred to characteristics of the environment such as beauty of the landscape and especially of the lake and mountain, serenity, diversity of fauna and flora, clean air, birds, buffaloes, while fewer were the negative comments such as bad condition of the roads, indifferent behaviour of the local people, pollution, litter, etc.

The interviewees expressed their opinion about the impacts of tourism to the environment; 10.3% said that tourism has a positive effect as it develops the area and gives vividness, 19.2% said that tourism doesn't affect the environment and 9% said that the effects depend on the way people develop tourism in their area. On the other hand

20.5% claimed that tourism has negative effect on the environment, 5% said that tourism causes sprawl to expand, destroying in this way the environment, and 30% referred to pollution, litter, disturbance.

The tourists were also asked to express their opinion about the present and future effect of tourism on the local people; 26.6% of them answered positive effect, 39.2% were more specific and said job opportunities and financial support. A few (3.8%) said development of the economy and environmental awareness. Fifteen point two percent believe that it may develop the place and help local people but this should be made carefully. Five point one percent claimed that it depends on the way that tourism will be developed. Negative opinions were less as 1.3% said that tourism will have negative effect unless local people organise themselves and percentage 2.5% referred to speculation. Also 6.3% claimed that the effect on local people is unknown.

When the interviewees were asked to give a definition of their own about ecotourism, 23.8% of them didn't know the meaning of the word. Some 36.3% said that ecotourism is tourism with environmental guidelines and 8.8% answered that it is tourism that is related to local community and tradition. Ten percent said that it is tourism with both environmental guidelines and related to the local community and tradition and 16.3% defined ecotourism as the tourism that has future in contrast with conventional tourism.

The interviewees also expressed their opinion about the role of local people to the ecotouristic activities. Many of them (42.5%) said that local people should play an active role in the development of ecotourism and that there should be a bottom-up approach of the development. Eleven point three percent said that local people should protect their place and the environment. Some others (10%) claimed that local people should be friendly to the visitors of their place and a few (5%) said that local people should facilitate, and support the development of ecotourism.

The interviewees were asked to express their opinion about the role of the tourists in the development of ecotourism. Twelve point five percent answered that tourists should respect and protect the environment, whereas 22.5% answered that tourists should protect and respect both the environment and the local people. Others (23.8%) claimed that tourists should prefer and seek for ecotourism.

The visitors of Lake Kerkini proposed many ways in which ecotourism could be developed in the area so as to support local people and tourists to protect the environment. Ten percent said that there is a need for proper planning and guidance by specialised staff. A few (8.8%) mentioned that education and public awareness is needed while 27.5% said that better infrastructure is the proper means. A few (7.5%) claimed that "eco-friendly" development is needed to discourage local people from emigration.

The interviewees were asked to specify which ecotouristic activity they would like to be developed or more developed in the area of Lake Kerkini. There will be reference to the most popular activities. Twenty eight point three percent of the tourists expressed their preference to walking in organised paths. Also 13.3% preferred cycling to be developed. The same percentage (13.3%) said that boating should be more developed in the area. Some others (15%) would prefer more accommodation facilities and restaurants to be developed. Other proposals for the area in less preferences were guiding tours, riding

horses, educational activities, infrastructure for bird-watching and fishing, more activities for children and young people.

Many of the interviewees have visited the area of Lake Kerkini before. So, when they were asked what did they learn about the lake after their visit 41.3% of them answered nothing. A few of them (5%) claimed that every time they learn something more about the area. Some interviewees (20%) received information about the whole region while others (7.5%) learned that the lake is artificial. Also 7.5% received information about the environment of the area.

Tourists usually when they visit a place use maps and other guides or information sources about the area. Among the interviewees of the survey, 47.5% didn't use any guidance maybe because they had visited the place many times before. Sixteen point three percent of them used maps and booklets for guidance. Only a few (11.3%) collected information from the local people (boatmen, friends, relatives etc.). An even smaller percentage (7.5%) had previously collected information from the Internet and only 5% from the information centre.

The favourite activity that the interviewees enjoyed during their visit to the area of lake Kerkini was walking for 23.8% of them, relaxing and drinking coffee for 17.5%, eating for 12%, driving a car or riding a motorcycle for 10%. Other activities that were mentioned by fewer visitors were bird-watching, fishing and boating.

