

# The impact of the Cyprus problem on the protection of the environment

Nasia Hadjigeorgiou



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 **PRIO**  
Cyprus Centre

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# **THE IMPACT OF THE CYPRUS PROBLEM ON THE PROTECTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT**

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**Report 1/2024**

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TRNC: The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) is only recognised by the Republic of Turkey. While for Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots, Ersin Tatar serves as President of the TRNC, the international community considers him the communal leader of the Turkish Cypriots. As the government of the Republic of Cyprus remains internationally recognised as the government of the whole of the island, the entire island is now considered to be a member of the European Union. However, the *acquis communautaire* is suspended in northern Cyprus pending a political settlement to the Cyprus problem (see Protocol no. 10 of the Accession Treaty)

**Cover artwork:** Antonis Tsangaris. Image created using AI. It was inspired by Nicosia International Airport in the UN-controlled buffer zone, that has been taken over by nature. The style is from the 1960-70s, to reflect the duration of the frozen conflict.

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## ABSTRACT

**T**his report argues that although the academic literature has explored the relationship between conflict and the environment before, during, and in the aftermath of violence, it has paid almost no attention to the environmental impact of frozen conflicts. To address this gap, our report examines environmental protection and its relationship to the frozen conflict in Cyprus. Based on a thorough study of UN Secretary-General reports, interviews with environmental experts and other key stakeholders, journal and newspaper articles, we argue that the Cyprus problem exacerbates the environmental degradation on the island in three major ways. First, it makes it impossible to have an accurate environmental picture of the whole of Cyprus, which contributes to a lack of cooperation from relevant *de jure* and *de facto* authorities when responding to environmental challenges. Second, the non-recognition of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) has resulted in its political and economic isolation. The political isolation of the *de facto* state precludes international and European oversight of policies and practices that have an impact on the environment, while its economic isolation exacerbates financial difficulties and contributes to the deprioritization of sound environmental policies. Third, environmental issues are often overshadowed and deprioritized by discussions relating to the Cyprus problem. Our report arrived at these conclusions after examination of Cypriot practices related to water management, recycling, the preservation of biodiversity, wildfire management and the energy sector.

# INTRODUCTION

**T**he protection of the environment is one of the most urgent needs of our time, yet it remains a secondary consideration among policy makers in Cyprus. This report argues that the failure to adequately protect the environment on the island is exacerbated by the Cyprus problem. As long as the frozen conflict remains unresolved, researchers will continue to face difficulties gathering environmental data relevant to the whole of Cyprus. In turn, decision makers will be unable to, or at the very least disincentivized from, developing comprehensive environmental strategies that respond to island-wide problems. Over the years, there have been instances where the two communities cooperated on environmental issues: the sewage system in Nicosia; some joint action when extinguishing wildfires; recent agreements to share a common electrical and electronic equipment recycling plant. However, such projects have often faced implementation difficulties and delays, while at the same time they are dwarfed by instances where cooperative efforts have failed, most notably in the field of water management. This report seeks to provide a more accurate understanding of the environmental costs of the frozen conflict, with the hope that this might incentivize the two communities to resolve the Cyprus problem. In the meantime, and while efforts are being made in this direction, better cooperation between the two communities for the protection of the environment is essential.

The report is structured as follows. Part 1 argues that although the literature has explored the relationship between conflict and the environment before, during and in the aftermath of violence, it has paid little attention to the environmental impact of frozen, or non-violent, conflicts, such as exists in Cyprus. Our report will address this gap in the literature. Part 2 offers a short overview of the frozen conflict in Cyprus, while Part 3 focuses on the negative environmental consequences of the Cyprus problem. Part 4 acknowledges that the existence of the UN-controlled buffer zone offers a safe habitat for endangered species on the island, but warns that with the passage of time, the environmental benefits created by the buffer zone are likely to diminish. Part 5 concludes and offers recommendations for action.

# IDENTIFYING THE GAP IN THE LITERATURE

With regard to the effect of conflict on the environment, the literature has examined the issue from three different perspectives: before, during, and after a war. The first strand of the literature – dealing with the ‘before’ – argues that environmental degradation and the consequent depletion of resources can lead to conflict. The second strand – which is concerned with the period of active hostilities – provides evidence that the violent conflict itself is detrimental to the environment. And the third strand – focused on the aftermath of the violence – hypothesizes that when implemented correctly, projects related to the protection of the environment can positively affect peacebuilding efforts. This section briefly reviews the literature and identifies a gap within it, namely, a lack of understanding of how *frozen conflicts* impact the protection of the environment.

The first and oldest strand of the literature argues that environmental degradation, which is exacerbated by climate change, is likely to lead to an increase in violent conflict, or ‘ecoviolence’.<sup>1</sup> Different causal mechanisms have been proposed to explain this. Most directly, it has been hypothesized that environmental degradation leads to resource scarcity, a ‘shrinking resource pie’,<sup>2</sup> which, in turn, pushes elites to capture resources.<sup>3</sup> This elite possession of resources further marginalizes the vulnerable, who, when desperate enough, will, in the words of one plutocrat, ‘come at us with pitchforks’.<sup>4</sup> A more indirect causal mechanism through which environmental degradation can lead to conflict is the idea that a shortage of natural resources constrains innovation. This creates a vicious cycle, as lack of innovation further reduces the availability of resources, which destabilizes the society and makes conflict more likely.<sup>5</sup> The expectation, therefore, is that environmental

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- 1 Thomas Homer-Dixon and Jessica Blitt, *Ecoviolence: Links among environment, population, and security* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).
  - 2 For a critical response to the ecoviolence literature, see Indra De Soysa ‘Ecoviolence: Shrinking pie, or honey pot?’ (2006) 2(4) *Global Environmental Politics* 1–34.
  - 3 Thomas Homer-Dixon, *The Ingenuity Gap* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).
  - 4 Nick Hanauer, ‘Beware, fellow plutocrats, the pitchforks are coming’, TEDSalon NY2014, August 2014, available at [https://www.ted.com/talks/nick\\_hanauer\\_beware\\_fellow\\_plutocrats\\_the\\_pitchforks\\_are\\_coming?subtitle=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/nick_hanauer_beware_fellow_plutocrats_the_pitchforks_are_coming?subtitle=en).
  - 5 Edward Barbier and Thomas Homer-Dixon, ‘Resource scarcity and innovation: Can poor countries attain endogenous growth?’ (1999) 28(1) *Ambio* 144–147.



scarcity contributes to a range of factors such as poverty and population displacement, which ultimately lead to violence.<sup>6</sup>

This literature has been the subject of much criticism. Despite its heavy reliance on the concept of 'resource scarcity', and even though all natural resources are, or can become, scarce, proponents of the ecoviolence thesis have not defined what we mean by the term.<sup>7</sup> Further, the intuitive appeal of this hypothesis notwithstanding, there is little statistical evidence that actually confirms it.<sup>8</sup> In fact, it has been counter-argued that it is not the scarcity of resources that leads to violence, but rather, their abundance.<sup>9</sup> This is because competition over abundant resources creates incentives for different groups to go to war, while accessing these resources provides the necessary financing for the war to continue. Academic debates aside, the perception that environmental degradation fuels conflict is strong among policy makers. For example, in his Nobel Peace Prize speech in 2009, President Obama confidently (and erroneously) declared that:

[t]here is little scientific dispute that if we do nothing, we will face more drought, more famine, more mass displacement – all of which will fuel more conflict for decades.<sup>10</sup>

More recently, the 2022 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report presented a more nuanced picture, noting that '[w]hile non-climatic factors are the dominant drivers of existing intrastate violent conflicts, in some assessed regions, extreme weather and climate events have had a small, adverse impact on their length, severity or frequency'.<sup>11</sup> The case of Cyprus also provides evidence of a more nuanced relationship between environmental degradation and conflict dynamics. Selby and Hoffman argue that, although water has been scarce in Cyprus for decades, this has at no point been the source of large-scale intercommunal violence.<sup>12</sup> While that might be true on the macro level, a more detailed review of Cypriot newspapers from the 1960s and 1970s reveals that when inter-ethnic tensions increased, the two communities would often blame each other for problems relating to

6 Val Percival and Thomas Homer-Dixon, 'Environmental scarcity and violent conflict: The case of South Africa' (1998) 35 *Journal of Peace Research* 279-298.

7 Nils Petter Gleditsch, 'Armed conflict and the environment' in Paul F. Diehl and Nils Petter Gleditsch (eds.) *Environmental Conflict* (Westview Press, 2001).

8 Tobias Hagmann, 'Confronting the concept of environmentally induced conflict' (2005) 6 *Peace, Conflict and Development* 1-22.

9 Nils Petter Gleditsch, 'Whither the weather? Climate change and conflict' (2012) 49(1) *Journal of Peace Research* 3-9.

10 Barack H. Obama, 'Nobel lecture: A just and lasting peace' (2009), available at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2009/obama/lecture/#:~:text=I%20receive%20this%20honor%20with,in%20the%20direction%20of%20justice>.

11 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 'Climate change 2022: Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the sixth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change' (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

12 Jan Selby and Clemens Hoffmann, 'Water scarcity, conflict and migration: A comparative analysis and reappraisal' (2012) 30 *Environment and Planning* 997-1014.

water distribution and access.<sup>13</sup> More recently, when Turkish Cypriots addressed their water scarcity problems by importing water from Turkey through a pipeline, Greek Cypriots perceived this as a threat against them.<sup>14</sup>

The second strand of the literature provides compelling evidence that violent conflict itself is detrimental to the environment.<sup>15</sup> For example, there have long been studies signaling that the use of military aircraft creates noise pollution, which, in turn, can lead to the degradation of animal habitats, decline in animal populations and species extinction.<sup>16</sup> Similar effects are also caused by soldiers positioned for on-ground battle in, or close to, the habitats of endangered species,<sup>17</sup> and by the detonation of landmines,<sup>18</sup> sometimes years after the violence has officially ended.<sup>19</sup> The detonation of landmines is detrimental to the environment in other ways as well, as it destroys vegetation and degrades soil structure.<sup>20</sup> A final example of environmental harm is the weathering and oxidation of lead bullets, which cause contamination of soil and water sources.<sup>21</sup> Further to the above, the mere preparation for war is also damaging to the environment. Even 20 years ago, war preparations accounted for 6% of all raw material consumption in the world, and produced 10% of global carbon emissions annually.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to these general negative consequences of war, environmental destruction is specific to the geographical area in which the violence takes place. For instance, when a 1991

