

PROTECTING COASTAL ZONES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: AN ECONOMIC AND REGULATORY ANALYSIS

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It is widely acknowledged and understood that the coastal zones of the Mediterranean are coming under increasing pressure. This in turn has serious implications for the environment and for the sustainable use of these highly valued ecosystems. All the littoral states have undertaken some measures to protect their coastal zones from over development, or development that is socially and environmentally damaging. The success of these measures, however, is questionable. In spite of well-reasoned and carefully drafted regulations, the pressure has continued to increase. The laws are ignored by developers who put up illegal units. In this and other ways the regulations are ineffective in achieving the key goals of sustainable development: i.e. development that protects the environment for present and future generations to enjoy.

This paper looks at the growing pressure on coastal resources from 'artificialization' or conversion of natural habitats into man-made ones. This pressure has been increasing steadily, at least since 1970 and probably from before then. Even since the 1990s when the problem was recognized and attention devoted to tackling it, the rate of urban development along the coasts has continued to increase in most countries.

A brief survey of the regulations for coastal zone management finds that integrated management, along the lines being discussed and proposed by researchers working on ICZM, is rarely implemented. Legislation is now in place in several countries that purports to provide the right regulatory framework, but it is being hampered by a lack of coordination between the regulating authorities (e.g. those responsible for land and sea and those responsible for different levels of government). The presence of specific coastal legislation does not appear to guarantee a better performance in terms of coastal protection. Lack of compliance is a problem, although the full extent of it is not known, except for a few countries. Illegal construction is a frequent phenomenon and is encouraged by modest fines, the granting of amnesties for dwellings that have been in place for a number of years and the practice of applying a statute of limitations on legal proceedings against violators.

It is not possible from the data available to establish how effective the different instruments such as setback policies and other regulations have been in protecting coastal zones. A detailed assessment of the extent of violation of the setback rule is needed. But even that would provide only a fraction of the information that should be collected. With a small setback area, at most a few hundred meters, a policy of intense development close to the sea is feasible and can result in a coastal zone that is substantially developed. Thus a wider assessment of the effectiveness of regulations by measuring outcomes is required. Some limited evidence that is presented is not encouraging – it does indicate continued and increasing pressure on coastal natural resources.

The experience so far indicates that a stricter regime is needed to protect overdevelopment of coastal resources. The practice of amnesties for illegal construction must stop and illegal units should be more frequently subject to demolition. The use of normal planning regulations for land use needs to be buttressed by special conditions that apply to littoral zones, which need to be extended beyond 100-200 metres. In these zones construction should be completely banned. A second zone, perhaps up to one or even two kilometres, should be subject to special permission from an authority that is responsible for ICZM and that supersedes other planning authorities. Decisions on permitting development in this zone should be part of a strategic plan, in which the external costs and benefits as discussed in this paper are fully taken into account.

There will be positive and negative externalities to account for. The data available are limited and more needs to be collected on the value of beaches with and without development, the value of coastal landscapes without development and with different types of development, the costs of limited access to beaches and the ways in which beach users respond to increased development. As this paper shows, however, the evidence is strongly in favour of conservation. The benefits to owners and developers of beachfront developments are much smaller than the plausible losses to beach users. Moreover the losses are much greater from ribbon development than for cluster development. These results need to be strengthened with further research.