

Redefinition of Urban-Rural Boundaries Under Centralized Governance: Urban Ecological Movements in the Case of a Coastal Town, Ayvalık, Turkey

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Abstract

This paper investigates the socio-ecological impacts of Turkey's 2012 Metropolitan Law (No. 6360) by analyzing how it redefined urban-rural boundaries through the case of Ayvalık. The law expanded metropolitan jurisdictions to include rural areas, intensifying top-down governance and triggering land use transformations. Drawing on urban political ecology and planetary urbanisation, the study explores how environmental movements in Ayvalık resist these changes and advocate for participatory governance. Through ethnographic research and spatial analysis, it reveals the tensions between centralized state planning and local socio-ecological dynamics. The findings highlight Ayvalık as a metropolitan hinterland shaped by contested governance, contributing to debates on planning amid planetary crisis and the need for more inclusive, ecologically tailored governance frameworks.

Keywords: Urban-rural boundaries; Centralized governance model; Urban ecological movements; Metropolitan Law; Ayvalık

Introduction

More than half a century ago, Henri Lefebvre had a strong assessment with the following hypothesis: "Society has been completely urbanized" (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 1). A notion of 'urban society' has been put forward as a result of an urbanisation process. He had a considerably sharp argument towards the disruption in 'well known' distinctions between the city and the rural through pointing out the emergence of the urban society. Since the emergence of Lefebvre's thesis, the notion of urban served as the encompassing phenomenon beyond the 'limits' of the city towards the rural areas, where the borders between them sought to disappear. His ideas have pioneered new theoretical frameworks and provided the understanding of the necessity to discuss changing urbanisation processes. Based on this, the crucial threshold of total urbanisation has exposed as being surpassed, indicating the practical realization of a "planetary urbanization of the urban" (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 569).

The assertion that the urbanisation process, in serving as a paradigm, has come to delineate the entire globe, was expanded by Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid (2014), acquiring contemporary relevance through the concept of "planetary urbanisation". This development has also infused new vitality into critical urbanisation theories and led the way to critically reconceptualize the relation between the urban-non-urban, city-rural, and centre-periphery. In the context of these dialectics, the emerging urban era is started to be discussed as characterized by planetary social and environmental interactions, establishing novel constraints on the utilization and alteration of the global built environment, presenting the potential for significant disparities and conflicts, while simultaneously offering new opportunities for democratic engagement and self-appropriation, reclaim of space across all scales. From a political ecological perspective, urbanisation involves a profound transformation of both physical and social environments. David Harvey (1996) points to the ecological dimensions of urbanisation as contingent upon the reproduction of specific socio-spatial relations. Similarly, Cronon (1992) emphasizes that these processes continually produce new urban natures—hybrid socio-natural formations that reflect shifting modes of production and resistance. Under capitalist urbanisation, nature is not only physically absorbed into the urban fabric but also symbolically redefined, serving as both a site of exploitation and a terrain of contestation. Urban natures are thus constantly reshaped through the dynamic interplay of political economy, social struggle, and spatial transformation.

Urban Political Ecology (UPE) has emerged as a critical framework capable of addressing these complexities. While Angelo and Wachsmuth (2014) were dealing with the unexplored aspects and, correspondently, potentials of UPE by telling the story of it in relation to current urbanisation dynamics and theories, they asserted that, there is a need for a return by adhering to UPE's previously adopted understandings—the desire to reinterpret urbanisation through Lefebvrian roots of provocative thinking. In line with this, the urbanisation process must then be understood as the "production of specific and quite heterogeneous spatio-temporal forms embedded within different kinds of social action" (Angelo et al., 2014, p. 381). The idea of reinterpreting urbanisation as a 'socio-natural' process is argued to provide means to critically reframe urban environmental issues within a broader context embracing economic, social, and historical dimensions. Thus, a political ecology of urbanisation

is made possible to be discussed through focusing on the process of “densely connected but unevenly differentiated urban fabric” (Angelo et al., 2014, p. 11). In this context, UPE has the potential to explore the planetary, ecological, political understanding of contemporary urbanisation when it is addressed in a diverse range of scales, encompassing ‘city’ and ‘non-city’ sites (Arboleda, 2016). However, the promise of a truly transdisciplinary UPE research agenda capable of capturing the implications of planetary urbanisation remains only partially fulfilled. I aim to address this by analysing a coastal town amidst intensifying urban-environmental tensions, where socio-spatial struggles unfold not only within conventional urban boundaries but also across peripheral and ruralized territories shaped by extractive and speculative pressures.

Urbanisation, is increasingly understood not as confined to the city but as a planetary process that restructures socio-natural relations across both urban and rural territories. In Turkey, this understanding has been institutionalized through a long-standing nationalist-conservative governance agenda that prioritizes urban expansion, leading to the growth of metropolitan areas to encompass their rural hinterlands. A key turning point in this trajectory was the enactment of Law No. 6360 in 2012—popularly known as the “Metropolitan Law” (Bütünşehir Yasası)—which extended the jurisdiction of metropolitan municipalities to entire provincial territories, thereby dissolving the legal distinction between urban and rural areas (Mengi et al., 2024). The law redefined the administrative structure by absorbing villages and small towns into metropolitan districts, transforming them into urban neighbourhoods and effectively marginalizing rural governance and identity (Batuman, 2017). This paper, in this context, examines the socio-ecological implications of these transformations in the case of Ayvalık, a coastal town in western Türkiye renowned for its ecological and cultural heritage.

