

7 Most Endangered 2024

Programme run by **Europa Nostra**, the European Voice of Civil Society
Committed to Cultural Heritage,
in partnership with the **European Investment Bank Institute**

Cycladic Islands
notably Serifos, Sifnos and Folegandros
Greece

Technical Report



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The team visited Serifos and Sifnos, where it met with the mayors and representatives from local associations. It also toured archaeological sites, historic locations and explored the islands' cultural heritage and landscapes. Due to weather conditions, the team was unable to visit Folegandros and held a virtual meeting (via Zoom) with the mayor and local representatives. Additionally, the team met or had virtual meetings with the mayor of Santorini, a member of the Save Ios advocacy association as well as Professor Ioannis Spilanis of the Department of Environment at the University of the Aegean.

The team is deeply indebted to the persons they met and the time they dedicated, as a result of which, the team gained a solid, though still partial, understanding of the challenges facing the islands. Moreover, the team developed insights into the concerns, attitudes and actions of both the island communities and the state authorities they met. [Annex Meetings](#) provides a complete list of the persons met. All meetings were held in Greek.

The team collaborated extensively with the Greek Society for the Environment and Cultural Heritage (ELLET,) the nominator, and reviewed a range of documentation, including an internet-based literature survey. ELLET provided invaluable assistance in identifying and confirming relevant national legislation and other Greek documentary and statistical sources. Special thanks are extended to Mary Tziraki of ELLET for her exceptional logistical support.

References are embedded in the Report in the form of links. They refer to specific sources, statements or paragraph sections. Omissions, if any, are unintentional and pure oversights.

Front cover photo: Folegandros_(c)_Dimos_Tsigaridas Landscape in Chora

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1. Summary

The Cycladic Islands – renowned for their rich history, cultural heritage, and scenic landscapes – are at a crossroads. Their unique charm faces mounting threats from overdevelopment, driven primarily by tourism and the proliferation of secondary residences. Intense commercialisation dilutes local culture and strains local resources. Left unchecked, these pressures will result in irretrievable damage to the Island’s distinct character and traditions which still largely determine the life and cohesion of society. This report reviews the challenges facing the islands and aims to raise awareness of civil society and state authorities. It advocates for sustainable practices and policy adaptations to safeguard the islands' future prosperity.

The Cycladic Islands concentrate a host of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Their whitewashed houses and churches, dry-stone walls, ancient footpaths, archaeological sites and traditional settlements stand as testaments to their long and storied past. Equally integral to the Cycladic charm is their natural beauty: rugged landscapes, pristine coastlines and unique ecosystems protected under the Natura 2000 network. Together, these elements form the basis of the Cyclades’ attraction as a tourist destination and contribute to the cultural and economic vitality of the region.

The intense growth of tourism has led to a surge in construction, including accommodations which combine five-star hotels with furnished housing for letting or sale. This development often disregards local architectural norms. There is frequently a misuse of modern building materials and practices, which clash with traditional aesthetic and sensible reliance on local resources. Unregulated and excessive construction has disfigured the landscape in some areas, compromising both environmental integrity and cultural authenticity. In the long run, the environmental impact of these buildings will further increase as they age because of the use of non-recyclable materials and construction practices.

Secondary residences are another major driver of overdevelopment. Owners tend to use these properties for short periods and then exploit them for short stays and financial benefit during the tourist season, roughly from Easter to October. These short-stays cause a disproportionate strain on local resources, particularly water and waste management systems. Additionally, they raise housing costs, making it difficult for local residents and essential workers to afford accommodation.

The spatial planning framework for the Cyclades is outdated and poorly enforced. Overlapping responsibilities between state authorities create governance inefficiencies and fragmented accountability. Strategic investments often bypass local preferences through Special Spatial Development Plans (ΕΣΧΑΣΕ) and alienate local communities.

Delays in implementing Local and Special Urban Plans (ΤΠΣ/ΕΠΣ) exacerbate the issue, having left islands vulnerable to unchecked construction and inadequate land-use management. They are now being rushed raising concerns about insufficient public consultation and doubts about whether they will effectively address the islands' specific challenges.

The intense commercialisation resulting in gentrification of the islands undermines local traditions and livelihoods, such as agriculture and livestock farming. These are displaced by

service-focused economies and income increasingly reliant on seasonal tourism. Local products are replaced by goods supplied by large corporations, leading to a higher carbon footprint associated with industrial scale food production and distribution. This trend not only erodes intangible heritage but also weakens the resilience of local communities with land and homes being sold for short-term financial gain.

Environmental degradation is another pressing concern. Over-tourism exacerbates resource scarcity, particularly water shortages, while climate change compounds these challenges. Without intervention, the islands face irreversible damage to their natural and cultural landscapes.

It is important for immediate and coordinated action to address these challenges. Key actions include:

- Raising awareness to motivate residents to engage in preserving their environment and heritage. Initiatives like the Network for Sustainable Development Cyclades, launched in 2023, exemplify efforts to mobilise collective action. The Network's founding resolution - "Protecting the Cycladic Identity from Irreversible Loss" - encapsulates the urgency of the situation.
- A change from current peak season tourism to a more balanced, sustainable and experience-based tourism that aligns with the islands' carrying capacity and cultural values. Thematic tourism and actions aimed at curbing the number of tourists during peak season while spreading attendance over a longer period, can reduce pressure on resources while diversifying local economies.
- Improved coordination among state authorities and greater municipal autonomy are critical for effective spatial planning and enforcement. Providing technical and financial resources to local authorities will enable them to better manage development and protect their heritage.

Examples from individual islands offer valuable insights. Serifos' studies on mining heritage, Sifnos' initiatives to curb in-cave dwellings and swimming pools and Folegandros' efforts to preserve dry-stone walls demonstrate the potential for local action and tailored solutions.

2. Conclusions & Recommendations

The Cycladic Islands stand at a point of inflection. While some islands, like Mykonos and Santorini, and possibly Paros, may already have crossed this point and are experiencing the consequences of overdevelopment, the majority still have time to act. The document concludes with the following key recommendations:

1. Adopt and Implement Sustainable Spatial Plans:
Ensure that ΤΠΣ and ΕΠΣ spatial plans are based on thorough public consultation and respect the carrying capacity of each island. Data should not be disregarded or incompletely and loosely taken into account. Tailored solutions must respect local preferences and prioritise long-term sustainability over short-term economic gains.

2. Control Construction and Regulate Development:

Enforce stricter regulations, implementation and control against unlicensed and inappropriate construction, particularly outside designated urban areas. Incentivise compliance with traditional architectural practices, promote the reuse of local materials and the adaptation of existing structures. Encourage environmentally sensitive construction practices that align with the islands' natural and cultural landscapes, reducing the impact of materials and building techniques that have a high carbon footprint. Respect the guidelines and basic principles of the Natura 2000 network.

3. Invest in Awareness Raising and Education:

Raise awareness among local communities about the risks of irreversible environmental and cultural transformations cf. the damage in Mykonos and Santorini. Stimulate interest among younger generations through early education to engage in sustainable practices and heritage preservation.

4. Promote Alternative Tourism Models:

Develop tourism strategies that prioritise quality over quantity, emphasizing eco-friendly practices and cultural experiences. Promote year-round tourism to alleviate seasonal pressures and include sustainable, thematic tourism activities.

5. Foster Collaboration and Advocacy:

Strengthen partnerships among local authorities, civil society and private stakeholders to advocate for policies that protect the Cyclades' unique identity. Initiatives like the Network for Sustainable Development Cyclades provide a valuable model for collective action and advocacy.

6. Address Critical Infrastructure Needs

Invest in essential infrastructure, such as water and energy systems, to reduce strain on natural resources and ensure resilience against climate change. Ensure frequent and regular transport, and resilient sea and air infrastructure. Expand access to reliable internet and digital infrastructure essential to a modern society.

7. Foster Sustainable Use of Water and Waste Water Resources.

Incentivise the construction of cisterns. Avoid water wastage for practices incompatible with the traditional dry climate of the Aegean Islands. Aim for grey water reuse.

8. Prioritise Affordable Housing

Implement policies to provide affordable housing for essential workers, including educators and healthcare professionals, as well as for young residents and families. Affordable housing is vital for retaining and attracting residents and ensuring the islands' socio-economic balance.

9. Sustain Traditional and Promote New Economic Activities

Support traditional activities, such as agriculture and crafts, while providing targeted support and incentives to help diversify the economy and stem urbanisation.

10. Offer Municipalities Technical Support to Control Local Development.

This will prevent illegal construction and monitor land use in their territories. The technical support should include final, complete and fully secure spatial data, such as boundaries of settlements, land use, forest maps, coastlines and beaches, archaeological zones, etc.

In sum, the Cycladic Islands must balance development with preservation to ensure their cultural and environmental heritage endures for future generations. The challenges are significant, but with concerted effort and timely intervention, the islands can chart a sustainable path forward.

3. Location – Purpose

The Cycladic Islands, notably Serifos, Sifnos and Folegandors, in the southern Aegean Sea, lying between the mainland and Crete, Greece.

The Cycladic Islands number over 220. The largest is Naxos, covering around 430 square kilometres, while among the smallest inhabited islands is Iraklia with just 18 square kilometres. They are disposed in a roughly circular formation that imparts their name, which is derived from circle (κύκλος) in Greek. The Cycladic Islands symbolise an iconic group with a rich history and consequent cultural heritage, and are renowned for their scenic landscapes.

ELLET¹, the nominator, has retained the three islands of Serifos, Sifnos, and Folegandros for the 7ME initiative² because of their respective size, population, cultural heritage, landscape and characteristic charm as representative examples of the Cycladic Islands. All three are confronted with the adverse factors of:

- a surge in construction, primarily driven by tourism and the pursuit of secondary residences, which undermines the islands' landscape and aesthetic appeal;
- an intense commercialisation and gentrification, which dilutes local culture and leads to a loss of identity;
- the consequent strain on local resources and infrastructure, aggravated by climate change, which pose an added threat to the Cyclades' natural beauty and biodiversity.

The purpose of the 7ME 2024 – Cycladic Islands initiative is to raise the awareness of national and regional authorities as well as civil society, notably the communities in the islands, of the above adverse factors and highlight their impact on the islands' development. Left unchecked they will result in irretrievable damage and the uniqueness of the Cycladic Islands cultural heritage, landscape and natural beauty will be irreversibly lost. The Islands' development and future prosperity may well be compromised.

4. Context

History and Cultural Heritage

Starting from prehistoric times, through the Bronze Age and the classical Greek period until the Roman conquest, consecutive civilisations occupied the Aegean Sea leaving vestiges and imprints of their culture, making the region historically multilayered and culturally outstanding. This cultural palimpsest, specific to each island's history, is one of the assets expressing their cultural identities and intertwines with the wider history of Greece. As such, the Aegean Sea is considered the cradle of many important civilisations, from which much of modern Western culture derived.

In addition to the historical and cultural importance large areas of the Cycladic Islands form part of the Natura 2000 network and provide considerable scientific interest. The natural features and intricate configuration of large and small islands rising from clear blue waters create a shoreline that few other areas have in the Mediterranean. The islands create biologically closed communities that serve as refuge for a variety of flora, the majority of which are endemic. In Serifos, endemic plants include *romulea bulbocodium* and *iris tuberosa*, while *campanula laciniata*, a cliff-adapted plant, thrives on rocky slopes. Sifnos is known for its endemic *allium apolloni*, a wild onion species found exclusively on the island. The isolation of one island from another and the resulting insular ecosystem makes endemism vulnerable to habitat destruction. The protected sea- or Neptune- grass *posidonia oceanica* with a high carbon absorption capacity grows in the Cycladic waters.

The Aegean sea, although semi-enclosed from the water bodies of the Marmara and Black seas to the north, is a passage for pelagic fish, such as tuna, swordfish, bonito and mackerel; and, its underwater geomorphology preserves a high diversity of habitat and aquatic species. Markedly, it is a gene pool for some of the world's vulnerable or critically endangered species, including the Mediterranean monk seal (*monachus monachus*) and the loggerhead sea turtle (*caretta caretta*.)

The Aegean is also a major flight path for migratory birds and the habitat of more than 300 bird species, according to Avibase, including sea birds, waterbirds, raptors, and passerines. Notable is the protected Eleonora's falcon (*falco eleonora*) for its unique breeding behaviour, timed to coincide with the peak migration of small birds in autumn, which provide abundant food for feeding their young. The Barcelona Convention, Annex II List of Endangered or Threatened Species lists 25 bird species, 14 of which occur in the Aegean.

