

Activism Rooted in Tradition

Artistic Strategies for Raising Environmental Awareness in Anatolia

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1. For an overview of the factors and policies contributing to human-induced environmental change in Turkey, see Adaman Fikret and Murat Arsel, eds, *Environmentalism in Turkey: Between Democracy and Development*, Ashgate, Burlington, Vermont, 2005.

2. The article shares statistics stating that only 5.1 per cent of Turkey's land is under protection (as opposed to the global average of thirteen per cent) and only 1.2 per cent of this land is under 'strict' protection. Now the government is conducting a legislative review of even these strictly protected natural areas, which puts them in danger of being tampered with and developed. Çağan H Şekercioğlu, Sean Anderson, Erol Akçay and Rasit Bilgin, 'Turkey's Rich Natural Heritage Under Assault', *Science* 23, December 2011, pp 1637–1639, DOI: 10.1126/science.334.6063.1637-b

3. Biologist Çağan Şekercioğlu quoted in an article about Turkey's

As Turkey's economy grows at dizzying speed, so do its energy needs, its population count and its rapid urbanization process. Combined, these factors are placing insupportable pressure on the country's environmental health.¹ Citizens living in crowded urban centres make up roughly seventy-five per cent of the country's population. They now find themselves facing a host of environmental problems such as air and water pollution, and insufficient waste management. Turkey's race to meet its growing energy needs is also transforming its rural landscape, displacing its rural populations and contributing to the disappearance of forests and rare species of wildlife in regions that support some of the richest biodiversity in the world. In a recent letter to *Science Magazine*, a group of biologists working in Turkey explain that Turkey's environmental laws and conservation efforts have continually been eroded to reach a point of crisis.² The letter states that in an atmosphere in which economic development has trumped all other environmental concerns, the government has been modifying existing environmental laws and passing new ones to remove any obstacles to the construction of dams, mines, factories, roads, bridges, housing projects and tourism developments on formerly protected lands.

Without environmental education, and suffering from enduring economic inequality, the Turkish population lacks awareness or concern about the impact of development on the country's long-term environmental health.³ Although environmental organizations such as Greenpeace Turkey and TEMA (Türkiye Erozyonla Mücadele, Ağaçlandırma ve Doğal Varlıkları Koruma Vakfı, or Turkish Foundation for Reforestation and Combating the Erosion of Soil and Habitats) have been in operation since the 1990s, significant concern and support for environmental causes only occurs when familiar modes of existence and ways of life are threatened. Rural populations whose livelihoods are being eradicated and whose villages are being demolished by the government's unsustainable development initiatives have staged some

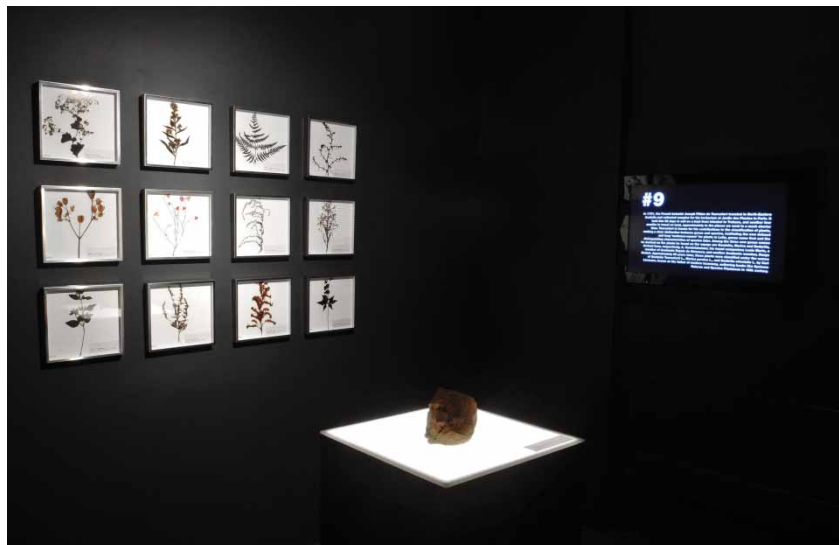
disappearing biodiversity states that only 1.3 per cent of Turkish citizens see environmental issues as a major concern. Jeremy Hance, 'Turkey's Rich Biodiversity at Risk', *Mongabay*, 28 March 2012, http://news.mongabay.com/2012/0328-hance_turkey_biodiversity.html#

of the most vocal protests. Even then, there is a lack of mutual identification amongst those who have been displaced or those who have lost their livelihoods that might bring their individualized goals together in a unified environmentalist movement. Enter the artists and independent film-makers who take it upon themselves to contextualize, amplify and draw linkages between these voices of dissent in the hope of articulating the greater losses at stake in Turkey's environmental crisis. The projects profiled here take the beauty of Turkey's diverse geography as a backdrop against which they frame some of the most controversial development projects altering the country's landscape, its biological makeup and its demographics.

