

Annual Report for Samaria (Lefka Ori) National Park



Clematis elisabethae-carolae Greuter
endemic to the National Park of Lefka Ori

Habitat: Karst cavities and open cracks where any type of vegetation is usually almost completely absent,
altitude 1200-1850 m

[Photo Source: Final Report of the project "Ex situ conservation of important plant species", contractor: MAICh, (2023),
beneficiary: NECCA, OP Transport Infrastructure, Environment & Sustainable Development, NSRF 2014-2020]

December 2024

2024 Annual Report for Samaria (Lefka Ori) National Park

State: Greece	
Name of the area: Samaria (Lefka Ori) National Park – (designated as “Cretan White Mountains National Park”)	
Year and number of years since the award or renewal of the European Diploma for Protected Areas: 2024, 5 years after the last renewal (11/2019). First award: 1979.	
Central authority concerned:	
Name:	MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT AND ENERGY (i) General Directorate of Forests & Forest Environment & (ii) General Directorate for Environmental Policy
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Authority responsible for its management:	
Name:	Natural Environment and Climate Change Agency (N.E.C.C.A.) <i>Local Unit concerned: Management Unit of Samaria National Park & Protected Areas of Western Crete</i>
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Authority responsible for its management:	
Name:	Forest Directorate of Chania
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1. Conditions: List here all conditions which were attached to the award or the renewal of the European Diploma. Explain either how the conditions have been totally complied with or detail the progress in complying with the conditions. Please also indicate any unresolved difficulties that you have encountered.

N/A

2. Recommendations: List here all recommendations which were attached to the award or the renewal of the European Diploma. Explain either how the recommendations have been totally complied with or detail the progress in complying with the recommendations. Please also indicate any unresolved difficulties that you have encountered.

1. proceed as quickly as possible to the signing of the pending presidential decree recognising the new boundaries of the Samaria National Park; adapt accordingly the funding of the management board and the implementation of the management plan; continue the monitoring of species and ecosystems, including in particular the phenomenon of drying pine trees;

1.a Proceed as quickly as possible to the signing of the pending presidential decree recognising the new boundaries of the Samaria National Park.

According to Greek legislation (Law No 1650/1986) a "National Park" is established through a Presidential Decree following the conduction and approval of the Specific Environmental Study (SES) for the area. The SES proposes the boundaries of a National Park, its zonation, the necessity for the establishment or not of regional zones or ecological corridors, and it also makes provisions for the regulation of activities to maintain the protected objects.

In 2019, the Ministry of Environment & Energy assigned a contract to a group of expert scientists to conduct the SESs and Management Plans for the NATURA 2000 sites in the region of Crete (part of which is the National Park of Samaria), under the context of the contemporary legislative framework. In 2023, the study deliverables were set to public consultation. More specifically, the public consultation lasted for the period from 11.09.2023 until 31.10.2023 (<https://ypen.gov.gr/se-diavoulefsi-i-eidiki-perivallontiki-meleti-epm-anaforika-me-tis-prostatevomenes-perioches-natura-2000-tmimatos-tis-perifereias-kritis-dytiki-kriti/>). The results of this procedure (comments) have been examined/ processed to update the text of the Study. The updated SES was firstly approved by the committee appointed for the monitoring of the relevant contract, and was subsequently approved by the Director General of Environmental Policy of the Ministry of Environment and Energy (decision no. ΥΠΕΝ/ΔΔΦΠΒ/103421/2610/25.09.2024). The SES will be sent for official approval to the Minister of Environment & Energy.

1.b Adapt accordingly the funding of the management board and the implementation of the management plan

According to Law No 4685/2020, the management of the protected areas of Greece has been assigned to the recently established legal entity of private law, supervised by the Ministry of Environment and Energy, called "Natural Environment and Climate Change Agency" (NECCA). NECCA replaced and integrated all the former Management Bodies of Protected Areas of Greece.