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- 13 Panayiota Pyla and Petros Phokaides, 'An island of dams: Ethnic conflict and the contradictions of statehood in Cyprus' in Filippo Menga and Erik Swynnedouw (eds.), *Water, Technology and the Nation-State* (Routledge, 2018).
  - 14 Dimitrios Zikos and Matteo Roggero, 'The patronage of thirst: Exploring institutional fit on a divided Cyprus' (2013) 18(2) *Ecology and Society* 25.
  - 15 For a detailed review of this literature, see Michael J. Lawrence, Holly L.J. Stemmerger, Aaron J. Zolderdo, Daniel P. Struthers, and Steven J. Cooke, 'The effects of modern war and military activities on biodiversity and the environment' (2015) 23 *Environmental Review* 443-460.
  - 16 Karen M. Mancini et al., 'Effects of aircraft noise and sonic booms on domestic animals and wildlife: A literature synthesis' (1998), available from National Ecology Research Center, Fort Collins, CO, USA. No. NERC 88/29.
  - 17 Thor Hanson et al., 'Warfare in biodiversity hotspots' (2009) 23(3) *Conservation Biology* 578-587; Jeremy A. Lindsell, Erik Klop, and Alhaji M. Siaka, 'The impact of civil war on forest wildlife in West Africa: Mammals in Gola Forest, Sierra Leone' (2011) 45(1) *Oryx* 69-77.
  - 18 Arthur H. Westing, 'Explosive remnants of war: Mitigating the environmental effects' (Stockholm Peace Research Institute, Taylor and Francis, London, 1985).
  - 19 Shawn Roberts and Jody Williams, *After the guns fall silent: The enduring legacy of landmines* (Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, 1995); Karen Troll, 'The impact of anti-personnel landmines on the environment' (United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2000).
  - 20 Asmeret Asefaw Berhe, 'The contribution of landmines to land degradation' (2007) 18(1) *Land Degradation and Development* 1-15.
  - 21 Xinde Cao et al., 'Weathering of lead bullets and their environmental effects at outdoor shooting ranges' (2003) 32(2) *Journal of Environmental Quality* 526-534; Donald W. Hardison et al., 'Lead contamination in shooting range soils from abrasion of lead bullets and subsequent weathering' (2004) 328(1-3) *Science of the Total Environment* 175-183.
  - 22 Abber Majeed, *The Impact of Militarism on the Environment: An overview of direct and indirect effects* (Ottawa, Canada: Physicians for Global Survival, 2004); Asit K Biswas, 'Scientific assessment of the long-term environmental consequences of war' in Jay E. Austin and Carl E. Bruch (eds.), *The Environmental Consequences of War* (Cambridge (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 303-315.

uprising in southern Iraq threatened to depose Saddam Husein, the dictator responded by draining roughly 94-97% of marshes covering approximately 20,000 square kilometers in the area.<sup>23</sup> Entirely different environmental problems are faced in Gaza, which is a much more population-dense area. These problems have been exacerbated by the already dire environmental conditions that existed throughout the entire occupied Palestinian territory, that had themselves been caused by governance restraints resulting from the Israeli occupation.<sup>24</sup> Since October 2023, Gaza has faced the collapse of sewage, waste water and solid waste management systems, which has led to the release of untreated sewage onto the beach and into the Mediterranean Sea and groundwater.<sup>25</sup> Different still was the environmental impact of the 1974 war in Cyprus, which resulted in fires in the Paphos and Troodos forests.<sup>26</sup> In addition to the burning of woodland, the fires caused the destruction of the only natural habitat of the Cyprus moufflon, almost causing its extinction.

The third and most recent strand of the literature argues that efforts to protect the environment can make positive contributions to peacebuilding in post-conflict contexts.<sup>27</sup> Despite environmental peacebuilding turning into a buzzword used to attract international funds, the causal mechanisms through which the protection of the environment assists peacebuilding are neither clear nor very well-supported by empirical data.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the claims that there are positive connections between the protection of the environment and peacebuilding are intuitively persuasive and there is at least some evidence, when certain conditions are met, that there is a positive relationship between the two.<sup>29</sup> Such expectations have also been popular with international actors, as for example, one UNDP representative in Cyprus acknowledged that discussions on 'how the two communities use the scarce water on the island, could be a good opportunity for them to come closer together.'<sup>30</sup>

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23 Bridget Guarasci, 'Environmental rehabilitation and global profiteering in wartime Iraq' (Watson Institution of International and Public Affairs, Brown University, 2017).

24 United Nations Environment Programme, 'State of environment and outlook report for the Occupied Palestinian Territory' (Nairobi, 2020).

25 United Nations Environment Programme, 'Environmental impact of the conflict in Gaza: Preliminary assessment of environmental impacts' (Nairobi, 2024).

26 Renos Solomides, 'The invasion of Cyprus and the huge environmental price' in Edmund A. Schofield (ed.), *Earthcare: Global Protection of Natural Areas: The Proceedings of the Fourteenth Biennial Wilderness Conference* (Routledge, 1979).

27 Ken Conca, 'The case for environmental peacemaking' in Ken Conca and Geoffrey Dabelko (eds.) *Environmental Peacemaking* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 1–22.

28 Šárka Waisová, 'Environmental cooperation as instrument of conflict transformation in conflict-prone areas: Where does it start, how deep can it be and what effects can it have?' (2015) 2 *Politické Vedy* 105.

29 Tobias Ide, 'Does environmental peacemaking between states work? Insights on cooperative environmental agreements and reconciliation in international rivalries' (2018) 55(3) *Journal of Peace Research* 351–365.

30 Interview with representative of UNDP in Cyprus (7 August 2024).

Efforts to protect the environment can arguably contribute to peacebuilding in four ways. First, when the parties are working towards a common goal, this reinforces cooperation and opens communication channels relating to other policy areas.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the expectation is that once there is cooperation for environmental protection, transaction costs for further cooperation are reduced, and opportunity costs for not maintaining, or further increasing, such cooperation rise.<sup>32</sup> Second, actors engaged in sustainable environmental protection are more likely to understand the importance of long-term goals in terms of environmental planning,<sup>33</sup> goals that are often necessary for the reconstruction of society more generally, yet in short supply especially in the immediate aftermath of the conflict. Third, environmental peacebuilding presents shared natural resources not as something to fight over, but as valuable assets, the prudent use of which can benefit everyone. If the resource in question is land, both academics<sup>34</sup> and international organisations<sup>35</sup> have advocated for the creation of environmentally friendly shared spaces, e.g., 'peace parks', which encourage interaction among the general public. When the resource is of especially high value, such as water, cooperative projects are best equipped to manage this sustainably and to everyone's benefit. When such cooperative projects are successful, decision-makers and the public are likely to progress from a mindset of competition to one of cooperation.<sup>36</sup> Finally, projects related to environmental protection involve a range of actors – policy makers, civil servants, and members of civil society – whose meaningful interaction will lessen hostility and improve understanding and trust.<sup>37</sup> There is ample evidence of this in the Cypriot context. Many early attempts at bicomunal projects failed due to mutual mistrust; in recent years, however, cooperation between Greek and Turkish Cypriot environmental experts is more widespread and effective.<sup>38</sup>

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31 Saleem H. Ali, 'Environmental planning and cooperative behavior: Catalyzing sustainable consensus' (2003) 23(2) *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 165-176.

32 Erik Gartzke et al., 'Investing in the peace: Economic interdependence and international conflict' (2001) 55(2) *International Organization* 391-438.

33 Saleem H. Ali, 'The instrumental use of ecology in conflict resolution and security' (2011) 14 *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 31-34.

34 Karina Barquet et al., 'Transboundary conservation and militarized interstate disputes' (2014) 42 *Political Geography* 1-11.

35 The Peace Parks Foundation, which aims to establish and reserve large functional ecosystems that transcend political boundaries, has received funding from, among others, the World Bank, the European Union, USAID, and a number of European and African states (Peace Parks Foundation, Donors and Partners, available at <https://www.peaceparks.org/about/donors-and-partners/#>).

36 Anais Dresse et al., 'Environmental peacebuilding: Towards a theoretical framework' (2019) 54(1) *Cooperation and Conflict* 99-119.

37 Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Perseus Book, 1954/1979); Thomas F. Pettigrew and Linda R. Tropp, 'Allport's intergroup contact hypothesis: Its history and influence' in John F. Dovidio, Peter Glick and Laurie A. Rudman (eds.), *On the Nature of Prejudice: Fifty Years after Allport* (Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

38 Interview with Greek Cypriot environmental expert (5 August 2024).

The three strands of the literature teach us valuable lessons for the case of Cyprus. The first strand (before the conflict) suggests that there is at least some evidence that protecting the environment can be a viable strategy to prevent conflict. This information is especially relevant in cases of frozen conflict, such as Cyprus, where the resumption of hostilities remains a possibility. This finding is particularly timely, as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza have made it clear that a frozen conflict will not necessarily remain frozen forever; rather, it can thaw – and violently – at any time. The third strand (the aftermath of the conflict) confirms the expectation that environmental protection can serve as a peacebuilding opportunity. However, it is the second strand (during the conflict) that reveals a gap in the literature: While it is clear that war – the actual violence that takes place during conflict – is detrimental to the environment, we have almost no understanding of the environmental impact of *frozen conflicts*, which are mainly non-violent states of affairs.

Frozen conflicts materialize when the previously warring parties have signed a ceasefire agreement, but not a comprehensive peace settlement. As a result, in these settings, the war is ‘not dead but sleeping’.<sup>39</sup> In some frozen conflicts, including Cyprus, the war results in the creation of a *de facto* state, which claims as its own a part of the parent state’s territory. This is often followed by a unilateral declaration of independence, which both the parent state and the international community typically reject. In such instances, frozen conflicts give rise to an internationally recognised parent state (in the case of Cyprus, the Republic of Cyprus, or RoC) and an internationally non-recognised *de facto* state (the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, or TRNC).<sup>40</sup> As these entities are technically still in a state of war and the very existence of one undermines the legitimacy of the other, they do not recognise or interact with each other. It is this unresolved relationship between the two entities, and the lack of cooperation between them, that often leads to the most detrimental consequences to the environment.

Addressing the gap in the literature and exploring the environmental consequences of the frozen conflict in Cyprus is essential for three reasons. First, it gives more detailed insights about the specific case of Cyprus and allows for development of specific recommendations that can be implemented with immediate effect. Second, it increases our understanding of the impact of the frozen conflict, not only on the island itself, but also in the region more generally – a region that is itself prone to violence. For example, the impact of desalination, or the dumping of waste into the Mediterranean Sea (which, this report argues, are practices that are exacerbated by the frozen conflict) should not be seen in isolation from the damage

39 Hugo Grotius, *On the Rights of War and Peace: An Abridged Translation by William Whewell* (2005), 434.

40 TRNC: The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) is only recognised by the Republic of Turkey. The government of the Republic of Cyprus remains internationally recognised as the government of the whole of the island. The entire island is considered to be a member of the European Union. However, the *acquis communautaire* is suspended in northern Cyprus pending a political settlement to the Cyprus problem (see Protocol no. 10 of the Accession Treaty).

caused to the same ecosystem by the war in Gaza. Finally, acquiring a better understanding of the impact of the Cyprus problem on the environment offers insights for other frozen conflicts, where data might be harder to come by. Thus, this report can be a useful starting point when exploring similar questions in Georgia/Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Moldova/Transnistria, or even less well-known frozen conflicts, such as Morocco/Western Sahara, and Somaliland.