The visitors were asked to express which environmental characteristic impressed them more; 31.3% of them answered the lake with the birds, 22.5% said the birds exclusively, 17.5% said "the whole of the environment", 10% expressed their good impression for the flora diversity and 8.8% said that the combination of the mountain with the lake was the most impressive.

The majority of the interviewees (93.8%) expressed their intentions of visiting again the area of Lake Kerkini and also the majority of them (97.5%) expressed their intention to recommend to others to visit the area.

Inductive method (binomial analysis)

For the data processing of the survey, except for the descriptive statistics, the inductive method (binomial analysis) was also used. The results of the binomial analysis are presented below.

Using the Mann-Whitney test the analysis briefly concluded in that older people show preference to visiting the spa of the area, also older people show preference to sightseeing as members of a group in contrast to the younger ones. Moreover, more educated people show preference to the ecotouristic activity of bird watching and shooting pictures with environmental interest. Additionally, more educated people show preference to go sightseeing and specifically go touring around the lake and walking. As far as it concerns the financial status of the visitors, more wealthy people show preference to riding horses, bird watching, touring around the lake, and visiting the lake with a boat.

Moreover, there were made comparisons with age, educational level and financial status and the ecotouristic activities that the visitors proposed to be developed. The most

interesting result was found in the comparison of educational level and the recommendation for opening more accommodation facilities and restaurants. Specifically, less educated people recommend to develop more accommodation facilities in the area and restaurants as well. Also it was found that more wealthy and also more educated people can explain the meaning of ecotourism while the visitors with low income or the less educated cannot explain the meaning of ecotourism.

Using the Spearman's coefficient it was found that the more wealthy the visitor is the more days he spent in the area of lake Kerkini ($\tilde{r}=0,307$, $\acute{a}=0,006$). Also by the Spearman's coefficient it was found that the higher is the annual income of the visitor the more negative he thinks that the effect of tourism towards the environment is ($\tilde{r}=0,250$, $\acute{a}=0,033$).

4.2 Local perceptions about tourism development in Kerkini Wetland

The information given below is based on semi-structure interviews and informal discussions conducted in the framework of the project "Integrated Management of European Wetlands" with local people, involved or not in tourism but certainly familiar with the area and its activities. For the purposes of SPIN project the following information was extracted and is presented below together with comments produced by participant observation of the researchers.

Organisation of tourism

There is a general consensus that tourism in the area of Kerkini is not well organised and that it is in its infancy. Tourism is now taking its first steps since the attempts for its development started only a few years ago.

Most of the people realise that there is no infrastructure to receive the tourists. They claim that tourists come in the area and they do not have anywhere to spend their money. There are many taverns, but not a very good restaurant for them to eat. Most significantly there are not enough places for accommodation.

Also, many local people claim that tourism in the area is actually represented by only a few professionals, like the owner of an ecotourism unit which includes a hostel and also organises guided tours in and around the lake, the owners of horses for horse riding, and a few others that organise tours.

Some comment that this bad organisation discourages people from staying in the area. Also the fact that there are plenty of taverns is not necessarily correct since, not all of them are open all the year round. Sometimes in the winter there is not even one operating.

Some argue that this bad organisation is not a particular phenomenon in their area but it is the current reality all over Greece, as they tend to believe that tourism, and especially what they call agrotourism, is not properly organised in our country. The Greek state does not offer, they say, a good infrastructure.

Nevertheless they seem aware that there is a government policy to support agrotourism / eco / alternative tourism development but people think that all these exist in a non organised form.

They also point out that there was never a suggested central plan for tourist development in the area. Tourism began to develop when tourists started to come to the area and when private initiatives were undertaken. The truth is that all the worthwhile efforts have been made mainly by individuals.

It is worth noting that in the past, long before people started to visit the area because of the wetland, visitors were coming in summertime to stay for a while in the mountain villages because of the nice climate (low humidity and cool temperature), especially those who suffered from respiratory problems.

Also, as far as we understand, another type of tourism, which developed before ecotourism became a fashion, was related to religion. Mainly elderly people used to and still come to the area on bus trips in order to visit the monastery and they combine that with a visit in the taverns of Poroia. Nowadays they might combine the trip with a short stop at the lake.

Despite this common feeling that tourism development is in its infancy and not so well organised, some people believe that it is heading more or less in the right direction and that the opportunity exists to organise it in the correct way and to avoid mistakes, bad examples and inappropriate models. For example local people are quite satisfied with the way the women's agrotourist cooperative has been functioning during the three years of its operation and there are new plans for future development.

