

Expats battle to save olive trees from pizza flames

By June Field in Corfu and Andrew Alderson

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A British woman has had death threats and hate mail for leading a campaign against the illegal felling of Corfu's famous olive groves.

Hilary Paipeti and Harry Tsoukalas, her business partner, are living in fear after warnings of reprisals from British expatriates and other foreigners on the island.

The threats follow the pair's decision to make a television programme and run an article in their monthly magazine, The Corfiot, condemning the practice of destroying the trees and shipping them to Italy for firewood and cheap paper.

The pair have also been criticised for "outing" a British couple who chopped down an ancient olive tree in their garden. Mrs Paipeti, 47, an author, estate agent, publisher and environmentalist - who created the 125-mile Corfu Trail in the Ionian island - said: "I am absolutely devastated by the whole situation.

"After the article appeared I began to receive hate mail and serious death threats, mainly from six or seven people who posted their anonymous messages on three different Corfu-related websites. I think I know who they are. I live alone in a remote location so it has been very worrying."

Mrs Paipeti, who is separated from her Greek husband, spoke from her home in Afra, central Corfu, which is surrounded by "olive tree graveyards". Thousands of trees, some hundreds of years old, have been cut down.

For generations, olive farming has been a way of life for Greeks - it is estimated there are four million trees in Corfu alone. However a litre of olive oil now costs less than Coca-Cola, and most young people prefer to work in the tourist resorts than toil in the fields.

Lorry loads of olive wood leave Corfu every week on ferries bound for Bari, Italy, where they are often used as wood for pizza ovens, according to the Corfu Heritage Association, founded by Mr Tsoukalas. Grove owners get about £28 for every tree.

Mrs Paipeti said some of the e-mails to message boards were threatening, libellous and obscene. "I contacted my lawyer, who had the messages removed," she said. "But then they soon reappeared on different sites."

Mr Tsoukalas, 41, a Greek Australian who has a farm in Arillas, north-west Corfu, says he is determined to protect the olive groves. He produced a television documentary that was aired on a Corfu channel to inform locals of the problem.

"Thousands of acres have been devastated by chain saws," he said. "All across the island, there are stumps instead of beautiful ancient groves. In the long run it will damage our tourism, which keeps most Corfiots in employment."

Mr Tsoukalas said he was attacked and beaten as he made the documentary. "I filmed some Greek and Albanian workers cutting down olive trees in Daphni village," he said. "They rushed over, punched me and smashed my camera but I was able to make a quick getaway in my car.

"From then on, the expat community began to attack Hilary and me - and set out to destroy us and our business."

Mrs Paipeti and Mr Tsoukalas jointly run a property agency that sells old village houses for restoration. It is called LuvCorfu and clients are mainly from Britain.

In recent months, business at the once-prosperous agency has slowed to a trickle. Mr Tsoukalas is downhearted that the Greek and English communities have turned against him.

"I have lost inestimable earnings," he said. "I am considering returning to Australia."

The action that led to the most hate mail was an article that identified a British couple, Tony and Ginny Bray, who had cut down olive trees on their property in Daphni, north Corfu. The Corfu Heritage Association said that the couple could face jail under Greek law if prosecuted.

Mr Bray, who has nine grandchildren, insists the tree was felled because it was unsafe. He said: "Just when we thought the harassment had died down, Tsoukalas pulled up outside our house with a video camera and intimidated us."

The Brays are taking legal action against Mr Tsoukalas for invasion of privacy but are against with the threats made to him and Mrs Paipeti. Meanwhile, Mrs Paipeti does not believe that the Brays are involved in the hate campaign. Some other Britons who live in Corfu are extremely concerned about the trees.

Sue Tsigoti, who runs a travel agency with her Greek husband in Acharavi village, said: "I am horrified what I see around Corfu. My husband comes from an agricultural background so I do understand what a gruelling job farming is but they are cut by amateurs. It is an ugly sight and very sad."

One of the few island mayors who have spoken out against the disappearing trees is Stephanos Poulimenos, of Achilleaon council. He is trying to introduce tougher laws to prevent further destruction. "I am really against this - it destroys the entire landscape and upsets the ecology - but we are powerless to stop it," he said.