## THE FROZEN CONFLICT IN CYPRUS

Britain decolonized Cyprus in 1960 and left in its wake a country deeply divided along ethnic lines, as well as a complex constitutional structure that required effective cooperation between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots at all levels of government.<sup>41</sup> This fragile system of governance collapsed in December 1963, when, following disagreements with the Greek Cypriot leader, Turkish Cypriot politicians and civil servants resigned their positions en masse. Between 1963 and 1974, many Turkish Cypriots were isolated in enclaves around the island, with Greek Cypriots remaining in control of all state structures. In 1974, a coup d'état, supported by the junta government in Greece, resulted in the temporary overthrow of the Greek Cypriot RoC President and sparked the Turkish invasion of the island.

The Turkish invasion resulted in forced population transfers, with Turkish Cypriots trekking to the north of the island, and Greek Cypriots to the south. Since then, Greek Cypriots maintain that the RoC is sovereign over the whole of Cyprus (minus the Sovereign Base Areas or SBA, a remnant of Cyprus' colonial history<sup>42</sup>), but that it only exercises effective control over the southern part of the island. The areas not under the effective control of the RoC are under the military, economic and political control of Turkey.<sup>43</sup> In 1983, the Turkish Cypriots unilaterally declared the independence of the TRNC, which has not been recognized by any state other than Turkey. Thus, the political geography of Cyprus is as follows: the RoC, mostly inhabited by Greek Cypriots, is an internationally recognized state, while the areas not under its effective control, mostly inhabited by Turkish Cypriots, remain an unrecognized, de facto state. Between the two is the UN-controlled buffer zone, while two more plots of land (Dhekelia and Akrotiri) make up the SBA, over which the British government has sovereignty. The RoC makes up 62%, the areas not under its effective control 35%, and the SBA 3% of the island. The buffer zone, which makes up roughly 3% of Cyprus, is technically considered as

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41 Nasia Hadjigeorgiou and Nikolas Kyriakou, 'Entrenching hegemony in Cyprus: The doctrine of necessity and the principle of bi-communality' in Yaniv Roznai and Richard Albert (eds.), *Constitutionalism under Extreme Conditions: Law, Emergency, Exception* (Springer, 2020), 291-312.

42 Nasia Hadjigeorgiou, 'Decolonising Cyprus 60 years after independence: An assessment of the legality of the Sovereign Base Areas' (2022) 33(4) *European Journal of International Law* 1125-1152.

43 *Cyprus v. Turkey* App. No. 25781/94 (Merits) (European Court of Human Rights, 10 May 2001).

part of the RoC, although, practically, many of the administrative decisions in the area are taken by the UN.<sup>44</sup> In 2004, the whole of Cyprus (minus the SBA)<sup>45</sup> joined the European Union, but the application of EU Law was suspended in the areas not under the effective control of the RoC; 'in the event of a solution to the Cyprus problem this suspension shall be lifted'.<sup>46</sup>

Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots remained entirely isolated from each other between 1974 (in some cases, 1963) and 2003, when the de facto authorities unexpectedly opened a checkpoint at the buffer zone, allowing people to cross to the other side of the island. Since 2003, another eight checkpoints have opened, thus increasing both the interaction between the two communities and opportunities for collaboration. Perhaps the most developed example of cooperation are the 12 bicommunal Technical Committees, which were first established in 2008 by the two community leaders. Their mandate is to address 'issues that affect the day to day life of people, through encouraging and facilitating greater interaction and understanding between the two communities'.<sup>47</sup> The members of the Technical Committees are appointed by their respective community leaders, but operate in their personal capacity.<sup>48</sup> Special reference is made here to the Technical Committees because it is owing to them that much of the cooperation on environmental protection exists.

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44 Nasia Hadjigeorgiou, 'The buffer zone in Cyprus: Clarifying the concepts of legal status and legal responsibility' Peace Research Institute Oslo (Cyprus Centre) (September 2023).

45 Nasia Hadjigeorgiou and Nikos Skoutaris, 'The status of the Sovereign Base Areas in Cyprus following Brexit' Peace Research Institute Oslo (Cyprus Centre), Occasional Paper Series 3 (2019).

46 Preamble to Protocol 10 of the Act concerning the conditions of accession of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Estonia, the Republic of Cyprus, the Republic of Latvia, the Republic of Lithuania, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Malta, the Republic of Poland, the Republic of Slovenia and the Slovak Republic and the adjustments to the Treaties on which the European Union is founded.

47 Sean Mc Gearty, 'Evaluation of the support facility to the bi-communal Technical Committees' (30 September 2022), available at <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/detail/13276?tab=documents>.

48 Nasia Hadjigeorgiou, 'The bicommunal Technical Committees in Cyprus: A rare example of "engagement without recognition"' (European Centre for Minority Issues, May 2024), available at <https://www.ecmi.de/infochannel/detail/ecmi-minorities-blogthe-bicommunal-technical-committees-in-cyprus-a-rare-example-of-engagement-without-recognition>.



# THE NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE CYPRUS PROBLEM

**A**t first glance, the Cyprus problem and the protection of the environment seem to have little to do with each other. Rather, it is accepted that environmental degradation on the island is due to a lack of environmental consciousness both among policy makers<sup>49</sup> and the general public,<sup>50</sup> an inability of the authorities to comply with their own plans and procedures when implementing environmentally sensitive projects,<sup>51</sup> or plain greed. This report nuances that standard argument by arguing that the frozen conflict exacerbates environmental degradation in three ways. First, it makes it impossible to have an accurate and complete environmental picture of the whole of the island and, consequently, contributes to a lack of cooperation in responding to environmental challenges. Second, the non-recognition of the TRNC has resulted in its political and economic isolation. The political isolation of the TRNC precludes international and European oversight of its policies and practices, while its economic isolation exacerbates financial difficulties and makes it less likely that environmental issues will be a priority. Third, the need to resolve the Cyprus problem tends to overshadow all other issues. The ways in which the frozen conflict relates to environmental degradation remain largely unseen, and therefore unaddressed, thus further exacerbating its negative consequences.

## **An incomplete environmental picture of the island**

The basic problem created by the frozen conflict is that it divides Cyprus into different *de jure* and *de facto* jurisdictions, each with their own agendas, rules and procedures. This makes it

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49 Nicolas Stephane Jarraud and Alexandros Lordos, 'Participatory approaches to environmental conflict resolution in Cyprus' (2012) 29(3) *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 261-281, 267.

50 In a 2009 survey, the majority of respondents reported that the effect of awareness-raising about environmental initiatives has not been felt equally among the Cypriot population, privileging those who already had some environmental awareness (Emel Akcali and Marco Antonsich, "Nature knows no boundaries": A critical reading of UNDP environmental peacemaking in Cyprus' (2009) 99(5) *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 940-947). See also, Yiannis Fessas and Ibrahim Alkan, 'Corporate environmental responsibility in Cyprus: Bridging the gap between knowledge and action' (Action for Cooperation and Trust, UNDP Cyprus, 2008), 40.

51 Gina Agapiou, 'Two former officials under investigation over Akamas roadworks' (*Cyprus Mail*, 12 June 2024), available at <https://cyprus-mail.com/2024/06/12/two-former-officials-under-investigation-over-akamas-roadworks/>.

difficult to collect data that can then be combined to create a complete environmental picture of the island. In turn, this state of affairs makes it impossible to devise comprehensive environmental strategies for Cyprus as a whole. This is problematic as, political divisions notwithstanding, the island is a single ecosystem, whose resources must be utilized sustainably through strategies that treat Cyprus as one entity.<sup>52</sup>

As already explained, politically, the island is currently divided into four parts: the RoC, the areas not under its effective control or the TRNC, the UN-controlled buffer zone, and the SBA. Since of the four parts, only the RoC is an internationally recognized state, environmental statistics from the RoC are often used to represent the situation on the whole of the island. Nevertheless, this presumption can create an inaccurate picture of the current state of the environment in Cyprus. For instance, the RoC Ministry of Tourism boasts that:

Cyprus is the proud recipient of 76 Blue Flag beaches (74 beaches and 2 Marinas - 2022) – an eco-label awarded to beaches and marinas across the globe that meet its standards – and is also regularly crowned “Cleanest Bathing Waters in Europe,” with Cyprus consistently reaching the highest scores in the Mediterranean, year after year. Cyprus’ beaches have the best water quality in the EU.<sup>53</sup>

While this information might be accurate in relation to the RoC, coastal areas in Cyprus that are outside its effective control have been reported as having the second highest amount of microplastics among beaches in the world.<sup>54</sup> Thus, assuming that the beaches, or any other part of the ecosystem, are equally well protected throughout Cyprus misrepresents the environmental problems faced in one part of the island and fails to take adequate action to address them.

Although the buffer zone is technically within the areas under the effective control of the RoC, conducting research there poses challenges, since researchers must obtain permission from the United Nations Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP).<sup>55</sup> Even when this is granted, researchers must be accompanied – often for their own safety – by UN personnel at all times, a requirement that restricts their movements and makes certain kind of research (e.g., relating to biodiversity) more difficult. Moreover, certain UN restrictions – such as prohibition of equipment like binoculars or telescopes – render any research necessarily more basic. Conversely, the generally excellent cooperation between the RoC and the SBA in all policy areas, including the environment, means that it is relatively easy to conduct research there.<sup>56</sup>

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52 Maria Hadjimichael and Klitos Papastylianou, ‘Environmental protection and cooperation in an (ethnically) divided island: The case of Cyprus’ *PCC Report* 6/2019; Akcali and Antonsich, ‘Nature knows no boundaries’.

53 RoC Deputy Ministry of Tourism, ‘Blue flags’, available at <https://www.visitcyprus.com/index.php/en/blue-flags>.

54 Emine Eminel Sulun and Zehra Azizbeyli, ‘The EU and environmental protection: Cyprus at the crossroads of Europe’ (2021) 20(1) *Ankara Avrupa Calismalari Dergisi* 293-317.