Finally, the Aegean has a wealth of reptile fauna, such as the endemic Cyclades or Milos endangered viper (*macrovipera schweizeri*.)

The main village of the Cycladic Islands, frequently known as chora (χώρα,) consists of houses clustered at the foot of the remains of a medieval castle built inland, on an elevation, to protect from pirate invasions. The houses are built close to each other for shade and protection from the strong north etesian, "meltemi" summer wind. Houses are simple, conforming to property boundaries, with the occasional projecting balcony or terrace and exterior access stairway. They are built of mortared rubble stone, occasionally left exposed and unpainted, but more frequently plastered and whitewashed. Most houses are accessed from the street, the entrance sometimes elevated with a stepped platform to protect the ground floor from rain water. Some may have a court- or back-yard. Houses are usually two storied, the more noble ones, built post-independence, may have neoclassical influences. The village streets wind along the natural topography, parting to form squares where churches and public buildings are

situated. These urban and architectural values are preserved and markedly perceivable, particularly if the prominent positions in the natural setting are considered.

The main village is usually complemented with a picturesque seaside fishing village, sometimes called skala (σκάλα,) which also acts as the island's port and commercial hub. From the 1950s onwards, this latter function has driven development and intense building activity. Fortunately, in more recent years and in most cases the risk of damage to the island's authenticity has been appreciated and controlled.

In sum, the visual impact of the Cycladic Island landscape is characterised by the vivid whitewash of the villages contrasting the silver green of olive groves and the rocky ochre of the sun-parched land, rising from the deep blue, “wine dark” sea and the contrasting outline of the mountain crests against the limpid wind swept summer sky.

Construction and Commercialisation

In the second half of the 20th century, during the poverty stricken years following WWII, [the construction industry became a key driver of economic growth in Greece](#), significantly contributing to GDP from the 1950s onward. Specific legislative measures, such as the General Building Regulation of 1955, and incentives, including the unique “land-for-apartments” ([αντιπαροχή](#)) system, [promoted construction](#) and supported the rapid expansion of urban centres, notably Athens. Employment opportunities in these urban centres led to population declines in rural areas, including the Cycladic Islands, as people sought work in the growing construction and services sectors.

The 1960s marked the beginning of [modern tourism](#) in Greece, with visitor numbers from around 33,000 in 1960 increasing tenfold by the end of the decade. This growth established tourism as an added pillar of the national economy, [contributing approximately 3-4% to GDP by 1980](#). [Tourism also bolstered rural and island economies](#), offering local communities additional income opportunities through room rentals, services, and jobs in the expanding sector, which helped mitigate the population shift to urban centres.

By the turn of the 21st century, Greece was [hosting around 13 million tourists](#) annually, exceeding its population, with Mykonos and Santorini in the Cyclades becoming prime destinations. Despite a temporary decline following the 2008 financial crisis, tourism numbers quickly rebounded, [reflecting Greece's enduring appeal](#).

In response to the 2010 sovereign debt crisis, the Greek government introduced legislation to stimulate investment and adjust fiscal strategy, with tourism a key focus. In 2013, the [Golden Visa programme](#) was launched, offering EU residency permits for property investments, aimed at attracting foreign capital. These initiatives were successful, with tourism surpassing [20 million visitors](#) by 2019, contributing over [€20 billion in revenue](#), or approximately 11% of GDP.

In 2020, the covid pandemic devastated tourism and the broader Greek economy, especially in the Cyclades, but recovery has been swift. Visitor numbers are projected to reach an estimated [35 million in 2024](#), a 7% increase from 2023, with tourism's direct [GDP contribution at 13%](#), rising to approximately 30% when including indirect economic benefits.

Construction has closely followed tourism’s trajectory, expanding to meet the demand for visitor accommodation and secondary residences among both Greeks and foreign nationals. Although construction activity slowed during the 2010s because of the debt crisis, it rebounded in response to the low-interest-rate environment created by the central banks' monetary policies following the 2008 financial crisis and later the pandemic. The [trillions of euros](#) in low-interest loans and quantitative easing measures globally spurred [real estate investment](#), fuelling rising [property values in Greece](#) and the Cyclades.

In the Southern Aegean Region, which includes the Cycladic and Dodecanese Islands, the number of building licenses rose from 2,694 permits (covering 530,355 m²) in the period July to August 2022-23 to 3,103 permits (covering 553,069 m²) in 2023-24, reflecting a 15.2% increase in the number of licenses and a 4.3% rise in total area. Notably, more than [two-thirds of these licenses](#) were for developments in the Cycladic Islands, marking the region as the third-highest in construction activity among Greece’s thirteen regions, following Attica (Athens) and Central Macedonia (Thessaloniki).

Tourism infrastructure has also expanded considerably. In 2020, there were [967 hotels](#) in the Cycladic Islands with a total of 49,392 beds. By the end of 2023, this number had increased to [1,151 hotels](#) with 61,675 beds—an increase of 19% in hotels and 24.8% in available beds, mostly driven by a growing demand for [luxury accommodations and boutique hotels](#). Short-term rental accommodations have grown comparably, with platforms like Airbnb reporting around [30,000 active listings](#) across the Southern Aegean in the five years leading to 2023, significantly increasing tourism capacity and affecting local housing availability.

[Property values](#) in the Cycladic Islands are now among the highest in Greece, second only to Athens. The average private property price stands at around €3,000/m², though prices can exceed €10,000/m² for luxury properties in popular destinations like Mykonos and Santorini. In recent years, [property values](#) have appreciated at an annual rate of 6-7%, with significantly higher increases in premium market segments.

This rapid development and increase in property values underscore the intense demand and economic transformation taking place in the Cycladic Islands, driven by a tourism boom and an influx of real estate investments.

The construction boom spans a wide range of developments, including hotels, summer house estates, commercial units, and individual residences. Presidential Decrees set special conditions and constraints to buildings in order to protect the Cycladic Islands’ distinctive architecture and natural landscapes (cf. Government Gazette [930/Δ/24.10.2002](#) (Serifos,) [668/Δ/05.08.2002](#) (Sifnos) and [402/Δ/17.05.2002](#) (Folegandros.) However, enforcement is often inconsistent, especially in areas outside defined urban planning zones (εκτός σχεδίου δόμηση), where [building codes are frequently circumvented or loosely interpreted](#).

A particular challenge in managing construction is the prevalence of “arbitrary” or unlicensed building (αυθαίρετη δόμηση), wherein structures are built without proper permits or exceed approved designs, with the assumption that they will be retroactively legalised. This practice is common, even within planned settlements, where extensions and modifications are often carried out in phases. For example, a pergola may be built and later enclosed to serve as a living space, or a water cistern may be converted into a swimming pool or even an additional room.

Larger, unlicensed structures are also an issue, adding substantial built area beyond initial permits and undermining preservation efforts. These unauthorised developments not only alter the visual landscape of the islands but also add to the strain on local resources and infrastructure, [compounding the effects of overdevelopment](#).

The sheer volume of construction is intensified by specific trends, such as the proliferation of swimming pools in secondary residencies and hotels, with many hotels featuring a private pool for each room. Another trend is the growth of [“in-cave” dwellings](#) (υπόσκαφα), originally found only in Santorini, where homes were carved directly into volcanic rock. These distinctive structures are legal ([Law N 4067/2012](#)) and are now replicated across the Cyclades. In principle, they offer a lower environmental footprint because of the insulation provided by the surrounding rock, which reduces the energy needs for heating and cooling. However, by extending spaces underground they have led to a dramatic expansion of built area and a significant increase in the number of residents and operational needs of the buildings. Arguably, these structures are meant to blend seamlessly with the landscape, preserving the visual integrity of the islands. More frequently, though, under the pressure of overdevelopment, they have resulted in the scarring of cliffs and hill formations, both due to the massive excavation during construction and after completion. Moreover, the high cost of excavation makes this type of construction a luxury item, with outdoor spaces designed accordingly, including swimming pools, lawns instead of indigenous vegetation and impactful access routes. Additionally, the scale of these dwellings is inconsistent with traditional land use for housing.

Additionally, the extensive use of concrete, metals, large glass panels and other modern materials has become common to meet the demands for fast and cost-effective construction. However, unlike traditional building techniques that mostly relied on locally sourced, reusable materials, these modern alternatives carry a high environmental load. They are difficult to recycle, and, if abandoned, contribute to permanent landscape damage, altering the aesthetic character of the islands.

Inevitably, the surge in construction and [intense commercialisation](#) fuelled by tourism, real estate investment and the influx of seasonal residents has affected local communities. This [has transformed the economy](#) from one rooted in the primary sector and traditional crafts to a more service-oriented and tourism-driven model. [Conflicts have emerged](#) between developers seeking rapid construction approvals and authorities charged with preserving cultural heritage. These tensions underscore a clash between commercial priorities and conservation interests, which in turn [disrupt social cohesion](#). Rising property values entice local residents to sell for a quick gain, leading to housing affordability issues and prompting migration to urban centres or, alternatively, discouraging people to settle in the islands.

The impact on local communities extends beyond commercial considerations, leading to a [dilution of cultural identity](#) and a uniformity that erodes the distinct character of each island. The result is a landscape increasingly shaped by external influences rather than local traditions, which threatens the cultural richness and timeless attraction of the Cycladic Islands.

Strain on Resources, Infrastructure and Natural Environment

The expansion of built area, tourism and seasonal residents severely tests the islands’ [“carrying capacity”](#) – the limit to which each island can sustainably support the influx of visitors and related economic activity without long-term damage to resources, infrastructure and local communities. In particular, the surge in up-market developments, short-term rentals and high-

end hotels has led to intense demand for essential resources like water and electricity, while placing a heavy burden on the islands' limited infrastructure.

Water scarcity remains one of the most pressing concerns. With minimal freshwater resources and little rainfall, the [Cycladic Islands struggle to meet the demand during peak seasons](#). Most islands now resort to [desalination plants](#) or yet rely on expensive water tanker ships that strain the environment and local budgets. For instance, the cost of desalinated [water on islands like Sifnos can reach €7 per cubic meter](#), far exceeding mainland prices. Rising temperatures, reduced rainfall and the odd extreme weather event caused by climate change over the last years, exacerbate these issues. Prolonged seasonal droughts jeopardise traditional agriculture and farming activities, and threaten the survival of native plant species, disrupting biodiversity.

Electricity supply faces similar challenges. The islands are being [connected to the mainland's grid](#) via underwater cables, which are vulnerable to overloading during peak seasons. High demand from up-market facilities with pools, air conditioning and other energy-intensive amenities frequently leads to electricity outages. [A telling example](#) was Folegandros and neighbouring islands in August 2024, when record heat stretched the system's capacity resulting in an outage lasting several hours. These electricity supply issues reflect the underlying problem of seasonal demand exceeding the islands' infrastructure capabilities, experiencing unsustainable expansion without adequate resources.

Transport and [waste management](#) infrastructure also come under severe pressure. Roads, originally built for small communities e.g. Folegandros has a single main road, struggle to accommodate the traffic of rental cars, buses and delivery vehicles during peak months. Ports and the six airports in the Cyclades get severely overcrowded. Indicatively, in recent years Santorini's airport has experienced a significant increase in passenger traffic, reaching 2.8 million passengers in 2023, leading to congestion and occasional operational challenges during peak season.

Another source of concern is the massive increase in waste generation, which severely strains existing collection and management systems. Many islands lack recycling programs, resulting in loaded landfills and environmental concerns. Attempts to implemented waste management programmes, focusing on recycling and composting needed to manage waste sustainably require strenuous and continuous efforts. Equally, the sewerage infrastructure on these islands is often outdated and not equipped to handle the increased load during peak season. Many areas rely on septic tanks, which can rapidly become overburdened, leading to potential environmental contamination. In Sifnos, efforts have been made to improve [wastewater management](#), including the construction of a biological treatment plant in the area of Apollonia. However, challenges remain in expanding and maintaining these systems to meet the ever growing demand.

5. Regulatory Framework

Spatial Planning – Southern Aegean Region

[Spatial planning in Greece](#) has a long and arguably mitigated history going back to the creation of the modern Greek State in 1830. [Law 2742/1999](#) laid the foundations to modernise spatial planning aiming at a balanced and sustainable development throughout the country. In response, the Regional Framework for Spatial Planning (RFSP) and Sustainable Development for the Southern Aegean Region was approved in 2003 ([Government Gazette B 1487/10.10.2003](#).) It outlined the strategic directions for spatial development, land use and environmental management within the South Aegean Region, aiming to promote sustainable development and address regional challenges.