Comparative studies of environmentalist movements in Asian countries have shown that Asian environmentalism tends to be culturally indigenized. Religious discourses and cultural values play as important a role in environmentalist struggles in Asian countries as the teachings of secular nationalist environmentalism adopted from European and North American countries.⁴ Sociologist Gabriel Ignatow believes that for developing countries the future health of the planet will depend less on secular nationalist environmentalism and more upon hybrid environmental movements that combine ethnic and religious identities with environmental concern by utilizing transnational support, high technology and mass media and communication strategies. In case studies that focus on Islamic environmentalism and ethnic environmentalist struggles in Turkey, Ignatow highlights local groups who gained a sense of empowerment from their ethnic or religious ties to challenge the authority of the state and to contest government-backed (or sponsored) development projects.⁵ Projects that similarly embody the hybridized characteristics of Turkey's environmentalist struggles are profiled here in order to illustrate how public support for conserving the region's diverse heritage and its

4. See *Asia's Environmental Movements: Comparative Perspectives*, Yok-shiu F Lee and Alvin Y So, eds, M E Sharpe, Armonk and London, 1999.

5. One of Ignatow's case studies focuses on the Alevi population of the Aegean town of Bergama and narrates their efforts to shut down the Ovacik gold mine, which poisons their drinking water with the large amounts of cyanide it uses for mineral extraction. Gabriel Ignatow, *Transnational Identity Politics and the Environment*, Lexington, Plymouth, 2007



xurban_collective (Hakan Topal and Güven Incirlioğlu), *Botany Carcinoma*, mixed media, installation, 2010

cultural traditions can be linked to a belief in the need also to conserve its diverse habitats.

Güven Incirlioğlu and Hakan Topal, two artists who make up the xurban_collective, visited Turkey's north-eastern provinces, a region classified as one of the world's thirty-four 'biodiversity hot-spots' because it supports a tremendous range of species, some very rare.⁶ A project titled *Botany Carcinoma* (2010) grew out of these travels.⁷ It catalogues the region's botanical specimens, rocks and architectural ruins in photographs and videos arranged in installations that are interspersed with quotes from historians and theorists such as Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault and Eric Hobsbawm. The videos interweave micro- and macro-cosmic views of the landscape, as close-up shots of wildflowers in a valley, or water rushing across stones in a mountain spring, cut to long shots of mountain ranges and fields dotted with the ruins of abandoned villages. The textual excerpts that accompany the photos and video footage speak to people's ties to land, as well as the writing of histories that either legitimize or sever these ties. 'Can continents have a history as continents?' enquires Hobsbawm. 'Let us not confuse politics, history and geography, especially not in the case of these shapes on the pages of atlases, which are not natural geographical units.' Taking inspiration from Hobsbawm, xurban_collective poses the question: 'Can one write a history of Asia Minor?'⁸

'Anatolia' is the more common term used to describe the subcontinent of Asia Minor, most of which is encompassed by the Turkish Republic. To write a history of Anatolia would mean hearkening back to periods of ethnic and cultural diversity that predate the rise of the nation-state and the division of peoples on different sides of newly drawn borders. A 'heterochronic' view of history, as termed by Foucault, would compress disparate pasts from different time periods together, so as to legitimize their existence on the same site.⁹ Xurban_collective's writings make reference to the Roman historian Strabo, who wrote about the diversity of peoples in Anatolia more than 2000 years ago. One need only look back a hundred years, however, to get a glimpse of how many different ethnic tribes and cultures recently called Anatolia home. Ethnographic studies of the region, such as one commissioned by the Ottoman government for the 1873 Vienna World Exposition, profiled dozens of different ethnicities in the chapters devoted to Anatolia, many of the groups particularized by different religions, languages, customs and ethnic dress.¹⁰ The following statement by the xurban_collective conjures a vision of this bygone diversity:

For the people of Anatolia, these plants had a totally different calling, each in his/her native language, intertwined with daily life often signifying the plants' qualities in folk medicine, color, looks and their overall benefit for humans... these species of wild plants spread across national borders under different names, just like the mountains and the rivers. Before national borders and nation-states, a diverse linguistic pattern possibly held true in Anatolia, Caucasia and the Middle East, each folk had their own names for rivers, mountains, plants, trees and indeed villages and towns.¹¹

A parallel is drawn here between the disappearing biodiversity of the region today and the impoverishment of its cultural diversity over the

6. Turkey's biodiversity supports 9000 plants (one-third of which are found only in Turkey), 150 amphibians and reptiles, and 500 species of birds, not to mention many large carnivorous mammals such as wolves, bears and lynx. Hance, op cit

7. *Botany Carcinoma* was originally commissioned for the exhibition 'Blind Dates', which explored Turkish/Armenian history and relations, and was on view at the Pratt Manhattan Gallery in New York from November 2010 to February 2011.

8. Xurban website, <http://xurban.net/scope/botanycarcinoma/>, accessed 14 April 2012

9. Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, vol 16, no 1, spring 1986, pp 22-27

10. Osman Hamdi Bey and Victor Marie de Launay, 'Les Costumes populaires de la Turquie en 1873', *Levant Times and Shipping Gazette*, Constantinople, 1873

11. Xurban's website, accessed 14 April 2012, <http://xurban.net/scope/botanycarcinoma/>



Halil Altındere, still from *Oracle*, video, 10 mins 20 secs, 2010

past century. The monocultures that have been imposed upon these lands through processes of industrialization are decimating the region's variety of plant and animal life. Hence xurban_collective's ominous use of the word 'carcinoma' in their title to conjure visions of a deathly toxicity. In a similar manner, the monolithic national identities imposed upon a disparate Ottoman citizenry in the years leading up to and after the formation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 negated the local people's tribal affiliations, ethnic traditions and individuated spiritual practices. Imposing the identity of the modern nation-state upon this diverse citizenry forced them to abandon their rural, agrarian ways of life, their ties to land, and the codes of conduct that had arisen from those agrarian traditions in order to capitulate to national constructs of authority. Industrialization had been a cornerstone of Turkey's modernization project and was a key to the growth of the nascent nation-state in the twentieth century. Since the 1980s, however, the country has veered towards a path of unchecked neoliberal growth, with little regard for sustainable development or conservation, and paying mere lip-service to social and environmental justice.¹² The question worth posing here is whether xurban_collective's vision of permeable borders transgressed by plants, rivers and people, drawing on Foucault's notion of a heterochronic history,

12. For an account of neoliberal policies in Turkey's modernization and industrialization programme, see Fikret Şenses, ed, *Recent Industrialization Experience of Turkey in a Global Context*, Greenwood, Westport, Connecticut, 1994.

could encourage Turkish citizens to question the state's programme of unchecked neoliberal growth and unsustainable development, and produce a shared investment in the health of the Anatolian soil.

Halil Altındere, a Turkish artist of Kurdish heritage, addresses a long-standing environmental battle between the Turkish government and Kurdish villages in his videos *Mirage* (2009) and *Oracle* (2010). The videos are set in the south-eastern region of Turkey where Kurdish villages have been flooded and villagers displaced by the building of dams and hydroelectric power plants (HEPPs) over the past two decades. This is fallout from the Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi (GAP), a sprawling series of dams built by the Turkish government to generate electricity and supply irrigation for the large-scale agricultural farms it is developing in this arid region. According to the objectives listed on GAP's website, the project sounds progressive from a social and economic standpoint; they are to enhance the presence and influence of modern organizations and institutions in order to remove those traditional ones which impede development; to support family unity and strengthen democratic patterns of intra-family relations by considering changes triggered by development; to reduce the rate of unemployment in the region, which is above



national averages; to encourage women's participation in the labour force; to bring infant and child mortality and fertility rates closer to national averages; to take relevant measures to identify and prevent health problems that may follow the expansion of irrigation in the region.¹³ Upon closer reading, however, the reader starts to discern the potential complications that are being covered over by this marketing speak. For example, what exactly does it mean to remove 'traditional' institutions in order to have the populations better comply with 'modern organization'? What types of time-honoured modes of subsistence or cultural identity markers may be lost in the process? And what kinds of 'health problems' are going to result from the expansion of irrigation in the region, either from the widespread use of pesticides on large-scale farms or new diseases introduced by humidifying what had once been an arid climate?

