The Influence of the Environmental Movement in Greece

David H. Close

The view generally to be found in the scholarly literature on the environmental movement in Greece is that it has little influence, and that there is little public awareness of environmental issues (Kousis, 1994; Demertzis, 1995; Fritham, Verney & Kostadakopulos, 1995). It will be argued in this paper that the view is very misleading, because it fails to take into account developments which began in the early 1970s and accelerated in the 1990s.

At first sight, the traditional view seems persuasive, because the development of the environmental movement has still had little impact at the institutional level. The two main political parties, Pasok and New Democracy, as well as the declining Communist Party, are still committed to development as an overriding goal, interpreted crudely as growth in Gross National Product. Thus, in protesting against some environmentally destructive projects (e.g. Ersoy in Greek), environmental protestors get sympathy from few parliamentary deputies. Greece's green party, the Federation of Ecological and Alternative Associations, was doomed by dissensions, and secured only one seat out of 300 during the years 1989-93 (Demertzis, 1995). Since the national election of October 1996, environmentalists have reached the zenith of their influence so far with the return to parliament of ten deputies of the sympathetic Coalition party.

Membership and resources of environmental associations are still very low by the standards of northern Europe. The staff of the monthly periodical Νέα Οικολογία estimated the total number of members in Greece at 15,000 (Fritham et al., 1995: 261), whereas in countries like Britain total membership runs into millions. On most issues, representatives of environmental associations have struggled to obtain a hearing from governments, even though they possess expertise which governments need. Although national parks have existed for many years, they are essentially without protection, because there is no counterpart to a national parks service (Tratsa, 1997).

Such appearances are deceptive, however, because as in other countries a revolution in environmental awareness has been taking place from below. An opinion poll of 1992, commissioned by the European Union, found that environmental concern and awareness had recently been growing with greater-than-average speed in Greece. As a result Greeks showed the highest degree of concern in the EU about "damage to animals, plants, and habitats", and more readiness than citizens of any other EU country except Portugal to participate in voluntary activities for environmental protection such as tree-planting or litter-collection (Commission of the European Communities, 1992).

The reason for this change in attitudes is not far to seek. Environmental problems that harm most people's quality of life have for many years become increasingly serious - for example the Athens nefos, omnipresent litter, polluted seas, illegal shooting, water shortages punctuated by occasional floods. In Greece as elsewhere, people have come to see these problems as inter-connected: a perception which is the foundation of ecological awareness. They have moreover become increasingly worried by the obvious inability of the national government to respond effectively to these problems (I. K. Πρεπεντέρνη, 1990). Consequently they have become receptive to the message of "the ecologists" as they are generally called.

This paper will try to explain how the ecologists have, despite the limitations of their numbers and resources, won not only sympathy but real influence. The brief explanation is that they have been skilful in making alliances with other social forces with parallel objectives.

They have been able to do so because they consist largely of professional people, like academics and teachers, with skills in political communication as well as analysis of environmental problems. The evidence that exists of their membership (e.g. Σφίκκας, 1997) indicates that the leading members of environmental organizations consist largely of people with tertiary qualifications in disciplines relevant to environmental management or environmental campaigning. The same conclusion is indicated by the contents of the leading environmental periodical, Νέα Οικολογία, which is largely abstract and theoretical in content, and so clearly caters for a highly educated readership. Environmentalists' possession of assured social status and relevant skills makes them self-confident and articulate in dealing with politicians, with professional people outside their organizations, and with the media. Support by academics and school teachers also gives them long-term influence. Although environmental protection is not (or at least was not in 1995) part of the obligatory curriculum in primary or intermediate schools, it seems to be taught on their own initiative by many of the teachers, who are supplied with material by some of the national environmental organizations (personal information from the Greek Association for Protection of the Environment and Cultural Heritage).

