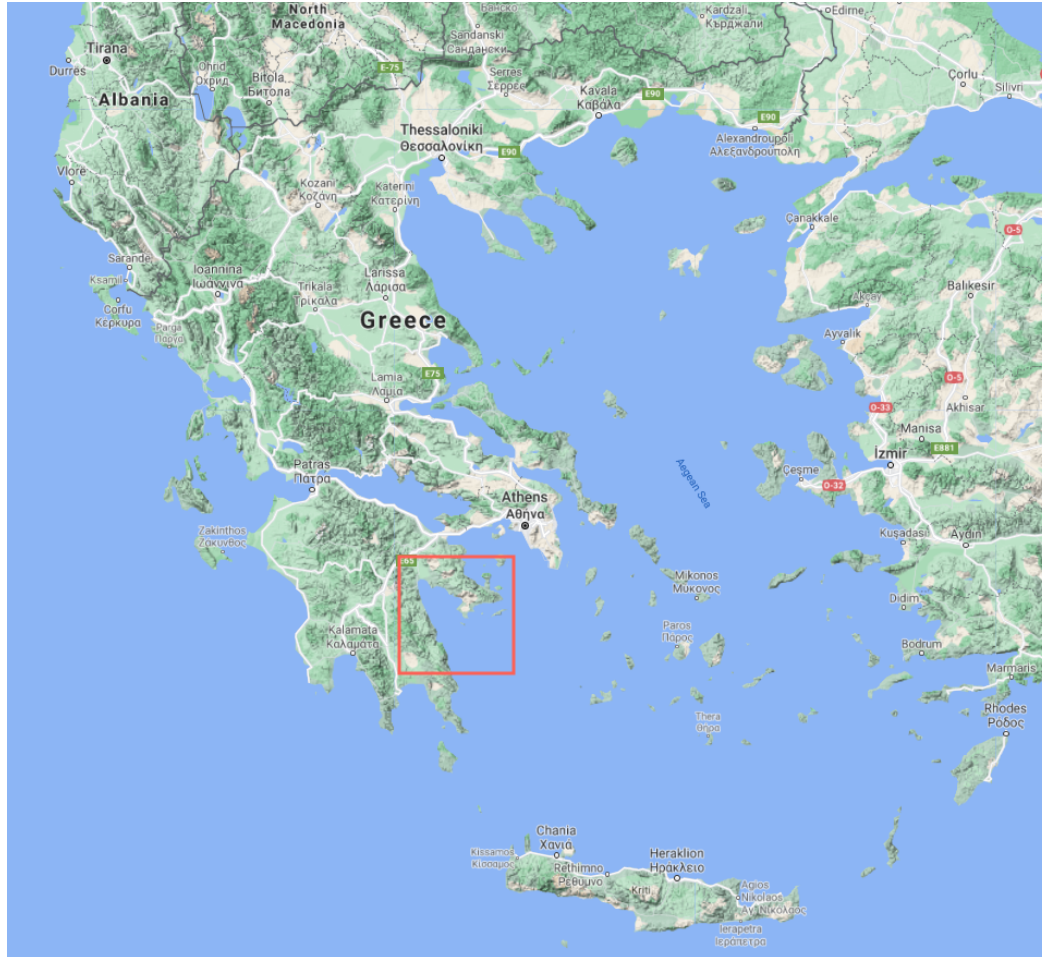




Argolic Gulf Environment Foundation

Scoping Report – Executive Summary

July 2021



Introduction

The Argolic Gulf Environment Foundation (AGEF) was established in the spring of 2021 in order to help protect and regenerate the natural ecosystems of the Argolic Gulf, which is situated along the eastern coast of the Peloponnese in Greece and home to the islands of Spetses and Hydra.

The AGEF is part of the Conservation Collective, a growing network of locally focused environmental foundations. The Conservation Collective and its members facilitate funding for the most effective grassroots environmental initiatives, with world-class oversight, management and programme aid. The network currently comprises 15 foundations across 4 continents. The AGEF is the seventh such foundation to be established in the Mediterranean and the third in Greece after the Ionian Environment Foundation and the Cyclades Preservation Fund.



Approximately 100,000 euros was raised in initial committed funding for the AGEF from individuals who care deeply about this special corner of Greece, and a Steering Committee was formed comprising a core team of donors. Additional funding will be sought from individual donors, local enterprises and other organisations.

