

IF SCHINIAS WAS A SALTWORK?

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Schinias is a coastal wetland in the Marathon plain. It presents a particular interest as an ecosystem, because it comprises one of the few coastal biotopes of Attika combining a great variety of natural habitats. Its important natural and cultural landscape is valuable for environmental education and contact with nature for four million people living in Attika. The state of the ecosystem strongly depends on the fine balance between surface and underground salt, brackish and fresh water. Conservation of the wetland and especially of its water balance has always met strong opposition from local people. About eighty years ago, the wetland has been partially drained in order to avoid risk of malaria and to extend agricultural activities. However, the drainage project has never been completed and only a part of the wetland has been cultivated, while the other part has remained a semi-dried marsh in which some military activities have been established. Many pieces of land in the marsh and in the surrounding forested areas have been reclaimed for building purposes by local people, housing associations or the municipality. Strong anthropogenic pressures that have been exerted on the wetland for many years have resulted in considerable environmental degradation. The construction of a Rowing and Canoeing Centre for the Olympic Games of 2004 was planned to upgrade hydrological conditions and it was expected to have positive impact on the ecological functions of the biotope. The location and design principles adopted for this facility aimed at restoring the natural hydrologic regime and suppressing other disturbing uses. The designation of the site as a National Park was expected to promote environmental protection and awareness but also recreation and sport activities. However, the realization of this ambitious integrated plan meets big difficulties of social and financial nature. The creation of a Rowing Centre has met a persistent opposition from several environmental organizations, which did not see the possible benefits for the area and focused on the fact of the installation of an artificial construction in a natural wetland. After the Olympic Games, these environmental organizations did not exert any real pressure to the government to promote the development of the Park. An active part of the local society, especially the municipality of Marathon and some local interest associations, has continuously been trying to undermine conservation activities of the National Park. Their participation in the board of the National Park as well as the efforts of Park administration to reach consensus through dialogue and public hearings did not led to better understanding or to a more positive attitude towards the ecosystem and landscape conservation. On the other hand, financial and political support from the government to the National Park has been very weak, especially after the Olympic Games. Therefore, effective operation and creation of necessary infrastructure of the Park as well as long term environmental protection remain highly uncertain.

Solar saltworks are series of connected ponds through which seawater flows, evaporates, and deposits salt. The ecological value of the saltworks stems from their shallow ponds that produce qualitative habitat for birds, shellfish, and other animals. The biological

process that develops along with the increasing salinity gradient in the evaporating ponds produces food, especially for many kinds of birds, which for this reason rest, feed and breed in the saltworks. A modern saltwork can also function as an integrated saline wetland and it may reach the ecological value of a natural saline ecosystem. Another very important contribution to environmental conservation is that ponds and surrounding property owned by the installation provide habitat free from human disturbances for bird nesting and other ecological functions. Nevertheless, the development of a unique saline ecosystem in parallel with the salt production process has not always been understood by conservationists.

A small part of the Schinias wetland is a natural saline habitat. However, the whole wetland could in theory become a saltwork, since local climate and geomorphology are favourable. If this had happened, some of its ecological components would be subject to a negative pressure, for example the coastal dune forest and the freshwater vegetation and habitats. However, persistence of the forest could be achieved, if a suitable management of underground water was established. Some freshwater habitats in the elevated part of the wetland, near the freshwater spring, could also be preserved. On the other hand, a much more efficient management of the main wetland could be applied by the saltwork company. Opposition from local people involved in different illegal activities would be easily overcome, since the operation of saltworks is a serious economic activity that cannot be impeded without cost. Law enforcement should be accepted by everyone and, given the important economic activity of salt production, eventual claims or demands from local people could be satisfied in an environmentally beneficial way. Therefore, effective environmental protection of the biotope, and even development of new ecological habitats for threatened bird species that live in Mediterranean saline wetlands would be possible.