

SENSE OF PLACE: FOREST, SOCIAL IDENTITIES AND ECOTOURISM ON THE PARNITHA MOUNTAIN

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ABSTRACT

This study is concerned with the sense of place – the special connection that people of Acharnes city had with place, the forest and the mountain of Parnitha. It outlines how people perceived, understood and related to this mountain and forest, which they were visiting for their leisure activities for almost a century, every summer. It reveals how the sense of place encompass the sense of belonging to a community, analyzing collective representations that structure the “imaginary” of mountain Parnitha and its forest. The place-based values and locality having contributed to the emerge of a different peculiar type of ecotourism in the beginning of 20th century in a suburb of Attiki, in Greece, until the first decade of 21st century. “The big fire of Parnitha” destroyed not only the mountain and the forest, but also demolish the sense of place and this form of ecotourism.

KEYWORDS

Sense of place; Ecotourism; Forest Imaginary; Social Identities; Commons; Emotional geography

1. INTRODUCTION

Place is more than location, including the natural, built, and social environments, emotions, values norms, behaviors. Sense of place denotes the sense of belonging, socially and emotionally through attachment and collective identity to a certain place ^[1]. Sense of place encompasses natural, social and cultural landscapes, community organization and place identity and is constructed on emotional and cognitive dimensions of place. The vacationer “tourists” of Parnitha construct a socio-ecological system and the resource and services (mountain, forest and tourism) are deeply connected to the cultural and emotional variables of the space. Ecosystems carry a strong emotional weight, rooted in the cultural motivations historically constructed by offered services of the mountain and its forest to the

citizens of Acharnes city. Place and its connotations are continually intertwined into the fabric of social life, anchoring it to services of the landscape ^[2]. This socio- ecological system specifies the patterns of interrelationship and co-evolution ^[3-5] of community and nature This socio- ecological system that established on Parnitha mountain has a “permanent” seasonal performance for almost a century.

2. METHODOLOGY

This work based on oral history, formal and informal archives and interviews, explores the unique configurations of historically layered social relations which intersect within and between the mountain and its forest. The writers focus on individual’s emotional intimacy, practice and experience, memories and reminiscences who were spending their

summers on the mountain and forest of Parnitha. Except for phenomenological approach the writers pay attention to the social networks that constructed a sui generis community. The social and cultural experiences that are gained on Parnitha mountain constitute the collective sense of place. Qualitative research contributes to the accretion of social experiences of a defined place constructing the sense of place. The data were collected through in-depth interviews and personal notes conducted with interlocutors who have spent their summers at least for 15 years on the Parnitha mountain. The ages of interlocutors ranged from 40 to 85 years old. Archives, written evidence and visual documents were examined and analyzed.



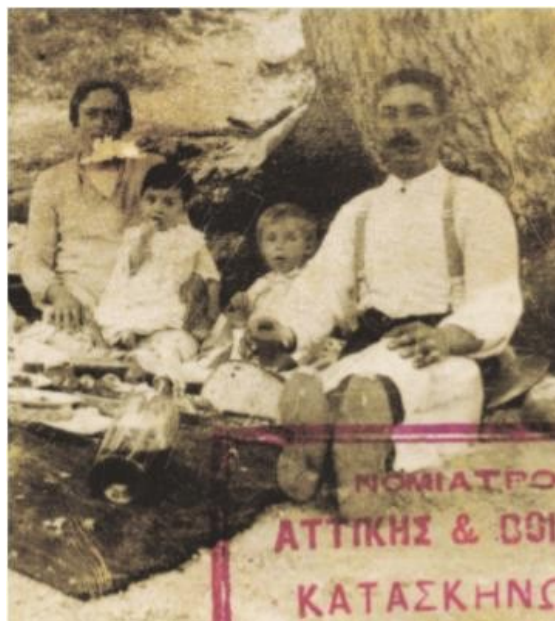
Source: *Commemorative Book of Camps in Parnitha Athens, 1940*

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals that that a differentiated practice of modern ecotourism was exercised from the beginning of the 20th century in Acharnes city in Attiki region. Although, historically, the term 'ecotourism' introduced in 80s describe the nature-tourism nexus. The writers argue that there is a nexus between ecotourism and the sense of place and the Parnitha's summer camp of the dwellers of Acharnes city prove this rigorously.

On the other hand the sense of place is a key-concept as it identifies how people perceive a place, how they value it, whether they protect or disregard, improve or deteriorate it, and whether they choose to abuse it for their low-term interest. Therefore, the sense of place,

inescapably, has an impact on environmental governance, resource use, attitudes or behaviors towards a resource. Our case study reveals that the eco-tourism of Parnitha is a part of the social process and reflects the value and moral systems of the society. Ecotourism on the Parnitha mountain as a social practice that ended abruptly by the forest fire in 2007- is much different in his organization from the contemporary concept of ecotourism. Visitors and guests are simultaneously the same. On the mountain, every summer a community is emerged. This community organize the social life of vacationer "tourists" and at the same time organize the functions and the services of the mountain and its forest. A social ecological system is evolved intensively every summer and a commons function in a stable seasonal time. This commons is organize in a protected area and the principle of *lex loci* is applied exclusively. By studying the 'representation' of the forest in practices of ecotourism, the social construction of the forest is studying and a comprehensive narrative of the sense of place and a commons is attempted. This work focuses on the perspective of nature in the community, on the perception and operation of the concept of 'collective ownership' under the power of different institutional contexts and economic settings. It reconstructs the 'image' that the community develops about the place - in time - under different economic, social and political realities. The Forest is not only a natural resource for the citizens of Acharnes, but also a cultural and social resource, offering a form of recreational ecotourism, based on historic bonds.



Source: Historical and Folklore Society of Acharnes, Parnitha 1931

4. CONCLUSIONS

The connection between nature and society, between the citizens of Acharnes city and the Parnitha mountain was strong for a long time, over a century. Throughout history the mountain and its forest supported the near forest community in many ways. When the mountain and forest products were not economically effective the dwellers of the Acharnes city discover the leisure value of the mountain. Through this practice and experience – the practice of ecotourism-a new meaning is given to the mountain. This appeal to the citizens fosters a sense of belonging. Forest, mountain, the social and communal experiences through that differentiated ecotourism reveal that the connections and

belongings to the mountain construct the 'sense' of place. This destroyed nexus is what the Acharnes dwellers have missed and crave.

Parnitha mountain and its forest are cultural resources, function as a matrix of hospitality for the local population, in which principles, norms, values, behaviors and actions are moved from the city to the mountain every summer. The property status and the organization regime does not affect the place 'distribution'. The sense of place, the citizens attachment to Parnitha mountain relates to the "everydayness" and feelings of continuousness and familiarity.

5. REFERENCES

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