The AGEF will follow the Conservation Collective's proven model of environmental grant giving that is nimble, non-bureaucratic, and highly effective. The bulk of the funds raised will be used to support local organisations and initiatives that aim to promote environmental protection, sustainability and resilience through small-scale direct grants. These grants will be complemented by other forms of support, such as connecting local groups and enterprises with the broad expertise available through the Conservation Collective.

In April 2021, Pavlos Zafiropoulos was hired as the Executive Director of the AGEF, responsible for the day-to-day running of the foundation. Among his first tasks was to draft a scoping report identifying the main environmental challenges in the region of the Argolic Gulf as well as potential targets for the first round of grants. The key conclusions of that report are outlined below.





The Argolic Gulf: An Overview

Natural Ecosystems of the Argolic Gulf

- The Argolic Gulf is located off the eastern coast of the Peloponnese, in between the regional units of Argolis and Arcadia. Just off the coast to the southeast and east are the islands of Spetses and Hydra and a number of islets. Most of the latter are uninhabited, although several are privately owned with summer home complexes.
- At its northwesternmost (and shallowest) end, the Argolic Gulf receives runoff from the floodplain of Argos and the outflow of the Erasinos and Inachos rivers. At its other end, the gulf has a relatively broad opening (about 20km near Spetses), through which it communicates with the rest of the Aegean.
- The region features a high diversity of ecosystems in a relatively small area; the gulf and its surrounding lands includes everything from deepwater ecosystems almost a kilometer under the surface of the sea, to wetlands rich in bird life, to fir forests and alpine terrain in the nearby mountains.
- In terms of its marine environment, the Argolic Gulf is essentially a microcosm of the Greek seas as a whole, with a very high percentage of the many species found in Greek waters inhabiting or regularly visiting the region, including large and iconic species such as bluefin tuna, dolphins, loggerhead sea turtles, monk seals and even the occasional whale. In the spring and early summer many fish species enter the gulf from the open sea with the aim of spawning in its shallower areas.
- On land, the Arcadian coast forms the southwestern arm of the gulf and is relatively wild and mountainous, with steep forested slopes rising to the peak of Mt Parnonas. This legendary mountain forms the heart of a NATURA 2000 protected area. The regional unit of Argolis to the northeast, while also hilly, features somewhat gentler terrain, with extensive areas of farmland cultivated primarily with citrus and olive plantations. Both coasts also feature several small but important wetlands which are important stops for many dozens of migratory bird species.
- The wide range of ecosystems means that a broad diversity of flora and fauna can be found in the region, including indigenous birds of prey, migratory bird species, mammals, reptiles, amphibians and diverse invertebrates.



Humans in the Argolic Gulf

- Humans have inhabited the shores of the gulf for many millennia – fossils show that the area had already been settled from at least 40,000 years ago. Since at least the rise of the Bronze Age Mycenaean civilisation, the shores of the Peloponnese have been continuously inhabited.
- The Argolic Gulf's strategic position on key Mediterranean trade routes played a key role in shaping its history, evidenced in the numerous coastal fortifications built and refined over the centuries by the ancient Greeks, Byzantines, Franks, Venetians and Ottomans, the most important of which was that of Nafplio, which subsequently became the first capital of the newly formed Greek state.
- This strategic positioning also led to the development of the great shipbuilding and shipping industries that peaked on the islands of Spetses and Hydra in the 18th and 19th centuries. The great wealth and knowledge amassed by these islands through maritime trade in turn would prove instrumental in Greece's struggle for independence from Ottoman rule and the establishment of the modern Greek state.
- In the 20th century, following the end of WWII and the Greek Civil War, tourism - both international and domestic - began to grow in importance for the communities around the Argolic Gulf, and today it constitutes the single most important sector of the local economy, with pronounced touristic and holiday home development in coastal areas such as Tolo and to the east in Porto Heli, Kranidi, Ermioni and on Spetses and Hydra.
- However both agriculture (especially fruit cultivation) and fishing remain important economic activities in the region. In recent decades a number of fish farms have also been created at several sites around the gulf.

The Key Environmental Challenges

As in many areas of Greece, the natural ecosystems of the Argolic Gulf face a number of ongoing local pressures that pose risks for their long-term health and resilience.

For marine ecosystems, while there are significant gaps in our knowledge about their current state, it is clear from past studies, as well as anecdotal evidence from local fishermen and divers, that fish and other marine species are significantly less abundant than they were only 2-3 decades ago, with the downward trend almost certainly continuing to this day.