55 Interview with Greek Cypriot environmental expert (5 August 2024).

56 Ibid.

Even with such excellent cooperation, however, researchers often find it difficult to combine data from different jurisdictions. Thus, writing on water scarcity, Zikos et al. note that:

The SBA and the United Nations Buffer Zone (UNBZ) are unknown variables in the overall picture of water management. The SBA and UNBZ have traditionally been excluded from all reports and studies on Cyprus; this has resulted in an almost total lack of knowledge about water-related data, consumption patterns and management schemes there.<sup>57</sup>

However, by far the most difficult territory for the RoC to cooperate with in terms of utilizing environmental data is the TRNC. Even when data has been collected by the de facto authorities, and is therefore technically available, the non-recognition of the TRNC means that this will neither be relied on by the RoC, nor included in reports drafted by international institutions. Moreover, while Turkish Cypriot researchers conduct environmental studies in the northern part of Cyprus, the results of this research do not always, or even often, find their way to the RoC so that they can be combined to create a complete environmental picture of the island. Thus, Greek Cypriot researchers might not be aware of (or even look for) relevant surveys carried out by Turkish Cypriots; can learn of them only after they have been published (often years after their completion); or might be using different methodologies when collecting data. This combination of factors makes collating the information impossible. It also happens that particular issues are monitored on only one side of the island. This was the case when researchers in the RoC identified the presence of an invasive type of mosquito for the first time in Cyprus.<sup>58</sup> They were able to identify how widely the mosquito had spread in the RoC, but in the north no one was conducting this sort of research. This example is also one of the rare instances where Greek and Turkish Cypriot scientists, under the auspices of the bicomunal Technical Committee on Health, eventually collaborated.<sup>59</sup> Yet, even after this successful bicomunal cooperation, there has been no data collection either in the SBA nor the UN-controlled buffer zone.

The lack of island-wide information is both a consequence of the lack of trust between the two communities and an exacerbator of this state of affairs. Thus, after agreeing that the Cyprus problem contributes to environmental degradation, a Greek Cypriot environmental expert off-handedly stated: 'I don't go to the occupied side. I don't know what is happening there.'<sup>60</sup> This fairly common attitude, especially among Greek Cypriots, creates two sets of problems. First, it worsens the already difficult situation described above, as the lack of

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57 Dimitrios Zikos et al., 'Beyond water security: Asecuritisation and identity in Cyprus' (2015) 15 *International Environmental Agreements* 309-326, p. 313.

58 Interview with member of the mosquito research team of the Technical Committee on Health (3 July 2024).

59 UNDP Cyprus, 'Identification and distribution of vectors of medical importance on the island of Cyprus', available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rx7o0fbTXcA>.

60 Interview with Greek Cypriot environmental expert (30 July 2024).

environmental data from the TRNC cannot be supplemented by even anecdotal evidence from experts. Second, this lack of information can contribute to the securitization of environmental concerns. For example, the interviewee argued that the Cyprus problem harms the environment and gave the example of poor air quality: air quality in the RoC, he argued, is worsened by the fact that the petrol used in Turkish Cypriot cars does not comply with European standards. Thus, he concluded that 'No matter what we do here [in the RoC], we are negatively affected by what is happening there [in the areas not under its effective control].' However, this attitude often detracts attention from the fact that 'what we do here' in terms of improving air quality is also woefully inadequate. Additionally, Turkish Cypriot environmental experts confirmed that low petrol quality in the north was a problem 10-15 years ago, but this has long been resolved.<sup>61</sup> What this anecdote also illustrates, therefore, is that environmental destruction can aggravate the tension between the two communities because it reinforces images of the other as harmful and, therefore, the enemy.<sup>62</sup>

Without comparable island-wide environmental data it is harder to adopt strategies that can respond to long-term problems, while the capacity to address unforeseen disasters in a timely fashion is also compromised. As Hadjimichael and Papastylianou explain :

Since environmental protection was not an issue pre-1974, environmental policies have evolved and been addressed separately by the Greek Cypriot and the Turkish Cypriot political bodies post 1974. Thus, even though from an ecological point of view the island is a series of interconnected ecosystems, there is a political and administrative separation of environmental protection in Cyprus. [As a result,] local development plans – whether urban, rural or coastal – do not consider the carrying capacity of the island's ecosystem, but instead have a rather fragmented understanding of the impacts of development on the ecosystem and the natural resources.<sup>63</sup>

Cooperation is essential when responding to island-wide environmental challenges. Illustrative of this was a 100-tonne oil spill in 2013 in the Karpasia/Karpas Peninsula.<sup>64</sup> The spill had to be cleaned as quickly as possible before it spread further down the coast, but the Turkish Cypriot request for assistance from Turkey went unanswered. The Turkish Cypriots appealed to the bicomunal Technical Committee on Economic and Commercial Matters, requesting that the RoC provide the necessary equipment.<sup>65</sup> The RoC swiftly did so and the

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61 Interview with Turkish Cypriot environment expert (31 July 2024).

62 Hadjimichael and Papastylianou, 'Environmental protection and cooperation in an (ethnically) divided island', 33; Akcali and Antonsich, 'Nature knows no boundaries', 945.

63 Hadjimichael and Papastylianou, 'Environmental protection and cooperation in an (ethnically) divided island', 26.

64 European Parliament, 'Parliamentary question – E-010578/2013: Environmental disaster caused by oil spill in Ammochostos Bay in Cyprus' (17 September 2013), available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-7-2013-010578\\_EN.html?redirect](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-7-2013-010578_EN.html?redirect)

65 Interview with member of the Technical Committee on Economic and Commercial Matters (13 July 2023).

crisis was averted. This incident showcases that bicommunal cooperation for the protection of the environment is both necessary and possible. Yet, as inspiring as this story may be, it still remains the exception. As one Turkish Cypriot expert put it, 'One common strategy would have been better. This is true for everything: water, land planning, agriculture. But such common strategies simply do not exist'.<sup>66</sup> The following examples offer additional evidence of this.

One serious problem in Cyprus, exacerbated by climate change, is the increasing number of wildfires every summer.<sup>67</sup> Few things exemplify more starkly than a wildfire crossing the buffer zone that environmentally, if not politically, Cyprus is one entity: when fires erupt on one side of the island – an increasingly common occurrence, especially in the north because of the overflowing of the Koutsoventis landfill<sup>68</sup> – those in the south can see the smoke, feel the soot, and smell the burning material. Even though wildfires affect the whole of Cyprus, there is no cooperative strategy to address them. As one Greek Cypriot expert explained: 'We have our system here, they have their system there, and there is some cooperation in the buffer zone, but it is very limited'.<sup>69</sup> In practice, the lack of cooperation makes it easier for a wildfire to spread, as there is no mechanism through which one community can request assistance from the other, without the issue becoming politically controversial. Thus, even though Turkish Cypriots have requested RoC assistance to control a wildfire,<sup>70</sup> to date the reverse has not happened. When, over the summer of 2022, the RoC was caught up in wildfires, Turkish Cypriots offered to send help through the Technical Committee on Crisis Management. The RoC refused, noting that the fire was under control, but it was speculated that this was so as not to allow TRNC-flagged vehicles into its territory. Ultimately, while the RoC thanked Turkish Cypriots but declined the help they had offered,<sup>71</sup> it received assistance for extinguishing the same fire from Lebanon, Greece and Jordan.<sup>72</sup>

66 Interview with Turkish Cypriot environment expert (31 July 2024).

67 The difficulty in extinguishing wildfires is also exacerbated by the fact that, following the EU embargo on Russia in 2022, Cyprus is no longer able to rely on Russian aerial support equipment needed for firefighting (Antigoni Pitta, 'Cyprus seeks EU exemption from Russia sanctions to meet firefighting needs', *Cyprus Mail*, 2 May 2022), available at <https://cyprus-mail.com/2022/05/02/cyprus-seeks-eu-exemption-from-russia-sanctions-to-meet-firefighting-needs/>).

68 Tom Cleaver, 'Alarm sounded over summer fires at north landfill' (*Cyprus Mail*, 3 June 2024), available at <https://cyprus-mail.com/2024/06/03/alarm-sounded-over-summer-fires-at-north-landfill/>.

69 Interview with Greek Cypriot environment expert (5 August 2024).

70 Helena Smith, 'Cyprus unity in fight against wildfires hailed as "very positive"' (*The Guardian*, 27 June 2022), available at <https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/27/cyprus-unity-in-fight-against-wildfires-hailed-as-very-positive>.

71 *Phileftheros*, 'Βοήθεια πυρόσβεσης πρότειναν τα κατεχόμενα για τις πυρκαγιές της Λεμεσού' ['The occupied areas offered help to extinguish the fires in Limassol'] (*Phileftheros*, 6 August 2023), available at <https://www.philenews.com/kipros/koinonia/article/1364178/boithia-pirosvesis-protinan-ta-katechomena-gia-tis-pirkagies-tis-lemesou/>.

72 Menelaos Hadjicostis, 'Multinational force fights stubborn wildfire in Cyprus: Israel could send planes too' (*The Times of Israel*, 7 August 2023), available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/multinational-force-fights-stubborn-wildfire-in-cyprus-israel-could-send-planes-too/>.

A similar lack of cooperation exists when dealing with other environmental issues. Perhaps the most urgent of these concerns water. Cyprus faces the most severe water shortage in Europe and is among the top 20 countries worldwide with the scarcest water supply.<sup>73</sup> In the RoC, groundwater resources are overexploited by about 40% of sustainable extraction.<sup>74</sup> Researchers estimate that the lack of water poses an even greater problem in the northern part of the island, but predictably, no data comparable to that of the RoC exists.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, water shortages are likely to become even more extreme, as Cyprus is expected to experience the most adverse climate change effects of any Eastern Mediterranean country, including temperature increases and changes in precipitation.<sup>76</sup>

Water scarcity on the island has been such a long-term concern that it almost predates the Cyprus problem: in 1965 the RoC invited the UN to come up with an island-wide plan to address this issue.<sup>77</sup> More recently, the EU's Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC) noted that 'where use of water may have transboundary effects, the requirements for the achievements of the environmental objectives established under the Directive [...] should be coordinated for the whole river basin district'.<sup>78</sup> In light of this, the EU endorses Cyprus-wide cooperation, promoting water management practices in all areas of the island, including the north. The urgent need for cooperation has also been highlighted by the UNDP:

When you have disconnected parts of an island, you have related problems. This is obvious. If the system is harmonized, you have better planning, better monitoring, less waste, and more efficient use of technology. In other parts of the world, four or five states might cooperate in order to jointly manage their water, regardless of their political positions or differences. Cyprus is not doing this, even though it is a single island. This should become a priority. It is becoming a humanitarian issue, more than anything else. If there is a big earthquake on the island, the first problem that people will have to face is finding clean water. And my understanding is that the political elites have not appreciated this.<sup>79</sup>

73 Katerina Charalambous et al., 'Policies for improving water security, the case of Cyprus' (The Cyprus Institute, March 2011), 1.

74 Georgios Nikolaou et al., 'Irrigation groundwater quality characteristics: A case study of Cyprus' (2020) 11(3) *Atmosphere* 302.

75 Gozen Elkiran and Zehra Ongul, 'Implications of excessive water withdrawals to the environment of Northern Cyprus' (2009) 23 *Water and Environment Journal* 145-154.

76 Nikolaou et al., 'Irrigation groundwater quality characteristics'.

77 Charalambous et al., 'Policies for improving water security, the case of Cyprus'.

78 Directive 2000/60/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2000 establishing a framework for Community action in the field of water policy, Preamble (35).

