

THE ENVIRONMENTAL ROLE OF TURKEY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN OVER THE NEXT 10 YEARS

In the Mediterranean –more than anywhere else– engagement in ecological transition is necessary. Turkey can play a decisive role by virtue of its geography and history, which provide it the capacity of having its voice heard in Asia, Africa, and Europe alike. The various international environmental initiatives hosted in Turkey over the last few years, as well as the highly determined standpoints of Turkish leaders, prove that this country is eager to play a stronger role in the major environmental movement that we see underway in most regions of the globe. Moreover, the vibrant debate in Turkey has demonstrated an environmental awareness among Turkish people. This should inspire authorities to move even further on environmental issues. Turkey could play a key leadership role particularly with regards to biodiversity, water, and energy.

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Due to its unmatched position in the Mediterranean landscape, Turkey has a special responsibility, particularly at a time when, like the rest of the world, it has to address the major challenges of ecological transition. Such responsibility is highly significant with regard to sustainable development, as it is in many other areas.

The Mediterranean is a fragile and exceptionally rich sea. Representing less than one percent of the global marine area, it is one of the planet's biodiversity reservoirs, harboring eight percent of its marine fauna and 18 percent of its marine flora.

Humans have always been drawn to this incomparable wealth. Some of the greatest works of our heritage –whether intellectual, artistic or political creations– have been created along the Mediterranean shores or whilst sailing its waves. Today, the Mediterranean attracts an increasingly large number of our contemporaries, for economic and cultural purposes or simply for leisure.



However, this attractiveness is also the source of the fragility of the Mediterranean. There are almost 500 million inhabitants currently living around this limited area –150 million of whom live along the coastline– not to mention the close to 300 million tourists who visit every year.

This extremely strong anthropic presence has of course serious repercussions on the environment. Various types of pollution, both land-based and marine (for instance, it is estimated that close to one million tons of oil is discharged into the Mediterranean every year), the unreasonable exploitation of certain resources, the deterioration of the coastline and of course overfishing of many species have made

the Mediterranean ecosystems vulnerable, thus threatening the living conditions of the populations living nearby. In addition to the numerous and varied crisis situations, this pressure on resources obviously leads to their depletion.

The Mediterranean environment is of course not homogenous. Significant discrepancies exist between the northern and southern shores, and between the Western and the Eastern Mediterranean. Although the countries of the European Union still need to progress in particular in terms of wastewater treatment, it must be acknowledged that as far as sustainable infrastructure is concerned, the eastern and southern shores lag behind significantly.

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Such is the state of our sea: rich but fragile, dense but full of contrasts, and riddled with disparity and tension. Coupled with other problems, these elements show the urgency of a situation that all Mediterranean countries must address together, and for which, above all, they need to show determination and set the example – in one word, leadership.

For environmental matters, no action can be effective if it is not collective. Although the Mediterranean world is now united by shared environmental risks, it struggles to understand the consequences of this factual situation. Despite the important progress made over the last 40 years –in particular with the Barcelona Convention adopted in 1975, the Barcelona Process, and the Union for the Mediterranean– the countries of the Mediterranean area have been slow to initiate joint action around common interests.

In the Mediterranean, more than anywhere else, engagement in ecological transition is necessary, at the risk of jeopardizing the conditions that make our way of life possible. This must go hand in hand with an ethical, intellectual, and political transition towards efforts focused on partnership, solidarity, and responsibility.

Turkey, by virtue of its geography and history, belongs to the two major regions, Europe and Asia, that surround the Mediterranean. It is also capable of speaking to all; its voice is heard in Asia, Africa, and Europe alike, playing a decisive role

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The various international environmental initiatives hosted in Turkey over the last few years, as well as the highly determined standpoints of Turkish leaders, prove that this country is eager to play a full role in the major environmental movement that we see underway in most regions of the globe.

On several occasions over the last few months, Prime Minister Erdoğan has reaffirmed Turkey’s objectives with regard to the environment, particularly in relation to biodiversity and forest preservation. He has expressed, I believe, the growing concerns of a population aware of the exceptional wealth of its natural heritage and which wants more than ever before to protect its diversity and originality.

The vitality of the debate in Turkey, especially concerning the protection of biodiversity, urbanization and energy, demonstrates an alert environmental awareness of the Turkish people. Such significant development should incite authorities to move even further with regard to environmental issues.

For my part, I would like to insist on three issues that I feel are priorities, and ones in which Turkey could play a key leadership role. These are biodiversity, water, and energy.

As far as biodiversity is concerned, in particular marine, this is the moment of truth. While many species are approaching a critical situation, we have the scientific knowledge and technical solutions available today to enable us to help secure their future more effectively.