However, [the reception of the RFSP was mixed](#). As one of the first frameworks of its kind, it faced challenges in influencing subsequent decision-making processes. In 2014, a review was initiated, focusing on the qualitative characteristics of individual island groups. The review considered various factors, including the productive and service sectors, construction, infrastructure, resources, cultural heritage, natural environment, carrying capacity etc.

In January 2021, the Ministry of Environment and Energy (YPIEN,) responsible for spatial planning, circulated a [revised version of the RFSP](#). The revision was [discussed with the Region and Union of Regional Municipalities](#) (ΠΕΔ,) leading to the establishment of specific conditions, particularly regarding construction and wind farm development, intended to guide YPIEN in formulating the final RFSP.

Close to four years later the final version of the RFSP has yet to be officially published. The delay can raise reasonable concerns about the timely implementation of strategic planning initiatives. It is crucial that the 2003 RFSP is urgently updated to ensure that the sustainable development of the South Aegean Region is implemented within a legally binding structured framework.

Spatial Planning – Sustainable Development for Tourism

In alignment with Law 2742/1999, the Special Framework for Spatial Planning and Sustainable Development for Tourism (SFSP-T) and its Strategic Environmental Impact Study were first approved in 2009 ([Government Gazette B 1138/11.06.2009](#).) The SFSP-T sought to provide a structured approach to tourism development across the country. However, from the outset, the SFSP-T faced legal challenges. An amended version was published in 2013 ([Government Gazette B 3155/12.12.2013](#),) but it too was contested. The Council of State, Greece's highest administrative court, annulled both versions (Decisions [A3632/2015 12.10.2015](#) and [A519/2017 01.03.2017](#)³.)

Notably, Article 6 of the Council of State Decision A519/2017 states: “... *development of tourist activity is still possible in the country, based on any provisions that feature in existing Regional Spatial Frameworks (cf. Council of State 3043/2011), as well as in hierarchically lower level planning, in relation to regional and spatial plans.*” This implies that tourism investments could still continue after the suspension of the SFSP-T, guided just by the existing regional and local planning documents. However, these plans are outdated cf. ΤΠΣ and ΕΠΣ below.

In July 2024, eleven years after the last amendment, YPIEN released for public consultation the [New Spatial Framework for Tourism](#) and its accompanying Strategic Environmental Study. [The draft framework has been criticised](#) for its lacunae, notably the lack

of assessment of the existing situation by geographical area in terms of sustainability and the absence of alternative scenarios to facilitate proper consultation and selection of an optimal model. These gaps leave the framework without a clear basis for defining where and within which limits tourist investments will be permitted. [Environmental organisations have raised objections](#) that the framework perpetuates the tourism development model of its predecessor, potentially exacerbating environmental damages. [Local authorities have also expressed concerns](#) about the framework's top-down, “horizontal” approach emphasising the need for specific solutions to address the diverse challenges of each region. The consultation period was extended from 15 to 25 September, due to significant public interest, reflecting the high level of engagement and the desire for a more inclusive and transparent decision-making process.

These legal developments outlined above and responses to the latest public consultation underscore the complexities involved in establishing a cohesive national strategy for tourism in Greece. They highlight the need for frameworks that align with both legal standards and ensure sustainable tourism development, whilst respecting environmental preservation and local community needs.

Construction outside defined urban settlements

A particular issue that has plagued the landscape in Greece is construction outside defined urban settlements (εκτός σχεδίου δόμηση). Two legal texts were intended to regulate the matter, namely [Law 1337/1983](#) related to the expansion of urban settlements and a Presidential Decree (Government Gazette [270/D/31.05.1985](#)) aimed to curb uncontrolled development. However, by establishing that any plot of land “can be built,” provided it has a minimum surface of 0.4 hectares and a façade of 45 metres on a public road, accompanied with a multitude of derogations, the outcome was contrary to the initial intention. This early regulatory framework evolved through successive legislation, culminating in Laws [4447/2016](#) and [4759/2020](#), which updated all existing Spatial and Urban Planning Legislation. Notably, [they introduce local urban plans \(ΤΠΣ\)](#) for individual or bordering groups of municipalities, which will define the complete spatial development and organisation of a given area. After the approval of the ΤΠΣ, no development e.g. construction will be allowed, unless compatible with the conditions and restrictions imposed by the ΤΠΣ. Special urban plans (ΕΠΣ) are foreseen for areas that exceed local administrative boundaries where larger scale initiatives or those considered of strategic importance are concerned cf. below. Clearly, the intention is that the ΤΠΣ and ΕΠΣ will manage land use more effectively and bring construction under control. Nevertheless, a number of [exclusions and derogations foreseen by the plans](#) risk again to hamper their ultimate effectiveness. An added issue is that the RFSP for the Southern Aegean, a higher level document which should normally guide the elaboration of the ΤΠΣ and ΕΠΣ for the islands in the area, has yet to be officially published.

Currently, [studies are in progress to define the ΤΠΣ and ΕΠΣ](#), with an estimated cost of EUR 600 million, co-financed by the EU’s Resilience and Recovery Fund. ΥΠΕΝ is [leading the preparation of the studies](#) in collaboration with the Technical Chamber of Greece and the involvement of Regional and Local authorities. The projected completion date is end-2025. After public hearings and the administrative approval process, it is envisaged that the ΤΠΣ and ΕΠΣ will be enacted into law by 2026.

“Strategic Investments”

Of particular relevance to the impact on the Cycladic Islands' development and landscape is a set of laws intended to stimulate “strategic investments” – essentially investments of above EUR 10 million. Initiated in the early 2010s in response to the sovereign debt crisis, Laws [3894/2010](#), [3986/2011](#), [4608/2019](#), and [4864/2021](#) seek to attract foreign direct investment by streamlining approval and licensing processes, while offering financial and fiscal incentives. Investments in the tourist sector are clearly targeted. However, concerns arise regarding the “fast track” and “one stop shop” streamlining procedures of this legislation, which may limit the time available for proper environmental assessments, especially when granting the use of land, seafront, beaches or sea space. Such investments are subject to Special Spatial Development Plans for Strategic Investments (ΕΣΧΑΣΕ) which determine an overall spatial layout that overrides the local ΕΠΣ. This raises questions about the adequacy of public consultation and the extent of community engagement in the decision-making process. In this context, ongoing and close monitoring of the impact of these laws is essential to ensure that the sustainable development of the Cycladic Islands is not compromised.

Specific Types of Tourist Developments

Laws [4002/2011](#) and [4875/2021](#) set guidelines for specific types of tourist developments in Greece, such as Complex Tourist Accommodations, which involve five-star hotels combined with furnished housing for letting or sale. These laws also establish so-called “Areas of Integrated Tourism and Model Tourist Destinations,” which designate entire areas to enhance the country's tourism image and, as such, require special management. Arguably, these represent “strategic investments” per se or destinations for such investments. Law [4864/2021](#), referred to above, introduced greater flexibility in the sale of serviced flats or units within hotels, providing de facto an incentive to increase built area. However, this type of activity must be approached with caution. Tensions may arise with local communities, especially if such developments prioritise tourist needs over local interests, leading to perceived threats to traditional culture and livelihoods. Ongoing dialogue among stakeholders is crucial to ensure that tourism development remains sustainable and beneficial for all.

Large-scale tourist facilities can easily alter the natural landscape and diminish the inherent beauty of an area, ultimately destroying its original appeal. This is of particular concern in sensitive regions like the Cycladic Islands, where, as already observed, overdevelopment may strain carrying capacity and result in environmental degradation.

Carrying Capacity

In 1992, the concept of “carrying capacity” was introduced into Greek jurisprudence by the Council of State through [Minutes 246 and 586/1992, and 398/1993](#), which dealt with draft decrees for the approval of planning studies for holiday settlements. Later, Law [4582/2018](#) (Article 2) on thematic tourism and Law [4819/2021](#) (Article 119) on urban planning and spatial regulations, both reference carrying capacity. Last, Law [4967/2022](#) (Article 64,) while addressing the simplification of environmental licensing procedures, provides a definition for “carrying capacity,” mandates its application and calls for its integration into revised planning standards. In particular, Article 4 of the [revised planning standards](#) provides specific guidelines for urban planning that, among others, aim to fulfil the principle of sustainable development. Paragraph 3 of these guidelines stipulates that consideration of carrying capacity must duly form part of the ΤΠΣ and ΕΠΣ studies. Paragraph 10 further requires the incorporation of considerations of the European Landscape Convention, to which [Greece is a signatory](#).

6. Field visit and Description of the Islands

Mission & Visits

The Europa Nostra and the European Investment Bank Institute appraisal team visited Greece from 18 to 23 October 2024. In Athens and Piraeus, the team held meetings with the Ministry of Tourism (Director General of Tourism Policy) and the Ministry of Maritime Affairs & Insular Policy (Secretary General of the Aegean and Island Policy.)

The team visited Serifos and Sifnos, where it met with the mayors and representatives from local associations. It also toured archaeological sites, historic locations and explored the islands' cultural heritage and landscapes. Due to weather conditions, the team was unable to visit Folegandros and held a virtual meeting (via Zoom) with the mayor and local representatives. Additionally, the team met or had virtual meetings with the mayor of Santorini, a member of the Save Ios advocacy association as well as Professor Ioannis Spilanis of the Department of Environment at the University of the Aegean.

As a result, the team gained a solid, though still partial, understanding of the challenges facing the islands and developed insights into the concerns and attitudes of both the island communities and the state authorities they met.

The three Cycladic Islands of Serifos, Sifnos and Folegandros

All three islands are situated in the western Cyclades. The appraisal team agreed that ELLET, the nominator, has made a well-founded choice in selecting them for the 7ME initiative as representative examples of the Cycladic Islands. They demonstrate that islands, regardless of differences in size, population and respective charm, all face similar challenges and threats, as outlined in Section 4. Context above.

To briefly recall, tourism has undoubtedly become a cornerstone of Greece's national economy, contributing significantly to its GDP. The growing demand for secondary residences, driven by the increasing affluence of both Greek and international societies, has further boosted visitor numbers and economic development. The Cycladic Islands, with their natural attributes, have been at the forefront of this boom. However, what began as a welcome influx of economic activity now poses a serious threat to the very assets that make these islands desirable. In the past two years, the post covid pandemic surge in tourism and construction has exacerbated existing challenges.

Two telling examples of extreme construction and damage to the landscape were brought to the attention of the appraisal team during the meetings:

- The mayor of Santorini described the island as “saturated” and subject to “irrational development,” noting that approximately 500,000 m² of built area have been added in recent years, this excludes unlicensed buildings. While his efforts have [temporarily halted new building permits](#) being issued, construction on sites with

existing permits, unlicensed structures and Strategic Investments continues unabated. Consequently, the landscape, once characterised by distinct settlements, is being transformed into an integrated urban setting, losing its natural rural charm (see [Annex Photographs](#))

- The member of the [Save Ios advocacy group](#) highlighted for her part the actions of several real estate companies on the island. Allegedly controlled by the same interests, these companies have progressively acquired large tracts of land and coastal areas over the past two decades. As a result, approximately 30% of the island's surface is now concentrated in a single group, granting it significant influence over the local economy. In the last five years, two 5-star hotels have been built on these holdings, adding to the two already existing on the island. Plans for nine more large-scale investments are underway, including Complex Tourist Accommodations and marinas, three of which have been classified as Strategic Investments.

Once implemented, these projects are expected to nearly double the island's built area, placing a disproportionate strain on its resources and infrastructure, with no clear evidence that the carrying capacity of Ios has been adequately assessed. Furthermore, the natural landscape, already disrupted by [extensive construction](#), has been further altered by the planting of [non-native tree species](#) to the Cycladic environment.

The three islands of Serifos, Sifnos, and Folegandros are on the cusp of suffering similar irretrievable damage to their landscapes, cultural heritage and natural beauty as described in the above examples. However, their respective unique character can yet be safeguarded with timely and well-planned actions aimed at balancing preservation with progress.

Serifos

Serifos covers an area of approximately 75 square kilometres. Its terrain is mountainous, with its highest point Mount Troulos, reaching 585 metres. The island's main village, Chora, is typically perched on a hillside overlooking Livadi, the island's port. Other notable settlements include Megalo Livadi, known for its scenic bay. According to the 2021 census, Serifos has a permanent population of about 1 250 residents, though [this number swells by up to 9,000](#) during the summer months – the estimated maximum number of visitors the island can accommodate, namely some 7.3 times the island's permanent population. This reflects the island's popularity and represents a tourist intensity among the highest in the Greek islands. In the five years to 2023, 78 building licenses were issued corresponding to a built area of 14,711 m².