79 Interview with representative of UNDP in Cyprus (7 August 2024).

The two sides' unwillingness to talk to each other makes coordinated action essentially impossible. Not only is the EU-mandated coordination entirely absent in Cyprus, but the two communities have also implemented strategies that are clearly detrimental to the other's, and therefore to their common, interests. On the one hand, the RoC has attempted to address water scarcity by storing water in reservoirs; so reliant has the RoC become on this strategy that it has, in per capita terms, the highest reservoir capacity in the world.<sup>80</sup> Yet, the water shortage problem in the RoC is so severe that even with this statistic in mind, more than 70% of the RoC's boreholes are over-pumped.<sup>81</sup> In addition to its questionable efficiency, as massive amounts of water stored in reservoirs are lost to evapotranspiration every year, this strategy is unpopular among Turkish Cypriots, who complain that the reservoirs trap water in the RoC that would have eventually flowed to the north.<sup>82</sup> An additional strategy used by Greek Cypriots is the extensive use of desalination,<sup>83</sup> which in itself is environmentally damaging because of the high concentrations of salt dumped back into the sea. As one expert lamented: 'You cannot imagine the sea ecosystem. There is nothing left.'<sup>84</sup>

The Turkish Cypriots have recently addressed their water problem by transferring water to Cyprus from the Anamur River in southern Turkey through a water pipeline.<sup>85</sup> While President Erdoğan declared that this water was available to the RoC in cases of water shortages – marketing it as 'the water of peace'<sup>86</sup> – Greek Cypriots have been decidedly unenthusiastic. The literature has highlighted concerns that this is yet another way in which Turkish Cypriots (and the eventual solution of the Cyprus problem) are becoming even more dependent on Turkey,<sup>87</sup> while one Greek Cypriot interviewee ruled out the possibility of using Turkish water owing to concerns that it could be switched off at a moment's notice.<sup>88</sup> Others have made similar points more forcefully, with one researcher declaring that Greek Cypriots would rather 'die from thirst than get water from Turkey that does not even recognize us as a country.'<sup>89</sup> The reluctance among Greek Cypriots to use this water is due not only to nationalist-fueled

80 Jan Selby and Clemens Hoffmann, 'Water scarcity, conflict and migration: A comparative analysis and reappraisal' (2012) 30 *Environment and Planning* 997-1014, p. 1003.

81 Nikolaou et al., 'Irrigation groundwater quality characteristics'.

82 Interview with Turkish Cypriot environment expert (31 July 2024).

83 Since the 1990s, four permanent desalination plants have been constructed, and a fifth commissioned, with the goal of producing 30% of domestic supply by 2020 (Michael Mason, 'Hydraulic patronage: A political ecology of the Turkey-Northern Cyprus pipeline' (2020) *Political Geography* 102086).

84 Interview with Turkish Cypriot environment expert (31 July 2024).

85 Mason, 'Hydraulic patronage'.

86 TRNC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Erdoğan: "Water from Turkey could be water of peace"' (30 October 2015), available at <http://mfa.gov.ct.tr/erdogan-water-from-turkey-could-be-water-of-peace/>.

87 Mason, 'Hydraulic patronage'. Also see, Fotos Fotiadhis, 'Απειλή για την Κύπρο το νερό από την Τουρκία' ['The water from Turkey is a threat to Cyprus'] (EnergyPress, 17 November 2014), available at <https://energypress.gr/news/apeili-gia-tin-kypro-nero-apo-tin-toyrkia>.

88 Interview with Greek Cypriot environment expert (30 July 2024).

89 Greek Cypriot researcher quoted in Zikos and Roggero, 'The patronage of thirst'.



mistrust, but to the fact that in the coming years, Turkey will face its own water scarcity problems.<sup>90</sup> 'What are the Turks going to do then? Keep their water or give it to Cyprus?', the first of the two Greek Cypriot researchers reasonably asked.<sup>91</sup> Even Turkish Cypriots have expressed concerns about the pipeline: the last time there was a technical problem with one of the pipes, it took 10 months to fix. If the Turkish Cypriot community comes to rely on this water and then, due to technical reasons, is left without, the damage might be irreparable.<sup>92</sup>

In addition to causing difficulties when responding to environmental disasters, the division of the island also makes it harder to proactively develop and implement environmentally friendly strategies. Two examples can be used to illustrate this. First, environmental experts have been arguing for years that sustainable recycling of electrical and electronic equipment requires some cooperation between the two communities.<sup>93</sup> This is because there is only one electronic recycling plant in the RoC, and this does not receive enough waste to be sustainable. Combining waste from both communities would ensure that electrical and electronic equipment from the TRNC would finally start being recycled, and the one recycling plant on the island would be at a lower risk of closing down.<sup>94</sup> At the time of writing (end of 2024), there are two depots in the TRNC for the collection of electrical and electronic waste, which is supposed to be transported to the RoC for processing. One of the two depots has already started collecting the waste, but has not yet transferred it to the RoC.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, despite calls for a combined effort for recycling plastics as well, there has been no action in this direction.<sup>96</sup>

A second example is the situation that occurred in the summer of 2023, when citrus fruits throughout Cyprus were attacked by a parasite.<sup>97</sup> Successfully addressing this problem required an island-wide response strategy that could be implemented on a yearly basis. The bicomunal Technical Committee on the Environment was called into action and ultimately developed this strategy. However, by the time this had been agreed, each of the two

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90 Both concerns were raised by the UNDP representative as well, when he noted: 'Turkey is in itself in a water crisis. How long is it going to keep sending water to Cyprus for? Water from Turkey creates vulnerabilities – it is political water and can be disconnected at any point' (Interview with representative of UNDP in Cyprus, 7 August 2024).

91 Interview with Greek Cypriot environment expert (30 July 2024).

92 Interview with Turkish Cypriot environment expert (31 July 2024).

93 Fessas and Alkan, 'Corporate environmental responsibility in Cyprus', 23.

94 A feasibility study that presumably makes a similar case for cooperation was prepared for the bicomunal Technical Committee on Economic and Commercial Matters in 2023, but is not publicly available (Annex I – Written update by the Greek Cypriot leader to the Good Offices Mission of the UN Secretary-General, 'Report of the Secretary-General on his mission of good offices in Cyprus' S/2023/6 (3 January 2023), Secretary-General, pursuant to and in accordance with UNSCR 2646, 2022).

95 Personal communication with member of the Technical Committee on Economic and Commercial Matters (5 September 2024).

96 Interview with Turkish Cypriot environment expert (31 July 2024).

97 Life for Citrus, 'The presence of "Diaphorina citri" in Cyprus has been confirmed' (6 September 2023), available at <https://lifevidaforcitrus.eu/2023/09/06/the-presence-of-diaphorina-citri-in-cyprus-has-been-confirmed/>.



communities had unilaterally gone ahead and implemented its own preferred solution.<sup>98</sup> Ignoring the Technical Committee's good work, and its proposals for cooperation is not uncommon. In April 2022, the Technical Committee on the Environment organized an inter-communal workshop on wildfire management, which attracted a group of 40 researchers, forest technicians and environmentalists from 17 different counties.<sup>99</sup> The workshop recommended a common pilot project for land management and fire prevention in villages around the buffer zone, a practical training course on the prevention of wildfires, and knowledge transfer from international experts. Yet, not one of these recommendations has been implemented. These two examples suggest that proactively developing and implementing environmentally friendly strategies is not impossible in frozen conflict contexts, but it is far more difficult. In best-case scenarios, such strategies may be adopted with significant delays, while in other instances, these can be suggested, but then be entirely ignored by decision makers.

### **The non-recognition of the TRNC**

The second way in which the Cyprus problem undermines the protection of the environment relates to the non-recognition of the TRNC, which has resulted in its political and economic isolation.<sup>100</sup> Since the TRNC cannot become party to international agreements, no international or European institution has oversight over the implementation of international standards there. In practice, this has had three negative consequences in terms of the protection of the environment. First, since Turkish Cypriots do not participate in international discussions and fora, they miss out on the sharing of good practices related to environmental protection. While this is partially addressed through information-sharing in bicommunal projects, the inability of Turkish Cypriot experts to participate in learning and networking opportunities undoubtedly has had an impact on the importance placed on the protection of the environment and the available tools to achieve this. Indirect evidence of this is revealed by the leap forward in terms of environmental protection that the RoC experienced when joining the EU.<sup>101</sup> Had similar opportunities and incentives been available to Turkish Cypriots, they too, would have taken advantage of them.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with member of the Technical Committee on the Environment (15 May 2024).

<sup>99</sup> 'Inter-communal workshop: Wildfire risk in the Cyprus buffer zone' (April 13, 2022 – Nicosia), available at [https://tcencyprus.org/images/easyblog\\_articles/93/Wildfire-risk-Cyprus-Buffer-Zone\\_workshop-summary\\_illustrations\\_fina\\_20220518-093651\\_1.pdf](https://tcencyprus.org/images/easyblog_articles/93/Wildfire-risk-Cyprus-Buffer-Zone_workshop-summary_illustrations_fina_20220518-093651_1.pdf).

<sup>100</sup> In a 2009 survey, almost half of the Turkish Cypriot respondents identified this as among the main obstacles to their work relating to the protection of the environment (Akcali and Antonsich, 'Nature knows no boundaries', 946).

<sup>101</sup> In the RoC, there are around 150 core legal texts relating to the broader area of environmental protection (Hadjimichael and Papastylianou, 'Environmental protection and cooperation in an (ethnically) divided island', 29). However, the RoC's poor implementation of these laws has been criticised by the European Commission, which has also opened an infringement case against the Republic due to its failure to complete its NATURA network (European Commission, 'Environmental implementation review 2022: Country report - CYPRUS', SWD(2022) 263 final, 8 September 2022).

Second, the non-recognition of the TRNC comes with an undermining of the rule of law that is detrimental to a number of social causes, including the protection of the environment. As one Turkish Cypriot expert explained:

The south is lucky because of the EU. They have more stable laws, but in the north, the agenda belongs to the government. Each party has a different opinion on what needs to be done and by whom. So, when a new party comes to power, everything changes. Also, each party appoints its own people, who change policy. For example, a few years ago, the Director of the Forestry Department changed, and he refused to accept any RoC help in putting out fires. The new Director is more qualified for the task and he is willing to accept help, but I don't know whether that will continue with the person after him.<sup>102</sup>

Related to the undermining of the rule of law in the TRNC is the lack of proper infrastructure and processes. As a result, 'people [in the north of Cyprus] do not have the same rights and privileges when it comes to environmental governance and justice, as in the rest of the world.'<sup>103</sup> A simple example refers to the building codes that determine, among other things, standards to ensure that all new buildings are well-insulated and energy efficient. Some elements of the building code in the TRNC comply with EU Law, but even these are often not implemented correctly in practice. The lack of infrastructure and process is so stark that one does not even need proper data to conclude that there is a problem. It is simply obvious to the naked eye: while in the RoC new buildings are properly insulated, in the TRNC developers do as they want and cut corners – to the detriment of the environment – in order to satisfy their bottom line.

