



## ***After Losing Crops to Drought, Sicily Fears Losing Tourism, Too***

Parts of southern Italy and other countries in the region are experiencing one of their worst droughts in decades. The authorities say they are working to at least save tourism.

**By Emma Bubola Photographs and Video by Gianni Cipriano**

Emma Bubola reported from Southern Sicily, touring the dried out farmlands on farmers' pick-up trucks.

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As tourists savored icy granitas under hibiscus trees and swam in the cool Mediterranean Sea, in the farmlands of southern Sicily, among hillsides so scorched they resembled desert dunes, a farmer watched recently as his cows headed to the slaughterhouse.

After months of drought, he didn't have any water or food to give them.

"It's devastating," said the farmer, Lorenzo Iraci Sareri, as tears fell on his tanned face, lined by 40 years of labor pasturing cows. "I have never seen something like this."

Parts of southern Italy and other Mediterranean regions, including Greece and southeastern Spain, are experiencing one of their worst droughts in decades. It is particularly devastating, experts say, because the lack of rainfall has been made worse by the higher temperatures caused by climate change.

Artificial basins where animals used to drink offer little but cracked earth. Wheat ears are small and hollow. Pergusa Lake in central Sicily, part of a natural reserve, resembles a pale, dry crater.



A water tank for cows in Leonforte, Sicily. With little food and water available because of the drought, livestock have been taken to slaughter.

Lorenzo Iraci Sareri, who has pastured cows for 40 years, said, “I have never seen something like this.”

But for many of these regions, the summer is also peak season for tourism, a key economic lifeline that the authorities fear is being threatened by news of water scarcity, and that they are trying to protect.

“We are forced to sacrifice the damage to agriculture, but we have to try not to damage tourism because it would be even worse,” said Salvatore Cocina, the head of Sicily’s civil protection.

He added that agriculture still accounts for the vast majority of water use, with the general population using just a fraction of it, even when it includes millions of tourists during the summer.

The authorities said they prioritized providing water to hospitals, to businesses that produce key assets like oxygen, and to vulnerable segments of the population. But also to hotels.

“The tourists don’t notice” the drought, Elvira Amata, Sicily’s top tourism official, promised.

Outside five-star resorts, in the arid South of the island, the signs were everywhere.

In Agrigento, which overlooks a valley holding the ruins of several Greek temples, the authorities are rationing water. Some homes on the outskirts have not received any in weeks.

Water scarcity has meant that a small number of small bed-and-breakfasts also had to pull some rooms from the market, or redirect customers to other hotels, said Francesco Picarella, the head of Federalberghi, Italy’s main hotels association, in Agrigento. But what hurt most were news media reports warning that tourists were “running away” because a lack of water, he said.

Since the reports started coming out, bookings dropped significantly, Mr. Picarella said. The region immediately responded by summoning officials and urging them to protect the tourist season.

Mayor Francesco Micciché of Agrigento at his desk. The mayor said the authorities had sought to preserve tourism by easing the rationing of the water in the city center, home to most bed-and-breakfasts.

A man and his grandson filling tanks and bottles with water from a fountain in Agrigento, Sicily.

The mayor of Agrigento, Francesco Micciché, said the authorities were distributing water more frequently to the city center, where most bed-and-breakfasts are, and they have made truckloads of water available to hotels. Some still complain about having to pay for the truckloads, but most hotels now can provide water, Mr. Picarella said.

“In the luxury sector I can’t tell them to ration showers,” said Isidoro di Franco, the general manager of Verdura Resort near Agrigento, as he sat at the bar overlooking green golf courses and lush pink and blue ornamental plants.

He said that the resort was restricting water use, and recycling water, but that it could not cut back on basic necessities.

The regional government is planning an advertising campaign to counter fear of the drought. Sicilians insisted that southern Sicily was not only ready to welcome tourists, but also desperately needed them.

“If you take us away tourism too, we are going to die,” said Cinzia Zerbini, a Sicilian spokeswoman for Coldiretti, Italy’s biggest farmers association.