Mirage and *Oracle* see past the GAP's greenwashing practices to tell a different story – that the construction of HEPPs is providing large profits for private interests while permanently altering the area's local populations and its soil. The dams will maximize return on the area's natural resources over the course of their lifespan, which is an average of fifty years, after which this region's younger generations will inherit losses from the environmental degradation wrought by the dams. Both videos include scenes that bring together the odd pairings of Kurdish traditions with visions of landscapes that have been drastically modified. In *Mirage* we are greeted with the uncanny apparition of a bulldozer speeding across a parched plain, its bucket filled with Kurdish men praying to the heavens in synchronic movement, ostensibly for rain. In another scene, men kneel and pray on equally parched ground, as they are baptised from a bottle of Evian poured onto their heads. In yet another scene, a man tries to resuscitate a drowned pregnant woman as her body lies prone beside a dammed lake. Such symbols equate the disruption of the natural course of the rivers' flow with the disruption of the lives of people who have drawn their sustenance from these rivers for centuries.

Oracle opens with the surreal image of a village that has been submerged, save for its minaret, which emerges from the middle of a lake. This is the Kurdish village of Halfeti, flooded in the 1990s when the Euphrates River was directed into the Birecik Dam (part of the GAP project). Halfeti is one of several ancient cities in the region whose Greek and Roman architectural treasures were submerged in the flooding.¹⁴ *Oracle* then turns its camera onto Harran, another picturesque and ancient settlement in south-eastern Turkey that was first settled 5000 years ago and is known to have housed one of the first universities in the history of Islamic civilization. Altindere situates his Kurdish protagonists inside Harran's striking indigenous architectural dwellings made of mud-brick and resembling giant beehives. In one scene, we see a mother standing in front of these structures in a defensive pose, holding a child in one arm and a gun in the other. In another, an older woman sits inside the dwellings, reading coffee grounds to tell a fortune. One would need to be able to speak Kurdish to be able to understand her premonitions, but one can presume that they contemplate and lament the future fate of these lands. Altindere's use of female protagonists in *Oracle* functions as a reminder that Anatolia

13. Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi website, <http://www.gap.gov.tr/about-gap/objectives-of-gap>, accessed 10 May 2012

14. The antique city of Zeugma was also flooded by the Birecik Dam. Hasankeyf, another antique city that lies further east and is now a village settled by Kurds, is also slated for destruction by the construction of the Ilisu Dam. The non-profit Turkish environmental organization Doğa Derneği has worked in tandem with Hasankeyf villagers to launch a protest campaign to stop the building of the dam.

may have once been settled by matriarchal cultures, a history that is reflected in the Turkish translation of the Greek-derived word Anatolia: ‘Anadolu’, which in Turkish equates female fertility with the fertility of the soil. By casting contemporary Kurdish villagers in the remains of these ancient civilizations, Altindere illustrates the Kurds’ indigenous ties to this soil to further underscore the injustice of their displacement from their ancestral homelands. In the spirit of their matriarchal traditions, he casts the Kurdish women as the oracles, storytellers and fighters who struggle to preserve their traditions and land rights.

In a manner that recalls Ignatow’s study of religious and ethnic minorities, Altindere appeals to the Kurdish people’s indigenous sovereignty to halt the pillaging of their natural resources by the private sector. Yet the spiritual rituals that feature in both *Mirage* and *Oracle*, such as the oracle telling a fortune or the prayer for rain, are not specifically Kurdish traditions. They are pan-indigenous references that point towards a global ecological history, drawing links between how colonizers seized and transformed indigenous lands in previous centuries, and how national governments and the private sector continue to enact similar land-grabs today. White-collar businessmen also make an appearance in *Oracle*, attempting to exploit the recreational possibilities of the new artificial lake they have constructed. In one scene, a man swims across the lake in his suit. In another more absurd scene, he attempts to surf its waveless waters atop an ironing board, perhaps an allusion to the poor planning techniques, faulty infrastructures and unfeasibly optimistic projections for the tourism industry that are guiding dam development projects. Yet at the end of *Oracle*, the man in the suit appears to have been subdued – we see an image of him buried up to his shoulders and ‘planted’ into the ground by the locals.