Historically, Serifos is known for its mineral wealth, with evidence of mining dating back to the Bronze Age. In the late 19th century, mining experienced a resurgence, with iron ore extraction becoming a significant economic activity until the mines' closure in the 1960s. Remnants of this industrial period, such as rusted machinery, abandoned buildings and railway tracks, dot the landscape, especially around Megalo Livadi, providing a unique glimpse into the island's mining heritage. Other cultural and historical landmarks, include the medieval Kastro in Chora, ancient observation towers and remnants of Roman and Byzantine influence.

[Today, Serifos is a beloved destination](#) for its natural beauty, marked by pristine beaches in idyllic settings. The island also offers a variety of hiking trails that traverse its rugged terrain,

leading to panoramic views and remote beaches. Serifos's modest agricultural sector includes the cultivation of olives, vegetables and vineyards, as well as the production of honey and wine. Livestock farming is mostly limited to sheep and goats, which support the production of local meat and cheeses. Together, these activities contribute to local traditions and cuisine.

Approximately 60% of Serifos is protected under the Natura 2000 network, with areas GR4220009 and GR4220029 covering sensitive habitats that host unique flora, bird species and marine life like the Mediterranean monk seal. This natural diversity enhances the island's appeal to ecotourism enthusiasts interested in exploring its diverse ecosystems.

The meeting with the Mayor of Serifos was attended by members of the Municipal Council and representatives from local associations. During the meeting, the Mayor highlighted the proactive steps taken to address the island's development challenges. In January 2023, the council commissioned a study from the Aegean Sustainable Tourism Observatory of the University of the Aegean, aimed at providing [guidance for sustainable development amidst the pressures of tourism](#) and resource strain. Additionally, a study was commissioned from the Urban Environment Laboratory of the National Technical University of Athens to assess the island's mining vestiges and landscapes, which constitute a valuable [asset of Serifos's industrial heritage](#).

The first study, led by Professor Ioannis Spilanis, draws on global best practices, including UNWTO and GSTC frameworks for sustainable tourism. Adopting a “what we have – what we aspire to” approach, it presents three alternative scenarios for Serifos's future development based on varying degrees of tourism intensity, namely: business as usual, mild changes and radical changes. Following initial public consultations, the preferred option lies between the second scenario, which seeks to reformulate the current growth model to alleviate pressures, and the third scenario, which prioritises adapting growth to the island's carrying capacity. This latter scenario encourages alternative, experience-based tourism promoting Serifos's identity, well-being and sustainable practices.

The second study, led by Professor Nikos Belavilas, was submitted to the Ministry of Culture in September 2024. It blends with the first, stressing the historical significance of Serifos's mining activities, with structures like the neoclassical administration building and the iconic ore-loading ladder in Megalo Livadi leaving a profound imprint on its landscape. The study highlights the dangers posed by unauthorised construction and the potential for large-scale tourism development that could compromise these cultural assets. To address these concerns, it advocates for the creation of an open-air museum and a thematic park that would integrate the mining monuments into a cohesive cultural and tourist attraction.

Professor Spilanis' study emphasises that transitioning toward the preferred scenario requires improved governance and strict adherence to the law, as a fundamental starting point. A key measure involves curbing the number of tourists during peak season while spreading attendance over a longer period, whilst improving living conditions and addressing current pressure points. It proposes how this can be achieved by limiting the number of beds on the island and promoting alternative localities, attractions and activities that highlight the island's unique identity, in short: effectively spreading visitors in time and space.

If adopted and implemented, the local economy would gradually shift away from a “tourism monoculture” to a more diverse model making Serifos attractive and sustainable – economically, socially and environmentally – throughout the entire year. As mentioned by a

member of the team, the ultimate goal should be to reverse the current trend and develop alternative activities to the extent that they take over from and put pressure on seasonal tourism.

However, such a transition will require strong commitment to and implementation of parallel policies and investments to strengthen the island's infrastructure and resource systems, particularly in water and waste management. Equally critical will be the regulation and control of construction activity, ensuring compliance with urban planning zones and putting a stop to unlicensed structures. The upcoming ΕΠΣ presents a pivotal opportunity to implement these changes, focusing on respecting carrying capacity limits.

A lively discussion ensued on the [Western Cyclades ΕΠΣ](#), which includes Serifos alongside Kythnos, Sifnos, Milos, and Kimolos. The mayor raised the critical issue of the Municipality's need for technical support to track the process, citing its limited capacity and resources. He also expressed concerns about the potential risk of relying on external consultants, who had already been involved in drafting the ΕΠΣ. A broader issue was raised regarding the small number of consultants engaged in preparing the ΕΠΣ and ΤΠΣ studies, with allegations of replication of survey findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Another concern centred on the accurate assessment and integration of carrying capacity into the ΤΠΣ and ΕΠΣ studies.

Despite these reservations, those present were encouraged to actively engage and participate in public consultations, as their input shall be vital to tailoring the ΕΠΣ to the island's specific needs. The importance of the ΕΠΣ was stressed as, once enacted, it will shape the island's spatial development and organisation for the next 20 years. The ΕΠΣ aims to manage land use more effectively and bring construction activities under control. If properly drafted, the ΕΠΣ should address the concerns of local stakeholders, including the vine grower and apiculturist present, who voiced worries about their livelihoods.

Proper land use planning should lead to a more rational valuation of property, encouraging locals to retain their holdings rather than selling them. In this respect, a key concern is the potential acquisition of vast tracts of land by real estate companies, which could be used for large-scale tourist developments. For example, [the company that used to exploit the mines](#) has been trying to re-establish ownership of some 250 ha in Megalo Livadi and the south of the island. At the time of writing, no strategic investments were envisaged for Serifos.

Another issue raised was the slow response of state authorities to municipal requests for assistance or guidance. This was attributed to the multilayered governance structure, with the so-called self-rule (αυτοδιοίκηση) of local authorities being characterised as a “euphemism,” given their limited capacity to act independently or make decisions effectively. Coordinating action with other islands and municipalities could provide a stronger, unified voice, enabling better representation and more effective advocacy for shared concerns.

A further grievance concerned the Urban Planning Office in Milos, which oversees Serifos. The office is slow to process building applications, ineffective in enforcing building codes and in controlling construction, especially outside defined urban settlements, all issues largely attributed to the office's [chronic understaffing](#).

Balancing the concerns and anxieties voiced by local participants at the meeting was their strong sense of engagement. Notably, all participants were young, with the mayor himself

in his early thirties. Some had chosen to return to their native island after spending years elsewhere, while others, with no prior connection to Serifos, had decided to settle there, drawn by its charm. This level of commitment to the island is an encouraging sign for its future.

Their apparent support for the development scenario that promotes alternative, experience-based tourism – emphasising Serifos’s identity, well-being, and sustainable practices – could gradually shift the island away from a “tourism monoculture” to a more diverse and resilient economic model. This approach would make Serifos more attractive and sustainable – economically, socially, and environmentally – year-round. Such progress could stabilise and potentially increase the island’s population, reversing the trend for urbanism and contributing positively to Greece’s broader demographic challenges.

Sifnos

[Sifnos](#), covers approximately 74 square kilometres. Its landscape is striking with rolling hills, terraced fields and sandy beaches. Mount Profitis Ilias reaches the island’s highest elevation at 682 meters. The main town is Apollonia, showcasing narrow, whitewashed alleys, traditional Cycladic architecture. Adjoining Artemonas is another notable village famous for its neoclassical mansions with blooming gardens. At their foot is the old capital, Kastro, perched on a cliff by the Aegean, which retains remnants of Venetian architecture, medieval fortifications and ancient walls. The island’s main port is Kamares, on the west coast with a long sandy beach and clear waters. According to the 2021 census, Sifnos has a permanent population of around 2,800 residents, marking a rise of 6% since the 2011 census. However, in the summer, the number often surges by several multiples.

[Sifnos has a rich historical and cultural heritage](#), with evidence of habitation dating back to at least the Late Neolithic Age, around 4,000 BCE. The island was an important centre of Cycladic civilisation, known for its mineral wealth, particularly gold and silver mines, which brought significant prosperity. Pottery production on Sifnos also dates back millennia and continues to thrive today, with workshops creating hand-painted ceramics that uphold traditional techniques. Sifnos has preserved modest agricultural activities, producing olive oil, honey and small quantities of wine that continue to contribute to the island’s economy and are staples in local recipes. The island is renowned for its culinary traditions, notably as the birthplace of Nikolaos Tselementes, the Greek chef who shaped modern Greek cuisine.

Sifnos’s biggest attraction is its natural beauty and landscape. The island has a network of hiking trails that connect villages and ancient sites, and offer visitors a scenic way to explore its beaches, landscapes and traditional architecture. Approximately one-third of Sifnos is protected by the Natura 2000 network with designated area GR4220008 that supports the typical Cycladic flora and fauna.

At the meeting with the Mayor of Sifnos, only a civil engineer serving as a volunteer adviser was present. The Mayor outlined the actions taken to promote the island’s heritage and preserve its landscape, including maintaining the old footpaths, which now attract hikers, and dry-stone walls, that define the landscape. She referred to the [circular she issued to state authorities in March 2023](#), shortly before the local elections, also aimed at raising the local population’s awareness. [The circular](#) called for the immediate implementation of measures to curb the “frantic growth” driven by the “intense tourist wave of recent years,” including an

outright ban of in-cave dwellings and private swimming pools. Her bold actions did not hinder her re-election. She also highlighted the Municipal Council's cross-party sense of responsibility and constructive attitude in agreeing to establish a Committee for the Protection of the Environment and Character of the island.

She expressed concern about the increasing use of modern building materials and practices, such as glass panels, un-whitewashed exposed masonry and two-storey houses, that are incompatible with the island's traditional architectural style outside defined urban settlements. There is a tacit agreement among local building contractors to respect the island's landscape and traditional architecture by, for example, avoiding construction on crests, refraining from two-story buildings and generally building "in moderation." However, the surge in development has drawn non-local contractors who may not adhere to these informal guidelines. She added that the challenge of regulating construction is aggravated by the incomplete mapping of minor roads and tracks, along with the lack of clarity on whether they are public or private. This uncertainty leaves the determination of whether a plot of land "can be built" open to dispute.

The Mayor echoed the grievance raised in Serifos about the Urban Planning Office in Milos, which also oversees Sifnos, reiterating its slow processing of building applications, ineffectiveness in enforcing building codes and weak control over construction. This prompted a comment in the ensuing discussion, to the effect that the voluminous and convoluted legislation on building codes exacerbates such issues, creating uncertainty and allowing regulations to be loosely interpreted or even circumvented at the discretion of planning office staff.

The discussion shifted to the importance of the impending Western Cyclades ΕΠΣ, which also covers Sifnos. Active participation in the upcoming public consultations was encouraged, to influence its drafting and ensure that the alternative development options it will be based on will properly consider the concerns of local residents. Despite Sifnos's relatively large permanent population of nearly 3,000 residents, the municipality does not have a technical service and faces a lack of sufficient support to effectively track and engage in this process. Consultation with the municipalities of other islands is ongoing to better coordinate actions and enhance the effectiveness of approaches to state authorities. However, while the ultimate goals are generally aligned, priorities may vary depending on the specific pressures faced by each island.

In addition to the concerns already raised in Serifos about the ΕΠΣ, apprehension was voiced that the ΕΠΣ might be presented before a thorough assessment of the island's carrying capacity is completed. As a consequence, there's the risk the plan could rely on statistical data that fail to accurately reflect the island's peak season population. Ensuring that the ΕΠΣ is based on precise and up-to-date data is critical for achieving sustainable development that aligns with the island's actual needs and capacities. Similar to Serifos, at the time of writing, no strategic investments were envisaged for Sifnos.

In closing, the Mayor outlined actions aimed at alleviating tourism pressure during the peak season whilst further extending the season. These initiatives include building on existing festivals, such as the [Tselementes](#) and [Thees](#) festivals, to showcase alternative activities like pottery, and further promote other pursuits such as hiking. It was suggested that a comprehensive "business plan" could be developed, also incorporating the support and preservation of traditional agricultural and farming practices. The plan would aim to foster a

more diverse and resilient economy for the island, reducing the reliance on and pressure from tourism.

