



ΥΠΟΥΡΓΕΙΟ ΝΑΥΤΙΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΑΙΓΑΙΟΥ

MINISTRY OF MERCANTILE MARINE AND THE AEGEAN



Municipality of Chios

OUR RESPONSE TO THE FIRES
Working together for a better Chios

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United Nations Partnerships in Strengthening the Role of Civil Society in Fire Management

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Captain Tsakos
Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen

Looking down from space to the planet Earth during the year 2012, the crew of the International Space Station observed smoke columns from fires burning in all continents. While in some ecosystems of the world fires occurred as a natural factor, or fires used as traditional and sustainable tool in land management, there were some smoke columns arising from locations which were considered safe haven of fire-sensitive ecosystems and biodiversity. This year severe fires destroyed large parts of such vulnerable ecosystems, for instance in the UNESCO World Natural Heritage sites in Southern Patagonia of Chile, or on the Canary Islands in the Atlantic. However, society was affected, too. In 2012 massive fires burning in North America, the Mediterranean region and Australia forced evacuations of more than 75.000 people. Wildfires also caused a large number of fatalities and high economic damages. Globally more than 160 firefighters and civilians lost their lives in wildfires in 2012, almost 3000 people were injured.

On 18 August 2012 Earth observation satellites registered an extended smoke column arising from the Island of Chios and spreading from the Aegean Sea southward toward the island of Crete. What the satellites could not see: The severity and impact of a disaster which deeply affected the ecology and society of Chios. The destruction of a major part of the world's unique resource of mastic is a tragedy that is unprecedented in the fire history of the Aegean and of Greece. The fires of August 2012 affected the heart of Hellenic culture.

Chios, an island with a rich, ancient land-based cultural history, cannot be understood without the surrounding maritime environment of the Aegean and the Hellenic tradition of seafarers. Born and rooted in the culture of Chios young men were motivated to become seafarers, and, as once stated by Captain Panagiotis Tsakos, the founder of the Tsakos Foundation, to become a *kalos kapetanios* – a *good captain* – who would become a global envoy of the Hellenic maritime spirit.

The Aegean history, not very much different from the Hanseatic environment from where I am stemming, is telling us that no captain, no ship in the world can serve its mission without a homeland, without the land base, from where they are leaving – and to which they always will return, sometimes following the lights of a fire set ashore, fires that were set to signal both – farewell and welcome back home. A land-sea symbiosis to which I would like to return at the end.

The core mission of the “Maria Tsakos Foundation – International Center of Maritime Research and Tradition” is the promotion of maritime culture and tradition in Greece and abroad. It was established as part of the Tsakos Group's inherent social responsibility vis-à-vis the shipping industry, the marine environment and the society as a whole. Alarmed and concerned by this destructive fire Captain Tsakos approached the Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, in August 2012, to seek for advice to follow up this major disaster. The Secretary General responded by expressing his regrets about the destructive fire that affected Chios and suggested that the Global Fire Monitoring Center would work with the Foundation.

Indeed, the United Nations system is mandated and available to serve nations and people, and to protect the global environment. But there is a need for a sound symbiosis between the “political and administrative” arm of the United Nations and those who own the United Nations system – the people. Without the spirit and the engagement of civil society in preserving the global environment the UN system would not be in the position to manage this mammoth task.

Similarly, there is a symbiosis between humans and fire. In an opening address to the last International Wildland Fire Conference in South Africa in May 2011, which I had the honor to convey to the conference attendees, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon stressed:

“Wildland fires destabilize ecosystems and the global atmosphere, and have clear implications for human health and security. Unlike other natural hazards, wildland fires are primarily caused by human activities. Measures to prevent them – such as education, awareness-raising and capacity-building – are well known and within reach. Community-Based Fire Management is particularly important.”

Globally the vast majority of fires are caused by people, thus they can be prevented and controlled. Thus, any fire management system, regardless if based on advanced technologies, or on traditional knowledge, can only work if people are participating actively and taking responsibility.

The Secretary General further stated:

The transboundary effects of wildland fires associated with long-range smoke transport and emissions are prompting the international community to strengthen cooperation in fire management. International organizations and civil society groups are working to build capacity, develop advanced technologies and promote sustainable land-use practices.

The UN system is strongly committed to this effort. Our work encompasses many aspects of fire management, including agriculture, forestry, health, science, the environment, emergency response and weather forecasting and monitoring.

We welcome the efforts of fire specialists to build a culture of prevention and to develop a spirit of global cooperation.

