THE AEGEAN ISLANDS: A PARADISE LOST?

TOURISM AS A DRIVER FOR CHANGING LANDSCAPES

In the Neolithic, mankind was already sculpturing a cultural landscape on the Aegean Islands. Subsequently, a procession of differing political and social regimes rose and fell, each imprinting its own distinctive mark. As in other Mediterranean localities, human populations increased rapidly during the 19th and early 20th centuries, occupying all available land and using complex management practices for subsistence and commodities. They shaped a cultural landscape based on terraces, with dry-stone walls, small agricultural buildings, small mountain settlements, networks of paths and similar features. At the same time, local and long distance commerce flourished, together with industry, and wealth was created. The change of production patterns during the 20th century caused the economic collapse of industry, agriculture and commerce. This resulted in a rural exodus and migration, and eventually the management of this landscape was abandoned. Later on, tourism arrived and speeded change. There was an upsurge of building and gradually the elements of the former landscape were dismantled, especially on the islands where tourism was more developed, leading to new landscape functions. Recently, plans for tourist development have been challenged by proposed schemes for the protection of unique habitats and species, along with a demand for alternative types of tourism. Landscape values are diverging as a result. Many locals seek short term gain at all costs from developing their land, and demand the high grade facilities found on the mainland, while others seek moderated and controlled development and the preservation of natural resources and the cultural landscape. Visitors and tourists also hold diverging views: some seek island playgrounds for summer holidays and/or houses to buy or rent; others see the islands (especially the smaller, remote ones) as heritage tanks, places where tradition is lived by locals and experienced by tourists. After discussing recent changes, this chapter will seek to answer the question of how future developments are likely to affect the landscape.