Folegandros

[Folegandros](#) is a rugged island in the southern rim of the Cyclades. With an area of approximately 32 square kilometres, it is the smallest of the three selected islands. Its rocky terrain – allegedly, the island’s name derives from a Phoenician word meaning “stony earth” – is punctuated by cliffs and dry-stone walls that criss-cross its landscape, typical of many Cycladic islands. Its highest point, Agios Eleftherios, reaches an elevation of 415 meters.

The main village, Chora, is perched on the edge of a cliff overlooking the Aegean. It features traditional whitewashed houses, narrow cobblestone streets and three picturesque squares. Ano Meria is the other notable settlement, which maintains a traditional agricultural lifestyle and is known for its "themonies" – stone-built farmsteads that reflect the island's rural heritage. Karavostasi, the island’s main port, serves as the primary entry point. According to the 2021 census, Folegandros has a permanent population of just over 700 residents. This makes it the smallest of the three selected islands also in terms of population, which, similar to the other two, swells significantly during the peak summer period.

[Folegandros](#) has a rich cultural and historical heritage, shaped by influences from ancient Greek, Roman, Venetian, and Ottoman periods. Archaeological evidence suggests that the island has been inhabited since the early Cycladic period, around 3000 BCE. Its iconic landmark is the Church of Panagia, a white-washed church on a hillside above Chora, accessible via a similarly white-washed winding path. The church becomes the focal point of the island’s Assumption Day festival in August, drawing crowds of locals and visitors alike. The island has a tradition of modest agriculture. To increase its limited arable land, terraced fields are built into the mountainsides and cultivated with crops like barley, wheat and figs. Farming is limited to mainly goats, known for their tasty meat because of the salt left on the windswept grazing land. The island’s aromatic dry flora enhances the flavour of local honey. In addition to modern wooden beehives, traditional stone beehives, preserved in the countryside, are an excellent example of Folegandros’s stonework heritage. The island has maintained a distinctive culinary tradition, including its *rakomelo*, a strong grape distilled spirit (raki) blended with local honey.

The dramatic cliffs and dry-stone wall marked landscape make Folegandros a popular hiking destination, with trails connecting settlements, scenic overlooks and remote beaches. Hiking is enhanced by the still limited road network. About 75% of Folegandros falls under the Natura 2000 network, specifically area GR4220004, which aims to preserve the island’s native flora and fauna, as well as migratory bird flyway role.

Folegandros, with its small area, population and limited road and water infrastructure, is arguably the most vulnerable of the three selected islands. The island has faced increased pressures, including the completion of a Strategic Investment in 2024, which coincided with the start of the new Mayor’s tenure. Participants at the Zoom meeting, including members of the Municipal Council, voiced significant concerns about the island’s future.

It was noted that the island’s society is undergoing notable change, with land and homes being sold for short-term financial gain and income increasingly reliant on seasonal tourism.

By the end of October, Folegandros is largely deserted, with construction becoming the alternative off-season activity to tourism. This shift has contributed to the decline of traditional livelihoods, particularly in the primary sector, as gentrification drives farmers from settlements. It was mentioned that in Ano Meria, the island's traditional agricultural hub, the population has dropped from 350 to 150 in just one generation, with only 10 farmers remaining. Without timely intervention, the island risks losing all primary sector activities entirely.

Secondary residences, which owners tend to use for short periods and then rent for short-term stays, have further exacerbated these issues. Such properties are often larger than the homes of local residents and disproportionately consume resources, particularly water, placing excessive strain on the island's limited infrastructure. They also reduce housing availability and drive up housing costs, making it increasingly difficult for essential workers, such as state teachers and medical practitioners, to secure affordable year-round accommodation. Compounding these issues, such developments frequently introduce architectural elements completely alien to the island's traditional standards, both in the morphology of the buildings and the configuration of open spaces, including the planting of trees ill-adapted to the Cycladic environment. These trees, compared to native species, are often poorly adapted to local conditions, demand greater infrastructure support – particularly in terms of water – than the existing systems can provide.

Confronted with these challenges, locals perceive a lack of support from the state. Despite a higher cost of living compared to the mainland, Folegandros residents face the same taxation rates, providing little incentive to remain and sustain traditional livelihoods. In this context, the Mayor mentioned his aim to retain, ideally increase, a critical mass of permanent inhabitants. He noted the difficulty he faced to find hands to restore the dry-stone walls, which are integral to the island's agricultural and cultural heritage.

Another issue raised was the above-mentioned recent opening, within the island's Natura 2000 area, of a strategic investment five-star hotel, featuring 25 suites – each equipped with a private pool – and two villas, which has pushed the supply of water to a critical point. The Mayor claimed he had to arbitrate the distribution of water. Adding to the pressure, another 14 suites, 10 villas and a hydrotherapy spa are planned as expansions to the same hotel.

[The start of the TIIΣ process for Folegandros](#), along with the neighbouring islands of Sikinos and Ios, was discussed. The consultants in charge of the studies held an introductory presentation in Ios the week prior to the team's visit. The locals attending the Zoom meeting appeared perplexed by the implications and uncertain about how to engage in the TIIΣ process, especially given the absence of residents with relevant technical expertise – the most qualified being an electrician and a stonemason. In the circumstances, the Mayor was encouraged to seek state support to hire external consultants to monitor and assist with the TIIΣ process. Coordination with Sikinos and Ios was also recommended to ensure a unified approach. While the importance of the TIIΣ and the preceding evaluation of the island's carrying capacity was acknowledged, there was scepticism about the likelihood of securing the necessary funds, particularly since a recent request for financial assistance for minor feasibility studies on water supply and road infrastructure still faced delays.

Folegandros seems to stand at a critical crossroads, with unchecked development and resource strains threatening its identity and sustainability. The imbalance between tourism-driven income and the decline of traditional livelihoods exacerbates these challenges. Without

coordinated local action and state support for sustainable policies to be enforced through the ΤΠΣ, the island risks irreparable harm.

In sum, while Serifos, Sifnos and Folegandros each has unique characteristics and demonstrates alternative initiatives – such as Serifos’s mining heritage and commissioning studies to guide its development, Sifnos’s relatively large population and its Mayor’s bold actions to curb frantic growth, and Folegandros’s small size and population, with the additional stress caused by the recently opened five-star hotel – all three islands share the same overarching challenges. They include peak tourism pressures, resource scarcity, the decline of traditional livelihoods and the need for better governance and planning. To avoid repetition, some specific issues highlighted for one island have been omitted from, but equally apply to the others and should be understood as common across all three.

Despite their specificities, all three islands require a unified approach to address the pressures of uncontrolled construction, overdevelopment, insufficient infrastructure, and the over-reliance on tourism. The shared need for sustainable tourism, stronger governance, enhanced technical capacity and preservation of traditional livelihoods presents an opportunity for collaboration amongst the three and other Cycladic Islands faced with the same challenges.

The state authorities

With only two meetings held with state authorities - namely, the Director General of Tourism Policy and the Secretary General of the Aegean and Island Policy – the team’s understanding of the state’s approach to addressing the islands’ challenges remains partial. To gain further insight, the relevant pages of other Ministries’ websites were reviewed, notably those of the Ministry of Environment and Energy and the Ministry of Development. In addition, the legislative background outlined under Section 5. Regulatory Framework and its implementation were considered.

A key impression is that the output of the respective Ministries could significantly benefit from increased coordination and collaboration. For instance, the Ministry of Tourism is understandably focused on its mandate to promote tourism by gathering data and formulating policies that feature new destinations and attract visitors, with the primary aim to maximise numbers and revenues. However, this focus appears to prioritise economic goals over considerations of sustainability, environmental impact and consequences for local communities. Better collaboration with the Ministry of Environment and Energy and, in the specific case of the Cycladic Islands, the Ministry of Island Policy, could help achieve a better balance between these priorities.

The management of Strategic Investments in the tourism sector by the Ministry of Development, provides another example of the need for better balance. The Ministry focuses on promoting foreign direct investment and streamlining approval processes to boost the national economy. While the Ministry of Tourism may be consulted, the use of Special Spatial Development Plans for Strategic Investments (ΕΣΧΑΣΕ,) which override local ΕΠΣ, risks sidelining sustainability considerations and causing controversy with local populations, as illustrated by the five-star hotel development in Folegandros.

Whilst not a Strategic Investment, a more egregious example is a [proposed development in Astypalaia](#), which, although part of the Dodecanese, shares many characteristics with the Cycladic Islands. This project includes plans for a tourist village comprising villas and hotels that would exceed the combined size of the island's two largest settlements. The Central Urban Planning Council (ΚΕΣΥΠΙΟΘΑ,) under the Ministry of Environment and Energy (ΥΠΙΕΝ,) initially approved the project based on a Special Urban Plan (ΕΠΣ.) This plan allowed construction densities three times higher than currently permitted, effectively circumventing the Local Urban Plan (ΤΠΣ) currently being elaborated. Following strong opposition from local residents and the Municipality, [ΥΠΙΕΝ rushed to block the approval](#). However, the block is temporary, and concerns remain the investment may yet proceed.

The Ministry of Environment and Energy's initiative to introduce Local and Special Urban Plans (ΤΠΣ/ΕΠΣ) represents a bold and long-overdue step toward managing land use and controlling construction outside defined urban settlements. However, its implementation, since being enacted in 2020, has faced worrying delays. Most of the studies have only recently started, with completion planned for the end of 2025. This timeline raises concerns about the process being rushed, potentially leaving insufficient time for proper consultation to ensure the plans are tailored to the characteristics of each island.

There is also apprehension that, similar to the New Spatial Framework for Tourism, a top-down, “horizontal” approach may prevail, disregarding island-specific solutions required to address their diverse challenges. An additional concern is whether the development models chosen by local inhabitants – on which the ΤΠΣ/ΕΠΣ outcomes will be based – will be fully respected. [A case in point is Skyros](#) in the Northern Aegean, where residents during the recent public consultation opted for a zero- or no-development scenario over even the mild-development alternative, which included plans for a marina, a cruise ship quay and five-star hotels. The community considered such projects alien to their customs and values. It remains to be seen whether their choice will be upheld or circumvented in the interest of development and the national economy.

The impression from the Department of the Aegean and Island Policy of the Ministry of Maritime Affairs & Insular Policy, was one of a pragmatic approach. It keeps frequent contact with the island Municipalities to appreciate their needs and focus on balancing development with preservation of cultural integrity. Through its office in Mytilene, the Department oversees the implementation of policies related to environmental protection, urban planning and architectural heritage across the Aegean islands. However, its actions frequently overlap with those of other Ministries, such as the Ministry of Environment and Energy in spatial planning and environmental protection, and the Ministry of Culture and Sports in safeguarding traditional settlements. This overlap and division of responsibilities introduces layers of governance, underscoring the need for good cooperation and coordination among the Ministries to avoid bureaucratic inefficiencies and fragmented accountability. Tellingly, the Department does not intervene in Strategic Investments managed by the Ministry of Development, despite their significant implications for the islands. [Greater municipal autonomy](#), supported by adequate resources, could help local authorities to implement and enforce policies, tailored to their specific needs and streamline processes more effectively.

Responding to the Mayor of Folegandros' account of having to arbitrate the distribution of water, the Department demonstrated [a professional grasp of the challenges in balancing water management](#) with the pressures of over-tourism on the islands. It argued that, while tourism increases demand, it is not the primary cause of water shortages. Instead, ageing infrastructure,

insufficient maintenance and inefficient water management systems account for significant water losses and waste. It also stressed the importance of timely and accurate data collection to identify specific consumption needs, which is critical for anticipating and effectively mitigating water scarcity.

Desalination can be a viable solution, but is not a universal remedy due to its high costs and environmental impact. It also requires operational expertise, which many municipalities often lack. Some islands have successfully achieved water autonomy by combining desalination with rainwater harvesting and efficient water use, presenting models that could be replicated elsewhere. These examples underscore the need for tailored solutions that consider local conditions and enhanced municipal planning capacity. The Department indicated its readiness to help manage water resources sustainably across the islands.

In sum,

- the overlapping responsibilities between Ministries create inefficiencies and fragmented accountability that complicate governance.
- Strategic Investments frequently sideline sustainability and local community preferences.
- The delayed implementation of the ΤΠΣ/ΕΠΣ risks rushing the process and missing the opportunity to tailor solutions to individual island needs.
- Addressing water scarcity requires foresight, planning and operational expertise to develop comprehensive water management solutions adapted to island needs and ensure long-term sustainability.