The third effect of the TRNC's non-recognition is the lack of oversight from organisations that are specifically tasked with protecting the environment. This consequence of non-recognition is not unique to environmental protection. Studies have shown that non-recognition, and the resulting lack of pressure from the international community, has led to much lower protection of human trafficking victims in the TRNC compared to the RoC.<sup>104</sup> However, examples relating to the protection of the environment also abound. In the early 2000s, and in preparation for Cyprus' reunification and EU accession, Cypriot scientists identified NATURA sites throughout the island.<sup>105</sup> Following the failure of the Annan Plan, TRNC authorities

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102 Interview with Turkish Cypriot environment expert (31 July 2024).

103 Interview with representative of UNDP in Cyprus (7 August 2024).

104 Nasia Hadjigeorgiou et al., 'Case study: Cyprus: Determinants of anti-trafficking efforts' (British Institute of International and Comparative Law, June 2022).

105 This exercise was undertaken within the framework of the technical assistance for management and protection of potential NATURA sites in the northern part of Cyprus (Project EuropeAid/125695/ C/SER/CY/7). The aims of the project included the preparation of EU standard management plans for the protection of seven specially protected areas in the areas not under the effective control of the RoC, which 'will become candidates to be designated as Natura 2000 sites following a comprehensive settlement and reunification' (Hadjimichael and Papastilianou, 'Environmental protection and cooperation in an (ethnically) divided island', 7).

designated these as environmentally protected areas under domestic law. Nevertheless, the lack of international oversight over the years has resulted in their inadequate protection. Thus, in the Pentadaktylos, one of the most well-known NATURA sites, illegal mining has been taking place for years.<sup>106</sup> The lack of oversight also leads to other environmental disasters, albeit smaller in scale. For instance, in the Pentadaktylos there are endemic plants that goats graze on that are either disappearing or on the brink of extinction. Despite the importance of these plants, they are not officially protected in any way. An interested onlooker can complain to whoever will listen, but there is no law forcing the de facto state's authorities to act.

In addition to its political isolation, the TRNC also suffers economic isolation due to its non-recognized status. Practically, this means that no state or international organisation is trading with, or investing in, the de facto state, with obvious negative consequences for the Turkish Cypriot economy. A direct effect of this has been the deprioritization of costly projects that are not considered essential to the economy.<sup>107</sup> For instance, over the years, the population of the TRNC has increased dramatically.<sup>108</sup> New arrivals include students,<sup>109</sup> migrant workers (without whom the recent building boom would have been impossible),<sup>110</sup> and tourists.<sup>111</sup> This population increase has put a huge strain on the sewage system, which has had no essential updates over the years. In turn, this has resulted in sewage regularly being spilled into the sea.<sup>112</sup> Moreover, because of gaps in, and non-compliance with, the building code, most luxury hotels in the north lack proper sewage systems and, therefore, also dump their waste into the sea.<sup>113</sup>

Conversely, projects that are expected to improve the struggling economy are likely to be given the green light, regardless of possible negative environmental consequences. The starkest illustration of this is the rampant construction that has been taking place, especially after the failure of the Annan Plan. These developments, which studies have shown are

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106 Interview with Greek Cypriot environmental expert (5 August 2024).

107 Selby and Hoffmann, 'Water scarcity, conflict and migration', 1007.

108 Fiona Mullen and Mete Hatay, 'Figure It – Episode 14: How big is the population of northern Cyprus' (6 September 2024), available at [https://islandtalks.fm/podcast/figure-it-episode-14-how-big-is-the-population-of-northern-cyprus-6-9-2024/?utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](https://islandtalks.fm/podcast/figure-it-episode-14-how-big-is-the-population-of-northern-cyprus-6-9-2024/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email).

109 Tomas Hoch and Viktor Heinz, 'Higher education in Northern Cyprus: The path from isolation to oversaturation' (2024) 72(2) *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 207-231.

110 Nasia Hadjigeorgiou, 'Human trafficking in Cyprus: The crime, victims, perpetrators, and their connection to the island's frozen conflict' Peace Research Institute Oslo (Cyprus Centre) (2022).

111 In 2023, 1.854 million tourists reportedly visited the TRNC (*National Geographic*, 'What you need to know about travel to Cyprus, 50 years after the island was split', 11 July 2024), available at <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/everything-to-know-about-cyprus-travel#>.

112 Sulun and Azizbeyli, 'The EU and environmental protection'.

113 *Financial Mirror*, 'CYPRUS: Sewage spills, sea pollution the norm for historic harbour towns' (*Financial Mirror*, September 22, 2009), available at <https://www.financialmirror.com/2019/09/22/cyprus-sewage-spills-sea-pollution-the-norm-for-historic-harbour-town/>.

implemented in a way that is particularly detrimental to the environment,<sup>114</sup> are often built on forest land, right next to the beach, and/or on Greek Cypriot properties. This unchecked construction, which has resulted in excessive mining for building materials, cutting down of forests, and degradation of beaches, also has negative consequences for the resolution of the Cyprus problem. As Greek Cypriots see their properties being developed beyond recognition, they worry that a comprehensive peace settlement is no longer possible, or even worth it.

The tendency to exploit Greek Cypriot land for economic gain and to the detriment of the environment is not unique to Turkish Cypriots. For example, the RoC has authorized mining in Androlykou, a Turkish Cypriot village in the Akamas. Although from 1998-2003 Androlykou fell within a NATURA site in an EU-funded project implemented by the RoC,<sup>115</sup> the NATURA area that was ultimately officially proposed by the RoC, and was declared as such by the European Commission, covered a smaller area than the original proposal, and did not include the village.<sup>116</sup> Environmental experts have criticized the RoC and argued that one of the reasons Androlykou has not been included in the NATURA area is because it is a Turkish Cypriot village and, therefore, less worthy of protection. As Hasan, the last Turkish Cypriot resident of Androlykou, stated in a 2009 interview: 'no one cares about this land, because it is Turkish land.'<sup>117</sup> Thus, the Cyprus problem has exacerbated the tendency to unsustainably exploit land belonging to the other community, with negative effects on the protection of the environment and the resolution of the Cyprus issue.

Only two international actors, the EU and the UNDP, have engaged with and provided funding to the TRNC authorities to address a range of social issues, including the protection of the environment. The EU has been willing to fund development and peacebuilding projects in the north because it considers this as part of its mandate to prepare the Turkish Cypriot community for eventual EU accession.<sup>118</sup> The UNDP is tasked with implementing confidence-building measures between the two communities as well as preparing the ground for a comprehensive peace settlement; helping out with development projects that benefit the Turkish Cypriots is part of this strategy.<sup>119</sup>

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114 Vedat Yoruca and Rusen Keles, 'The construction boom and environmental protection in Northern Cyprus as a consequence of the Annan Plan' (2007) 25(1) *Construction Management and Economics* 77-86.

115 The Akamas Peninsula was initially mapped and proposed as a Special Area of Conservation in the framework of a LIFE Third Countries project (LIFE98 TCY/CY/172).

116 Hadjimichael and Papastylianou, 'Environmental protection and cooperation in an (ethnically) divided island', 9.

117 Quoted in *ibid*, 10.

118 European Commission, 'Aid programme for the Turkish Cypriot community', available at [https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/support-turkish-cypriot-community/aid-programme-turkish-cypriot-community\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/support-turkish-cypriot-community/aid-programme-turkish-cypriot-community_en).

119 Interview with representative of UNDP in Cyprus (7 August 2024).

It is through these lenses that the two organisations have funded and helped implement the updating and expansion of the Mia Milia/Haspolat wastewater treatment plant, which serves both communities.<sup>120</sup> The project has not been without its challenges. While the consortium that was awarded the contract for the project is also operating the plant for 10 years, a joint entity to manage the enterprise in perpetuity has not been formed, raising concerns about the project's sustainability.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, the joint enterprise recently faced significant financial difficulties. Turkish Cypriots collect money for the plant's operations in Turkish lira, but have to make payments in euro. Because of the depreciation of the Turkish lira meant they were unable to cover expenses, the RoC, with the support of the EU, had to cover the difference.<sup>122</sup> Despite such challenges, the EU and UNDP recently collaborated on the extension of a similar project in the TRNC, namely the Morphou Wastewater Treatment Plant.<sup>123</sup> The sewage plant is supplemented by an irrigation project for the use of treated effluents, which is expected to contribute to the safeguarding of underground water resources. Preliminary plans are currently in place for the carrying out of a feasibility study assessing whether this plant can also be connected with the infrastructure in the RoC, in order to help with its irrigation needs.

The development of the sewage plants points to two, already discussed, effects of the Cyprus problem on the environment. On the one hand, the international isolation of the TRNC is undoubtedly detrimental to the Cypriot ecosystem. The updated sewage system was long overdue because of its deprioritisation, and only became possible when, rather exceptionally, international actors began to engage with the TRNC. On the other hand, a frozen conflict also robs the parent state from, or at the very least delays, collaborations that would be beneficial to 'its' environment. Waste management projects should have been an obvious area of collaboration between the two communities, especially since they have been jointly running the Mia Milia/Haspolat sewage station since 1979.<sup>124</sup> Yet, even in 2024, such collaborations are considered politically risky and have to be actively encouraged by the international community. Therefore, although non-recognition of the de facto state is clearly detrimental to the TRNC, hidden environmental costs also spill over to the RoC.

120 UNDP, 'Working together for the people of Nicosia: The new Nicosia wastewater treatment plant' (date unknown), available at [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/cy/NNWWTP\\_Brochure\\_25March2014.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/cy/NNWWTP_Brochure_25March2014.pdf). Other projects for the protection of the environment in the areas outside the RoC have also been funded by the EU. Most recently, the EU funded three energy efficiency projects in Lefka/Lefke (see UNDP, 'Three remarkable measures for energy efficiency and renewable energy production in Lefka/Lefke'), available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0ffKDAxSE&list=PLawLQV0c6EBH17p0o-g-bnKVxAbwhCTRW&index=2> [in Greek] and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRLagvLol3c&list=PLawLQV0c6EBH17p0o-g-bnKVxAbwhCTRW&index=3> [in Turkish].

121 Zikos et al., 'Beyond water security'.

122 Interview with representative of UNDP in Cyprus (7 August 2024).

123 UNDP, 'Morphou wastewater treatment plant extension', available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGc1baCsVg8&list=PLawLQV0c6EBH17p0o-g-bnKVxAbwhCTRW&index=10>.