Among the professionals are academics with relevant skills, many of whom have volunteered their services to organizations trying to combat urgent environmental problems. An example of this spirit of voluntary service is the study of the environmental impact of the proposed part-diversion of the river Achelous by a team from the Polytechnic. In a public-spirited attempt to find some answer to what was now an acrimonious controversy, the Rector of the Polytechnic announced to the press in 1993 that this study would be undertaken.
The report two years later confirmed the allegations of the environmental organizations, that the environmental impacts would be extensive and destructive (Χατζημητρίης, 1995).

Other professionals with relevant skills are lawyers and judges, many of whom have seen it as their mission to ensure that the growing body of environmental legislation is honoured. It was on the recommendation of a group of politicians and legal experts that article 24 of the 1975 constitution laid down the government's obligation to protect the environment. This clause seems to have been in advance of its time, and was prompted by reaction against the disregard for the environment which was considered one of the malign features of the Junta. Since then there have been influential judges and lawyers who have worked to realise the implications of article 24. When in 1980 a lawyer living in Patras sued twelve industries for pollution, he was generously helped by lawyers and legal academics (Βελλόπουλος, 1987: 140). Judges of the Council of State have prided themselves on their work in interpreting and codifying environmental law (Σκούφης & Τάχος, 1988; Παπαδημητρίου, 1994).

The Council of State has shown some courage in defying infringements of environmental law by successive governments since the late 1980s. For example in August 1993 it ruled invalid executive decrees amnestying αυθαίρετα (unlicensed buildings on public open space) just before a general election (Βήμα, 15 August 1993: A 20). On numerous occasions it has delayed, or in some cases stopped, construction projects because they have failed to comply with the requirements of the law requiring valid Environmental Impact Statements (Βήμα, 26 January 1997: A 11). These actions appear to form a departure from the judiciary's traditional reputation for submissiveness to the executive (Αλεξιάτος, 1993: 72-3).

Some judges have taken an interventionist role. For example, in 1992 the Public Prosecutor's Office of Attica, exasperated by official inaction, undertook on its own initiative an investigation into pollution, mainly by industry. Because the judges lacked staff with technical expertise, they relied in part on the services of volunteers (Βήμα, 27 June 1993: A48; 29 August 1993: A38; 16 October 1994: A42; 27 November 1994: A48; 5 May 1996: A 34).

Environmental campaigners have in Greece as in other countries proved adept in use of the media: television, radio, and the press. The media regard environmental issues as newsworthy, partly because of the general public concern about them that now exists, and partly because they give rise to dramatic conflicts. Those sections of the media in opposition to the government are naturally attracted to any issue which will embarrass it. Thus the breakdown of the government monopoly of the broadcast media widened the opportunities available to environmentalists. The government monopoly of radio broadcasting was broken in 1987, and the monopoly of television broadcasting in 1989. Now most television viewers watch private channels, and - if taxi drivers are any indication - most listeners tune in to private radio stations. Presumably the private channels and stations influence by their competition the content of government news programmes (Περιηγητής, 1993:99; Βήμα, 6 August 1989: 31; Καθημερινή, 7 April 1996: 27). The number of newspapers appears to be very large in Greece, and they are much read by those with political influence. Although many, perhaps the majority, are partisan, their political diversity ensures that environmental controversies will usually be reported somewhere (Περιηγητής, 1993: 101; Καθημερινή, 31 March 1996: 31).

A striking example of media receptivity to the ecologists' views occurred at the height of the confrontation with Turkey in January 1996 over the islets known as Τα Ιμα. The solution proposed by the Hellenic Ornithological Society - that the islets be made a biological reserve under European Union administration - received extensive coverage in the national press.

Environmental campaigners also work in frequent alliance with elected local governments, and attach great importance to them. One campaigner in 1987 Αυλάκες Γρηγοριάννης - a veteran of socialist politics - seemed to speak for all when he wrote: "the public body through which [the environmental movement ] will chiefly act will be elected local government" (Ορφανίδης, 1987: 222). Their motive is partly ideological. Like green parties in other countries they believe in the psychological and political necessity of vigorous community life. It is also that they see more hope of influencing local authorities than national party machines and national bureaucracies.