Perceived types of tourism and its characteristics

Agrotourism and ecotourism are the terms mainly used by the people in the area. It often seems that both terms mean more or less the same thing to them and they use one or another irrespective of what term the interviewer uses. Some have a simple, yet direct definition of this form saying that it is when people visit the area and they offer them hospitality.

Agrotourism is understood as the type of tourism which attracts people from the big cities to the villages. It relates to farming activities and engages the tourist in an authentic way of living. Some people mean a little house that has a yard, permanent staff in it, and shows to the tourists the local activities, the traditional recipes, the everyday life as the collection of vegetables from the garden, and of eggs from the chicken.

Agrotourism and ecotourism are sometimes seen with nostalgia. Some people mention that, especially for the tourists, who live in blocks of flats, ecotourism is to be in a house that will remind them of their grandparents' house in the village. People are also aware of the possibility that placing the prefix eco in front of tourism will merely become a marketing tool, a fashion, as ecotourism is promoted in life – style magazines as the smart thing people do. They say that nowadays that agrotourism is a fashion, and the area is very much advertised, any random visitor arrives there. They might want to get away from the town and go to the countryside believing that in this way they will live like rural people, but when they arrive they actually want some comforts and conveniences.

The term ecotourism is understood to mean tourism which utilises small scale hotels, where tourists participate in simple farming activities, taste local produce and have a different type of relaxing experience which is worth mentioning later to other potential visitors. This way of understanding coincides with the agrotourism idea.

In ecotourism the visitors according to the local people should be aware of what they come to see because the region is sensitive, they should respect the environment and they should preferably be “nature lovers”. Some local people really keen on the idea of hospitality, claim that visitors should be treated like a guest in the house or as part of the family who takes part in everyday activities. The eco-visitor should appreciate the particularities of each area, and local community and show respect to it, but also to protect the area and contribute to the promotion of the area. According to local people ecotourism should be a form of tourism which demands respect from both parties, hosts and visitors. The locals should understand that them as hosts should protect, love, respect and keep their environment clean and also set the rules for the visitor so as not to destroy it.

The term “healthy tourism” that is used sometimes is understood to be the “good” tourism which actually has the characteristics described above that has benefits for all parties, host, visitor and nature. We could argue that it is closer to the term responsible tourism. The terms sustainable or responsible tourism were not mentioned at all.

Ideas for the future development of the area

It is common knowledge that there is a future for tourism development in the area. There is need for a lot to be done in order to achieve this development especially referring to infrastructure needs such as accommodation, road networks and public transport.

They see a need for increasing local people’s training and education about the area and its natural wealth. Foreign languages, especially English is one of the quite basic elements tourism professionals need.

Also training of people is necessary either if it is for working in the tourist business, or if it is for keeping the area clean from garbage. Actually the latter is a big problem created mainly by the residents of the area, a problem that the authorities either fail to combat or just ignore.

Many people also mention the need for adequate signing and information available in order for the tourists to find their way around easily. There should also be coordination of information in the established centres and special attention should be paid to the idea of making wise use of the natural resources. The various information centres should provide proper information to ensure that the visitors can be advised, informed and make good use of their spare time.

A common proposition from the local people is that local authorities should play a substantial role in promoting the area. They should make more organised efforts with leaflets or references to some publications so as to advertise its ecological wealth. They should also help activities like bird watching by constructing specific facilities like observation posts with very good telescopes in specific places around the lake so that there is no reason for the tourists to go in the lake and disturb its species.

Finally, there is a belief that the visitors should be offered more to do in the wider area such as walks on signed paths. Mountain Belles for example, is a very interesting destination. A more innovative proposition was to build wooden houses in the mountain where tourists could stay and be involved in traditional activities.

Examples of perceived well-organised tourism models

When people comment on the future tourism development of the area they are using certain models from their experiences either from Greece or abroad, which they would like the area to follow or avoid.

In terms of good organisation, one model they have in mind is the desirability of effective organisation as demonstrated in particular areas of Greece, as for instance Zagorochoria, or Mountain Pilio. Both of them are mountainous and contain villages of great architecture and landscape. These are considered examples of good organisation. People describe the areas as offering sufficient and good quality accommodation, being accessible by public transport, having good promotion at a national and also to some extent at international level. They are visited all year round, they offer local cuisine and products, there is enough information about the areas and tourists are offered different activities to do. Some seem to believe that areas such as the above, or places of similar importance e.g. Prespa lakes area receive more attention from the government or the local authorities. The model of tourism to follow is the one that encourages small-scale traditional lodges like some local people have experienced abroad.

