

Tunisia's sandy beaches eaten away by coastal erosion

July 23 2024, by Guillaume GERARD



A man looks on as a digger spreads sand on a beach in the tourist town of Hammamet as authorities fight to protect the coast from rising sea levels and erosion.

In Tunisia's seaside town of Hammamet, bulldozers diligently shovel sand from a nearby desert onto a popular beach in an attempt to stop it

from disappearing due to erosion.

"This beach is the postcard image of Hammamet," said environmentalist Chiheb Ben Fredj peering nostalgically at the town's iconic Yasmine beach.

"It has been seared in our minds since our childhood," he added, as laborers worked to restore the central Tunisian waterfront to its former sandy glory.

Like many other [coastal areas](#) in North Africa, severe erosion has led to many of Hammamet's sandy beaches vanishing in recent years, taking a toll on the holiday hotspot about 65 kilometers (40 miles) east of the capital Tunis.

Coastlines across the world are in a constant natural flux, with the seas claiming and depositing sediment.

But human activity, including coastal property development and offshore sand mining, significantly accelerates [beach erosion](#).

Among other impacts, construction and coastal defenses in one area can stop sediment from traveling along a coastline, leaving existing beaches deprived of new material.

Studies have also shown the impacts of climate change, including rising temperatures and sea levels, exacerbate the phenomenon.



Environmentalists and government agencies have blamed badly designed coastal construction for worsening beach erosion.

Tourism draw

In the Mediterranean, where the British National Oceanography Centre says sea levels have risen at a higher rate over the past 20 years than the entirety of the 20th century, shorelines are changing rapidly.

The sea is also warming 20 percent faster than the rest of the world, according to the United Nations.

Tunisia's coastline has been a major asset for the Mediterranean country with a struggling economy, as it aims to host some 10 million tourists

this year.

Tourism accounts for up to 14 percent of the country's GDP, providing tens of thousands of jobs in a country where unemployment tops 16 percent and 40 percent among young people.

Tunisia has already lost more than 90 kilometers of beaches to erosion, according to official figures from last year.

Of the country's 570 kilometers of sandy beaches suitable for swimming, 190 kilometers are at imminent risk of disappearing, according to Tunisian reports.



A man walks next to rock armour built to protect the coastline from erosion in the tourist town of Hammamet.

A majority of the beaches most affected by erosion are located near cities.

Tunisia's environmental groups, as well as the government's Coastal Protection and Development Agency (APAL), blame the rapid erosion mostly on human activity and construction on the coast, which they say is further aggravated by climate change.

"Construction projects have not been designed to respect coastal dynamics," an APAL official told AFP.

'Not sustainable'

To save the Hammamet beach, one of Tunisia's worst-affected according to the World Bank, authorities last month began trucking in around 750 lorry loads filled with sand from the inland desert province of Kairouan, about 110 kilometers away.

APAL, which operates under the environment ministry, was in a race against time to refill the beach before the peak of tourist season.

But while the rebuilding of beaches, known as beach nourishment, may be a quick fix, "it's not a sustainable solution", said Ben Fredj.



Tunisia, which has a stagnating economy with high unemployment, relies on tourism for as much as 14 percent of its GDP.

"This sand may not last long," added the secretary general of the Environmental Education Association.

"It can be swallowed in a few days in the event of a storm", he said, as was the case in the summer of 2023.

The process can also prove expensive.

Coastal authorities estimated the cost of restoring sand to three beaches in Hammamet, Monastir and Sfax at 3.9 million Tunisian dinars (\$1.25 million).

But for locals, restoring their priceless seafront is worth the money.

The Yasmine beach "is a showcase for Hammamet," said Narjess Bouasker, who runs the town's Menara hotel and leads the regional hotel federation.

"We must take back our beach that the sea has swallowed," she said, calling for a balance between safeguarding the landscape, cherished by locals and foreign visitors alike, and fighting [coastal erosion](#).



Tunisia's coastline has been a major asset for the small Mediterranean country with a faltering economy.

"For us, the priority is not to touch the beauty of the city," she said.

Bouasker said she has seen increasing awareness among authorities, but refilling beaches with sand is still a gamble.

"We don't know how the sea will react", she added.

© 2024 AFP

Citation: Tunisia's sandy beaches eaten away by coastal erosion (2024, July 23) retrieved 23 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-07-tunisia-sandy-beaches-eaten-coastal.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.