

## ECOTOURISM IN BÜYÜKKONUK, NORTH CYPRUS

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### ABSTRACT

Ecotourism has become a significant notion for people and tourism sector after UNWTO announced year 2002 as “World Ecotourism Year.” Human being has been damaging nature and ecosystem since the very first day he discovered fire. With years passing by, advancing technology and using more chemicals than ever before have increased this destruction level. Mankind always used the nature as if it’s a never-ending source but people recently realized that even nature itself has a limited rejuvenation ability, which may need centuries, and some damages done may be almost irreversible. One of the ways for helping nature is ecotourism. This study contains examination and research of ecotourism attitude that brought into life in 2006 in Büyükkonuk, which is in Karpaz Peninsula of North Cyprus. Besides that, Ay Phodios (quest house), which is the best example of this ecotourism approach and guest house concept in Büyükkonuk, is examined in terms of using space and ecological materials used in it. One of the focus points of the study is how inhabitants of Büyükkonuk benefited from ecotourism, what did ecotourism contributed to the region and intended use of ecotourism-friendly buildings in Büyükkonuk. In the century we are living in, the countries which raised their awareness about sustainable tourism realized that; it may only be provided by being in step with a natural and fertile environment, while considering negative impacts of the possible developments on this environment, started to take precautions. Still, it’s questionable if these precautions are enough or not. Both in urbanization and structuring, preserving green spaces and keeping the balance of ecological balance has a lot of importance for our society and future generations.

**Keywords:** Eco tourism, sustainability, environment, ecology, tourism, Büyükkonuk

### KUZAY KIBRIS BÜYÜKKONUK’TA EKOTURİZM

### ÖZET

Dünya Turizm Örgütünün 2002 yılını, “Dünya Ekoturizm Yılı” olarak ilan etmesiyle, ekoturizm kavramı insanlar ve turizm için önemli bir adım olmuştur. İnsanoğlu ateşi keşfettiği andan itibaren, ekosistemi tahrip etmektedir. Yıllar geçtikçe, teknoloji ve kimyasalların artması bu tahribat, daha da artmıştır. İnsanoğlu doğayı her zaman sonsuz bir kaynakmışçasına kullanmıştır. Fakat insanoğlu doğanın kendini yenileyebilme kabiliyetinin sınırlı olduğunu ve bunun için uzun bir zamana ihtiyacı olduğunu daha yeni yeni fark etmeye başlamıştır. Bu çalışma, Kuzey Kıbrıs’ta, Karpaz Yarımadası’nda bulunan Büyükkonuk Beldesi’nde 2006 yılında başlatılan ekoturizm hareketinin araştırılması amacıyla yürütülmüştür. Araştırmada ekoturizm olgusu, misafir evi kavramının en güzel örneklendirmesi olan, Ay Phodios Misafir Evi kullanılan ekolojik malzemeleri ve kullanım alanları da incelenmiştir. Çalışmada, Büyükkonuk Beldesi’nde yaşayan insanlar beldedeki ekoturizm hareketinden nasıl yararlandıkları ve ekoturizm hareketinin Beldeye kazandırdıkları incelenerek, Büyükkonuk Beldesi’ndeki ekoturizmi etkileyen binalar ve bu binaların kullanım amaçları tespit edilmeye çalışılmıştır. Çalışma sonucunda, beldede yaşayan insanlarla yapılan anket değerlendirilmiştir. Yaşadığımız yüzyılda sürdürülebilir turizmin, ancak doğa ile uyum içerisinde, doğal ve verimli bir çevrede gerçekleştirilebileceğinin farkına varan ülkeler, kalkınma çalışmalarında çevreye verilebilecek zararları da göz önünde bulundurarak, bu konuda önlemler almaya başlamışlardır. Yapılaşma ve kentleşmede, doğal alanların ve ekolojik dengenin korunması daha sağlıklı bir toplum ve gelecek için büyük önem taşımaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Eko turizm, sürdürülebilirlik, çevre, ekoloji, turizm, Büyükkonuk

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most important elements in tourism development is natural sources (Aslan, Z. and Demircioğlu, G., 1995), the biggest point of attraction of tourists is the natural beauties and heritages of the countries they visit. They make their travel preferences from places that still have its natural beauties, historical heritages, unpolluted sea and a convenient climate for a vacation.

