

The Role of Traditional Livestock in the Marine Park Alonnisos - Northern Sporades

Research – Conservation – Integration

The Marine Park embraces the populated island of Alonnisos and the almost uninhabited other islands the Northern Sporades, the so called Deserted Islands – a total of 6 larger and 16 small islands.

Of these Deserted Islands only the island of Gioura is in state possession. The Holy Monastery of the Megisti Lavra on Mt. Athos owns the large island of Kyra Panagia with 6 adjacent small islands and the island of Skantzoura with 5 satellite islands. The two Adelfia Islands and part of Peristeri Island (opposite of Alonnisos), together with 2 smaller islands offshore are owned by the community (Dimos) of Alonnisos,. Privately owned are the islands of Piperi, part of the island of Peristeri, Psathoura plus one smaller island next to it. The historical records indicate a very significant role in land cultivation and grazing by monastic communities and their labour employees. The island of Kyra Panagia was purchased by the Holy Athanasios one millennium ago as a source of agricultural products for the first large monastery on Mt. Athos, the Megisti Lavra which he founded. On Athos, no female livestock is permitted.

This agricultural heritage should be fully integrated into the management of the Marine Park. On Alonnisos - which functions as a gateway and buffer zone of the park, agriculture was focussed on wine cultivation and only secondary grazing. Now tourism prevails.

Early sailing connections link the Northern Sporades with the Chalkidike Pensinsula, the port of Koufo in particular. It was on this route that the cattle breed of Sykia reached the islands. There is sufficient photographic documentation of the similarities and there is also proof in oral tradition. Cattle were kept in living memory on the islands of Alonnisos, Kyra Panagia, Piperi, Gioura and Psathoura.

The cattle of Piperi deserve special mention: they inhabited this rather steep and rocky island, all the year round. The island's owner, the family of Lemonis on Skopelos kept a few animals also on that island. This dwarf, hardy population had adapted to the arid and rocky environment to an amazing degree. But all our efforts to preserve it failed! There exists only one descendent hybrid bull on Skopelos now. A comparative study is required to establish the relationship of this cattle population and the Sykia breed. There are photographs, film shots and several preserved skulls available; the skulls should be secured earliest from their present owner, a medical doctor in Hamburg. Further skulls are said to exist still on Piperi.

The last cattle of Gioura Island, a bull, a cow and a calf are documented on photographs; they appear to be slightly different from the usual Sykia phenotype.

There are also some old photographs of Sykia cattle (draught-animals) on Alonnisos.

Glossa sheep from Skopelos were also kept traditionally on islands in the Park: on Alonnisos, Peristeri, Gioura and the small island next to Psathoura. There is sufficient photographic and oral documentation. The warden on Gioura kept a small flock which had adapted very well to the arid conditions there.

The Skopelos goat breed is still kept on Piperi by the island's owner, the Lemonis family.

Also Kyra Panagia had its distinct variety of goats. There is sufficient photographic documentation.

The so called "wild", but actually feral goats on Gioura were seriously regarded as the original stock from which domestic goats descended. But we provided evidence in 1961 that the Gioura goat actually shows the characteristics of domestic goats because it descended in fact from such stock, probably in the time when the island was inhabited by monks or even earlier in history. The Gioura goat nowadays is an ecological problem of immense dimensions: The 800 meters high rugged island once carried a forest of oak; it is almost completely destroyed.

Some smaller herds should be maintained as a historical record, but on Gioura itself the goat should be eradicated, because it is very difficult in the steep terrain to keep the population on any low level.

The present situation: On Kyra Panagia according to the Presidential Decree of 1992 only 300 goats are permitted, for the period of 4 months per year.

In fact, however, a total of 4.390 goats roam on the island all the year round and destroy her oak forest. On top, the people who lease the island from the Monastery and run this grazing business professionally, collect subsidies for approx. 2.000 goats – this environmental and economic scandal has passed unnoticed despite of several attempts to make it public over the years. The Ministry of Environment so far has turned a blind eye on the situation.

On Piperi only feral goats remain, the endemic cattle vanished more than a decade ago.

The situation on Gioura has been mentioned above, as well. A total eradication of goats on this very inaccessible rugged island is the only feasible solution. Small groups could be kept at locations which are easily controlled (for instance a small island near Evvia and the island of Agios Georgios between Alonnisos and Skopelos).

But the stock should be kept at low numbers also there. Some smaller islands (Strongylo next to Skantzoura, and the Adelfia islands near Alonnisos for instance,) have been largely devastated by goat overgrazing.

The main ecological impact, however, on several small islands is the abundance of rabbits. All the rabbit populations in the Park must be exterminated, by all means.

The future role of domestic livestock: The Management Body for the Park has to adopt the presence and ecological role of traditional livestock on its official agenda. On the one hand side, the evident damage by overgrazing by goats and rabbits has to be addressed. On the other hand, the traditional breeds of cattle, sheep and goats should become integrated elements in the conservation and park management objectives. Practically, cattle imported from Sykia should largely replace the goats on Kyra Panagia: a herd of up to 100 heads is sustainable there. Goats on Kyra Panagia should be limited to 100 –200 heads maximum, of the old breed that existed there. Glossa sheep should be kept as in the old days in small flocks on several islands, like Psathoura, Peristeri and Alonnisos.

A special target is the re-introduction of cattle to Piperi Island. From feral cattle stock captured in the mountainous region of the Chalkidike Peninsula. The aim is not just a rather nostalgic return to former conditions. The breeding of dwarf hardy cattle is of immense ecological as well as economic significance: only such stock possibly can replace goats under marginal pasture conditions. (Sykia) -Cattle prefer a diet of grass and herbs and leave the tree saplings and foliage plus twigs of trees largely intact – certainly to a much higher degree than the domestic goats do.

The island of Papù once carried an almost autark monastic community. There are remains of the monk cells (kelià), of a threshing place and other. For educational tourism in the Park, this unit should be restored and traditional life stock added. The question as always remains: who is going to do it and will devoted people be able to get over the exploitive commercial lobby that reigns in the Park (Kyra Panagia and adjacent islands, including Papu) and over the obstacles of bureaucracy and ill-created (=nonsense) regulations as imposed by the Ministry of Environment, in its Presidential Decree.

Thassos / Alonnisos, in June 2005

Dr. Thomas Schultze-Westrum (initiator and promotor of the Marine Park since 1976)

Yiannis Vlaikos, (Ecological Movement of Alonnisos and resident researcher of the Marine Park's cultural and natural history).