Fishing (including largely unregulated "recreational" or "amateur" fishing) is undoubtedly the primary driver of this decline, although other pressures on marine environments also likely play



a significant role, such as damage to seagrass meadows and other fish nurseries caused by boat anchors and pollution from agricultural run-off and other sources of waste.

Likewise on land the natural world faces a range of pressures. Few of the environmental challenges are new, however many appear to be only growing more pronounced. For example, chronic problems with groundwater supplies (due largely to inefficient water use in the agricultural sector) look set to become more pronounced due to the impact of climate change in combination with anticipated greater demand from the tourism sector. Similarly, without significant upgrades to the region's waste management systems and (much) greater rates of recycling and composting, any additional growth in the tourism sector will only add to the already unacceptable levels of waste that ends up in illegal landfills, and often ultimately in the environment. Meanwhile valuable ecosystems - such as certain wetlands already under pressure from encroaching farmland and other forms of development - may effectively cease to exist entirely, despite being formally protected under Greek law.

In short, under a business-as-usual scenario, it appears certain that the natural wealth and beauty that has characterized the Argolic Gulf since humans first arrived on its shores will continue to be dangerously eroded. This will likely ultimately prove catastrophic not only for the area's natural ecosystems which could be damaged beyond repair, but also for the people whose livelihoods depend on them, directly or indirectly. Fishermen can't fish in empty seas, nor will tourists visit to swim in algal or jellyfish soup.

Fortunately, there is already growing local acknowledgement that new models are needed moving forward to ensure the environment of the Argolic Gulf continues to provide the wide range of ecosystem services that have long been taken for granted. This has given rise to a small but growing number of initiatives in the region that aim to forge a more symbiotic relationship between humans and nature. It is initiatives such as these that the AGEF will seek to support.

Key Priorities for the AGEF

Given that many of the most pressing environmental challenges in the Argolic Gulf have been many years in the making, for lasting change to occur, a new narrative is required for the region, one that sees it emerging as a champion of a form of economic development that has environmental sustainability at its core. Working with, rather than against, natural systems will not only help preserve the region's natural capital for future generations, but will provide countless direct and indirect benefits to the human populations that today inhabit and visit the region.

As such, the aim of the AGEF will be to support groups and initiatives that will help catalyze this shift, providing workable (and thus replicable) solutions that take into account local attitudes and circumstances.



Below are the areas identified as priorities for the grant-giving activity of the AGEF:

- **Marine Ecosystem Protection and Regeneration:** The AGEF will support efforts to gain better scientific understanding of the ecosystems of the Argolic Gulf, identifying key fish nurseries and marine habitats. In parallel, it will seek to develop and support plans to protect and regenerate these habitats, working with local fishers and other stakeholders, and drawing on international best practices to help limit the most damaging practices and bring about a return to abundance.
- **Waste Management and Reduction:** A priority for the AGEF will be to support efforts large and small to reduce waste and promote recycling and composting. With regards to household waste, the organisation will seek to obtain commitments from every municipality and community of the Argolic Gulf to work towards the ultimate goal of a Zero Waste economy. The AGEF will also assist, where possible, in the development and implementation of waste management systems involving selection at source and upcycling and composting at local facilities. Similarly, we will seek to work with local farmers to increase the levels of composting of agricultural waste, as well as the use of compost to improve soil quality on farmland. In parallel, working with local fishers and other stakeholders, the AGEF will also assist with clean-up operations of ghost nets and other marine and terrestrial waste that impacts local natural beauty and poses a threat to wildlife including iconic species such as loggerhead turtles and monk seals.
- **Ecotourism Development:** The AGEF will work with local enterprises to further accelerate the shift that is already underway towards environmentally conscious forms of tourism, helping expand the tourism season and creating greater incentives for the protection of local nature and wildlife. In this the AGEF can play the role of a catalyst, helping local businesses pool resources, access outside sources of funding, and draw on international know-how and networks to usher in a new era of tourism for the Argolic Gulf.
- **Regenerative Agriculture:** Drawing on domestic and international experience and networks, the AGEF is committed to supporting farmers who wish to implement more holistic forms of cultivation, working with natural systems and populations as opposed to against them. Such methods not only help nature (and, importantly for the region, reduce water consumption), but can also lead to improved incomes and resilience for farmers, through better prices for high quality organic goods and potential diversification of income streams through agritourism and other activities.



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