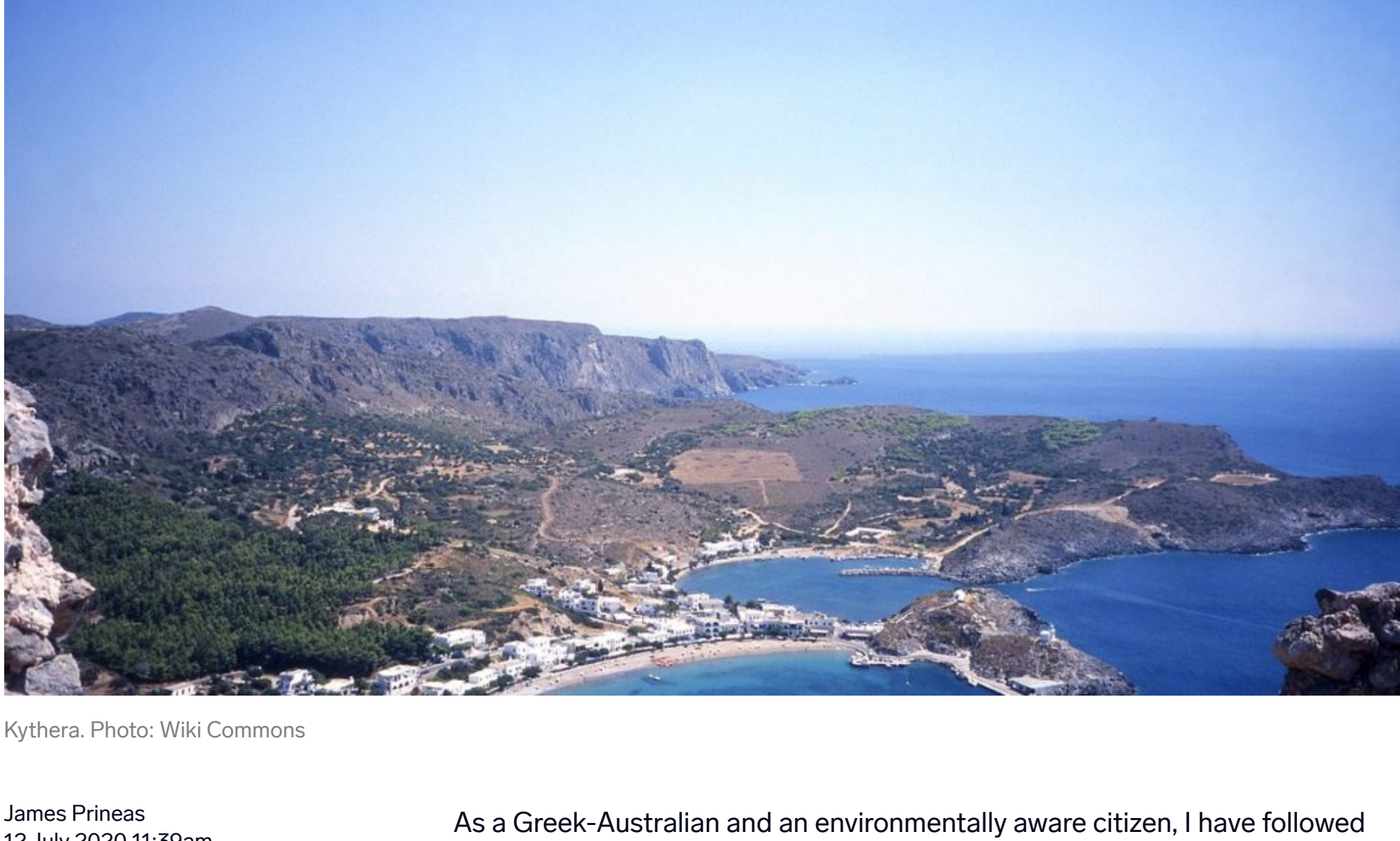




DIALOGUE / OPINION

The Rape of Aphrodite

Kythera's natural beauty is under threat by a disproportionate burden of wind towers



Kythera. Photo: Wiki Commons

James Prineas
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As a Greek-Australian and an environmentally aware citizen, I have followed the debates around developing renewable energy sources in both Europe and Australia with great interest. Having installed an off-grid renewable energy system in our house on Kythera – mythical birthplace of Aphrodite and motherland to my grandparents – I am also well aware of the technology's great advantages, as well as of the ample clean energy potential in both my homelands.

