

New hope for forests of ancient Athens' silver hills

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New life: a plant grows in a burnt area of a national park in the hills above Agios Konstantinos near Athens.

It was once the source of Athens' fabulous golden-age wealth before its hillsides were blackened by fire after fire and scandalously torched by a

foreign mining company.

Now an [ancient forest](#) south of the Greek capital is finally to be revived having suffered catastrophe after catastrophe.

In the fifth century BC, Lavrio was home to the silver mines that made Athens a superpower of the ancient world.

In the 19th century, long after the flow of silver had dried up, a French-Italian mining company won the rights to mine lead in the hills around Agios Konstantinos.

In those days the area was covered in a "dense mix" of oak, carob and Judas trees, according to Nikos Georgiadis of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

But the Roux–Serpieri–Freyssinet company wanted to tap the ancient mining shafts as quickly as possible. So according to the locals, they simply burned the forest.

Scandal

It set off a scandal, with Greek Prime Minister Epaminondas Deligiorgis accusing the company in 1872 of illegally "cutting down, burning and uprooting" the woods that earlier "stretched to the sea".

"Some aged oaks still stand in the area today and there are sparse oak bushes, indicating the existence of more extensive forests in the past," Georgiadis told AFP.



Ravaged: WWF experts walk through the moonspace of the burned forest near Athens.

But it was far from the last disaster visited on the woods. Two years ago nearly 50 acres of pine forest around Agios Konstantinos were gutted by the worst wildfires in more than a decade.

And since many trees had also been burned in 2012, the forest could no longer regenerate naturally, Georgiadis said.

But he said the calamities presented an opportunity to diversify from pine, whose resin is naturally flammable, and bring back more fire-resistant trees that previously existed in the area.

In November and December, some 300 volunteers and experts from WWF Greece, the local forestry agency and a state research institute replanted the area with around 15,000 trees and shrubs.

Climate change-proof

"We are trying to create a forest resistant to [climate change](#)," Georgiadis said, saying the hills are currently threatened by [soil erosion](#).



Nature fights back: a sapling pushes through the burned earth.

Among the 14 species planted are broad-leaved Valonia oak, downy oak,

carob, Judas tree, hackberry and laurel.

"Broad-leaved trees are the most resistant to fire," said George Karetsos, a veteran forester at the state Institute of Mediterranean Forest Ecosystems.

Out of the 15,000 plants and shrubs, most are saplings but some 2,000 are part of an experiment involving seeds, the WWF said.

Georgiadis said if the seeds take root they should grow into stronger trees.

"We hope it will lead to some new (reforestation) guidelines," he said.

Various chemicals and repellents were used to determine which method offers the best protection against rodents, birds and insects, Karetsos said.

"We wrapped some acorns in wire, others we placed in plastic tubes. Some were dipped in petrol and others were coated with anti-corrosive," he said.



A WWF volunteer replants trees on a burned hillside near Athens.

"Most fires in Greece are due to negligence and stupidity," said Yiorgos Machairas from the Lavrio forestry agency.

The 2021 fire that burned 172 acres of [forest](#) around the town began from a rubbish bin, he said.

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