Cyprus Island, which is the third biggest island in Mediterranean Sea after Sicily and Sardinia, has a geographical characteristic that reflects all the possible natural richness of Mediterranean Sea. With its untouched natural beauties, preserved historical heritage that carries the traces of many civilizations, bright sea, flora and fauna and climate; Cyprus has significant ecotourism conditions and remains on the agenda of the World. Complete Mediterranean climate prevails on the island; warm to hot, dry summers and mild to cool, wet winters (URL 1, 2011).

Karkas Peninsula in north Cyprus has always been an escape place for people who wanted to walk away from people and search for peace. Karpaz, which includes TRNC's national park area, is the true beauty of nature in our modern times. Once upon a time, Büyükkonuk Province in Karpaz Peninsula had the best untouched nature of all Mediterranean. It always drew tourists' attention with its nature and historical heritage. Once the people living in that area were trying to make a living out of farming and stockbreeding; now they are getting involved into their keep with tourism. Also one of the other things that add value to villages' heritage is its sites (location) on an ancient graveyard. People and nature factors are mostly ignored in unsupervised and fast industrialization process of our time and this endangers all the living species with a range of issues that can be generalized as environmental pollution (Aslan, 1993). Although this industrialization is blamed as the main reason of pollution; tourism, industry without a chimney, has also its negative impact on our environment. Tourism, which has a very close relationship with environment by the terms of sustainability, chases general short-term advantages while marketing its resources and damages these resources that give life to it (Aslan and Aktaş, 1994).

Depletion of sources, impacts on nature, arising infrastructure problems, the pollution and waste that growing tourism leaves, in capabilities of recycling and getting rid of that waste because of insufficient infrastructure and capacity, abuse of fresh water sources, destruction of forests, damages done to seashores and beaches, soil erosion, subversion of natural diversity, damaged historical heritage, noise pollution caused by aircraft and crowd are main environmental negative impacts of tourism industry (Özbey, 2006).

These negative impacts of tourism cause disaffection for both visitors and tourist-accepting, touristic communities. However, high quality tourism experience can only be provided if natural resources and historical and environmental heritage are preserved. Sustainable tourism is the only way for protecting natural, environmental and socio-cultural sources and keeping the loss at minimal levels while keeping tourism income and activities at maximum and ecotourism is seen as the best way to provide it (Avcıkurt, 1996). Shortly, pollution affects tourism in every way possible. For an improved and sustainable tourism, its environment must be clean as much as possible. Besides all of these facts, there is always a cultural transformation in touristic places which leads these places to lose their characteristics. As a result of pollution (of every kind) number of visitors diminishes and tourism loses its sustainability.

Nature is the first thing that comes to mind when we think about environment. However it isn't right to constraint environment only with nature. Environment must be understood as the surroundings or conditions in which a person, animal, or plant lives or operates and interacts. This contains earth, air, water, underground, the surface, the atmosphere and space itself. Hence, environment is everything surrounding, our world. Environment is the biological space that millions of species owe their life. Environment consists of interacting organic and inorganic units. If there is no environment, then it means there is no human being alive (Erdoğan, 2003).

The problem statement for this paper was; Tourists negative impacts on ecotourism despite the fact that there are many actions taken for sake of it in Büyükkonuk in Karpaz Peninsula and why ecotourism doesn't covers a larger area in Cyprus.

The main focus of the article was; how inhabitants of Büyükkonuk are benefiting from ecotourism, what it gave to the municipality and what are the uses of ecotourism-friendly buildings in Büyükkonuk town?

## Ecotourism in Büyükkonuk, North Cyprus

The research question for the article was; what actions are taken to improve ecotourism in Büyükkonuk? Are these actions and activities enough and sufficient for ecotourism to cover a larger area in the region?

The research objective for the article was; how can we minimize the negative impact of tourism on natural and historical heritage, which are the main sources of an improved tourism?

The objective of this article is to prove ecotourism's necessity and importance that is the output of relation of ecological approach with tourism, which can devastate nature if not monitored, by the terms of architecture, tourism and nature in our century.

Ecotourism, even though it was not conception at that time, started with scientists Earth, air and water are polluting statements in the 1960s. After realization of these warnings which weren't taken seriously at that time, "back to the nature" movements have started and in 1992 Rio Earth Summit, sustainability of resources had become an current issue and criteria's for the World and the nature are presented. These criteria is summarized as improving the use of nature while saving it and making local people benefit from tourism without assimilating or losing their cultural heritage and concept of ecotourism has shown. Ecotourism is a rapidly growing branch of tourism and it's believed that it's the sustainable form of tourism. The International Ecotourism Society defines it as: Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people (URL 2, 2011). It is a tourism policy that appreciates and loves natural values; protects environment and wild-life without damaging natural sources and nature; rejects negative impacts on natural sources preserves biological diversity; knows that sources are not only for today but for future; supports and improves local people's socio-economical status while keeping an eye on local cultural values and traditions (Erdoğan, 2003).