NECCA receives permanent funding by the State for its operational costs, but can also have other funding sources. The resources and financial management of the new Agency are described in detail in article 31 of Law 4685/2020. NECCA, is also a beneficiary (sole beneficiary or partner) of EU funded Programs (Cohesion Fund, Life, Horizon 2020, Erasmus+, etc).

Starting from 2022, the revenues from the entrance ticket to the National Park of Samaria constitute a resource of NECCA. 30% of the annual income is allocated to the adjacent municipalities for the conduction of works related to the management of the protected area.

NECCA also undertakes the implementation of actions necessary for the operation of the Gorge of Samaria as a visiting area (e.g., annual restoration of the main path, contract assignment for the supervision of the main path, the transfer needs inside the Gorge, the cleaning and maintenance of facilities, as well as the coordination of the personnel in the Gorge, maintenance of the digital transceiver communication network, etc).

The management plans for the protected areas of Greece are under compilation, as already mentioned in the previous section. Their implementation will be a responsibility of NECCA, in cooperation with other relevant authorities, where necessary.

In general, NECCA is responsible for the implementation the policy drawn up by the Ministry of Environment and Energy for the management and conservation of protected areas in Greece, the promotion and implementation of sustainable development actions and the response to climate change.

Among its responsibilities are:

- a) the undertaking of the scientific and administrative support of the national system of protected areas.
- b) the preparation of a Five-Year Action Plan which is approved by the Minister of Environment and Energy, which ensures the planning and coordination of the management of the protected areas of Greece, as well as the monitoring of its implementation according to specific performance indicators set.
- c) the drawing up of a Priority Action Framework, which is approved by the Minister of Environment and Energy, as a strategic and operational planning tool, in which funding needs and priorities are determined regarding the management of protected areas at national and regional level and through which their financing is facilitated.

1.c Continue the monitoring of species and ecosystems, including in particular the phenomenon of drying pine trees;

In 2012 a monitoring program for the two NATURA 2000 sites GR4340008 and GR4340014, covering the total size of the National Park of Samaria, was established by the former Management Body of Samaria National Park-West Crete (MB). The program included the monitoring of important habitat types and species of flora and fauna, according to the European and the Greek legislation, or species which are considered threatened according to international institutions (e.g., IUCN). The latest relevant research program, funded through the Operational Program "Crete 2014-2020, NSRF 2014-2020, and conducted through contract assignments to scientific experts in each field, ended in 2023. In particular, the monitoring program included: 17 terrestrial habitat types, 32 plant species, 31 species of fauna (terrestrial molluscs, terrestrial arthropods, amphibians, reptiles, bats, other mammals and micromammals), 3 marine habitat types, 4 marine species, and of the species of avifauna.

At the moment, the Ministry of Environment & Energy implements a project for the monitoring and evaluation of the conservation status of species and habitats of Community and National interest in Greece. The program is divided into the following sections-projects:

- 1: Horizontal scientific and technical coordination for the synthetic exploitation of the results
- 2: Terrestrial and wetland habitats
- 3: Species of flora
- 4: Invertebrate species (except marine)
- 5: Amphibians and reptiles (except marine)
- 6: Fish fauna
- 7: Mammals (except marine)
- 8: Marine species and habitats
- 9: Avifauna

The program started in 2022 and is expected to end within the first semester of 2025.

Within the boundaries of the National Park, 3 meteorological stations have been installed and operate on a continuous basis since 2012. The meteorological parameters monitored follow the standards set from the National Observatory of Athens.

Regarding the phenomenon of drying pine trees, in 2016 the former MB funded via the NSRF 2007-2013, the "*Study for the assessment and evaluation of pine diseases and of its extensibility in Lefka Ori, with subsequent management proposals*".

In 2019, the former MB included in a project funded by the O.P. "Transport Infrastructure, Environment and Sustainable Development" NSRF 2014-2020, the monitoring of sampling plots to observe the evolution of the phenomenon. The contract was assigned to a scientific expert in November 2020 covering a period until the end of 2023. The results of the project will be evaluated for any future management actions.

