

How green is their valley

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A remote hideaway could thrive on, or be wrecked by, eco-tourism

THEY used to be one of Turkey's best-kept tourist secrets: the scented plateaus of the Pontic Mountains, with their wild flowers and exuberant dancers. For the handful of travelers who came this Far East, few landscapes were as enticing as the Hemsin valleys in the province of Rize, a place where many locals speak a dialect close to Armenian, practice moderate Islam and are agnostic about their origins.

More recently, news of this area's beauty has been spreading. A new breed of eco-tourist, many of them from Israel, has begun to head for the yaylas, or meadows, with their roaring rivers and stone bridges. But the very attractions that draw in these green wanderers could be destroyed if clumsy developers and opportunistic local politicians get their way.

To see the aesthetic hazards of unregulated tourism, go no further than **Ayder**, a yayla overlooking one of the Hemsin valleys that was once renowned for its tranquility and hot springs. Thanks to a stream of Turkish and foreign visitors, the air is thick with smoke rising from barbecues. Mournful Arabesque music blares from tour buses and cars. Garish motels and handicraft stands obscure the view.

Many Hemsinlis are furious. Ayder's degeneration began after it was linked by road to the nearby town of Camlihemsin, says Selcuk Guney, a local activist. One of his aims is to ensure his birthplace, the neighboring Firtina valley, avoids a similar fate. So far it is virtually untouched; that is partly because access is by dirt track.

Mr Guney insists that if the region's unique way of life is to be preserved, and well-managed eco-tourism is to flourish, the footpaths leading to yaylas must not be replaced with paved roads; and tour buses "that leave nothing but trash behind" must be restricted. Mustafa Orhan, a crusty old bee-keeper who led a successful campaign against a planned hydro-electric dam on the Firtina River, suspects that the government's unspoken aim in building roads is to help commercial logging. Locals have long used electric pulley-carts, running along steel cables, to bring food and other supplies to their yayla homes. So, instead of roads, Mr Orhan asks: "Why not build electric cable-cars to carry people?"

Locals of his persuasion have found an ally in Rize's governor, Enver Salihoglu; he too opposes further road construction in the valleys. Smart development could avoid ruining this Shangri-la, he believes. In Camlihemsin, for example, there could be more emphasis on bees, trout farming and organic tea. Of course, not every Hemsinli is so conservation-minded. "I want cable television and a fridge," says Muazzez Yildiz, an elderly lady whose cottage has a gorgeous view of the Firtina valley. The question is how to help her without wrecking the place for those who will pay a premium for its virgin enchantments.