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The research methods used for the article were, before going to Büyükkonuk with the aim of research, information about the problems were, the focus points and aim were gathered about it. Plans were made according to uses of ecotourism-friendly buildings and how they affect the life there. After the problem was revealed, keywords of the problems were researched and examined. After completing these, analyses about the problems and objectives were made by going to Büyükkonuk town. Answers to questions like "When did ecotourism start?" "How did it applied?" were searched. Ay Phodios Guest House, best example of Ecotourism in this region was examined. Photographs of the region and Ay Phodios were taken. An interview with Gulay Komili, one of the pioneers in ecotourism and an important person in Büyükkonuk Municipality, conducted. Information gathered about ecotourism from the very first day to present. Tourist's damage and impact on ecotourism were analyzed. For missing information, internet sites, the library and books were used.

When theoretical stage finished, pictures of ecotourism-friendly buildings, Ay Phodios Guest House and natural environment were taken. All the phases that Büyükkonuk went through by means of tourism were researched by interviewing people in Büyükkonuk. In surveying stage 25 people in Büyükkonuk questioned with 3 different questions. While considering survey results, supporting data that helped to create these 3 charts is collected. Survey results were in percentage format. In the first survey, answer for "What was the increase in rates of tourism after eco-tourism applications in Büyükkonuk?" was searched. Charts have been prepared according to answers. In the second one, question that was determined 4 factors asked: "Which one of these 4 factors effecting eco-tourists to stay shorter than expected? Charts were also prepared according to these answers. Lastly, in the third question, "What was the average age group of participants in the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> eco-days and what was the participation rate among all?" was asked and made visual narrations with the results. In the end, all the gathered information, data and visuals evaluated and the article was written.

## 2.1. Case Study

Büyükkonuk (Fig. 1) village is located at the base of the "The Panhandle" of Cyprus (Fig. 2) where seashore and mountains meet. Büyükkonuk is surrounded by lush greenery, olive groves, farm pastures and forests. Apart from that, wild donkeys find their place to live in that habitat in Büyükkonuk. Although it is known that the whole village is built on a cemetery, the construction date is unknown (Büyükkonuk Municipality, 2011).

Formerly known as Komi Kebir, this village with a population of about 800, located on the foothills of the Five Fingered Mountain Range as it stretches into the 'panhandle' that is the Karpaz. Surrounding the village are well tended farmlands and orchards of olive and carob, vineyards and almond trees, and farms with dairy cows and flocks of sheep and goats which are fed from the fields of barley and other fodder. From this agricultural background, the local villagers are diversifying into sustainable tourism with the objective of preserving the Cypriot culture, the environment and the traditional activities for future generations. Through small family run guest houses and restaurants, festivals and Sunday markets, the villagers open their doors for visitors to join them in the nostalgia of traditional village lifestyle; there is good food as well as demonstrations of activities such as cheese making, bread baking, broom tying, lace making, weaving and even mud-brick making and other activities like trail walking and donkey rides (URL 3, 2011).

Old buildings stand as reminders of earlier times and include over fifty traditional arched houses, four olive mills, and numerous churches and religious buildings of note in and around the village (URL 4, 2011).



Fig.1. the Overview of Büyükkonuk (Google Map, 2011).

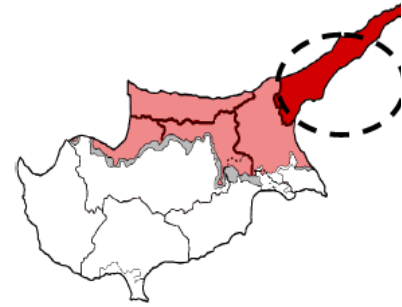


Fig.2. the Map of Cyprus (TRNCPIO, 2011).

## 3. THE ECOLOGICAL ACTIVITIES IN BÜYÜKKONUK

### 3.1. Establishing Ecotourism in Büyükkonuk and Projects



Fig. 3 a, b. Büyükkonuk Municipality's Building.



Fig. 4. The road in front of the Büyükkonuk Municipality's Building.



Fig. 5. A view from one of the Büyükkonuk streets.