2. open a certain number of side trails along the main trail for several purposes: a. for mountaineering, b. for scientific research, c. to make some historical buildings or ruins accessible for rehabilitation, and d. to create new emergency paths for rescuing people or combating fires. The access to these newly reopened trails should be prohibited for visitors and strictly regulated;

Proposals regarding this recommendation, which refers to the core zone of the protected area (gorge of Samaria), will be examined/studied thoroughly by NECCA in collaboration with the relevant authorities, taking into account the current legislative status of the area, in order to define actions to be incorporated in the next Priority Action Framework.

Moreover, it should be noted that scientific research as well as the protection of the elements of cultural heritage within the boundaries of the core zone of the National Park are strongly supported by the competent authorities. Apart from the aforementioned monitoring program conducted by the Ministry of Environment and Energy, there are other scientific projects which are carried out within the boundaries of the National Park and its core zone. For instance:

- In 2020, following the approval from the Ministry of Culture of a relevant study, the project "Restoration and promotion of five of churches in the National Park of Samaria", received funding by the O.P. "Crete 2014-2020". The project was carried out under the supervision of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Chania. The aim of the project was to preserve and enhance these historical buildings (dating from the beginning of the 14th to the 18th century), which are integrated harmoniously in the landscape of the forest, so that they can be statically and morphologically restored and safely accessible. In the frames of the project, restoration works (eg, removal of the old tiles and installation of a new ceramization with Byzantine roof tiles, dealing of cracks, replacement of the old worn winged altarpiece (templon) of the temples, etc) were conducted at the 5 in total small single-aisled temples located in the Gorge of Samaria from the Ephorate of Antiquities of Chania.

- The applied research project "3D geological structure modeling of Samaria Gorge, aiming at the investigation of hydrogeological conditions and water reservoir levels in the core of Samaria National Park (Lefka Ori), Western Crete " with a duration period: May 2020 – July 2024, and funded by the Green Fund of the Ministry of Environment & Energy, was implemented by the Technical University of Crete in collaboration with the General Secretariat of Natural Environment and Water, the General Directorate of Forests and Forest Environment, the Forest Directorate of Chania and NECCA (former MB). The deliverables for 2024 include the final technical report and the final proposals. In particular, the rational management of the available water resources of the springs is described, while the final 3-D geological model of Samaria Gorge, digitalized in a G.I.S environment is proposed. Moreover, a summary of the geological mapping around the Samaria Gorge springs and the corresponding interpretation of their formation is performed. Furthermore, the hydrograms of water supply of Samaria Gorge springs are presented, as well as the corresponding results of the water geochemical analysis, while the description of the automatic equipment, which records the water quantities is included. In addition, the results of the geophysical research for the monitoring of the salinization front as well as the flow measurements of the Kefalovrysia spring from where the community of Agia Roumeli is supplied with water are included.

The results of this applied research project were presented at the following 2024 international conferences:

1) Manoutsoglou, E., Lazos, I., Steiakakis, E., Vafeidis, A., 2024. Geological and Hydrogeological Settings of springs in Samaria Gorge. European Geosciences Union General Assembly 2024, Vienna, Austria, 14-19 April 2024, EGU24-8656; 2) Andronikidis, N., Lazos, I., Kritikakis, G., Manoutsoglou, E., Steiakakis, E., Vafidis, 2024. 3D Electrical Tomography for monitoring sea water intrusion at Samaria gorge National Park. 12th Congress of Balkan Geophysical Society, Kopaonik Mt., Serbia, 27-31 May 2024; 3) Manoutsoglou, E., Lazos, I., Kallithrakas-Kontos, N., Kanellopoulos, C., Steiakakis, E., Varouchakis, E., 2024. Chemostratigraphy and Geostatistical Analysis of Geochemical and Lithological Data from the Trypali Unit, Omalos Region, Western Crete, Greece. Book of Abstracts of the 15th International Conference on Geostatistics for Environmental Applications (geoENV2024), Chania, Greece, 19-21 June 2024, p. 37-38;

- In the frames of the TREEADS project, which aims to a holistic fire management ecosystem for prevention, detection and restoration of environmental disasters, a pilot study concerning Human and Animal Evacuation is realized in the Gorge of Samaria (<https://treeads-project.eu/>).