The UN system is available to provide the best professional advice, to support countries in developing land and fire management policies and fire management capacity with the ultimate aim to make natural and cultural ecosystems resilient to damaging fires. But the success of all these efforts are depending on the active participation and taking responsibility of civil society.

The Global Fire Monitoring Center, based in Germany, is serving the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction. Its most efficient mechanism is the Global Wildland Fire Network, within which numerous regional networks, government bodies, and civil society organizations, together with the UN specialized agencies and other non-UN international organizations, are cooperating. The Global Fire Monitoring Center and the Global Network are available to facilitate the dialogue between the science community, the people responsible for and affected by fire, and the policy makers.

In its relationships with Greece the Global Fire Monitoring Center is looking back to a long tradition of cooperation. Since the late 1970s we have exchanged expertise and views on fire management in the

Mediterranean Basin. The first European Symposia on Fire Ecology took place in 1977 and 1982 in Freiburg (Germany) and explored the environmental and human ecology of fire. Close relationships with Greece developed in the 1980s and have resulted in efficient networking and partnerships, such as our cooperative work with the European Center on Forest Fires based in Athens, academics at the Aristotelion University of Thessaloniki, and the Hellenic Agricultural Organization "Demeter".

These institutions are working together in order to understand the changes of land-use and the changes of cultural fire regimes over time. We intend to explore why the many fires that historically occurred or were used in the Mediterranean Basin, including the islands of the Aegean islands and mainland Greece were different, were less destructive. Why was the historic cultural environment more resilient to fire? Was this due to more intensive land cultivation, more intensive use of biomass, due to more dependencies of people on the produce, and thus a more active the protection of their lands? What are the consequences of the rural exodus, the urbanization of the young generation with regards to land cultivation?

The reflections about the Aegean brings me to my personal insight in the fires in Greece. Back in 1985 the Greek Foundation *Idryma Kratikon Ypotrophion*, invited me to visit the country and to enter in a dialogue with Greek scientists on forest fire ecology and management.

The summer of 1985 was a hot summer in Greece during which many large, devastating fires affected the country. On Sunday, 18 August 1985, I took the boat from Kavala to Thassos Island. From a long distance I could see the huge smoke column rising over the island and a fast developing forest fire. On this very day it was one of more than 50 wildfires burning in Greece.

Arriving in the harbor of Limenaria I saw a detachment and command post of the Greek Navy, led by an Admiral, several ships, including Greek Navy warships anchoring in the Bay of Limenaria, and Navy soldiers getting ready to fight fires.

I talked to the Admiral and offered assistance, explaining that I was a reserve officer of the Federal Germany Navy, commanding officer of a Navy ship, but also a forest fire expert, my civilian profession. Some 15 minutes later a Navy Lieutenant knocked at the door of my hotel room and reported to me: "Sir, the government in Athens has authorized us to use your assistance."

What followed was the finally successful attempt to save some of the forests of Thassos, and the village of Maries. I did my best to support decisions of the governor of Thassos, who was in charge of handling this the emergency situation. And I worked with General Skoulas, Greek Army, who had put up his fire fighting headquarters at the community building of Maries. A carefully, calmly and responsibly acting officer.

Navy soldiers arrived from Limenaria. I gathered and instructed them how to fight the fires with the few water buckets, hand tools and wet towels they brought uphill from the coast. We called aerial assistance by water bombers, they did several successful drops. I instructed the villagers how to defend their gardens and houses against the flames. In the end, the fire on Thassos Island had caused huge damages, but Maries and other villages were safe, and the mariners had bravely contributed to this success.

When the fires around Maries calmed down I checked the situation in the forests nearby, which were still smoldering. There I encountered a burning old chestnut tree. This tree had caught flames, the inside of the trunk of the tree was glowing, but the tree was still standing, alive with green branches. I sat down nearby and accompanied tree in its final way to destiny.

Here I felt that there were two different souls in the two chambers of my heart which had governed my response to the fire in Thassos. In one chamber was the heart of a forester and ecologist, the mission to protect our forest from fire destruction. The other chamber was the heart of the Captain of a ship, used to command seafarers, and now for the first time to guide the mariners to battle a forest blaze. Here in Thassos I felt the unity, the symbiosis of both.

By reflecting about these experiences in 1985 I would like to congratulate and encourage Captain Tsakos to support the next generation of Chios islanders to become a *kalos kapetanios* – a good

captain – in the spirit of the preservation of the Hellenic culture and the environment, both at sea and at home ashore.

Thank you, Captain, excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, for your attention and your patience.