## Ecotourism in Büyükkonuk, North Cyprus

Büyükkonuk is the first, Ministry confirmed, eco-touristic village in North Cyprus (Fig. 3-5). Later another village in Girne also took this title but it's not as important as Büyükkonuk. There are no extensive works done or planned there. Main objectives of Büyükkonuk Ecotourism Society are sustainable rural development, supporting rural life, and preserving Cypriot village life, culture and traditions with the help of ecotourism (URL 3, 2011).

The very first actions about eco-tourism were taken 4-5 years ago. First of all, Büyükkonuk Eco-Tourism Committee had been established then merged with municipality which they have worked together in lots of projects. In their first Project they established another committee for Copy Center and Management Center. But it wasn't functional enough. A total of 7 committees were established overall. During Ayşe Dönmezer era, Copy Center was opened and they reduced the committees one by one. Copy Center was a 2 year long Project. After the first steps, experts came to the village and made a research on with what did the village remembered on; what was famous about that village. Then they suggested different 5-6 logos as the village's sign. Inhabitants of the village had chosen their own logo by voting. They took the example project of ECOAGRO and villages around. After a while, the Eco-Tourism Committee had become legalized and took the name Eco-Tourism Institute. The Institute then started an environmental planning project with Karpaz Dostları (Friends of Karpaz).

With the improvements in eco-tourism around the region, a place that was closed for the last 18 years restored and reopened by villagers to sell handcraft items. A woman from the village opened a traditional Cyprus food restaurant with the donations from the EU.

A nearly-rotten oil mill was repaired and put back to use. Now there are 45 women learning Cypriot handcraft in that mill. It's been said that there would be continual education and production in all village. Also 3 hostels were built which 2 of them are in operation and 1 will open soon. They're publishing Eco-Village newspaper which is mostly based on researches and useful information about eco-life (Komili, 2011).

The primary goal of the Büyükkonuk Eco-tourism Association is to promote sustainable rural development and protect the Cypriot village lifestyle, culture and traditions through the promotion of eco-tourism (URL 5, 2011).

### 3.2. Renovation and Solar Energy Project

They made restorations and landscaping to the Church (Fig. 6-8) and festival area which are across the school. They set used solar-powered lights to illuminate the area. 2 big sized solar panels are used here while 5 are used to illuminate the road to Büyükkonuk Municipal Facilities.



Fig. 6. Ay yorgi Church.



Fig. 7. Ay yorgi Church.



Fig. 8. Solar-powered light elements in front of the Ay yorgi Church.

### 3.3. Rainwater Saving Project

Not so long after these projects, they started "Rainwater Saving Project". Water tanks that were placed in the courtyard of mosque saved rainwater which provided free and healthy way to water the plants there (Fig. 9 a,b,c,d).



Fig. 9 a,b,c,d. Rainwater storage place in village mosque.

### 3.4. Eco-days

The Institute and Municipality were organizing Eco-days (Fig. 10 a, b) together for increasing natural awareness. Apart from that the Institute there is a member of a European eco-village network (Generation Eco-Village Network) which is has a lot of special requirements for joining.

### 3.5. Organic Pazar

Every Sunday is the Bazaar day of the village where villagers try to raise their income by displaying and selling their handcrafts (Fig. 11 a, b). They are all using paper and cloth bags instead of plastic ones because plastic bags are dangerous for all environment.



Fig. 10 a, b. Ecoday in front of the Ay-yorgi Church.

Fig. 11 a,b. Organic Bazaar Place.

### 3.6. Water Treatment Plant

The water treatment station located in the Municipal of Büyükkonuk is established in order to supply potable water to its citizens, due to the fact that the tap water is not potable in Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. The people of Büyükkonuk fill up their own drink water from this station for free. Sea water desalination in the region, where ecological life is supported, solved the problem of potable water of the region to a large extend (Fig.12 a, b).



Fig. 12 a. Water Treatment Plant.

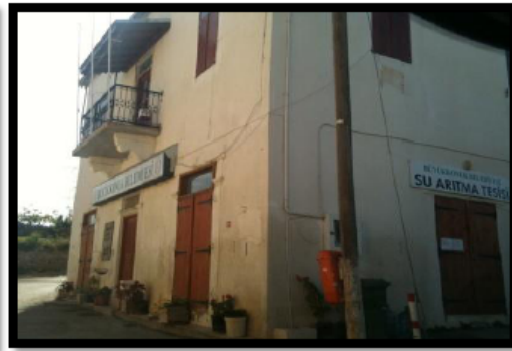


Fig. 12 b. Water Treatment Plant.

