

Development threatens Morocco's wild shoreline

By Tom Pfeiffer

SAIDIA, Morocco, Dec 12 (Reuters) - Ecologists say a tragedy is unfolding in north Africa where construction firms are moving in on some of the last unspoilt stretches of Mediterranean coastline in the search for profits.

With Spain trying to preserve what remains undeveloped on its built-up shoreline, Morocco has stepped forward as a willing host for large-scale tourism development as it seeks to narrow the north-south wealth divide and lift millions out of poverty.

The cost, say environment campaigners, will be irreparable damage to the Mediterranean's wilder southern shores where urban and industrial expansion, rampant pollution and illegal sand extraction are already taking their toll.

Morocco wants to attract millions of extra tourists to a chain of seaside resorts being built by Spanish, Belgian and Dutch consortia and U.S. groups Kerzner and Colony Capital.

The first is under way in Saidia on Morocco's eastern edge, where Spain's Fadesa is turning a low-lying area of forests and dunes into 7 million square metres of shops, golf courses, hotels with 17,000 beds and 3,100 villas and flats. On its British Web site, Fadesa promises "landscaped parks and green areas, as well as pleasant public spaces, (will) harmonise with the beautiful natural surroundings."

At the development last month, machines lumbered over a landscape of earthworks, workers' shacks and the tattered remains of what campaigners say was Morocco's only juniper forest. "We call them the destroyers," said local environment campaigner Najib Bachiri. "They dug up 6 km of dunes and killed thousands of tortoises just so you can see the sea from the corniche." In a statement, Fadesa said it had "put in place measures for the protection, recuperation and regeneration of the environment beyond what was demanded by Moroccan law".

BEACHES

RETREATING

Seven out of 47 of Morocco's Mediterranean beaches have disappeared in recent years, the European Environment Agency (EEA) said in a report last year. In Algeria, of between 250 and 300 km (160 and 190 miles) of sandy beaches, 85 percent were retreating and losing sand.

In valleys throughout the Maghreb, new dams for irrigation are trapping sediment that once washed down to coastal areas to bolster important wildlife habitats. Wildlife groups said Fadesa was given carte blanche to destroy the dunes that protected Saidia's hinterland from the sea and flatten all but a small patch of forest.

"They could at least have left some of the trees for the golf courses, but even they were uprooted," said Mohamed Benata, head of regional development association ESCO. Fadesa has said the Saidia project will create 8,000 direct jobs and more than 40,000 indirectly in a poor region cut off since 1994 when Algeria closed its land border with Morocco.

Tourism Ministry officials said they wanted each new resort to make use of the local environment to attract higher-spending visitors, adding that they had enforced the most widely used international standards for preserving the natural habitat.

Some observers say Morocco made a mistake in allowing Fadesa to build close to the Moulouya wetland, the country's most important reserve for more than 200 species of birds, and fear the worst, given plans for up to a million visitors every year.

"It's too close to the mouth of the river which has the richest ecosystem," said Alaoui El Kebir of the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP) in Rabat.

Saidia's unique habitat drew life from water seeping through the sand and collecting in marshy areas. Fadesa has built channels and barriers to drain water away from the buildings. "Fadesa say the work will dry about 5 percent of the wetland but our calculations show it'll be more like half," said Benata.

MIGRATING BIRDS

Without the wetland, a vital stepping stone for hundreds of millions of migrating birds would be removed. The EEA says several north African wetlands are threatened, including Lake Bizerta in Tunisia, the salt lake of Regahaia in Algeria and 23rd of July Lake in Libya.

Bachiri accuses Fadesa of flouting local laws by pumping water from the Moulouya river. Lorries could be seen last month on the river bank loading up with salty water then returning to the work site. A spokesman for Fadesa said the company had presented an environmental impact study when tendering for the project, which the Moroccan government had accepted, and had implemented steps to protect and improve the environment beyond that required by Moroccan law.

ESCO's Benata said mega-projects such as Saidia were out of fashion in Europe -- Spain had begun copying a strategy pioneered on the French Riviera to reclaim land, demolish buildings and regenerate the ecosystem. Once the Saidia development is complete, Fadesa is likely to sell the site to management companies. Years down the line, however, nature may regain control. "We produced a flooding scenario which shows most of the Fadesa complex could be under water by 2050 as global warming raises sea levels," said Maria Snoussi, earth sciences professor at Mohamed V University in Rabat.