

## Safeguarding the livelihood of rural communities and the environment in the Mediterranean through Nature-based Solutions



The Mara-Mediterra Partnership welcomes readers to this first e-Newsletter of the PRIMA funded **Mara-Mediterra** project. Launched on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 and with a foreseen duration of 36 months, the project aspires to promote the uptake of agro-ecological practices and eco-engineering solutions around the Mediterranean.

### A hectic run-in to present Mara-Mediterra's credentials!

From the very start, the consortium research teams grabbed every opportunity that presented itself to introduce the scope and expected results of the project.

Among these efforts, the presentation by **Mara-Mediterra's** Project Coordinator, **Dr. Vasileios Takavakoglou (SWRI)** at a side event of the COP27 on 11 November 2022 evidently takes the limelight. Speaking in the Session entitled 'Regional actions on land degradation, climate change resilience & food security', he emphasized the urgent need to transform current food production systems and management practices of our natural resources if we are to address the interlinked challenges of a changing climate and safeguarding human health and the environment through responsible consumer behaviour.



(Left) The session moderator, Ms Alessandra Sensi from the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), fully concurred with the bottlenecks and drawbacks to upscale the use of sustainable land management practices which Vasilis presented. (Right) Prof. Angelo Riccaboni, Chair of the PRIMA Programme, concurred that Mara-Mediterra's Living Labs bring a highly promising approach to share the project outcomes with farmers and other end users, decision-makers and to increase awareness among society as a whole.



Due credit must be given as well to the Algerian partner, the industry AMENHYD. AMENHYD's research team first held an Info-Day which was joined by many participants active in the forest and water management sectors, which was then followed by a launching event in Djelfa that was joined by four ministers in Algeria. Djelfa, also known as the Gateway to the Sahara, is the location where AMENHYD will be embarking on a micro-ecosystem afforestation protocol to get the country's flagship project, known as the Green Dam, back on track.



## Successfully combating desertification with the help of Nature!

Having proved himself as a highly successful business manager in Greece and Romania, Antonios Tirpintiris wished to give something back to the island where he grew up to young adulthood. He was particularly struck by the ongoing desertification on the western shores of Lesbos Island.

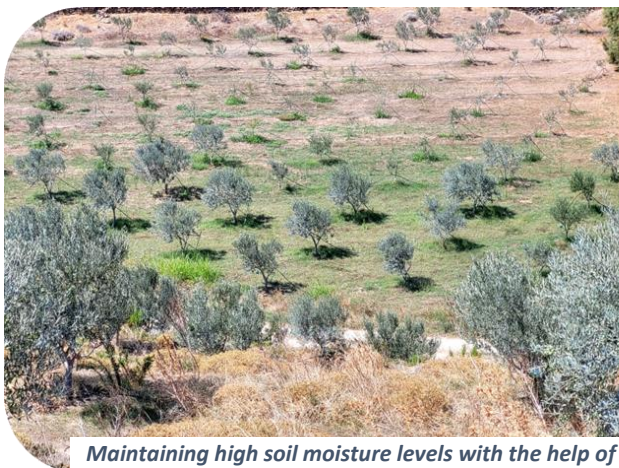
Antonios and his wife, Fotini, gave the Mara-Mediterranean Consortium a warm welcome at their Faros Estate in Sigris during a field trip organized as part of Mara-Mediterra's First Project Meeting.

First on the menu was a walk about on the estate where they had invested in the planting of no less than 44,000 olive trees. To anyone familiar with the acute scarcity of fresh water in this part of the North Aegean Island, this effort would surely have seemed against the odds, if not futile. Their determinedness paid off as this multitude of olive trees together with hundreds of palm trees they planted as windbreakers, effectively changed the micro-climate of the area. Antonios recounted how the annual rainfall doubled from a mere 400 mm when they first embarked on their initiative about a decade ago, to over 800 mm today.