### 3.7. Ay Phodios Guest House

A visit was made to Ay Phodios Guest House (Also 3 hostels were built which 2 of them are in operation and 1 is opening soon) in Büyükkonuk which is under the title of eco-tourism. Ay Phodios is completely made of adobe but only its ceiling was made of wood (Fig.13). Ay Phodios was originally the name of the hill behind the village. By the villagers, it's commonly recognized as the village's symbol. There are 4 bungalow houses and a small restaurant. Even though buildings were new-built, they have the harmony with traditional village houses because of the architectural style and adobe and wooden material used for building them. Other features of the buildings include wattle ceilings and ornamented window frames. Furniture and textures of the guest house also resembles traditional Cyprus style (Fig.14, 15). They are organizing activities like cycling, trekking, donkey-riding trips and feeding animals on farms, organic farm activities, handcraft displays and olive oil soap making.



Fig. 13. The ceiling of the Ay phodios. House.



Fig. 14. The curtains of Ay phodios House.



Fig. 15. The furnace for making bread.

### 3.8. The Activities of the Association Include

Bi-annual Eco-Day festivals, where music, folk-dancing, village theatre, donkey rides and many other activities compliment the stands selling local traditional foods and crafts make a fun day out for the whole family. Sunday markets, where every Sunday throughout the year, the members have stalls selling a good selection of pastries, breads, kebabs and drinks as well as farmer's produce like fresh eggs, vegetables, olive oil, wine and other specialty products.

Ladies folk dancing group, where the mature women members get training in basic folk-dancing so they can add to the variety, color and action at the festivals and other events, empowering women with self confidence to make them proud and responsible for preservation of their culture.

Training of members and other villagers in areas like ecological awareness, sustainable living, fundraising, small business management and other topics that strengthen them as members of a civil society (URL 5, 2011). Founded in 2005, the Eco-tourism Association now has an office in the village and many active members, most of them women (URL 5, 2011).

### 3.9. Other Activities

There are many more activities will take place soon, such as advertisements for hostels, eco-day festivals etc. There will be special festivals for educating and entertaining children. They are also planning to invite Generation Eco-Village Network to these organizations. A campaign named "Help the Nature" will be held in the region beginning from 1<sup>st</sup> of April.

## 4. RESULTS

The question: What is the increment rate of tourism in Büyükkonuk after ecotourism? is arranged in 3 different ways and asked to 25 people living in Büyükkonuk. Questions such as: How was tourism in Büyükkonuk like before

ecotourism by the terms of incoming tourist rate and how is it now after ecotourism started? are asked in the survey done to 25 people living there. The result is: Büyükkonuk has already been a touristic place, thanks to its cultural and natural heritage. After ecotourism movements started, at rate in increase is lack of advertisements. Advertisements were started after they decided to hold the very first Eco-Day event. These advertisements are still carried on from that time (Fig. 16). A website by Büyükkonuk Ecotourism Society (URL 5, 2011) was designed for helping and guiding people who wanted to visit. After plenty of ads and commercials and Eco-Day's, tourism rate (according to incoming tourists) has increased by 75%. This increase can be seen on the chart as well. At first glance, tourism rate increased by 25% in the region.

Firstly, four factors, which were the reasons of why tourists are staying for a short time, was specified as answers to the survey question. The question "Which one of these four factors were forcing tourist to keep their visits short-termed?" was asked to 25 people in Büyükkonuk and they were asked to choose one of these 4 factors as an answer. Five out of 25 people said it's because of "tourism agencies", 5 said it's because of the "fatigue", 7 people said it's because of "certain months" while 8 people picked it's because of their "holiday concept". Answers given were transferred into pie chart and visuals were prepared according to ratios (Fig. 17).

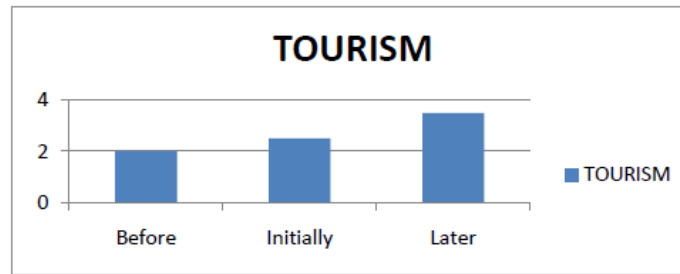


Fig. 16. The increase of tourism income in Büyükkonuk before and after ecotourism.