Additional observations

Several discussions during the meetings echoed the reservations raised by Professor Ioannis Spilanis in his [contribution to the public consultation](#) on the New Spatial Framework for Tourism (NSFT.) The critique highlights that the draft NSFT's "*conclusion that all spatial plans are linked to sustainable development is nowhere substantiated in practice. All available environmental measures ... rather indicate the opposite.*" He further notes that the draft NSFT refers to a series of overarching international and European environmental policies, such as the European Landscape Convention, to which Greece is a signatory, in only a general and vague manner. The policies are presented as optional guidelines rather than prerequisites for new tourism developments.

Interlocutors alleged that a similar pattern of largely unsubstantiated claims regarding the sustainability of investments and adherence to environmental policies permeates public sector documentation, including that of the Ministry of Development concerning Strategic Investments. This issue extends to private sector entities, such as the [Greek Tourism Confederation](#) (ΣΕΤΕ,) the [Hellenic Chamber of Hotels](#) and private promoters of tourism and real estate projects. An aggravating factor is the ability of private promoters to request the preparation of a ΕΠΣ to facilitate their projects, whilst being in charge of the related Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and carrying capacity studies. This role raises concerns about potential conflict of interest.

A particular concern regarding these studies is the frequent misinterpretation or narrow application of sustainability principles. There is a tendency to limit the scale and focus solely on the specific investment project, neglecting the broader regional context and landscape. This limited perspective often results in tenuous conclusions and inadequate recommendations that fail to comprehensively address environmental and social impacts.

Yet another complaint is the perception of an uncooperative attitude from state authorities toward the needs and concerns of local communities. This perception often discourages municipalities – particularly smaller ones and those most in need – from seeking financial and technical support from the state, for fear of antagonising it. This attitude seems to stem from the overlapping responsibilities among state authorities, coupled with bureaucracy, delays in responding to requests and a frequent lack of tailored approaches. The reliance on top-down, “horizontal” methods, coupled with rushed processes – particularly in the case of strategic investments that sideline local preferences – intensifies frustration among local stakeholders.

7. Implementation

The previous sections have outlined the background, key issues and challenges that confront the Cycladic Islands to ensure their development and future prosperity, while preserving their unique cultural heritage, landscape and natural beauty. So, what could the response be?

The Mayor of Santorini proposed that the most effective approach involves coordinated and concerted action by Local Authorities – starting at the regional level and then through the [National Union of Municipalities of Greece](#) (ΚΕΔΕ). He dismissed concerns about the “political cost” of such actions as unfounded, citing his own re-election as evidence, a stance supported by the similar electoral success of the Mayor of Sifnos.

Civil society also has a critical role to play in fostering collaboration and advocacy. The Save Ios initiative is a good example of civil action at the level of an individual island, campaigning for the preservation of the island’s landscape. At the collective level, the [Network for Sustainable Cyclades](#), launched in October 2023, is an excellent example of action among multiple stakeholders. Its founding resolution succinctly articulates the core issues and emphasises the need to intervene for the Protection of the Cycladic Identity from Irreversible Loss – a call very much in line with the priorities of ELLET, which is a founding member of the Network. [A meeting in September 2024](#) aimed to strengthen advocacy through concerted efforts between the Network, ELLET, and the Mayors of the Cycladic Islands.

There is an urgency to act. With the expected enactment of the ΤΠΣ and ΕΠΣ in 2026, which will shape the islands’ spatial development and organisation for the next 20 years, and given the societal changes in the islands – including land and homes being sold for short-term financial gain and ongoing construction defacing the landscape – it can conservatively be said that the Cycladic Islands are at a point of inflection. Some islands may already have crossed this point: the transformation of Santorini’s rural landscape into an integrated urban setting and the reduced visits and revenues Mykonos has experienced in the last two years serve as stark

warnings. Fortunately, the majority of the islands still have time to act before suffering irretrievable damage.

In taking action, there is a clear need to change the mindset at the local level. This includes raising awareness among local inhabitants about their capacity to act. Especially important is to stimulate interest among younger generations through early education to engage in sustainable practices, heritage preservation and take an active interest in their island's future.

At the national level there is a pressing need to advocate for policies that better reflect the needs and are attentive to local concerns. For example, while Strategic Investments may have been justified during Greece's sovereign debt crisis, they now require careful screening and selective promotion to avoid adverse impacts. Some, including ELLET, call for their [outright stop in the islands](#). The outcome of the proposed controversial investment in Astypalaia and the respect for the choice of Skyros's residents of a "no-development" scenario for the island's ΤΠΣ, will serve as key indicators of the state authorities' commitment to honouring local preferences and environmental sustainability.

Yet another reason for action are the vulnerabilities for the national economy that an over-reliance on tourism presents, as highlighted in the report [A Growth Strategy for the Greek Economy](#) by Nobel Prize economist Christopher Pissarides, commissioned by the Greek Government in 2020. These vulnerabilities include economic volatility due to external shocks e.g. pandemics or geopolitical instability, seasonal employment patterns leading to income instability and underinvestment in innovation and higher-skill industries. Moreover, the study also stresses the risks of environmental degradation and cultural erosion from intensive tourism as a threat to the very assets that make Greece an attractive destination. [These concerns have been recently reiterated](#) with calls for a shift in the national economic model. In October 2024, the Ministry of Development [presented the "new productive model"](#), which indeed prioritises measures to strengthen the country's industrial base, innovation and improved productivity.

Policies to promote new activities while sustaining traditional ones are vital to diversifying the Cycladic Islands' economies and fostering resilience. Observations from individuals met on the islands revealed a small yet dynamic group of young people willing to stay or return from urban centres. Encouraging this trend should be a priority for state as well as local authorities, as it has the potential to yield significant benefits.

Firstly, such policies would help counteract urbanisation and revitalise rural and island economies, offering sustainable livelihoods and preserving cultural traditions. In so doing, they would help reduce greenhouse gas emissions and promote circular economies. And, secondly, they may positively impact Greece's demographic challenges by creating an environment conducive to raising families. However, to achieve such outcomes, several critical concerns must be addressed.

Chief among these is the need for robust health and education infrastructure. Equally critical is the reinforcement of water and energy systems to reduce strain on natural resources and enhance resilience against climate change. Reliable and frequent sea and air transport connections are indispensable for maintaining accessibility and promoting economic and social activities. Adequate facilities are vital not only for supporting young families but also for addressing the needs of the entire population, including the elderly. Additionally, the provision of reliable and high-speed internet is crucial. Modern societies rely on connectivity for

education, remote work opportunities and attracting digital nomads – groups that could contribute to the local economy and enrich the islands' social fabric.

Equally important is addressing the issue of affordable housing. The increase in property values driven by tourism and real estate investment has made housing inaccessible for many young people and essential workers, including civil servants, educators, and healthcare professionals. Without affordable housing, these individuals will be discouraged from settling on the islands, exacerbating demographic and economic challenges.

Targeted policies, backed by appropriate investments, could help establish a sustainable framework that supports local communities while also bolstering the national economy. By promoting diverse economic activities and addressing critical infrastructure issues, such efforts would help ensure that the Cycladic Islands remain vibrant and attractive inhabited spaces, rather than become enclaves over-reliant on seasonal tourism.

The timing for action is particularly opportune. Over the past two years, the challenges of tourism and the built environment have increasingly come under public scrutiny. Regular coverage in the press has brought the debate to the fore through initiatives such as [Reimagine Tourism](#) and raised it to the highest political level.

Four years ago, the Europa Nostra – European Investment Bank Institute 7 Most Endangered 2021 [Five Southern Aegean Islands](#) (Amorgos, Kimolos, Kithira, Sikinos and Tinos) initiative sought to reconcile the transition to renewable energy sources (RES), notably wind farms, with the preservation of the islands' cultural heritage, landscapes and environment. It highlighted the risks posed by an excessive installation of wind turbines, as reflected in the licence applications submitted to the Regulatory Authority for Energy, which threatened to deface the islands' landscapes and compromise their appeal as tourist destinations.

The initiative likely gained traction because it coincided with growing opposition to industrial-scale wind farms in the Southern Aegean and a dawning realisation by state authorities of their potential damage – not only to the islands' aesthetic and cultural value but also to tourism, the cornerstone of both local and national economies. As a result, few, if any, wind farms have been constructed in the region since.

In concluding, it is sincerely hoped that the current initiative will achieve a similar impact by addressing the surge in construction, primarily driven by tourism and the demand for secondary residences, which erodes the islands' landscape and aesthetic appeal. Furthermore, it must confront the intense commercialisation and gentrification that dilute local culture and identity, as well as the mounting strain on resources and infrastructure exacerbated by climate change. Together, these factors threaten the Cyclades Islands' natural beauty, biodiversity, and the very essence of what makes these islands so unique.

8. Financing Possibilities

In 2023 the Hellenic Society for Local Development and Public Administration ([Ελληνική Εταιρεία Τοπικής Ανάπτυξης και Αυτοδιοίκησης](#) (EETAA) – website in Greek only)

commissioned and published a document entitled “Islandness 2021-2027” ([Νησιωτικότητα 2021-2027](#).) The document was compiled by a research team of the University of the Aegean, led by Professor Ioannis Spilanis. It provides a comprehensive framework to support island municipalities in Greece, including those in the Cyclades, in planning their developmental interventions for the period 2021-2027. It offers a cohesive methodology for planning, an innovative “toolbox” of proposals for actions and projects tailored to island regions, and insights into funding opportunities available during this period.

Many of the Appraisal Report recommendations will be found in the document, which emphasises the unique challenges and needs of island regions, advocating for strategies that promote sustainable development, environmental preservation, and the enhancement of local economies. It underscores the importance of modernising infrastructure, including health, education, water, energy, and digital connectivity, to improve the quality of life for residents and attract new opportunities. Additionally, it highlights the necessity of preserving cultural heritage and traditional architectural standards while accommodating development.

The document’s Chapter 4: National and European Priority Action Areas for the Programming Period 2021-2027 highlights these actions and lists several financing mechanisms. By integrating these funding sources into coherent, island-specific strategies, the document aims to provide island municipalities, with the tools to effectively address their challenges and support their sustainable development during this programming period. The EETAA website also provides a [detailed list of funding sources](#).

National Funding Sources

- National Development Programme ([Εθνικό Πρόγραμμα Ανάπτυξης](#) – Law 4635/2019 (A’167)) and its Regional Programmes
- NEARHOS ([NEAPXΟΣ](#)) Programme (Law 4770/2021) initially launched in 2021 by the Ministry of Maritime Affairs & Insular Policy aimed specifically at the support of island communities. After considerable delay the programme has been activated in 2024, with the EIB providing Technical Assistance, to target water, energy and port infrastructures on the islands. Financing is expected to start in the course of 2025.
- The “[Antonis Tritsis](#)” programme (Law 22766/9-4-2020 (B’ 1386)) aimed at promoting integrated strategic development and social cohesion plans of local authorities throughout Greece. It is cofinanced by the EIB and has a total investment budget of some EUR 3bn.
- The “[Green Fund](#)” which aims to promote the country's environmental policy and development through environmental protection.

Of note, although not mentioned in the EETAA document, is the [GR-eco Island initiative](#). The initiative was launched in 2021 and aims to transform the nation's islands into models of green economy, energy autonomy, digital innovation, and eco-mobility. [An example](#) is the island of Chalki, which has become Greece's first energy-independent island through the installation of a 1 MW photovoltaic park, leading to significant reductions in electricity bills and CO₂ emissions. [The initiative operates within the framework of public-private partnerships](#), with more than €150 million secured from European funding sources to support related interventions.

EU Funding Sources

- The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) programming period 2021-2027 ([Εταιρικό Σύμφωνο Περιφερειακής Ανάπτυξης – ΕΣΠΑ 2021-2027](#))

It provides funding for projects that enhance sustainable development, infrastructure, digital transformation and resilience against climate change. More specifically, for the Cyclades, it could promote initiatives for improved connectivity, adoption of renewable energy, supporting tourism and small businesses, and preserving cultural and natural heritage.

- The Recovery and Resilience Fund (RRF) ([Ταμείο Ανάκαμψης και Ανθεκτικότητας](#))

Designed to support Member States in addressing the economic and social impacts of the covid pandemic, while promoting sustainable growth. For Greece, particularly the Cycladic Islands, it can support projects that drive green and digital transitions, strengthen healthcare and education systems, and boost economic resilience.

