

THE OLIVE WARS

Greeks demolish ancient groves for Italian pizza

By June Field

Made famous by Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals*, the Ionian island of Corfu attracts millions of tourists every summer, in part because of the welcome shade of its centuries-old olive groves that swathe the slopes of the island.

Initially introduced and cultivated by the Venetians, it is estimated that there are four million trees on the island, but they are disappearing at an alarming rate. 'We are facing an environmental disaster,' warns Hilary Paipeti, a British author and real estate agent, who has lived on the island for more than a decade.

Despite the fact that Greek law forbids the clearing of such groves, local farmers are selling them off for a few euros to illegal gangs of loggers, who clear away entire plots at a time. As a result, the northern hills of Corfu are already scarred by ugly 'bald spots'. Every week, container-loads of this wood are shipped to the Italian ports of Bari and Brindisi.

'Gangs cut them down with chainsaws. Our beautiful trees end up as charcoal for Italian pizza ovens,' says Harry Tsoukalas, an Australian-Corfiot businessman who supports conservation organisations such as the Corfu Heritage Association. He claims that every month some 'seven or eight thousand trees are felled'. According to him, grove owners get about £28 for each tree sold.

This mafia-style activity was first recorded in my news article for *The Sunday Telegraph* in March 2005. We witnessed trucks parked beside groves in the Corfiot hinterland with gangs of foreign labour, mainly Albanians, felling trees, leaving the stumps behind.

This problem is not confined to Corfu but is rife around the Greek islands and mainland, where local authorities appear to turn a blind eye to land clearance of this kind. For generations, olive farming was a way of life for Greeks. However, a litre of olive oil now costs less than Coca-