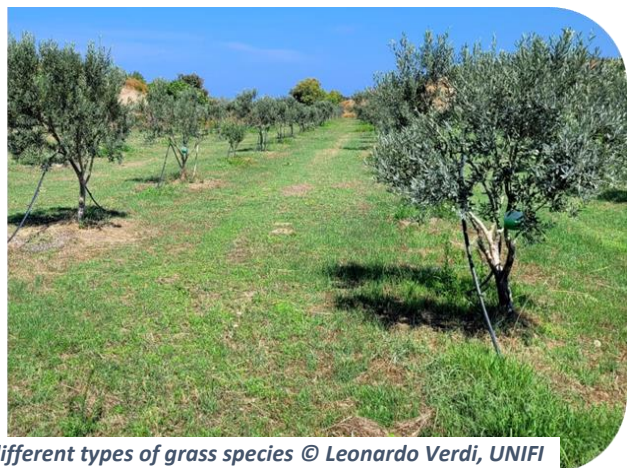


*Antonios Tirpintiros sharing his Nature-based Solutions to halt the desertification on the Island of Lesbos ©*

As the walkabout took place in the early afternoon with the temperature hovering around 30 degrees, Antonios had another surprise up this sleeve. He invited us to touch the ground and to everyone's astonishment, the ground was still feeling moist! He assured us that with olive harvesting just round the corner, the trees were not being irrigated. The real reason had to be ascribed to different types of grass, purposely introduced to maintain the soil moisture level as high as possible.



*Maintaining high soil moisture levels with the help of different types of grass species © Leonardo Verdi, UNIFI*



If the opportunity had presented itself, he would gladly have employed a larger work force, not least to control erosion e.g., by terracing the area. Yet, also for this challenge he had learned how to simply let nature take care: plants were encouraged to grow, particularly plants that grow into hedges and make deep roots. Antonios will clearly not be heard calling anything a weed, except for seaweed ... which is collected from the nearby seashore and added to a heap of everything else that gets collected as waste from the estate... as it makes for an excellent organic fertilizer!



*View of the Faros Estate, foreground: halting erosion with the help of plants © Leonardo Verdi, UNIFI*

Their long-term investment in nature has made the Faros Estate an important biodiversity habitat for plants, birds, and animals alike. They are deservedly proud also of the amazing quality of the Extra Virgin Olive Oil produced at their Sigris Olive Mill which is equipped with the very latest technology.

## Launch of initial set of videos on Mara-Mediterra's YouTube channel

The successful adoption of agro-ecological practices such as those practiced by Antonios Tirpintiris as well as of other farmers in Italy, Greece and Malta, are being recorded and uploaded to Mara-Mediterra's channel on YouTube. These clips will form part of an initial set of testimonials which bring the spotlight on the economic and environmental benefits of adopting practices such as the use of organic manure, minimum tillage, mulching and more. In parallel to this effort, which is led by Anna Dalla Marta at UNIFI, a further set of clips will bring the spotlight on the land and water degradation challenges affecting each of the 5 case studies in Mara-Mediterra.



These clips will feature prominently on the agenda of a first series of stakeholder workshops which are being organized on the theme: **'What are your Needs, What we can Offer'**. To obtain directly comparable outcomes, the agenda features brainstorming and other interactive sessions in which the participants will be invited to provide their views on why agro-ecological practices, including those mentioned above, continue to remain widely unpractised across Europe and around the Mediterranean Region, even though their economic and environmental benefits are well-proven in the research literature.

## Upcoming Events

**January 2023:** Organization of **First Series of Stakeholder Workshops** addressed to policy and decision-makers in the agriculture, water, environmental and land use planning sectors in Mara-Mediterra's hotspots of land and water degradation in Algeria, Egypt, Greece, Lebanon, and Turkey.

**March 2023:** One week visit of IRMCo's Senior Researchers, Anna Spiteri and Dirk De Ketelaere, to meet up with SWRI in Greece to prepare for a Mara-Mediterra 2 proposal submission to an upcoming PRIMA Call. This visit is sponsored by a **Travel and Mobility Grant** awarded to IRMCo by the Malta Council for Science and Technology. Foremost on the agenda will be to explore the further upscaling of Mara-Mediterra's current array of Nature-based Solutions, decision-support tools and cross-border transfers around the Mediterranean.

**April 2023:** Organization of **Mara-Mediterra Second Project Meeting** in Malta. Foremost on the agenda will be the evaluation of the outcomes of the first series of stakeholder workshops and of the outcomes of a pilot Living Lab run by IRMCo in Malta.

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