124 UNDP, 'Working together for the people of Nicosia'. Also see, UNDP, 'Cyprus: Wastewater brings communities together: The new Nicosia waste water treatment plant' (nd), available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g0bGsrlr\\_Yc&list=PLawLQV0c6EBH17p0o-g-bnKVxAbwhCTRW&index=6](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g0bGsrlr_Yc&list=PLawLQV0c6EBH17p0o-g-bnKVxAbwhCTRW&index=6).

## The Cyprus problem overshadowing environmental considerations

The first two ways that the Cyprus problem affects the island's environmental issues – the lack of comprehensive data, and the non-recognition of the TRNC – are relatively easy to identify. Their effects simply go unnoticed because we have not taken the time to seriously consider causal connections between the frozen conflict and protection of the environment. Conversely, the third effect of the Cyprus problem on the environment is harder to pin down: the need to protect the environment is often overshadowed by the all-encompassing attention placed on the Cyprus problem.<sup>125</sup> To put it differently, Cypriots are so accustomed to prioritizing *the Cyprus problem* over all else that, often unconsciously, they adopt strategies detrimental to the environment if these are seen as (even minor) wins for their side. An example of this is the Greek Cypriot interviewee quoted earlier in this report, whose political beliefs prevent him from crossing the buffer zone to contribute work for the environmental protection of the entire island. Although not explicitly admitting this, his actions imply that no matter how important the protection of the environment might be for him, considerations related to the Cyprus problem are more important. This was most starkly put by Yiannis Papadakis, when he lamented an attitude he observed in the RoC:

Other problems elsewhere [i.e., other than the Cyprus problem] received scant attention. [...] Only the Cyprus Problem counted as a real problem worth talking about. Everything else was minor; it could wait. [...] If anyone dared breach the silence, one was accused of – what else? – treachery. “How dare you accuse us of violating human rights when we accuse the other side of this?” The Cyprus Problem became the perfect alibi for abuses within.<sup>126</sup>

This attitude is neither specific to Greek Cypriots, nor to one particular interviewee. In fact, early bicomunal environmental projects had a high non-completion rate precisely because the Greek and Turkish Cypriot partners tasked with implementing them fell out over political disagreements.<sup>127</sup> While this tendency has gradually decreased, confirming the thesis that greater contact promotes levels of trust and successful cooperation,<sup>128</sup> the anecdote illustrates that even (environmental) activists are sometimes willing to sacrifice (environmental) initiatives on the altar of the Cyprus problem. If we consider the island as a single ecosystem, this mindset – which is reflective of the zero-sum relationships evident in the political negotiations of the Cyprus problem more generally – is undoubtedly counter-productive.

<sup>125</sup> Nasia Hadjigeorgiou, 'The invisible impact of frozen conflicts: A case study of foreign domestic workers in Cyprus' (2022) 22(2) *Ethnopolitics* 177-198.

<sup>126</sup> Yiannis Papadakis, *Echoes from the Dead Zone: Across the Cyprus divide* (I.B. Tauris, 2005), 174.

<sup>127</sup> Interview with Greek Cypriot environmental expert (5 August 2024).

<sup>128</sup> Deniz Yucel and Charis Psaltis, 'Intergroup contact and willingness for renewed cohabitation in Cyprus: Exploring the mediating and moderating mechanisms' (2019) *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* 1-20.

Two further examples illustrate this phenomenon. The literature examining connections between the Cyprus problem and women's issues has long argued that policy makers explicitly prioritise a comprehensive peace agreement over a range of feminist demands.<sup>129</sup> As one academic article noted, feminist activists are often told: 'Let's sort out the Greek-Cypriot -Turkish-Cypriot thing first, and then we'll sort out the gender thing.'<sup>130</sup> Similar feelings have been reported in relation to the environment, with one activist quoted as saying: 'We need to solve the Cyprus problem first, then environmental cooperation can take place; not the other way round.'<sup>131</sup> Environmental experts interviewed for this report noted that the Cyprus problem was never elevated over environmental concerns in such an explicit manner, but insisted that its prioritization over other considerations was often implied by policy makers. The interviewees who identified this hierarchy in considerations, unprompted and unanimously, gave the same example to support their conclusion. Virtually all bicomunal environmental projects are delayed, at some point in their implementation, by disagreements related to the Cyprus problem. The most common of these disagreements relates to the language to be used when publicly talking about the project.<sup>132</sup> Should a village mentioned in a study be called by its Greek Cypriot name, Turkish Cypriot name, or both? What should one call the de facto authorities? Should references to them be accompanied by inverted commas? Can a publication that is an outcome of a bicomunal project have a Turkish Cypriot author, if that author is affiliated with a university in the TRNC?

The questions are endless, their potential answers are a political landmine, and navigating this successfully takes time, which – in an era of water scarcity, droughts, heat waves, forest fires, biodiversity losses, and soil and ecosystem degradation, all of which are likely to intensify due to climate change – is in short supply. As one frustrated Cypriot expert put it:

I have never been told that the protection of the environment is less important than the Cyprus problem, but I have seen this play out in practice. We were messing around with terminology – how we should say this and that – rather than dealing with the urgency of the protection of the environment.<sup>133</sup>

129 Myria Vassiliadou, 'Questioning nationalism: The patriarchal and national struggles of Cypriot women within a European context' (2002) 9(4) *European Journal of Women's Studies* 459–482.

130 Nayia Kamenou, 'Feminism in Cyprus: Women's agency, gender, and peace in the shadow of nationalism' (2019) 22(3) *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 359–381, 360.

131 Akcali and Antonsich, 'Nature knows no boundaries', 944.

132 This becomes even more complicated by the fact that the RoC has passed the 'Law Relating to the Amendment Procedure for Geographical Toponyms of the RoC (Law 66(I)/1998)', which provides in Section 6(1) that anyone who publishes, circulates, or offers maps, books or other documents that include names that are different to the toponyms accepted by the RoC, will be subject to a 3-year prison sentence, a €50,000 fine, or both.

133 Interview with Greek Cypriot environmental expert (5 August 2024).



This was confirmed by an international actor, who noted:

My general impression is that resolving the Cyprus issue prevails over the need to protect the environment. We see this in our interactions with decision makers. We need to have a great discussion about environmental topics, but instead of doing this, the political agenda prevails.<sup>134</sup>

The tendency to prioritise political over environmental considerations is most evident in RoC decisions related to the energy sector. For example, from the outset the RoC vetoed the possibility of transferring natural gas to the island through Turkey in the absence of a comprehensive peace agreement. Nevertheless, at the time and considered from an exclusively economic perspective, this could have been the most viable option.<sup>135</sup> The reason for this decision is not a secret. In 2016, the Technical Committee on the Environment held a public discussion on how to combat desertification in the era of climate change in Cyprus.<sup>136</sup> During the event, a member of the audience asked the Technical Committee why more ambitious options, such as hydrocarbons, were not being considered. The Committee simply replied that the topic is too politically controversial and should be avoided. The fact that desertification is an existential threat for Cyprus does not appear to have been an important enough consideration. This potential solution's connection to the Cyprus problem was enough to disqualify it as an option.

Similarly, in recent discussions with Greece about an interconnector for sharing electricity among Cyprus, Greece, and eventually Israel, some argued that the project required a significant economic investment from the RoC, but there was no guarantee of the project's successful completion should Turkey forcefully intervene. On the one hand, the project seems a positive development both for Cyprus and the region, as Cyprus would be part of the EU energy network. This would allow electricity imports to the RoC and end its reliance on fuel oil for energy, while also making possible RoC exports of solar-generated electricity. On the other hand, the RoC concerns are not unreasonable, especially in light of earlier incidences of Turkish intimidation;<sup>137</sup> for example, when in 2018 Turkey sent a ship to block RoC drilling activities in the RoC's exclusive economic zone.<sup>138</sup> The Greek Prime Minister argued that if the financials of the interconnector project were agreed, then 'any geopolitical

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134 Interview with representative of UNDP in Cyprus (7 August 2024).

135 Ayla Gurel et al., 'The Cyprus hydrocarbons issue: Context, positions and future scenarios' *PCC Report 1/2013*, 50.

136 Hadjimichael and Papastylianou, 'Environmental protection and cooperation in an (ethnically) divided island', 49.

137 Nektaria Stamouli, 'Cyprus has gas for Europe. A decades-old conflict is keeping it untouched' (*Politico*, 9 June 2022), available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/cyprus-gas-europe-decade-old-conflict-untouched/>.

138 Euractiv, 'Cyprus, Turkey spar after warships block gas drilling ship' (*Euractiv*, 12 February 2018), available at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/cyprus-turkey-spar-after-warships-block-gas-drilling-ship/>.



dangers will be overcome', but many Greek Cypriots remain unconvinced.<sup>139</sup> The objective here is not to fault the RoC for prioritizing political over environmental considerations, especially in high-risk projects. Rather, it is to note that as long as the Cyprus problem remains unresolved, no part of Cyprus, and especially the RoC, will be able to freely adopt policies beneficial to the environment.<sup>140</sup>

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139 EuroNews, 'Κυρ. Μητσοτάκης για την ηλεκτρική διασύνδεση με την Κύπρο: Το έργο θα γίνει αν καταστεί βιώσιμο' [Kyr. Mitsotakis on the electricity interconnector with Cyprus: The project will go ahead if it becomes sustainable] (EuroNews, 8 September 2024), available at <https://gr.euronews.com/2024/09/08/mitsotakis-gia-ilektriki-diasyndesi-me-kypro-to-ergo-tha-ginei-an-katastei-biosimo>.

140 This is an argument that has also been made in the literature in relation to water management policies (Mason, 'Hydraulic patronage').

# THE POSITIVE ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE CYPRUS PROBLEM

It is almost axiomatic to claim that there is one positive environmental consequence of the frozen conflict: the preservation of endemic flora and fauna in the buffer zone. Animal survival requires habitats uninterrupted by roads and buildings, and the heavy building on both sides of the island has destroyed many animal habitats, leaving the buffer zone as the only safe space for many species. For example, the buffer zone is the only area in Cyprus where we see the now almost extinct river turtles.<sup>141</sup> In the early 1970s, the endemic population of Cyprus moufflons also faced extinction. The RoC adopted preservation programmes that increased their population from approximately 800 in the 1990s to around 3,000 animals today.<sup>142</sup> Officials from the RoC Game Fund and Veterinary Department have made it clear that the programmes would not have been as successful had the moufflons not been able to breed and live undisturbed in the buffer zone.<sup>143</sup>

The positive consequences notwithstanding, experts warn: 'The buffer zone is neither the heaven, nor the oasis that everyone says it is. It is a small-scale Cyprus.'<sup>144</sup> As almost half of this unusually 'busy buffer zone'<sup>145</sup> is open to farming, the land is often littered with water pipes, empty pesticide bottles and other garbage. Farming in the buffer zone is likely to increase in the future, because, since 2024, the area has been completely demined.<sup>146</sup> Moreover, this 'no-man's land' has often been perceived by Cypriots as a convenient dumping site for their waste. So serious has the problem become that the UN Secretary-General noted that 'activities such as illegal hunting and rubbish-dumping in the buffer zone [...] represent a direct challenge to [UNFICYP's] authority.'<sup>147</sup> This is a fast-growing problem, as in 2021 the

141 Costas Constantinou et al., 'Ambivalent greenings, collateral conservation: Negotiating ecology in a United Nations buffer zone' (2020) *Political Geography* 102096.