It is therefore significant that the resources and confidence of local authorities have tended to grow since the μεταπολεμικής of 1974 onwards. For a long time the growth was gradual; but the revival of economic and cultural activity in provincial towns was already noticeable by 1989, when the President of the Commercial Bank of Greece, Αδαμάντιος Πετρέλας, referred to recent initiatives in cultural matters by municipal authorities as a welcome break with what he called the widespread κρατικός of Greek citizens, by which he meant reluctance to take voluntary action in the public interest (Βήμα, 28 May 1989: 39). Since 1994 Pasok governments have greatly increased the resources and responsibilities of elected local authorities. These reforms included a change of immense significance, the introduction of democratic elections for the second tier or nomarchies, which included both the nomarchies and their advisory councils. Even though the local authorities of both tiers are extensively controlled by the political parties, they have ample scope to act independently of the government of the day, given that many of them will at any one time be controlled by parties or individuals that are independent of or opposed to it.

Local authorities at both the first and second tier have proved eager to acquire responsibilities of environmental management, many of which by their nature require community participation and local monitoring. For example the
nomarchial advisory councils were found by a survey of 1989 to be ably staffed and keen to take a greater role, especially in environmental affairs (Verney & Papageorgiou, 1992: 112). In recent years the municipalities and communes of the Attica basin have taken a leading responsibility for the problem of waste disposal, which has become critical. The United Association of Municipalities and Communes of the Nomarchy of Attica (ΕΣΑΚΝΑ) conducted a pilot programme for recycling paper which reportedly met with enthusiastic public participation (Βήμα, 27 March 1994: A 48).

Another recent example of municipal initiative is small but revealing. After vandals massacred breeding waterbirds in the Axios-Aliakmon-Loudias deltas, the local δημάρχος or mayor of Chalastra immediately appointed a temporary warden, and convened a meeting attended by representatives of national environmental associations, of agricultural cooperatives, and of other local governments, the local branch of the national Forestry Authority, and a biologist from Salonika University. The outcome was the appointment of wardens by the Forestry Authority, and the rostering of volunteer assistants. The national (and presumably the local) press gave the initiative sympathetic coverage (Βήμα, 9 July 1995: A 40). The significance of this case lies in the prompt reaction by the municipality to remedy the failure of the national government, and the cooperation between diverse organisations.

The first and second tier authorities were also potential allies of environmentalists because of their readiness to resist environmental threats posed by construction projects. For example in the years 1993-1996 first-tier authorities took a prominent part in at least 23 of the 32 local environmental protest movements which have come to the author's attention through reading the press and Νέα Οικολογία. The objects of protest were: polluting power stations or oil refineries (in six cases); new arterial roads (in four cases, to which one should really add one protest movement against a tunnel, and another against a bridge); the diversion of water from a river, lake, or spring (in four cases); the siting of a rubbish dump (in three cases); pollution of a river by sewage (one case); new electricity pylons (one case); destruction of an urban green space (one case); and hunting in a wetland (one case). The second-tier authorities quickly showed a new spirit of independence after they were made elective. Thus the name of Aitolokarnania showed increased militance in opposition to the Acheloos project, while soon afterwards eleven nomes shut down government services in protest against a road tunnel under the Maliakos gulf (Καθημερινή, 5 September 1995: 4; 24 January 1996: 18).