The tourism model to avoid is what they refer to as “island” tourism. The examples of Crete, Rhodes, Corfu made people learn from the mistakes made in the past. This is a type of tourism that currently does not take place in Kerkini. Instead they believe that the most appropriate type of tourism in the area is what is described as agro or eco tourism and is a contrast to what they refer to as mass or industrialised tourism. They would not like to see large-scale hotel developments or a casino overlooking the lake, and though they do not oppose to the development of the area they express such fears. Perhaps this could be called the “Faliraki” syndrome. This is a resort in Rhodes, which has attracted a lot of media coverage for the insensitive behaviour of mainly young British holiday makers.

Some would like to see a model of tourism in the area which offers the opportunity to people visit the nearby mountain on foot or by bicycle. However they do not agree with the pattern followed by some Greek people, visiting protected areas driving their 4x4 vehicles without doing any walking. Another model to be avoided is the “Arachova” model (an area in central mainland Greece near a skiing resort) people just go skiing in the day and clubbing in the evening.

Most and least favourite tourists

There is a generally friendly and hospitable environment in the area. Not even one person shows dislike for having tourists around; quite the opposite. Everyone seems really interested in having visitors in the area of Kerkini. Concerning preferences, the main

thing that seems to influence them is behaviour. For example many people say that they prefer tourists that are nice people, smiling and polite.

Furthermore, the nice behaviour is often related to showing care and respect for the area. Local people want the visitors to be careful about the environment, but also to show respect to the local people and traditions.

Also, the more respect and love the visitors show for nature, the more wanted they are from the locals. However, there is an opinion that the time goes by and Kerkini is more and more advertised, the visitors are less the true nature-lovers, rather they are just what are described as 'random tourists', that want to see something they've heard about.

Another common argument is that Greek tourists are not careful especially in the matter of garbage, and secondly in that they create noise and confusion arriving in many buses together. So, many times, foreign tourists or Greek tourists travelling alone are preferred. There was a comment though that Greek people tend to spend more money even if they don't stay long in a place, so professionals might prefer them.

Considering also the problem of tourism leakage, many people want visitors to stay as long as possible in the area. This is also related to their behaviour since people who stay longer become more familiar with the locals.

Finally, there seems to be a preference for aware and informed visitors, because the more they know about the local environment and the local culture, the more they will appreciate what they see, and enjoy their time there. This is another way of advertising Kerkini lake and the area around it, through word of mouth by having people that really understood and appreciated this place informing others about its existence.

Perceived communication/information channels and gaps for development of ecotourism

There is a general agreement that there are not enough information channels for the development of ecotourism. As is commonly understood, the spread of information is a vital method of promotion and development. Many places, even if they have nothing really important to show, have become popular tourist destinations because of advertising. And others, like Kerkini especially some years ago, that have really beautiful scenery and calmness and tranquillity to offer, are not very well known. Marketing is almost not existent.

However there are some individuals who make some efforts for their own good and their colleagues'. For example a young man, owning horses for eco-tours, tried and managed to make some professionals of the village produce an advertisement brochure.

Concerning signs and route markers, etc, the situation has improved a little. Recently, some signs were put in the village of Kerkini to show the way to the lake. However in the broader area, there is not enough guidance for the visitor who is unfamiliar with the region.

Moreover, there are substantial gaps in the information channels, which places many obstacles in the development of ecotourism. The only information point is the information centre, which is, of course, adequately organised and helps enormously the visitors. However, it is not open all the time, and there is nothing else to provide guidance

to the visitors. Some people believe that a shop providing maps, guidebooks, etc is necessary to the area.

Conservation measures

The conservation of lake Kerkini is a matter of interest to many environmental organisations, local, national or international. The lake is under protection through national, European and international agreements, for example, the Ramsar Convention. Also, the government tends to favour the funding of programmes dealing with research and conservation actions for the lake, knowing its international importance.