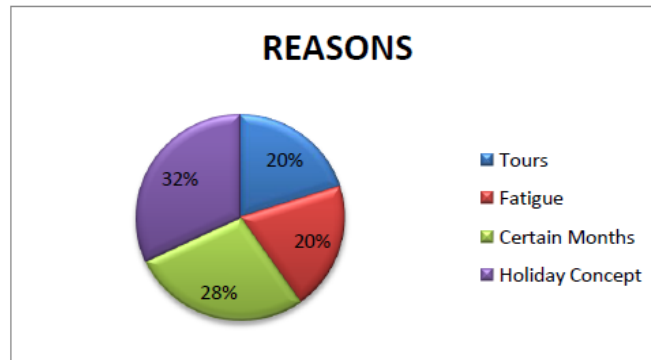


Fig. 17. Result of researches about the reasons of why eco-tourists are visiting for a short time.

The question: What was the average age of people participated in 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Eco-days and what was the ratio of them? was also asked to these 25 inhabitants in Büyükkonuk (Fig.18).



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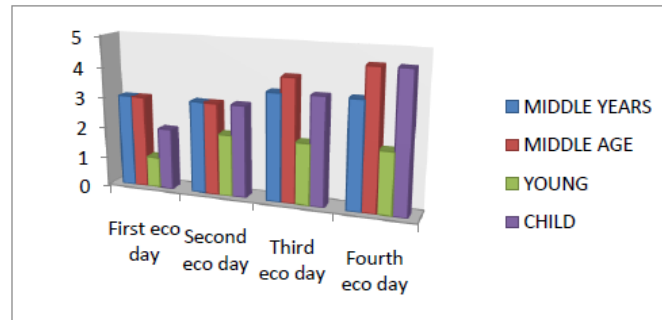


Fig. 18. Attendance rates for eco-days.

While most of the participants in the first eco-day were mostly middle-aged; on the second eco-day young and middle-age and groups were participated equally. On the second eco-day, young age group's participation increased by 1/2. Besides from these children age group doubled their participation rate in the second one even though there was just a little participation in the first one. For the 3<sup>rd</sup> eco-day, middle age group had the most participants among all. Their participation rate increased by 1/3 compared to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> eco-days. Middle age and child age groups equally participated in the 2<sup>rd</sup> eco day. While middle years and child age groups participation increased by 1/6, young age group stayed the same as the last one. In 4<sup>th</sup> eco-day middle years and young age group participation rate stood still but middle-age participation rate increased by 1/8. Child age group was also increased by 1/3. Because the most increasing rate was with the child age group, in 15<sup>th</sup> May 2011 a special Children Eco Day was organized.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Büyükkonuk was accepted as the first eco-village in Cyprus. It's important to sustain and preserve these features in Büyükkonuk as much as possible for ecotourism is an applicable field that protects biological diversity and cultural values, supports economical growth.

Instead of evaluating ecotourism as just an income channel for locals, it is needed to be considered from ecological point of view while paying attention for nature to not to be damaged. Precautions for minimizing pollution and negative impacts must be taken into consideration before they would harm the nature. Environmental awareness, nature consciousness and culture must become widespread with ecotourism events and activities. Flora and fauna in Cyprus has a great diversity and has a great potential as tourist attraction which must be considered. For that, eco-touristic potential of regions must be evaluated and consume-protect balance must be preserved while these events take place. Necessary steps to be counted on for improving ecotourism which started in Büyükkonuk;

- Natural environment and traditional buildings must be preserved to have a sustainable ecotourism
- Educations must be given to people by experts.
- Ecotourism notion in the region must be enhanced.
- A suitable planning for the region must be done by means of ecotourism.
- Rules for ecotourism concept must be issued for the region.
- Products and marketing and advertising should be made for ecotourism in the region.
- Observing and stating pros and cons (both physical and moral) of ecotourism conception in the region.

In summary; solutions for longer visits should be found and applied according to the ratios of the 4 factors (reasons) of short visits of tourists that shown in the second chart in data evaluation and data visualization. For a better and faster regional development, providing sustainability and enhancing ecotourism conception in the region, solutions should be put into practice. Actions for increasing participation rate in Eco-Days and promoting ecotourism in the region must be taken and monitored closely. If all these operations result in success, sustainability of ecotourism in Büyükkonuk may be provided for a better environment and also can be a good model.

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\* All photos taken by Ayşegül CENGİZ.