- The Aegean Islands are eligible for the Just Transition Mechanism ([Μηχανισμός Δίκαιης Μετάβασης](#))

In 2025 the EIB is expected to support regional projects under the Pillar 3 of the Mechanism with amounts to be defined shortly

- The European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) ([Ευρωπαϊκό Ταμείο Θάλασσας, Αλιείας και Υδατοκαλλιέργειας](#))

It supports the sustainable development of maritime and fisheries sectors while preserving marine ecosystems. For the Cycladic Islands, it can help promote sustainable, small scale fishing practices, foster aquaculture and assist coastal communities, whilst protecting marine biodiversity. The fund also targets blue economy initiatives, such as maritime tourism and innovation, which can be of special relevance to the Cyclades.

- The [LIFE](#), [HORIZON](#), [INTERREG](#) and [ESPON](#) EU programmes are mentioned in the EETAA document as potential sources of funding.

Annexes

Threatened Heritage and Landscape Assets

A unique natural and anthropic environment.

The Aegean islands offer more than just their renowned beauty, defined by the unique interplay between the deep blue sea and the arid, rocky landscapes. They embody a rich, multilayered history shaped by cultural, political, social, and economic forces, which have created distinct identities for each island. The varied geomorphology of these islands has led to diverse approaches to human activity, resulting in a wide range of settlements that, while seemingly similar, differ greatly in their character.

Land use patterns in the Cyclades typically revolve around the main village (chora) and smaller settlements, often located inland to protect against pirates and other threats, both natural and human. The iconic whitewashed houses are densely clustered to provide shade and shield residents from the region's strong Aegean winds. These homes are arranged along narrow streets that follow the contours of the hilly terrain where most settlements are built.

The architecture, perfectly adapted to the sunny climate and persistent winds, is characterized by monolithic, smooth, cast-like forms that are strikingly highlighted by the bright sunlight. Building openings are kept small to minimize exposure to intense sunlight and enhance resistance to frequent high winds.

Roof styles vary based on local conditions, with sloped roofs appearing in some areas, while the flat roofs typical of the Aegean dominate. These flat roofs are practical for the region's minimal rainfall and windy conditions. Construction materials are primarily local, with stone as the main component, and wood used sparingly due to its scarcity. The specific choice of materials reflects the resources available in each area, showcasing subtle regional variations.

Agricultural land was carefully organized into terraced formations to adapt to steep slopes, prevent soil erosion from rainfall, and retain water for crops. Endless dry masonry walls follow the natural contour lines of the terrain and divide properties. Maintaining these walls was essential to preserving the agricultural practices and ensuring their productivity.

Water scarcity necessitated specialized agricultural techniques, including specific methods of tillage and planting. The volcanic soil, often rich but challenging, required tailored practices to support farming. Some crops, such as lemon trees, needed protection from strong winds, which was provided by tall walls surrounding them.

Farmhouses were typically rare and strategically scattered across the landscape. To shield against harsh winds, their roofs were designed to rise modestly, blending practicality with the natural environment.

The cultural and archaeological monuments of the Cycladic islands embody the rich historical and cultural legacy of the region, spanning from antiquity to the present. Shaped by a succession

of civilizations—including Ancient Hellenic, Roman, Byzantine, and Venetian influences—these islands experienced a period of remarkable creativity during the Ottoman era. Together, these layers of history have given rise to a unique landscape that forms an integral part of our shared intangible heritage, deeply intertwined with the identity of the Aegean Sea.

Modernity transitions and transformative processes.

Modern Greece has progressively adopted new lifestyles, shaped by societal changes and the development of infrastructure and services aimed at improving quality of life. Economic growth, coupled with the rise of private car transportation and increased energy availability to support various human activities, has significantly accelerated the scale of these transformations. One of the most visible outcomes has been the expansion of housing beyond the original historic settlements. Over the past decades, efforts have been made to manage overdevelopment in certain areas, but striking examples, such as Santorini and Mykonos, reveal the dramatic transformation of these iconic islands. Once celebrated for their natural beauty and unique character, they have been reshaped to serve a tourism industry driven solely by economic gain. The resulting altered landscapes face significant challenges in recovering from extensive development using unsustainable and non-recyclable materials. It is not mere rhetoric to assert that this relentless exploitation will leave little cultural value for future generations to preserve.

However, this trend is now undergoing a significant negative shift, as massive developments for tourism exploitation, frequently distinguished by external capitals, intensify the pressures on islands which have resisted over-development. Additionally, the climate crisis is exacerbating the challenges, as infrastructure faces increased strain from extreme weather events such as heavy storms, droughts, and wildfires. These factors highlight the need for more thoughtful and sustainable approaches to development in these fragile environments which is distinguished by unique heritage values.

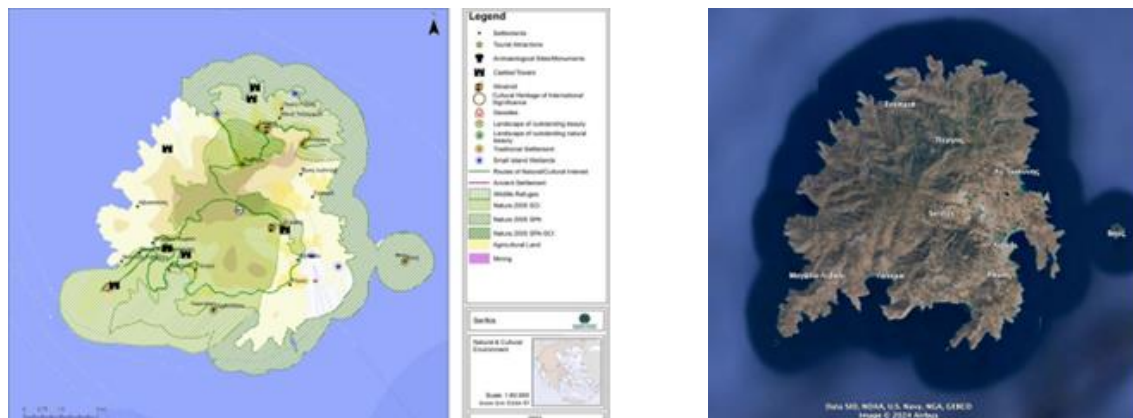
One of the key drivers of rapid change is the cost of energy required for human activities, largely sustained by fossil fuels. In architecture, this has resulted in the decline of the millennia-old practice of sourcing materials locally. The building sector, driven by an aggressive industrial strategy dominated by global trends and corporations, has increasingly lost its ability to preserve the logic and aesthetic values of historic architecture, both in terms of construction, aesthetic values, typologies and agglomeration. Additionally, the uncontrolled expansion of construction—particularly along coastlines—governed by the arbitrary division of land and the demand for summer residences, poses a significant threat to the preservation of historic landscapes.

Despite the challenges, the islands remain rich in cultural and natural values. Below is a brief overview of assets that can support sustainable development of the three islands under focus, while preserving cultural practices and the cultural landscape. Central to this effort will be the formulation of policies aimed at strengthening local communities, encouraging year-round permanent residency, and promoting the continuation of traditional land use, particularly in agriculture and farming.

Serifos

Serifos is home to several remarkable archaeological and heritage sites, including impressive 19th-century industrial remains linked to copper and iron mining. The mines were permanently closed in the summer of 1963 due to the depletion of reserves, the high costs of small-scale

operations, and, most importantly, the global collapse of iron ore prices. The island's mining history is particularly notable around Megalo Livadi, where visitors can explore remnants such as rusting railways, abandoned tools, and the Serifos Mining Museum, which offers a detailed account of the island's industrial heritage.



The Chora of Serifos, with its labyrinthine alleys and traditional Cycladic architecture, is crowned by the ruins of a Venetian castle that provides stunning panoramic views of the Aegean. This settlement has retained much of its historic integrity due to its hilltop location. In contrast, the former fishing village of Livadi has expanded into a typical seaside Greek village, with sprawling houses encircling the wide, sheltered bay that is protected from northern winds.

Among the island's most significant archaeological sites is the White Tower (Aspros Pyrgos), a Hellenistic watchtower. Another fascinating feature is the so-called Throne of Cyclops, a large rock cave near Megalo Livadi, with Hellenistic remains.

Serifos also boasts notable religious landmarks, including the Monastery of Taxiarches. Built in 1572 as a fortified structure to defend against pirate attacks, the monastery was established following the arrival of the Archangels' icon from Cyprus.

The island's natural landscape is equally impressive, with extensive areas that continue to preserve its historic character, offering visitors a unique natural beauty.

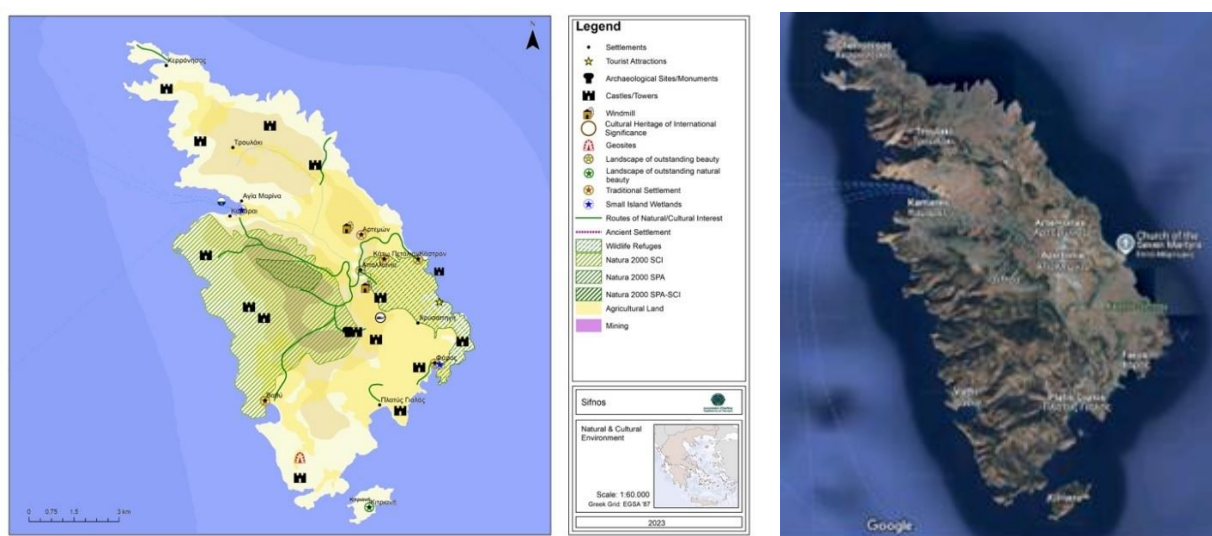
Main heritage assets are⁴:

- The Stavrakopoulos Cave between Megalo Livadi and Koutalas.
- The Neolithic find at Kountourou.
- The mining activities at Avessalos (3325–2890 BC).
- The Mycenaean tombs at Mega Chorio.
- The ceramics from the 8th–3rd century BC in the extensive area between Maliadiko and Koutalas, indicating use of the area and the mines since antiquity (submitted to the 21st Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities on 21.07.2005).
- The Castle of Grias at Koutalas (7th century BC onwards).
- The wall at the Xerou site (7th century BC onwards).
- The wall at the Liomantra site (7th century BC onwards).
- The Koutalas Tower (White Tower, 4th century BC).
- The ancient tower at Cyclops Cape in Megalo Livadi (Psaropyrgos, 4th century BC).
- The extensive remnants of mining activities at Skouries Avessalos (4th century BC).

- The Church of Agia Irene in Koutalas.
- The triconch Church of Saints John, George, and the Life-Giving Spring.
- The Church of the Holy Trinity.
- The mining structures in Koutalas, Serifos.
- The loading dock at Koutalas.
- The thermal baths of Megalo Livadi.

Sifnos

Distinguished by its important past in Classical times, Sifnos seems to have been a particularly rich settlement in antiquity, due to the mining of gold, lead and silver. Their treasury in Delphi as well as the fact that they were among the first to mint coins underscores the glorious past.



The island holds wide agricultural lands distinguished by the terraced landscapes, dry-stone walls, and dovecotes reflect traditional agricultural practices, while its walking trails connect villages and ancient monuments, offering a journey through history and nature.