The sad reality, however, is that the private sector has not been so easily subdued by civic initiatives in Turkey. Two recent documentaries that survey the construction of hydroelectric power plants in Turkey’s Black Sea region demonstrate the imminent crisis that these and other development initiatives pose to Turkey’s environmental health. *İşte Böyle (Damn the Dams)*, directed by Osman Şişman and Özlem Sarıyıldız, and *Bir Avuç Cesur İnsan (A Few Brave People)*, directed by Rüya Arzu Köksal, were recently screened at the 2012 Istanbul Film Festival, followed by a panel discussion about the environmental degradation wrought by the building of the dams.¹⁵ Many HEPPs are being erected with faulty infrastructure and shoddy construction to maximize short-term profit and gains, often at the expense of ensuring the long-term sustainability of the region’s natural resources. Clips of interviews with public officials included in the films divulge the frightening fact that within twenty years the government plans to divert the entirety of the region’s abundant rivers and springs into dams to harness them for hydroelectric power.

Taking stock of all that there is to lose, both films include ample footage of the lush Black Sea region. It consists of green hills, alpine plateaux and forest-covered mountains whose highest peaks lie under cloud cover. Mountain springs have carved paths through each of its valleys and villages have mushroomed beside these streams. The villagers earn a livelihood from working the fertile land, and a rich local agricultural

15. A third film, *Against the Flow*, directed by Umut Kocagöz and Özlem Işıl, was also screened on 13 April 2012, before the panel discussion at the Istanbul Film Festival. I was unable to access this film for this article.



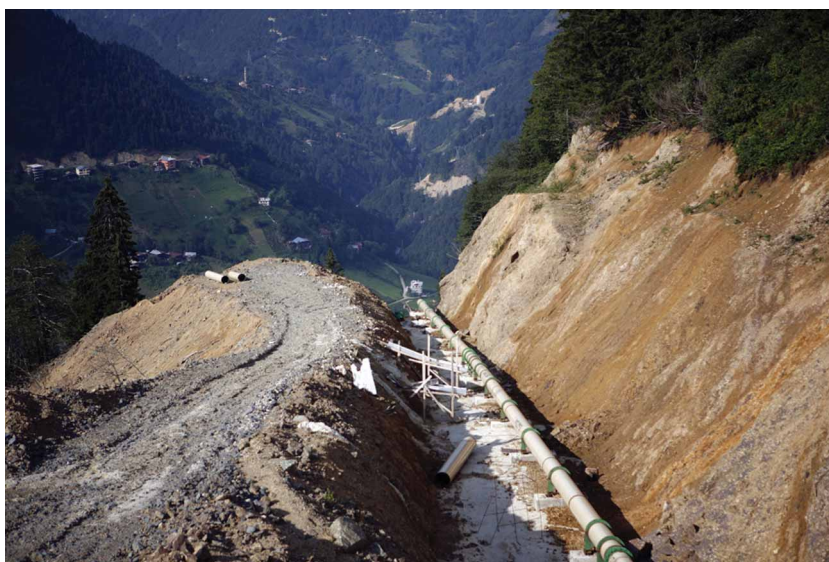
Rüya Arzu Köksal, *Bir Avuç Cesur İnsan (A Few Brave People)*, film still, 2011; the sign reads: 'they don't care about us, they only want our water'

economy supports small-scale fisheries, organic farms and husbandry. Harnessing these streams for hydroelectric power will dry out the forests and pastures, exsiccate orchards and farms, and annihilate the livelihoods of local populations. It will also accelerate the shift Turkey has been undertaking from a once agricultural economy towards an industrial one – agricultural products are now on Turkey's list of imports, whereas in the past it was always able to produce a high and diverse yield of agricultural products to feed its own population. In *İşte Böyle*, we see a villager reading aloud an angry letter she wrote to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, criticizing him for his edict that every Turkish family has a duty to bear at least three children in order to contribute to a young and lively labour force. She asks how she is supposed to support three children when her mode of subsistence has been eradicated. Another villager in the same film proclaims: 'If my village dries up, what use is a nation or a government for me?' It becomes clear that leaving their village would be a death sentence for these people; there is no other kind of life they are prepared to lead. The documentary footage mirrors Altındere's fictional narrative, as some of the villagers most vehement in opposing the rape of their valleys by the developers are the women. It suggests that the agrarian

feminism visualized in Altındere's videos is not a nostalgic fabrication but a powerful force that has the potential to be directed towards a more expansive environmentalist movement. Footage of elderly women throwing themselves in front of bulldozers is juxtaposed with their rough handling by government security forces, only to intensify the villagers' anger at their mistreatment.