I am thinking of marine protected areas in particular, areas where commercial activity is restricted and which not only allow us to protect the most endangered species, but also to regenerate overexploited ecosystems. Marine areas have already been created in many regions of the world, and some leading-edge countries have developed

the foundations for a proactive and efficient environmental protection policy. Enabling the regeneration of stocks also allows for the implementation of sustainable fishing systems, which directly benefits the local populations.

The development of similar marine protected areas in the Eastern Mediterranean would be a major step forward for all environmental activists. Moreover, this concerns fish stocks as much as the protection of marine mam-

mals, as proven by the success of the Pelagos Sanctuary that was created over 15 years ago by France, Italy, and Monaco for cetaceans. At a time when species such as the monk seal have already vanished from the Western Mediterranean and are at risk of extinction in our sea, it is high time that we implement effective mechanisms that are able to protect it and form part of a sustainable development approach.

It is not too late for the monk seal or for any other species. Action for the blue-fin tuna, which was conducted three years ago by the Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation and the Monegasque State under the authority of HSH Prince Albert II, proves that such causes deserve to be given support with determination and that these efforts can bring about real progress.

In addition to a few emblematic and well-known animals, many other species are currently endangered and need to be protected by implementing a different approach with regard to our seas and their resources, particularly concerning fisheries, including long-term stock management. Marine protected areas specifically allow for the implementation of such management, whilst opening up promising prospects for local economies – especially in terms of tourism. Thanks to them, we will be able to restore the balance of entire ecosystems, thereby ensuring a future that is not jeopardized by deteriorating environmental conditions for future generations.

Moreover, the same considerations apply to water, which is a crucial issue around the Mediterranean. This is linked of course to the relative scarcity of water resources in a region where population growth is extremely rapid, particularly in the countries situated on the eastern and southern shores. This is also due to a lack of political will all around our sea. Due to inadequate infrastructure, it is estimated that close

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to 30 million people around the Mediterranean currently have no access to drinking water and that 180 million live below the water poverty line (1000 cubic meters per capita per year).

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This situation results in many human tragedies: health-wise, economically, and culturally. We know today that water distribution and the implementation of efficient systems have a direct impact on the ability of a region to develop from an agricultural, industrial, and even educational point of view. In addition to these objective data that can be

observed worldwide, other issues come into play in the Mediterranean in relation to access to certain waterways against an extremely tense geopolitical background.

Confronted with such a complex situation, I think there is no other alternative than to implement regional solutions by means of integrated water management that takes the disparate realities of an entire region into consideration by uniting all stakeholders involved.

Naturally this requires a strong potential to mobilize, especially given the tension I mentioned earlier, which arises in part from the scarcity of this natural resource. It seems that Turkey, which has both the geological wealth and the political arguments to assume natural leadership in this field, has a key role to play here.

Assuming environmental responsibility on a regional scale for these essential issues would be a crucial step in affirming Turkey’s determination to address the risks – ecological, strategic, and social – that currently hang over the Mediterranean region.

Such responsibility could also promote a bold and ambitious energy policy. Like water, the energy issue encapsulates a large number of the problems that affect the Mediterranean region. Environmental problems related to the use of hydrocarbons whose damaging effects on the environment, both locally (through pollution) and globally (through global warming) we are now well aware. Economic problems too, are associated with the scarcity of these hydrocarbons, the tension and price increases which it generates. Finally, there are social problems caused by the unequal access to energy in the Mediterranean region, at a time when such access is a prerequisite for all development.

To solve these problems, our region has a distinct advantage: the abundant presence of solar energy waiting to be exploited. The technical solutions are starting to be available that will enable us to truly benefit from this energy on a wide scale. Once again, the resources and political will are lacking to enable us to make the Mediterranean –certain areas of which suffer from energy deficits– a sustainable production region, which will not only find the resources needed to ensure its development, but also the resources for a strong commercial impetus that is respectful of the environment.

The production of renewable energies offers extremely important economic prospects across the entire globe, as demonstrated by Chinese and American resolve in this respect. The Mediterranean countries have the potential to affirm their commitment to this third industrial revolution that has been set into motion. This includes other areas such as energy efficiency, now a central issue that we have made one of the priorities of the Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation with tangible results already observed.

The main objective for all the areas I have noted above is to chart the course for action. This is precisely where the responsibility of a large country such as Turkey –with a long tradition of initiative– must be demonstrated. Turkey can play a role in the global movement that makes the environmental cause an issue with which everyone can identify and around which new alliances are formed and new powers are built.

These powers, of which Turkey will be an integral part tomorrow, can constitute a forum not only for the expression of humanistic, generous, and responsible values, but also one that serves as the basis for the technological revolution that is already radically changing the strategic reality of our world.

The powers of tomorrow will be those that have been able to address these challenges, those that will have led our world towards the path necessary for sustainable development. Turkey is in the perfect position to be one of them.



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