No one is opposed to the principle of Kythera being energy autonomous. The issue is whether to turn a pristine island into an industrial wind farm. The current proposals would permit at least 100 skyscraper- sized wind-generators to be built, which would be visible from every corner of the island. Four production licenses have already been granted for 60 wind turbines (which would produce a total of 150 MW of power), and another 60 towers are in the pipeline. Kythera's own energy needs would be guaranteed with only two or three turbines. Even when energy demand peaks in the middle of August, as the island fills with tourists, two large wind generators plus a modest array of solar panels would more than cover the island's needs.



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Why then does Kythera need so many wind turbines? Put simply, it doesn't. The energy produced by the new constructions is intended to supply the mainland, not guarantee the island's own needs. In fact all the energy produced would have to be routed through the mainland, as the limited high-voltage infrastructure on the island couldn't process the massive production. Ample wind and sun are available on the Peloponnese, just 20 km away, so why not build them there for their own supply, and save all the extra expenses involved? The added costs of construction on Kythera would be enormous: undersea cables to cross the Gulf of Laconia to the Peloponnese; the many necessary bypass roads to avoid villages with narrow streets for the transportation of the mammoth turbines.

Clearly, the companies bidding to undertake this colossal project see a way to make a tidy profit. Perhaps the generous E.U. subsidies and loans available are a key factor? Or the prospect of selling the energy assets on to Chinese or Turkish entities interested in gaining political influence in Greece and the EU makes it more than worth their while. As to why they don't just build on the mainland, the environmentally-insensitive policies of wind-power companies, which have been extensively documented and led to heated stand-offs between locals and police, have made them too many enemies, and they are looking for so_er targets.

The current government's policies, hurried through without the usual parliamentary debate, favour a bulldozer approach which would see environmental planning as well as archeological considerations sidelined.

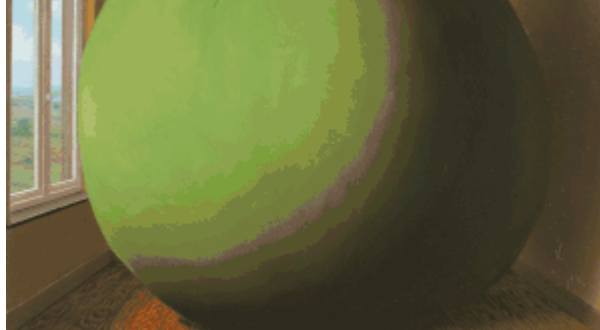


Photo: James Prineas

Kythera isn't a big island: just 30km long and 16km wide. The 100-metre high turbines will be visible from up to 40km away, making them jarringly obvious from almost any point on the island. Hardly ideal for an island prized for its unspoilt natural riches.

One of the first sites on Kythera slated for the construction of the massive turbines is a mountain peak less than 750m away from the traditional village of Mylopotamos. Local groups challenged the legality of the 2007 initial proposals and a court ruling blocked the construction in 2011. Another proposed site is Finkies, less than 2kms west of the picturesque villages of Logothetianika, Kousounari and Katsoulanika. This is the location of one of the most important neolithic settlements on Kythera, where polished tools, obsidian artefacts and evidence of prehistoric buildings are in abundance.

The wind turbines, substations and transmission lines will be a blight on the prized natural landscape, threatening Kythera's tourism. Roads will destroy forest, and heavily impact both flora and fauna. Noise pollution from the turbines will undermine the tranquility of the countryside. Tourism will invariably suffer.



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Kythera is also an ecologically important area for protected birds, and for many rare species it forms a key migratory crossing. Accordingly, much of the island has been declared an E.U. NATURA 2000 Special Protected Area. For one species, the Elenora Falcon, Kythera is a vital breeding ground. The insensitive placement of wind farms near breeding areas will likely devastate the colonies. The Greek Ornithological Society has thus recommended that all migratory crossing areas be excluded from the construction of wind parks.

