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## **Greece betrays the Olympic spirit**

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Writes on ecopolitics and Greek history

What has happened to the Greek Olympics?

Athens is hosting the 2004 Games, but it (too willingly) is paying a terrible price in cultural defilement. What Greece has done to Greece for the sake of the games is a good measurement of how far the original ideal of the Olympics has fallen.

The original Olympics were held in Olympia, Peloponnese, in honor of Zeus, the father of the gods in Greek mythology. Athens had nothing to do with the ancient Olympics.

Modern Athens has even less. This city-without-a-plan is a cement megalopolis chocking the Acropolis to death. About a third of all Greeks live in Athens, often creating intolerable conditions resembling Third World cities. There are so many cars in Athens their owners park them on sidewalks. Athens is nearly devoid of green. And despite the building of a new airport, new roads around the city, the expansion of the metro system, and planting of thousands of trees, Athens is not a livable city.

Now add a few million visitors. Where will the drinking water come from – in a city that already has water-supply problems? And what is going to happen to the thousands of tons of waste left behind by the visitors?

The ancient games were held every four years beginning in 776 B.C. and run for more than 1,000 years before the Christian Roman Emperor Theodosius ended the games in 393. The Olympic agon (contest) was much more than a struggle between outstanding men for physical excellence. It was in honor of Zeus – and, politically, it was an extraordinary effort to reign in the Greek passion for war and bring Greeks together from all over the world for the celebration of their common culture. For about one to three months around

each Olympics, a truce (ekecheiria or “holding of hands”) went into effect, and all warfare ceased throughout the Greek world.

The Olympics was an effort to build a Panhellenic commonwealth, a united Hellas under democratic governance. The Olympics was also building better and nobler human beings. It was the Greeks’ struggle for arête or virtue, an effort of the Olympic athlete for perfection.

Pierre de Coubertin of France and Demetrios Vikelas of Greece had the idea for a modern Olympics, first hosted in Athens in 1896. More than a century later, in August 2004, Athens will have another chance.

But this Olympics has little to do with its classical model. Olympia will not be involved in these Olympics. The sacred area of Marathon, where the Greeks defeated the Persians in 490 B.C., has been defiled by a huge rowing and canoeing facility. The central sports complex makes no reference to the masterpieces of ancient Greek architecture. In addition, the Athens Olympics is going to be an armed camp. Pressure for security from the United States and Israel has been such that the Greek government is spending close to \$ 1 billion in hiring foreign security companies. And now, after the Madrid bombings, Greece is asking for United Nations help. Greek troops are also practicing with British and American soldiers how to prevent potential nuclear and chemical attacks.

It’s about time we reconsider the purpose of the Olympics. It is wrong to use this great institution of athletic competition and idealism for commerce, show and politics. Rotating the Olympics around the world is a bad idea. The Greeks started the games – let the Greeks continue their ancestors’ experiment for the benefit of humankind. We need to return the Olympics to Olympia, Greece, and every four years let the youth of the Earth compete for arête.

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