3. design and apply measures to reverse the observed invasion of old olive groves by pine trees next to the village of Samaria;

During 2020-2021, the former Management Body of the National Park, under the O.P. "Transport Infrastructure, Environment and Sustainable Development" NSRF 2014-2020, proceeded in the mapping and evaluation of the current state of the old olive groves around the abandoned village in the Gorge of Samaria. Currently, and using the results of the above mentioned study, a pilot action for the protection and enhancement of the old olive groves is examined by the project partner (MAICh with the competent authorities), in order to be realized in the frames of the StrategyMedFor project (<https://www.etc.uma.es/strategymedfor/>). Specifically, the proposed pilot action concerns a pilot plot near

the abandoned village inside the Gorge of Samaria and involves works such as: fencing of olive trees, planting of aromatic species and other native flora species, improving soil fertility, etc.

4. preserve the current extent and quality of wilderness, excluding any new roads within the limits of the Samaria National Park, and retain a similar situation as far as possible in the surrounding areas;

Following a relevant Ministerial Decision (Government Gazette 1007/D/2021) conditions and restrictions for the protection of the roadless area of Lefka Ori were set for a period of 2 years. In particular, in an area of 382,06 km² covering the largest part of the National Park of Samaria corresponding to ~65% of the NP, which has a total size of ~585 km²), the construction of new roads for motorized vehicles, -regardless of scale, or any other kind of technical intervention, change or alteration of the natural environment-, is prohibited.

The validity of the above-mentioned Ministerial Decision was extended in 2023, for another 2 years, with the Decision no. ΥΠΕΝ/ΔΔΦΠΒ/131403/4176/14.12.2023 (Government Gazette 1037/D/2023) of the Minister of Environment and Energy.

Thus, in 2024, no application files regarding the environmental licensing of new roads construction within the boundaries of the National Park, were sent for assessment/giving expert opinion, neither to the Forest Directorate of Chania nor to NECCA.

Other actions to preserve the quality of wilderness involve:

i. the provision of expert opinion and the proposal of specific terms and conditions for works and activities to be implemented within the boundaries of the National Park, in the context of the “appropriate assessment” of the article 6 of the EU Directive 92/43/EEC and the national forest & environmental law,

ii. scientific work/research for the evaluation of the management of the protection elements, in order to monitor/preserve quality of wilderness, such as the previously mentioned national monitoring and assessment of species and habitats of Community and National Interest program supervised by the Ministry of Environment and Energy. For instance, the project concerning the flora species aims to provide data for the submission of the 5th National Report (2019-2024) on flora species of Annexes II, IV and V of Habitats Directive (92/43/ EEC) for Greece. In addition it offers a unique opportunity for data collection concerning the conservation status assessment, investigation of population trends, and also the pressures/threats that important threatened plants of Greece face. The Mediterranean Plant Conservation Unit of MAICH is responsible for monitoring 15 plants of Crete (8 in Lefka Ori).

5. take appropriate measures to facilitate the accessibility of the national park for disabled people up to 2.5 km from the south entrance of the park.

Following the relevant recommendation of the Council of Europe, the co-competent authorities/services (Forest Directorate of Chania, former Management Body of the National Park, Region of Crete, Municipality of Sfakia) worked together to technically study this issue and find resources for its application. As a result of this process, a project for the creation of an accessible path to the Samaria Gorge for people with disabilities that require a wheelchair has been included in the NSRF of the Region of Crete for the period 2021-2027 and specifically in the Integrated Spatial Investment for the UNESCO Sites of Crete. The project concerns a route of approximately 2 km, starting from the southern entrance of the gorge.