New environmental legislation passed in May – not short of ambiguities and cryptic provisions – treats environmental protection as an obstacle to growth. Sokratis Konstantinidis, a representative of the Copelouzos group, the company behind two wind park applications for Kythera, presented his company's vision of a rapid approval process at a renewable energy conference in September 2018. "The new Special Spatial Planning Bill should not support unreasonable restrictions against renewable energy projects", he said, and "[these restrictions] are not needed for biodiversity protection." Now, less than two years later, the government passed legislation caving in to these demands, and islands with 'Natura' certifications are being targeted for bloated wind energy projects. The updated Special Spatial Planning is being prepared, but judging from the Government's past submissions, it will probably be just as ambiguous as the recent law or even more lenient with the indiscriminate construction of wind farms in environmentally important areas.

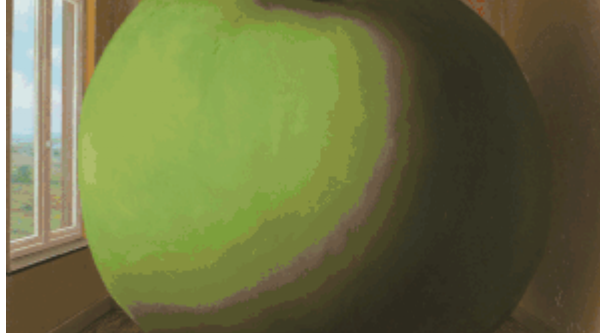


Photo: James Prineas

The affiliations between members of the current administration and the companies lobbying to weaken environmental protections date back to the 1980s. Dimitris Copelouzos, whose conglomerate holds controlling shares in the company involved in constructing the proposed wind parks on Kythera – and one of Greece's richest men – is widely considered to be above the law. Favoured by the ruling political party Nea Demokratia, as well as by Konstantinos Mitsotakis, former party leader during the 1990s and father of presiding Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Copelouzos has been involved in the suspicious offloading of state utilities into private hands. Despite many accusations and official attempts to prosecute him, he has never had to defend himself in a court of law. Furthermore, Michalis Gourzis, the vice president of Terna Energy, another conglomerate plotting to construct turbines on Kythera, is the father-in-law of the Minister of State, Georgios Peristeris. Alexandra Gourzi, Michalis Gourzis' wife and the minister's daughter, is the legal adviser to the Energy Regulatory Authority (RAE), which allocates the licenses for wind parks. Moreover, these companies are beholden to powerful Chinese, Russian and Turkish shareholders, casting still more doubt on the true motivations behind the projects. Should foreign interests be influencing Greek and E.U. energy resource policy, in closed-doors meetings with government officials of questionable connections?

We should be asking why the Greek government is facilitating the desecration of some of the nation's most pristine regions, when other locations – including offshore and even floating sites – would produce more energy with far fewer drawbacks. Why should Kythera be asked to corrupt its unblemished skyline to produce at least 30 times more energy than it can possibly use? Solar panels combined with battery storage have also now become viable alternatives and their environmental impact is considered more acceptable. This is not about resisting renewable energy. It's about carefully implementing the best clean-energy technologies while causing the least environmental impact possible. It's about spreading the burden equitably across the country, and not allowing big companies to rape the land for profit.

If you're concerned about the issues raised in this article, please send a signal to the authorities by contacting your local Greek consulate and signing the petition. The support of the Diaspora is invaluable to Greece, and if we come together as a community we will be heard.



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James Prineas July 2020

Photo: James Prineas

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

James Prineas was born in Australia to Kytherian-Greek grandparents and has initiated many cultural projects related to the island over the past 30 years. A_er the success of his 1996 photographic exhibition A Village on Kythera, in 2001 he conceived and created kythera-family.net, a cultural archive website for the Diaspora Kytherian community, a site which allows users to upload their photographs, family trees, life stories and other cultural material to be shared with the wider community. More than 20,000 entries have been submitted to the site since its inception. James Prineas lives in Berlin with his Danish wife and sons and spends as much time as he can on Kythera.

Some of his other Kytherian projects:

- 2013: Kythera From the Air. Coffee-table edition of aerial photographs
- 2014: Kythera from Above. A DVD shot from a drone
- 2015: The Kytherians. Collec:on of short stories about Kythera
- 2017: Kythera mon Amour. Feature film
- 2018: Winter on Kythera. Feature film
- 2020: An Island named Desire. Feature film



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