

# 'Barbarians' come in bulldozers to fight second battle of Marathon

The Guardian 14/5/01 p.10

**Michael Howard** in Marathon

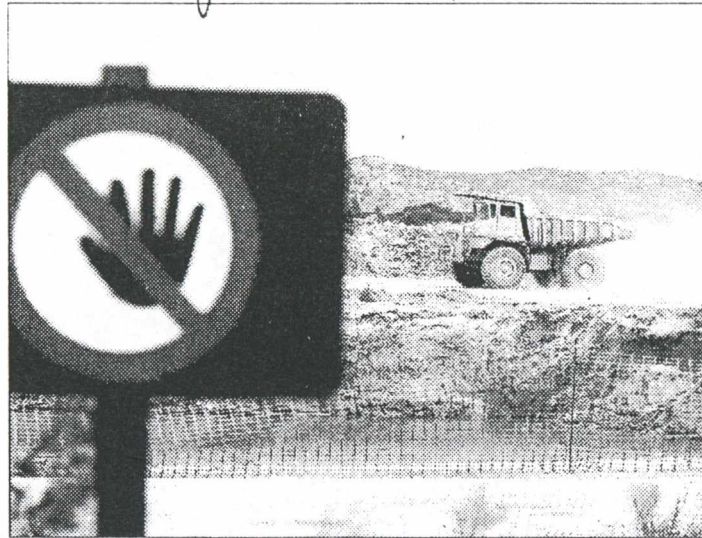
The site of the ancient battle of Marathon, where the Greek victory altered the course of western civilisation and set the standard for running endurance, has become a scene of conflict between environmentalists and the Olympic movement.

Nearly 2,500 years after Athenians routed the invading Persian army, the second battle of Marathon is under way. This time those decried as "barbarians" come in bulldozers and with the blessing of the international sports industry.

The Schinias basin on the Marathon plain — from where on a September day in 490BC a runner was sent to carry news of the Greek triumph the 26-mile route to Athens — is the chosen venue for the Olympic rowing and canoeing centre for the 2004 Games.

Designed around two man-made lakes with grandstands for 15,000 spectators and viewing for 30,000 more on the lakesides, facilities will include a dock for motorboats, a three-storey starting tower, a four-storey finishing tower, a helicopter pad, and a petrol station.

Around 1.5m cubic metres of earth and stone will be scooped out, which opponents say could ruin an area of environmental and historical importance.



**The Olympic site causing conflict** Photograph: Aris Messinis

The controversy has called into question the Olympic movement's newly won green credentials. Ecologists fear the project will cause "irreversible damage" to a coastal habitat, which includes a forest of rare umbrella pines and an expanse of marshland used as a migration stopover for 176 species of bird.

Historians and archaeologists argue that Marathon should enjoy the same sort of protection as the civil war battlefields in the United States.

"This is part of the natural and cultural heritage of Greece, and one of the last surviving examples of the classi-

cal landscape of Attica," says Theodota Nantsou of WWF Greece, which has been spearheading the campaign to have the project halted.

Last weekend, a coalition of historians, archaeologists, and environmentalists staged a protest "marathon march" from Athens. On the beach at Schinias they heard speeches accusing the Greek government of arrogance and greed over its refusal to consider another site for the complex.

Campaigners have taken their protest to Brussels. They say that unless the bulldozers fall silent, Greece will be in violation of all sorts of EU laws,

including the habitats directive. The Greek government, supported by the International Olympic Committee, insists the Schinias project is environmentally sound. It claims that the coastline of Marathon bay has changed significantly since ancient times and that the Olympic complex is being built in an area that was formerly at the bottom of the sea.

"We truly believe that the works at Schinias will be compatible with the principles of environmental protection and provide a legacy for Greece for generations to come," said George Kazantzopoulos, environmental manager with the Athens 2004 organising committee.

The Greek state has a poor record on the environment; many coastal areas have suffered from unplanned development, and the fear is that once the Olympics are over, the developers will move in.

Kevin Standing of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, which is helping to coordinate the campaign, describes the rowing centre as "an environmentally damaging project of the worst kind. Now the folly of the Greek government will be exposed on the world stage of the Olympic Games, which should be a high point, not a low point of cultural achievement".