Conservation measures, environmental protection measures etc. seem to be a big area of conflicts, where different kinds of profits meet and come in contradiction to each other. There is a perception supported by the great majority of local people which implies that only a few people really care about the natural environment. Many local people argue that all the organisations are only talking and not really acting. They say that the government funds only research and studies about the lake, but not really actions to protect and restore it.

At the same time, certain individuals are seen to be more responsible and sensitive regarding conservation measures than authorities and official institutions.

The government is often blamed for not enforcing conservation measures to the area and local people support that ‘ecologists’ took some conservation measures which only concern the birds’ protection since according to their sayings, ‘ecologists’ only care about birds. On the other hand, some local people argue that local institutions –e.g. Municipalities- took some initiatives in relation to conservation measures, like cleaning activities and patrolling of the area, but the problem is that these initiatives rarely take place and last for a short period of time.

Relating to tourism though, there is a common argument that it is not the main factor for the degradation of the lake. People argue that activities were happening in and around the lake long before visitors started to visit the area. And the lake was absolutely fine then. They tend to blame other “scientific factors” and not the amount of visitors. Of course they refer to over-fishing as well, which occurs mainly by the locals.

Moreover, some argue that the lake is already over-protected, in the sense of the legal restrictions for certain activities, i.e. constructing around the lake, allowing shops (taverns and cafeterias) to operate near the lake, fishing illegally, etc.

So, interestingly, there are two opposite opinions concerning the protection of the lake. On one hand some say that Kerkini lake needs protection and immediately, and on the other hand they argue that it is already over-protected, facing no danger from people.

Examples of power, influence and decision-making in organisations / institutions affecting management and development of ecotourism

As mentioned earlier, there are many different institutions and organisations that affect in one way or another the development and management of ecotourism in the area of

Kerkini. However the examples of power, influence and decision making that we have are not so many. Moreover, there is a common argument which many times is not correct, that everything is or should be in the hands of the local authorities. The truth is that sometimes they are the ones that can actually decide about certain things. So there are accusations that the municipality and the prefecture can but don't help the local community out of neglect.

Sometimes, the accusations are even worse. People argue that on some occasions, the authorities don't act only out of neglect, but on purpose. For example, the only tavern that is at the port is owned by the municipality, which rents it out, and is being accused of putting profit higher than what is best for the local community.

Of course there is sometimes the tendency to put the blame on the government, trying to excuse the local authorities in a way, and this brings out another important issue, which is neglect for the towns and villages near the borders of the country.

Perceived harmonies and conflicts between formal and informal institutions with regard to tourism

A conflict that can be found in the area of Kerkini concerns the restrictions that the government imposes because of the designation of the area as one protected by the law. There are people who can work and prosper, not needing to make a construction near the lake, as for example some horse owners who find the restrictions really necessary.

On the other hand there are professionals in the village who believe that if they were allowed to work near the lake, they could earn something from tourism too. For example some people consider that earning their living should be the first priority of the government for the people of these remote areas.

However, the conflict goes deeper than this. The restrictions are not applied to everyone, so there are some people profiting from the lake, for example the tavern owner at the port, and the people making the tours with the boats.

Another big complaint of the majority of the professionals in the area is that there are certain monopolies. There are people owning hotels and restaurants that have made certain deals, and monopolise the tourists. The problem of not having cooperation among them is the reason according to many people that the area cannot develop.

Finally, there is a huge conflict between the two municipalities around the lake, the one of Kerkini, which includes Kerkini village and all the upper villages, and the municipality of Irakleia, which includes Lithotopos and the villages nearer to Serres. It is obvious to someone who visits the area and stays for a while that these two sides are highly competitive. Lithotopos is really closer to the town of Serres and is easier for someone to access it, so there are many taverns and a big luxurious, not at all ecotourism-oriented, hotel. The place is also much more publicised. The village of Kerkini on the other side is not publicised and it can't profit so much, so they accuse the former of not caring about the environment, and only taking advantage of it. The competition is higher now that a big boat will start from Lithotopos and make tours into the lake. And even though the boats in all the villages operate with engines that might disturb the birds that nest there, the new big boat of Lithotopos, caused really reactions from ecological groups.

Changes in livelihoods as a result of tourist development

Local people believe that tourism is generally positive, that supports their income and gives opportunities for new jobs, especially for young people. However, this income should not become the primary source but should complement the income from other professions that people have, particularly farming. People also take additional work in taverns, as shop owners, have boats for trips on the lake, guide people in the area, produce and sell local products. Also there are opportunities for unemployed women to become involved in providing local delicacies and crafts, to work in the hotels, or offer bed and breakfast accommodation.