142 Costas Constantinou and Evi Eftychiou, 'The Cyprus buffer zone as a socio-ecological landscape' (The Satoyama initiative, 2014), available at [https://satoyama-initiative.org/case\\_studies/the-cyprus-buffer-zone-as-a-socio-ecological-landscape/](https://satoyama-initiative.org/case_studies/the-cyprus-buffer-zone-as-a-socio-ecological-landscape/).

143 Ibid.

144 Interview with Turkish Cypriot environment expert (31 July 2024).

145 Walter Absmann, quoted in Constantinou and Eftychiou, 'The Cyprus buffer zone as a socio-ecological landscape'.

146 Tom Cleaver, 'Buffer zone now free of mines, government says' (*Cyprus Mail*, 8 June 2024), available at <https://cyprus-mail.com/2024/06/08/buffer-zone-now-free-of-mines-government-says/>.

number of incidents of illegal dumping in the buffer zone was three times higher than in 2019, a phenomenon that also significantly increases the risk of wildfires in the area.<sup>148</sup>

Related to this is the idea that the buffer zone is a 'green zone by default,' insofar as it was created not to address environmental concerns, but due to the need to restrict human activity for security reasons.<sup>149</sup> Since the dominant concern in relation to the buffer zone is the maintenance of the status quo, sound environmental policies are not easily prioritized.<sup>150</sup> This offers one explanation for the lack of any policy to address the packs of wild dogs that have become the largest predators in the area. These dogs pose a threat to people and animals residing in and around the buffer zone (both because they are likely to attack, and because they carry diseases), yet nothing is being done to control them.<sup>151</sup> Moreover, in the absence of a clear answer on who is responsible for policing the buffer zone,<sup>152</sup> it has become easier for individuals to appropriate land that does not belong to them for their own use, often with detrimental consequences for the environment. One of the most extreme instances of this involved a man who planted 40,000 prickly pear trees over 500 hectares in the buffer zone, when he only had permission to use 20 hectares of this land. Then, using the Cyprus problem to excuse environmental destruction, the Greek Cypriot farmer portrayed his illegal actions – which resulted in the destruction of rare flora and the prevention of underwater enrichment – as a form of 'resistance' against Turkish Cypriot shepherds.<sup>153</sup>

Finally, difficulties in the buffer zone are exacerbated by the fact that UNFICYP has neither the resources nor the know-how to adequately protect the environment. In the absence of a clear answer as to who has legal responsibility in the area, the UN is often left to pick up the slack. Yet the number of UN personnel in Cyprus has been decreasing steadily for years, from 2,506 in 1979<sup>154</sup> to 797 in 2022.<sup>155</sup> In 1993, with the strength of UNFICYP at 1,513 persons, the UN Secretary-General warned that 'successive reductions in the strength of the Force have brought UNFICYP to a point where the viability of the present operation is in doubt'.<sup>156</sup>

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147 UN Secretary-General, 'Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations operation in Cyprus' (S/2007/699, 3 December 2007), para. 33.

148 UN Secretary-General, 'United Nations operation in Cyprus: Report of the Secretary-General' (S/2021/1110, 31 December 2021), para. 25. \_\_

149 Constantinou et al., 'Ambivalent greenings, collateral conservation'; Jarraud and Lordos, 'Participatory approaches to environmental conflict resolution in Cyprus', 262.

150 Constantinou et al., 'Ambivalent greenings, collateral conservation'.

151 Constantinou and Eftychiou, 'The Cyprus buffer zone as a socio-ecological landscape'; Interview with Greek Cypriot environmental expert (5 August 2024).

152 Hadjigeorgiou, 'The Buffer Zone in Cyprus'.

153 Constantinou et al., 'Ambivalent greenings, collateral conservation'.

154 UN Secretary-General, 'Report by the Secretary-General on the United Nations operation in Cyprus (For the period 1 December 1978 to 31 May 1979)' (S/13369, 31 May 1979), 4.

155 UN Secretary-General, 'United Nations operation in Cyprus: Report of the Secretary-General' (S/2023/3, 3 January 2023), 14.

156 UN Secretary-General, 'Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations operation in Cyprus' (S/25492, 30 March 1993), para. 5.

Unsurprisingly, with the present number of UNFICYP personnel almost half of what it was at the time of the warning, effectively policing this 346-square km area has become an even greater challenge. This, coupled with the fact that international personnel are often unfamiliar with threats to the local environment, can result in its sub-optimal protection. As one researcher recalls:

A few years ago, we set up cameras in the buffer zone expecting to see wildlife, and we ended up filming the hunters instead. We told the authorities, they found and fined the guy. He paid his fine and continued what he was doing.<sup>157</sup>

Another, remembers a similar experience:

When we were doing our research, we saw a man in the buffer zone preparing some lime sticks to catch ambelopoulia. The UN people were watching him do this every day, but hadn't realized what he was doing; they thought it was some kind of traditional ritual, rather than illegal bird trapping. So, we had to explain to them that what he was doing was illegal. But even then, all they can do is simply say "you need to leave, you need to stop", but they don't have the power to arrest anyone.<sup>158</sup>

Even with its limitations, the buffer zone remains one of the few places on the island where animals can roam free. Yet, the continuation of the frozen conflict and the inability of the two sides to reach a comprehensive peace settlement is putting this at risk. The undisturbed animal habitats come at a cost that is borne by those displaced from their homes in the buffer zone, who are unable to use and develop their properties.<sup>159</sup> Increasingly however, the seemingly unending pressure to develop the whole of Cyprus is putting a strain even on the buffer zone. Thus, in 2024, following rare violent reactions against the UN by Turkish Cypriots, the leaders of the two communities agreed to build a network of roads in Pyla, as well as to initiate housing and other projects to address the needs of those residing in the buffer zone.<sup>160</sup> It remains to be seen whether this agreement is a one-off event or the beginning of the gradual environmental degradation of the buffer zone as well.

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157 Interview with Turkish Cypriot environment expert (31 July 2024).

158 Interview with Greek Cypriot environmental expert (5 August 2024).

159 Constantinou et al., 'Ambivalent greenings, collateral conservation'.

160 UN Secretary-General, 'United Nations operation in Cyprus: Report of the Secretary-General' (S/2024/12, 3 January 2024), para. 11.

## CONCLUSION

**T**his report has argued that the frozen conflict in Cyprus exacerbates environmental problems on the island, as the unresolved situation makes Greek and Turkish Cypriot decision-makers more likely to ignore them, or fail to take joint action to address them in a comprehensive manner. The passage of time is likely to lead to even greater environmental degradation, not only due to the impact of climate change, but also because long-standing problems such as water scarcity remain unresolved and festering. With these observations in mind, the report concludes with a list of actions that we recommend are adopted by decision makers as soon as possible. It should be borne in mind, however, that in the absence of a comprehensive peace settlement, even the adoption of such recommendations in full can only offer short-term relief from what are essentially existential threats.

It is, therefore, recommended that Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots:

1. Cooperate with the UNDP to collect island-wide environmental data. The two communities should take a proactive approach and routinely make environmental data available to the UNDP, thus setting the groundwork for a comprehensive island-wide environmental dataset. The UNDP could help in this effort by defining different environmental categories – e.g., air quality, water scarcity, biodiversity – and outlining a methodology for data collection so that information from both sides is comparable. Additionally, the UNDP could also allow academics and researchers to share their own data for inclusion in the database, while also increasing transparency and making this information available to the public.
2. Utilise the bicommunal Technical Committees, which have been designed specifically to promote and implement cooperation between the two communities. In addition to the Technical Committee on the Environment (which will have the leading role), other Technical Committees should also be involved in these efforts. For example, the Technical Committee on Economic and Commercial Matters can assist with cooperation in the fields of energy management and recycling; one concrete step in this direction is for the Technical Committee to push for joint recycling of plastic.
3. Develop a comprehensive strategy for responding to wildfires that can be triggered easily, quickly and without this becoming politically controversial every time. This is a project that can be jointly implemented by the Technical Committee on the Environment

and the Technical Committee on Crisis Management, both of which have taken (unilateral) steps in this direction. This joint activity of the two Technical Committees will generate greater momentum for action, while also ensuring greater efficiency and non-duplication of work.

4. With the help of the UNDP and the Technical Committee on the Environment, develop and implement a comprehensive strategy that addresses the island's water scarcity problems. This strategy should also involve consultation with the SBA. Integral to the success of such strategy is the development and promotion of a bicommunal campaign to raise public awareness of the issue. Past bicommunal campaigns (concerned with different themes, e.g., location and identification of missing persons) have been successful, and offer a blueprint of what is likely to work well.
5. With the help of the UNDP and the EU, encourage and fund bicommunal research projects that relate to the environment. When developing these funding opportunities, there must be careful consideration of how the researchers can share their findings through joint publications, even in instances when they may be affiliated with universities in the TRNC. This will address the knowledge gap and also indirectly contribute to better intercommunal understanding of the island's environmental problems.
6. Together with UNFICYP, resist pressure to develop the buffer zone. Any new development projects should be beneficial to the environment; examples include the establishment of a photovoltaic park<sup>161</sup> or a common 'peace park'.

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161 UN Secretary-General, 'United Nations operation in Cyprus: Report of the Secretary-General' (S/2024/12, 3 January 2024), para. 11.

This report argues that although the academic literature has explored the relationship between conflict and the environment before, during, and in the aftermath of violence, it has paid almost no attention to the environmental impact of frozen conflicts. To address this gap, our report examines environmental protection and its relationship to the frozen conflict in Cyprus. Based on a thorough study of UN Secretary-General reports, interviews with environmental experts and other key stakeholders, journal and newspaper articles, we argue that the Cyprus problem exacerbates the environmental degradation on the island in three major ways. First, it makes it impossible to have an accurate environmental picture of the whole of Cyprus, which contributes to a lack of cooperation from relevant *de jure* and *de facto* authorities when responding to environmental challenges. Second, the non-recognition of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) has resulted in its political and economic isolation. The political isolation of the *de facto* state precludes international and European oversight of policies and practices that have an impact on the environment, while its economic isolation exacerbates financial difficulties and contributes to the deprioritization of sound environmental policies. Third, environmental issues are often overshadowed and deprioritized by discussions relating to the Cyprus problem. Our report arrived at these conclusions after an examination of Cypriot practices related to water management, recycling, the preservation of biodiversity, wildfire management and the energy sector.

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