Whereas the film by Şişman and Sarıyıldız focuses on the inhabitants of one particular village and documents their isolated struggle, Köksal's film starts with a similarly pinpointed focus but gradually expands to survey the coalitions these villagers form with other opposition struggles in the region. In the beginning, their protests seem hopelessly meagre: a handful of people are seen marching with placards down the main street of their village as their neighbours look on with disapproval. Over the course of the film, however, the populations of different villages come together to form a coalition called 'The Brotherhood of Rivers', and their protests culminate in a massive march against HEPPs in Istanbul. Köksal explains that this movement did not grow out of ties to one single ethnic community, although ethnic ties did help. A good segment of this opposition movement is ethnically Laz – a minority group native to the Turkish and Georgian Black Sea coast whose ties to the region date back to ancient Greece. But equally large portions of the movement include people of differing backgrounds such as the Hemshin peoples of Armenian heritage, and many others who are ethnically Turkish.¹⁶ Rather than sharing a common ancestral heritage, these people share the common need to derive sustenance from their farms and the desire to maintain their agrarian ways of life.

After offering an optimistic vision of this growing environmentalist movement, Köksal's film ends with some terrifying statistics: of the sixty dam projects that were taken to court by locals, thirty-nine of them were stopped by the courts after successful arbitrations; yet the



16. Rüya Köksal, email message to the author, 24 April 2012

Rüya Arzu Köksal, *Bir Avuç Cesur İnsan (A Few Brave People)*, film still, 2011



Osman Şişman and Özlem Sarıyıldız, *İşte Böyle (Damn the Dams)*, film still, 2012; a local fishery owner talking about factors affecting his business

state's vision for the year 2023 is to reach 4000 HEPPs in total. These statistics reveal just how unsustainable the government's growth plans are – if water sources are tapped at such speed and on such a scale, what sort of regenerative potential will there be for this country's soil and water? Moreover, some of the main environmental problems that accompany the building of hydroelectric dams – such as waterlogging, salinization and increased seismic activity – may unleash unprecedented environmental catastrophes in years to come. These figures also divulge just how large an opposition movement is needed to derail the government's nightmarish vision for the future.

The projects profiled here contain the hybridized modes of collaboration and communication that Ignatow believes are necessary for effective environmentalist movements in developing countries. They attempt to build a bridge between the environmental awareness that has been passed onto Turkey's educated elite from developed societies such as Europe and North America, and the knowledge and traditions that are intrinsic to the people of Anatolia, to modes of life and ways of being that are closely tied to its rural, agrarian past. For the xurban_collective, transgressing state indoctrination to draw upon the history of Anatolia as a continent is about accepting a heterogeneous heritage that is constituted by the variety of peoples and civilizations. For Altındere, gleaning wisdom from past civilizations, including one that was home to the first university in the Islamic world, can encourage a preservation of rural livelihoods while enabling members of urbanizing Kurdish populations (such as the artist himself) to stay connected to their ethnic roots. The resistance struggles launched by the rural populations profiled in films such as *İşte Böyle* and *Bir Avuç Cesur İnsan* draw strength from their own cultural resources while collaborating with those from outside their region, such as the lawyers who help them wage their legal battles and the delegates of international environmental organizations who offer them strategies to keep their land. Their willingness to speak openly with

documentary film-makers such as Köksal, Şişman and Sarıyıldız enables them to spread word about their struggles to broader audiences who can contest the unsustainable development projects steered by flawed leadership.

Turkey's environmental problems, including an impending energy and food crisis, do not come with easy solutions. Although the public cannot be expected to solve these problems on their own, they should feel emboldened to voice their opposition when the government sells out for short-term solutions that take too high a toll on the health of the environment. Those who are most vocal about protecting the well-being of their land are the country's poorest rural populations. Educated urban residents often discriminate against the rural migrants in their midst, seeing them as the cause of overpopulation, pollution and a host of other urban environmental problems. They need to understand the forces of industrialization that are increasingly dispossessing rural populations of their livelihoods in the country and forcing them to migrate to the cities. An ability to put aside class and ethnic divides long enough to sympathize with the grievances of Turkey's rural populations may perhaps reveal a shared fate; for the country's rapid economic growth and development are taking a high environmental toll from which no one is exempt.