Another expressed hope is that tourism will help alleviate some of the detrimental affects suffered by people occupied in 'traditional' occupations. Tourism is seen as something that will create opportunities in the future but residents need to understand that there is an opportunity there to take.

However, there is a fear expressed that some will take advantage and create a kind of monopoly and the whole community will not have the opportunity to benefit. For this reason some residents were worried about the initiatives taken in tourism. This could be because they needed time to understand and believe that it is worth investing in or devoting their energy and time in order to have a supplementary income from tourism. Others think that the locals should be supported by the authorities and specialists to understand and value their area more and to develop small businesses in order to help their currently limited additional income from tourism.

There are suggestions that the development of tourism should link with the production of local products and encourage the production of organic ones. In order for this to happen the hotels and the restaurants should make an effort to buy and promote them and value the particular farmer who is trying to produce organically and keep the quality. There are hints that this at the moment does not happen.

Constraints on the development of ecotourism in the area

There are several constraints on the development of ecotourism in the area. Most of them are mainly infrastructure. For example the transportation to and from Kerkini, and also between the various villages, is very difficult. There is no bus straight from Thessaloniki, so someone has to change buses in Serres, which makes the journey longer and tiring. Also there is no connection between the various villages of the area. The train stops only in some of them, and someone has to take taxis to visit the other places. Of course there is no problem if visitors travel with their own car. However many people do not believe that there is such a serious problem with the transport.

Another problem is generally the lack of organisation as mentioned earlier. For example there are many taverns, but in the winter there are days when none of them open, because it is not sure if there will be anyone to eat there and sometimes the prices are really high.

An important theme that emerged through the participant observation and the interviews, is the depopulation of the area generally, and specifically in the form of emigration

abroad. The lack of job opportunities drives young people away. A very big portion of them end up in Germany, trying to find a better future. This is a constraint in the economic development of the area in general.

Even though in the area only a few people can communicate in foreign languages, there is the general argument that this is the least important problem for a foreign visitor who decides to visit Kerkini. They say that even a foreign person can communicate with the human way.

Finally according to the majority of the local people, there is enormous lack of communication and cooperation among the professionals involved directly or indirectly in tourism. This might be the biggest obstacle of all. Ecotourism by definition should provide equal opportunities and profits to the local community.

5. Conclusions

Summarising all the aforementioned information, the following basic conclusions can be drawn.

As it seems, multi-occupation in the area of lake Kerkini is a very common phenomenon. Tourism cannot give something more than just a supplementary income, with the exception of certain people who benefit due to certain monopolies. However, local people believe that they will benefit from the potential development of ecotourism in the area.

According to the opinion of many local people, the main problem in the management of the area's natural resources is the involvement of many institutions. Hopefully, this situation will improve with the establishment and full operation of the Management Body of Kerkini Wetland.

A similar situation occurs concerning the management and development of tourism, where many institutions are involved. Furthermore, the specific role of each one is not clear and distinctive. All of them operate quite autonomously without following a central approach (i.e. national strategy).

The main form of tourism currently in the area is daily visits either from individual tourists or from organised groups of people such as school children, members of different associations, ecologists, etc. For almost all of them the main attraction of the destination is the lake. However it is not always enough to keep them as the main problem anticipated is the limited length of stay.

Concerning the definitions of the different forms that tourism can take, only a few local people are aware of the meaning of the terms "ecotourism", "agrotourism", "sustainable tourism". Despite that, they certainly comprehend the contrast of them to "mass, conventional tourism" and they always relate them to the environment and to the sense of hospitality.

As far as the relation of tourism to environmental conservation is concerned, it is a common belief that tourism is not the main factor for the degradation of the lake. The environment has changed from the construction of the new dam and is altered by other activities as well. However, conservation measures are a big area of conflicts. In addition to this, there are also conflicts among people and among whole villages or municipalities, where the main issue is the profit from the lake.

Finally, the main problems for further development of tourism and ecotourism are infrastructure, in the sense of transportation, accommodation and generally lack of organisation. Moreover an urgent need is to inform the public and effectively promote and advertise the area. But most of all, the lack of cooperation and communication among the people is the real obstacle in the sustainable development of the broader area of Kerkini Wetland.