Environmentalists have also found powerful allies outside Greece, in northern European organizations, or else in the Commission and Parliament of the European Union. Northern European organizations have financed certain projects and campaigns on a large scale, for example a long-standing project for public education in the environmental values of the Nestos delta, and the campaign against the part-diversion of the Acheloos river. The Hellenic Ornithological Society for some time derived much of its funding from abroad, as has the Greek branch of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF - Greece). The Commission has been a powerful ally for environmentalists, because since the late 1980s it has controlled much of the funding for major construction projects in Greece. Greek environmentalists, allied with their counterparts based in Brussels and with the Environment Committee of the European Parliament, have provided the Commission with information about the failure of the Greek government to comply with its own laws for environmental protection. The Commission for its part has come to value such information (correspondence with the Commission in the files of WWF - Greece and the Hellenic Ornithological Society).

Although environmentalists' activities have been controversial in Greece as elsewhere, they frequently attract favourable public comment. One recent example was an illegal demonstration by Greenpeace protestors against persistent oil pollution of the Saronic Gulf by one major company. Here was a matter of great public concern which had been neglected by the relevant government department (Κυριακάτη Αγγί, 10 November 1996: 28-9; Βήμα, 13 April 1997: A41). Other examples are the collective attempts periodically reported in the press to protect the environment by such means as watching out for forest fires, or planting trees (Βήμα, 22 August 1993: A32; 3 April 1994: A91). Cases such as these explain the results of a poll in 1995 of attitudes to secular ideologies, which found that ecology received a positive rating by a far higher percentage than any other ideological position: 83%, compared with 54% for the next-preferred position of socialism, and 31% for neo-liberalism (Καθημερινή, 27 August 1995: 5).

National governments, having been compelled to abandon many construction projects since the early 1970s, have been forced to respect the power of residential communities and of environmental campaigns. In 1987 an environmental campaigner boasted, perhaps without much exaggeration, that "nearly every attempt to establish a more or less polluting industry [anywhere near a residential area, since 1973] has encountered ferocious resistance and been stopped" (Χρυσώγγελος, 1987: 324). The Public Electricity Corporation (ΔΕΗ), being one public body especially subject to attack, acknowledged in 1995 that its decisions on siting of power stations were now influenced by "a noticeable increase in the environmental sensitivities of citizens." (Hellenews, November 1995: 76-7). In January 1996 it was reduced to attacking through the press the nomarchial councils of Lasithi and Chania for allegedly blocking its attempts to establish a new power station in Crete. It was well known that governments were discouraged at least in part by fear of public reaction from pursuing plans to establish a nuclear reactor. The only serious attempt to do so, in the late 1970s, was checked by community resistance. (Θ. Κ. Γεράνιος, Βήμα, 21 April
The Influence of the Environmental Movement in Greece

David Close

1996: A4; Κ. Παπαστέφανος, Βήμα, 23 April 1995: A 25). Government officials have been forced to formulate Environmental Impact Statements (EISs) which will satisfy the increasingly stringent requirements of the law, and for some time at least they fell far behind with this work (Βήμα, 19 November 1995: A 42). Possibly government departments are learning the new art of public consultation as a prerequisite for major έργα, although it is clear that they have still far to go.

The Ministry of Environment and Public Works is also showing somewhat greater readiness to cooperate with professionals with skills in environmental management. Thus the task of surveying and registering important habitats, in accordance with the EU's Natura 2000 programme, was entrusted to biologists of the Greek Centre for Habitats and Wetlands (EKBY), a branch of the private Goulandres Museum. Members of environmental associations have been told that they will be represented on boards of management of the more important wetlands that will be thus registered. At a recent national conference of environmental associations, one of a series of annual conferences, government representatives for the first time attended and acknowledged their value (Οιωνός, Winter-Spring 1996, nos. 7-8: 3).

The significance of these conclusions extend beyond the sphere of environmental issues. They force one to reconsider traditional conclusions about the power of the national executive, both in relation to other branches of government such as the judiciary and local authorities, and still more in relation to voluntary associations such as residents' protest groups and environmental associations. Power and initiative in Greece have become more dispersed than they were until recently. Environmental problems have formed only one of the stimuli to this process of devolution, and can be seen as one of the consequences of economic modernisation.

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