Moreover, on December 09th 2024, a program agreement, with a total budget of 320,000 euros, was signed between NECCA and the Municipality of Sfakia. The project intends to make provisions of accessibility for the route starting from the port of Agia Roumeli until the southern entrance of Samaria. Moreover, there will be provisions for the accessibility of the route starting from the Port of Agia Roumeli until the Holy Church of Agia Triada, which will allow environmental recreation for people with disabilities in the wider area of the Park.

3. Site Management: List here any changes to the European Diploma holding site management, in relation to both terrestrial and aquatic environments (as appropriate), and in relation to staff and finances, since the last annual report was submitted to the Council of Europe. Please also indicate any unresolved difficulties that you have encountered.

There are no changes to the Samaria National Park, in relation to the terrestrial or aquatic environments.

Changes in relation to staff

There are no changes regarding the personnel of the “Samaria National Park & Western Crete Protected Areas Management Unit” of NECCA, compared to the previous year. For the operational needs during the visiting period of the Gorge of Samaria, NECCA collaborates with external cooperators (contractors). The operation of the Gorge of Samaria include work such as the cleaning-maintenance of the main path, the maintenance & improvement of infrastructure, and the supervision of the area along the main path, etc.

The Forest Directorate of Chania, as well as the Fire Department, also contributed, each Service in their field of jurisdiction, to the operation/supervision of the core zone of the National Park, during the operational period.

Specifically regarding the Forest Directorate of Chania:

- The permanent staff employed this year at the Gorge of Samaria by the Forest Directorate of Chania, included one Forester and one Forester of technical education and on a daily basis one or two rangers. During the period when the National Park (NP) was closed to visitors, the guarding of the protected area was conducted on a daily basis at the forest outpost of Xyloskalo, at shorter intervals in the south exit at the forest outpost of Agia Roumeli. At least once a month surveillance and maintenance work was conducted at the forest outpost that the Forest Directorate of Chania retains in the old settlement of Samaria. During the time that the NP was open for visitors on a daily basis, a ranger was at the forest outpost of Samaria and at regular intervals at the forest outposts of Poria and Kalyvaki. Forest rangers, also, connected the water supply in the escape path of “Potistiria-Kalyvaki”. In addition, the surveillance of the Gorge of Samaria was conducted through patrols of the area from different hiking trails and any violations for the protection of the ecosystem were detected and handled properly. Within the framework of Regulation 690/2008 and the Commission Implementing Decisions 2012-535/EE and 2007-433/EPS, the Forest Directorate of Chania carries out official surveys for quarantine pests in the natural pine forests of Agios Ioannis-Aradaina-Anopoli. Also, in the pine tree forest of Agios Ioannis-Aradaina and in an area of 63 acres, cleaning, pruning, wood chipping and transportation of chipping products were carried out. The Chania Forest Directorate of Chania, also supports the conduction of the actions of the above mentioned TREEADS program.

Changes in relation to finances

There are no changes regarding the finances of the protected area. NECCA continues to receive the revenues from the entrance ticket to the National Park of Samaria. The adjacent municipalities, also, continue to receive a 30% from the annual revenues for the conduction of works related to the management of the protected area.

The operation of the National Park as a visiting area is also supported by the State (through the regular annual budget of NECCA). Research work is supported either from the State or from co-financed EU programs.

4. Boundaries: Give details of any changes to the boundaries of the European Diploma holding site since the last annual report was submitted to the Council of Europe. If there are any changes, please attach an appropriate map to this report. Please also indicate any unresolved difficulties that you have encountered.

There are no changes in the boundaries of the Samaria (Lefka Ori) National Park, since the last reporting period (2023).

5. Other information: List here any other information about the European Diploma holding site which you consider should be provided to the Council of Europe.

The logo flag of the European Diploma of Protected Areas has been hoisted at both entrances of the Gorge of Samaria, in order to communicate to visitors that the area is under the auspices of the Council of Europe.
