



## IONIAN ECO VILLAGERS, GREECE

### CONSERVATION AWARD

### FINALIST 2009

# CASE STUDY

**Ionian Eco Villagers** provides a conservation-focused holiday experience in one of the world's most over-developed tourism regions, the Mediterranean coast. Focused on endangered sea turtle conservation and education, and immersion in local culture, Ionian Eco Villagers operates in the National Marine Park of Zankynthos, where nearly 80% of all remaining endangered Loggerhead Sea Turtles in the Mediterranean come to nest each year. Fifteen small cottages and studio apartments, owned by local Greek families, provide accommodation for up to 60 people at any one time. The limit on guests ensures that the local community benefits directly from tourism, all the while minimising pressure on the fragile marine eco-system.

Ionian Eco Villagers, its sister company Nature World Travel, and their partner NGO, Earth Sea and Sky, all work together to provide a unique sustainable tourism



experience combining volunteer conservation programmes, eco-friendly activities and sea turtle education, with guests staying in the locally owned accommodation that forms the Eco Villagers network. Their goal is fighting against the damage of mass tourism in Greece, and particularly on the island of Zakynthos, by minimising the negative impacts of tourism on the environment, undertaking conservation work on the ground, and informing guests and local businesses of the unique flora and fauna found in Zakynthos, and the importance of safeguarding them.

In 1996, they established a Wildlife Information Centre on Zakynthos to promote, protect and preserve the rich natural heritage of the Ionian Islands. Staff and volunteers work together to inform tourists about the nesting sea turtles and other wildlife, and how to protect nests and hatchlings, as well as providing guidelines for appropriate behaviour in the Marine Park, reminding tourists that they are visiting a protected area. The centre plays host to approximately 100,000 visitors annually and it also operates education seminars for visiting school groups. Ionian Eco Villagers' conservation work is funded through the sale of merchandise and local produce at the centre, membership fees and visitor donations.

# CASE STUDY

In 1981, a Greek Presidential Decree declared that all buildings built on/behind sea turtle-nesting beaches in the National Marine Park of Zakynthos were illegal. Despite this, buildings have been and are continuing to be constructed on the nesting beaches. As a result, Ionian Eco Villagers, mobilising with other conservation groups, helped to secure the imposition of a fine by the EU on the Greek Government for failing to properly implement and enforce the existing protective legislation for the area.

In addition, in 2006, Ionian Eco Villagers lobbied the government to prevent tourists from hacking away at the unique, mineral-rich clay cliffs found on Zakynthos. This practice was causing irreparable damage to the island's natural habitat, speeding up erosion and degradation to the cliffs. The area is now signposted and roped off, providing protection to the unique cliff formations.

Ionian Eco Villagers also helped to secure nocturnal light and noise restrictions at beachside bars and hotels in Laganas Bay, where the endangered Loggerhead Sea Turtles nest each summer. And they succeeded in getting all night flights banned to avoid disturbing the nocturnal nesting of turtles. Speed, anchorage, and fishing restrictions are now in place in the nesting bay during the breeding season.

Within the tourism industry on Zankynthos, Ionian Eco Villagers has also worked with property owners to take a more environmentally friendly approach, including energy-efficient light bulbs, solar panels for hot water, use of eco-friendly cleaning products, and water capture tanks for rainwater in a region where fresh water is often scarce.

Ionian Eco Villagers has established an 80% customer return rate each year by successfully combining a great holiday with sustainable tourism practices and conservation in one of Greece's most popular island destinations.