Principal cultural assets are:

Archaeological Sites and Ancient Monuments

- **Ancient Acropolis of Agios Andreas:** This Mycenaean-era acropolis, located on a hilltop, features well-preserved fortifications and an on-site museum showcasing artifacts from the area. The site provides insight into the island's history during the Late Bronze Age.
- **Towers of Sifnos:** Scattered across the island, these ancient watchtowers date back to the Archaic and Classical periods. They were part of a defensive network and served as signal towers. Notable examples include the White Tower and the Black Tower.
- **Remnants of ancient mining activities,** such as shafts and tools, testify to Sifnos's importance in antiquity as a center for gold and silver mining.
- **Traditional Villages**

- Apollonia: The island's capital, known for its picturesque alleys, whitewashed houses, and neoclassical mansions. It's a hub of cultural activity, hosting festivals and local craft shops.
- Kastro: A medieval village perched on a hill overlooking the Aegean Sea. The settlement retains its Venetian character, with narrow alleys, arched passageways, and ancient walls. Highlights include ancient columns incorporated into buildings and the iconic Church of the Seven Martyrs, perched on a rocky promontory.
- The principal religious places are:
 - Monastery of Panagia Chrysopigi: The island's most famous religious site, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Sifnos' patron saint. Located on a rocky outcrop by the sea, the monastery is a symbol of the island's spiritual and cultural identity.
 - Church of Panagia Angeloktisti (Virgin Built-by-Angels): An architecturally significant church known for its Cycladic style and local legends.
 - Churches and Chapels: Sifnos boasts over 200 churches and chapels, many with historical frescoes and icons, reflecting the island's deep religious heritage.

Pottery Tradition.

Sifnos has a long history of pottery-making, dating back to ancient times. The island is famous for its distinctive ceramic ware, including cooking pots, decorative items, and traditional “mastelo” (a special ceramic pot used for cooking lamb). Visitors can explore pottery workshops in villages like Artemonas and Vathi.

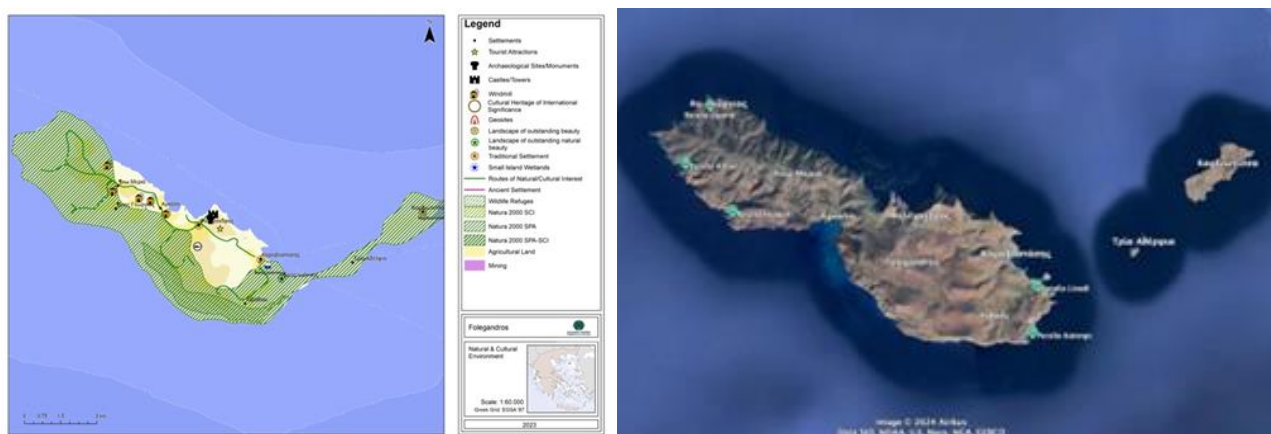
Local Festivals and Traditions

- The Religious Festivals of Panagia Chrysopigi is particularly famous.
- Sifnos is known as the birthplace of Nikolaos Tselementes, a renowned Greek chef who modernized traditional Greek cooking. Signature dishes include chickpea soup (revithada), mastelo, and almond-based sweets (amygdalota).
- Museums
 - Folklore Museum in Kastro: Showcasing the island's history, everyday life, and traditional crafts.
 - Archaeological Museum of Sifnos: Located in Kastro, it houses artifacts from the island's ancient sites, including pottery, statues, and tools.

Folegandros

Folegandros has preserved much of its natural character, shaped by its rugged terrain of steep cliffs and limited plains. The island's minimal road infrastructure allows for expansive views of its unspoiled landscapes, characterized by terraced hillsides with sparse vegetation. Lemon trees, a plant that can hardly resist the strong north winds, are carefully protected by tall dry-stone masonry walls, a testament to traditional agricultural practices.

Many of the island's farms now stand in varying states of ruin, serving as poignant reminders of Folegandros's agricultural heritage. These structures bear witness to a way of life that is increasingly under threat from gentrification and neglect, with some at risk of collapse.



The capital of Folegandros, Chora, is a noteworthy example of traditional Cycladic architecture. Its labyrinthine streets, whitewashed houses with small unites, those of the upper floors accessible through external masonry staircases. Notably, the medieval Kastro district, a fortified settlement built in the 13th century, remains well-preserved and offers a glimpse into the island's history of pirate defense. Some streets are larger than others becoming a sort of plaza, showing adaptation to the local climate.

Perched on a hill above Chora, the Church of Panagia is one of Folegandros's most iconic landmarks. Its whitewashed structure, connected to the village by a zigzagging stone path, offers breathtaking views of the Aegean Sea. The church, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, is famous for its miraculous icon and plays a central role in the island's religious festivals, particularly with the procession of the Panagia icon through the island's villages.

Karavostasis, the island's main port, retains its quaint charm, while Ano Meria, a traditional farming village, offers insight into rural Cycladic life. The Ecological and Folklore Museum in Ano Meria showcases tools, artifacts, and reconstructed homes, illustrating the island's agricultural past.

The island is a hiker's paradise, with well-marked trails leading through its rugged terrain, connecting villages, beaches, and historical sites. These paths offer stunning vistas of the sea and surrounding islands.

Folegandros is part of the Natura 2000 network, protecting its unique ecosystems. The island's dry, rocky landscapes are home to rare plant species and traditional agricultural terraces, which have shaped the environment for centuries.

Situated on the northeastern coast, Chrysospilia Cave is a significant natural and archaeological site. Known for its stalactites, stalagmites, and ancient inscriptions, the cave holds evidence of habitation and ritual use in antiquity.

Meetings – Persons met during the field trip

Friday, 18 October 2024

Ministry of Tourism, 12 Amalias Avenue, 205 27 Athens

Panagiota Dionysopoulou, Director General of Tourism Policy

Stavroula Kefala, Head of the Research Directorate
Vasiliki Christidou, Directorate of Strategic Planning

ELLET, 28 Odos Tripodon, 205 57 Plaka, Athens

Nikos Zorzos, Mayor of Santorini, online meeting

Maria Koutroubi, Lawyer, Save-Ios Association representative

Saturday, 19 October 2024

Municipality of Serifos, Chora

Konstantinos Revinthis, Mayor of Serifos

Chrysa Rapti, Serifos Women's Association "Andromeda" representative

Natalia Roumelioti, Architect-Engineer, Municipality of Serifos, Urban Planning Committee

Georgios Faldamis, Mechanical Engineer

Ilias Chartofylakas, Association of Rental Rooms "Taxiarchis," President

Georgios Nikolaou, Serifos Merchants and Professionals Association, President

Dimosthenis Diamantis, Serifos Agricultural and Beekeeping Cooperative, representative

Evangelia Dougekou, Megalo Livadi Serifos Association, representative

Stavros Chaeretas, Megalo Livadi Serifos Association, representative

Present via Zoom

Ioannis Spilanis, Professor, University of the Aegean

Nikolaos Belavilas, Professor, National Technical University of Athens

Sunday, 20 October 2024

Municipality of Sifnos

Maria Nadali, Mayor of Serifos

Andreas Kalogeros, Civil Engineer, Adviser to the Municipal Council

Monday, 21 October 2024

ELLET, 28 Odos Tripodon, 205 57 Plaka, Athens

Municipality of Folegandros, online meeting

Kyriakos Marinakis, Mayor of Folegandros

Tilla Maria Bali, Deputy Mayor, Administrative and Financial Services

Antonis Papadopoulos, Deputy Mayor, Works and Infrastructure

Andreas Thodoris Papadopoulos, President of the Municipal Council

Christoforos Divolis, Secretary of the Municipal Council, former President of the School Committee and the Nautical Club

Zacharias Venios, Municipal Councilor, former President of the Fishermen's Association

Eirini Marinaki, Community Councilor, President of the Parent-Teacher Association of the High School and Lyceum

Tuesday, 22 October 2024

ELLET, 28 Odos Tripodon, 205 57 Plaka, Athens

Sustainable Cyclades Network, online meeting

Ioannis Spilanis, Professor, University of the Aegean

Alkmini Paka, Architect, ELLET Adviser
Eleni Maïstrou, ELLET, President Council for Architectural Heritage (ΣΑΚ)
Betty Hatzinikolaou, ELLET, President Council of Institutional Framework (ΣΘΕΠ)

Wednesday, 23 October 2024

Ministry of Shipping and Island Policy, Akti Vassiliadi, Gate E1-E2, 185 10 Piraeus

Manolis Koutoulakis, Secretary General of the Aegean and Island Policy
Myrevi Nasiou, Scientific Advisor to the Secretary General of the Aegean and Island Policy

Present via Zoom

Ms. Giannelis, Messrs. Savvas, Vathrakoulis
Environmental and Architectural aspects.

Mary Tziraki, ELLET, Urban and Regional Planner, (ΣΘΕΠ) was present at all meetings.

References

All references are imbedded in the Report in the form of links. They refer to specific sources, statements or paragraph sections. Omissions, if any, are unintentional and pure oversights.

Photographs

Construction outside defined urban planning zone [in Vlichada, Santorini](#)
Envisaged 2 500 m² built area, 83 pools

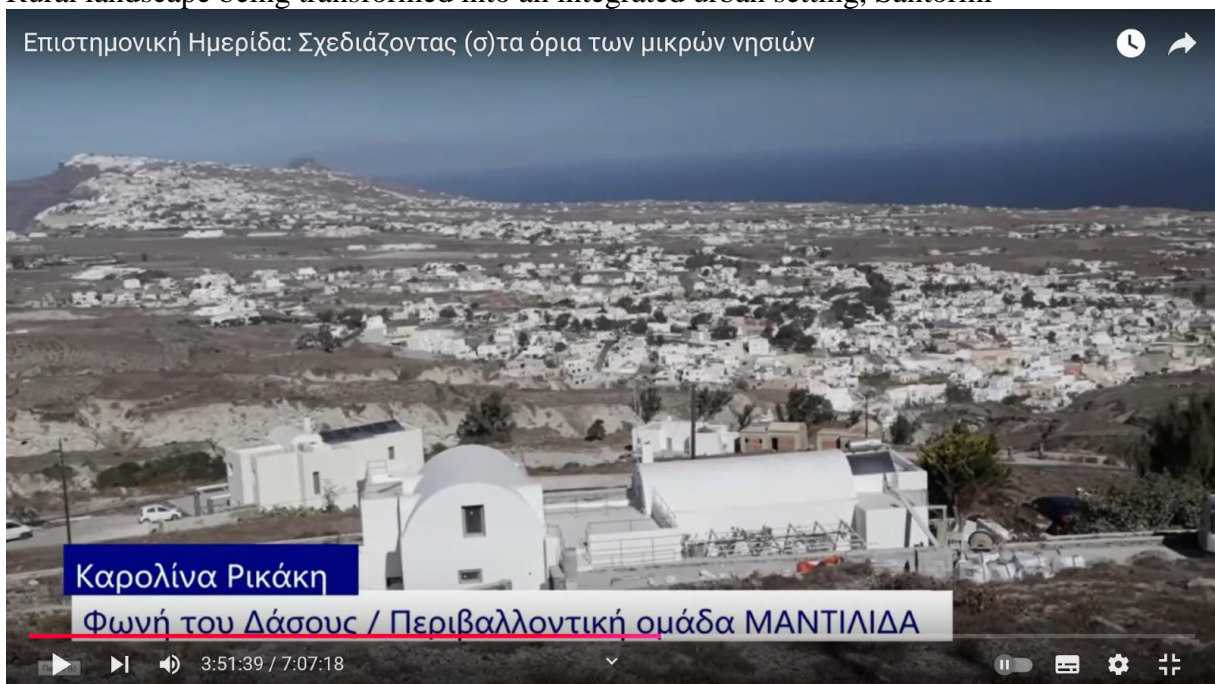


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<https://youtu.be/beVU4np7tII?t=13890>

Rural landscape being transformed into an integrated urban setting, Santorini



<https://youtu.be/beVU4np7tII?t=13899>



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From above, you can hardly distinguish the separate settlements anymore in Mykonos, due to the dense construction throughout the island. [theacevip.com]