

Archipelagos Institute of Marine Conservation Promises Experience Rewarding to Students and the Environment in Greece

By Constantine S. Sirigos

Greece has established itself as a prime study abroad destination largely thanks to its traditional schools, but students are also drawn to the unique experiences offered by institutions like the Archipelagos Institute of Marine Conservation, which was established in 1998 as a non-for-profit non-governmental organization (NGO) for the protection of nature in Greece's islands and seas.

Hydrobiologist Anastasiou Miliou is the Scientific Director of the Institute and knows that the young weigh many factors when making study abroad choices. Some of them don't want only to gain something, but to "give back."

"The most important thing about the later generations of diaspora Greeks coming to Greece for study abroad experiences is that they are not only coming to rebuild their connection with Greece. They come now with backgrounds and knowledge that enables them to make contributions to Greece."

In the case of the Institute's programs, they participate in the noble work of protecting Greece's natural environment and "They come with a strong desire to help and a genuine love for Greece and the environment," which is deeply appreciated, she said.

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The institute invites young students with different majors and various kinds of professionals – chemists, biologists, lawyers, journalists, documentary film makers and animators, and others, all of whom can help in the broader endeavor in some way, plugging gaps in the Institute's areas of expertise and staffing.

Another target group of undergraduate and graduate students come to different islands for periods



The vessels of the Archipelagos Institute of Marine Conservation are active in many islands and Greek seas.



Participants in the activities of the Archipelagos Institute of Marine Conservation spend time on the shore and in its research vessels.

ranging from a few months to a few years to do research for advanced degrees and to gain practical experience. Others devote their sabbaticals to the cause.

The bottom line, however, is that people come not to vacation on nice Greek islands, but to work with energy and passion, with a desire to roll up their sleeves and get to work, especially at field stations in isolated islands. Miliou said, "they are ready to go wherever they are needed to defend Nature in Greece."

She said of the Institute, "our purpose is to combine our scientific expertise with the efforts of the local communities, but also to apply political pressure with the aim of defending the Greek seas from various kinds of attacks...which are widespread and continuous."

Institute staff, its website notes, "cooperate with authorities to develop and apply pilot management and conservation projects aimed at protecting habitats and species of the Aegean Sea. These projects can later be applied to other parts of Greece and the northeastern Mediterranean."

Miliou said that "we save whatever we can and make direct attempts" - in the words of the website

- "to stop destructive human behavior, such as illegal fishing, explosions at sea, waste dumping, maritime pollution, erosive overgrazing and other threats to biodiversity."

"We combine those efforts," Miliou added, "with programs in the communities, lessons in classrooms, and efforts to convey the relevant facts and information to the country as a whole and to the appropriate international bodies."

Thodoris Tsimpidis is the Institute's prime mover as its founder and director. Since 1998, Miliou told The National Herald, "some people have dedicated their whole lives, others as much of their time as they can" out of love for the environment, and Greece.

"In Greece we have an incredible natural setting, the richest sea environment of sea life in the Mediterranean and all of Europe and it would be a shame if this is destroyed at time when everyone else is paying attention to the environment."

The institute, which focuses on protective action in addition to its research activities - it uses the latest scientific and technological tools - is especially concerned with plastics pollution, chemical waste and sewage, and the well-being of dolphins.

The new Aegean Marine Life Sanctuary, located "on the Greek island of Lipsi, in a pristine, biodiverse coastal bay, with minimal human presence...aims to provide a hospital for marine species in need. It will be the first sanctuary in the world for dolphins rescued from captivity. The dolphins will be rehabilitated and have the opportunity to re-learn their innate behaviors in their natural environment," the website notes.

Miliou said that "Attitudes towards dolphins are changing and it is more and more understood that these are highly intelligent beings that are being abused."

Some American college and university departments give credit and include the Institute in their study abroad programs, including the Hellenic Studies program of Princeton and the Environmental Law program of Yale University. The Institute is beginning a study abroad relationship with the University of Texas at Austin, with which there has been cooperation regarding computer applications for nature conservation.

At this time the Institute does not have a formal relationship with a Greek-American organization, but it would very much like to pursue transatlantic ties.