

The vengeful sea devouring Albania's coast

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Environmentalists say a dangerous mix of climate change and rampant, unregulated urban development are behind the rapid disappearance of the shoreline in impoverished Albania

Asim Krasniqi watches anxiously as the Adriatic Sea creeps ever closer to his beach bar in Albania, a country faced with an alarming pace of coastal erosion.

"I'm nostalgic for how this place used to be," the septuagenarian told AFP wistfully, remembering when this beach in Qerret, to the west of

the capital Tirana, was bigger and "many more" foreign tourists came.

"Today everything is degraded," he said.

Environmentalists say a dangerous mix of climate change and rampant, unregulated urban development are behind the rapid disappearance of the shoreline in the impoverished Balkan country.

"The sea has swallowed the coast. She is taking revenge on man, who has destroyed nature," said Sherif Lushaj, an environmental specialist at Polis University in Tirana.

The initially "inconspicuous" phenomenon has become far more serious in recent years, Lushaj told AFP.

Further north along the coast, near the concrete constructions in the beach resort town of Shengjin, dozens of tree trunks are decaying in water, a reminder that there used to be a forest between the sea and Kune lagoon.

The lagoon is now threatened, less and less protected by a thin strip of land that is fast disappearing.

Once perched on sand dunes, nuclear bunkers built during the communist era of dictator Enver Hoxha also now barely emerge above the water. Others have been engulfed by the sea.

Of the 427 kilometres (265 miles) of Albania's coast, "154 are affected by erosion", Environment Minister Blendi Klosi told AFP.

Sometimes barely perceptible, the advance of the sea in other areas has reached a frightening pace of 20 metres a year, he said.

Near Shengjin, it has engulfed "some 400 metres of ground in the course of the last 15 years," said the minister.

Vanishing wildlife

"This place will disappear if the state does not take necessary measures," said Osman Demi, a fisherman in his sixties who remembers the "terrible night" of December 31, 2009, when sudden floods submerged his village.

"We fish bass, crab, mullet here. The destruction of this lagoon would be a catastrophe," said his colleague Albert Pati, adding that in certain corners, once full of fish, "the water is already dead".

Pelicans have disappeared from the lagoon. A census conducted a year ago found just 7,000 birds, down from 50,000 in the 1970s.

Soon, if nothing is done, the people living here will also leave. There are 2,000 whose homes are threatened by the water, according to Jak Gjini, in charge of environmental issues in the Lezhe municipality, which covers Shengjin.

"The situation is dramatic," he said.

Everything is working in favour of the sea's conquest. There is climate change, with increasingly violent winter storms driving the water further and further in.

Then there is Albania's massive deforestation, the extraction of sand from the rivers and rampant urbanisation along the coast.

Almost deserted in winter, Shengjin is home to 15,000 people in the summer as holidaymakers and seasonal staff take up residence in blocks

of multi-storey concrete buildings, constructed on the sandy soil of the lagoon.

Those who have invested here are "the bosses", said a fisherman with an enigmatic smile. These "bosses" build without permits, which they get after the building is erected using bribery during election campaigns, or hard cash.

'Law of the strongest'

"People are afraid to take on the interests of the powerful. It's the law of the strongest," said Gjini.

"These constructions are the result of pressure exerted by individuals to build without regard for urban planning."

In his bar in Qerret, Krasniqi points out the rocky piers perpendicular to the coast that are sinking into the sea.

They were built without authorisation by the owners of villas or hotels on the coast who hoped to protect their own property from erosion—but in doing so, they simply shifted the problem onto neighbouring constructions.

"They have changed the currents, aggravating the problem," he said.

Minister Klosi promises that "all the illegal construction in the sea will be destroyed and those responsible will be punished".

But even this unprecedented action would not be enough, according to Eglantina Bruci, [climate change](#) specialist for the United Nations Development Programme in Tirana.

"The only solution... would be the construction of rock structures parallel to the coast and dune replenishment."

Gjini said the cost of such measures would be "extraordinary" for one of the poorest countries in Europe—but by doing nothing, Albania anyway gets poorer by the day, he warned.

"Albania's land is shrinking."

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