Many farmers are already desperate. One, in the hills near the southern Sicilian town of Caltanissetta, said his goats were drinking from basins so depleted that one of them had died as the mud dried in her stomach.

In northeastern Sardinia, the main lake is at a third of its capacity. A local government representative said officials had to make a choice between tourism and agriculture, and completely halted running water for irrigation.

“We decided to sacrifice agriculture,” said Giancarlo Dionisi, the local prefect of the Sardinian province of Nuoro. While farmers would be compensated for their losses, he said, the damage of having waterless hotels could last longer.

“If tourists who come can’t shower, they create a negative word of mouth,” he said.

Many in Sicily were so appreciative of the financial benefits brought by tourism that they did not object to water consumption by tourists during the drought. Others raised objections.

Some farmers said that the heightened attention on visitors in Mediterranean regions was enabling a kind of tourism in which local conditions are not taken enough into consideration.

“Locals are getting fractious,” Francesco Vincenzi, the president of the Italian association of agricultural water boards, said in a statement. “They feel threatened in the availability of a primary good like water.”

In the drought affected Spanish region of Catalunya, locals started a campaign called #NoEnRaja, which roughly translates to “you can’t take something from nothing.” They argued that together with agriculture and industry, the booming tourism sector was responsible for the mismanagement of scarce resources.

According to Barcelona's institute of regional and metropolitan studies, the water consumption of the average guest at a luxury hotel is five times that of a resident, contributing to what the campaign called "the injustice in the use of water."

"If we don't get forage and we don't get water, we will have to slaughter them all," said Luca Cammarata, a goat farmer near Caltanissetta, Sicily.

A goat died after drinking clay from an almost empty artificial basin in Caltanissetta.

In Portugal this winter, as reservoirs emptied, orange farmers complained that golf courses were still being watered.

"First come the people, then the golf courses, then you," Pedro Cabrita, an orange farmer, paraphrased a local official as telling him.

Some officials have responded to the apparent imbalance. On the Greek island of Sifnos last year, the mayor called for a ban on the construction of private swimming pools. In Spain, a recent ban on refilling swimming pools included fancy resorts.

Samuel Somot, a researcher at Météo-France, the National Weather Service in France, said increasingly harsh Mediterranean droughts risked future desertification as well as “water wars.”

The problem is likely to intensify. Higher temperatures mean that animals and plants are thirstier while lakes and basins evaporate faster, said Luigi Pasotti, a director with Sicily’s Weather Service for agriculture.

This year, Coldiretti said that Sicilian farms lost over 50 percent of their wheat harvest on average.

In the southern region of Puglia, honey production dropped 60 percent because it was so dry that many plants could not flower. The olive harvest there was predicted to fall by half because of the drought.

In Sicily, the drought is now bringing longstanding water management problems to the fore. Large quantities of water are lost because of poor infrastructure. In Agrigento, that can be over 50 percent, officials said. Desalinators and wells were dismissed in the past.

A man lifting a cover to give residents access to cleaner water. The fountain they usually draw from has been polluted by algae.



An abandoned desalination plant in Porto Empedocle, Sicily. The drought has brought to the fore longstanding water infrastructure problems.

The Italian government has announced it would allocate 12 billion euros, roughly \$13 billion, to water projects. After years of hearing promises, experts are skeptical that the projects could be put in place anytime soon.

But the issue needs to be addressed fast, said Edoardo Zanchini, the director of Rome's climate office. "Otherwise the agriculture lands will be abandoned," he said, "and abandoned lands become deserts."

The Bank of Italy said the output generated by agriculture in Sicily had dropped last year because of climate induced shocks, while tourism grew. Many farmers in southern Sicily said that they could not withstand another bad year.

"If we don't get forage and we don't get water we will have to slaughter them all," said Luca Cammarata, a goat farmer near Caltanissetta, as he pushed his skinny goats toward the few green sprouts left on his yellow pasture. Another year like this would amount to a "death sentence," he said.

"Should we all move to the coast and do tourism?" he asked.

**Emma Bubola** is a Times reporter based in London, covering news across Europe and around the world. More about Emma Bubola

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