Within this context, Ayvalık is conceptualized as a “metropolitan hinterland”—a space absorbed into the urban regime yet politically and geographically peripheral. Here, nature becomes simultaneously instrumentalized and symbolically contested, revealing the contradictions of neoliberal urbanisation. The study argues that the restructuring of governance and space under the Metropolitan Law has intensified socio-environmental inequalities and catalysed new forms of grassroots resistance. These dynamics are explored through the lens of urban political ecology, which provides a critical framework for analysing how capitalist urbanisation reshapes both environments and the social movements that emerge in response.

Although urban social movements have been widely studied, ecological resistance in administratively urbanized but geographically peripheral contexts remains underexplored. This paper posits that the ecological movements in Ayvalık represent an emergent form of urban ecological resistance—a localized response to the restructuring of nature as part of urban space. By confronting the contradictions of planetary urbanisation, these movements offer a situated critique of centralized planning and a reimagining of the urban-rural interface. Accordingly, the central research question guiding this study is: What kinds of environmental movements evolve in response to the changing conceptualization and perception of ‘nature’ under the conditions of planetary urbanisation intensified by a governance reform such as the Metropolitan Law?

The analysis is based on qualitative social science research conducted in Ayvalık over a period of 2 years (2023-2025) complemented by policy document analysis and a review of academic and gray literatures. This involved 6 in-depth interviews with the actors of resistance (activists and locals who comprise the resistance), academicians, and architects working specifically on Ayvalık and the ongoing spatial change. In doing so, it contributes to critical planning and urban theory by illuminating how peripheral geographies expose the uneven, multi-scalar nature of urbanisation and the political possibilities that arise from it. By foregrounding the role of legal instruments in reshaping territorial governance, the study demonstrates how planetary urbanisation reconfigure both material environments and forms of political agency. Through the case of Ayvalık, the paper reveals the entangled geographies of urban and rural transformation and the grassroots resistances that contest and redefine these boundaries under centralized governance.

Tracing The Urban-Rural Boundary Through Ayvalık's Socio- Ecological Transformations

The coastal town of Ayvalık is located in the Aegean region of Balıkesir Province, in northwestern Turkey. It is bordered by Gömeç to the north, Dikili to the south, and Bergama to the southeast (Figure 1). Characterized by its undulating topography, Ayvalık is an archipelago consisting of more than twenty islands and islets, the most prominent being Cunda Island—also known as Alibey. Due to its positioning within an archipelago, Ayvalık lies on a small inland sea, protected by Cunda within a sheltered bay. The broader geographical context includes

the Madra Mountains to the east and the Aegean Sea to the west, with the city itself expanding between coastal areas and hills rising 100–200 meters inland. Over time, the urban fabric has extended toward these hills and further northward. Its location on the western edge of this inland sea, formed between Central Anatolia and the island of Lesbos (Midilli), has long shaped Ayvalık's identity as a key node in olive oil production since the 19th century.



Figure 1. The location of Ayvalık. Source: Google Earth.

Ayvalık is designated both as an 'urban conservation area' due to its historic port and traditional settlement patterns, and as a 'natural conservation area' to preserve its olive groves and protected landscapes. A range of legal frameworks concerning cultural heritage, forestry, and agriculture regulates and safeguards the region. The olive groves, central to Ayvalık's heritage, are protected under specific agricultural policies, and conservation designations cover areas such as Cunda Island, parts of the Hakkı Bey Peninsula, and 20 of the 22 surrounding islands. Portions of this landscape have also been incorporated into a national park to ensure long-term ecological preservation. In recognition of its cultural and industrial significance, the Ayvalık Industrial Landscape was added to the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List in 2017 (Tentative List Ref. No. 6243). The town's well-preserved industrial buildings, along with its port, traditional settlement, and olive groves—covering 13,200 hectares—offer a comprehensive portrayal of the industrialization process (UNESCO World Heritage, 2017). By the 1980s, with the growing prominence of the tourism sector, Ayvalık began to be recognized as a desirable tourist destination due to its coastal features and natural beauty.

The earliest documented references to Ayvalık date to the 16th century, while local oral traditions trace its founding to around 1580 by members of the Greek community (Şahin Güçhan, 2008). Despite a lack of continuous documentation, it is known that Ayvalık was granted autonomy by imperial edict around 1789, marking a period of rapid urban growth and a predominantly Greek population (Sağlam, 2022). During the 19th century,

within the Ottoman Empire, Ayvalık became a key port town on the western Anatolian coast, owing to its thriving olive oil and soap production and trade networks (Akin Akbüber, 2015).

By this time, Ayvalık was home to over a hundred olive oil presses and more than thirty soap factories. It supplied a substantial portion of Istanbul's olive oil and soap needs, with exports extending to regions such as Thrace, Macedonia, and even Russia (Yaman-Kocadağlı, 2011). This economic boom, especially during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, significantly increased the town's population and wealth. Infrastructure developments, alongside the olive oil industry's profitability, transformed Ayvalık from a modest coastal settlement into a significant "commercial harbor city" within just a century (Akin Akbüber, 2015, 2020; Uçar, 2015; Sağlam, 2022). Despite the enduring spatial imprints of its port-based industrial identity, Ayvalık's urban fabric and social composition have been continually reshaped by social and ecological upheavals. From the earliest records to the 2000s, major shifts in population, social structure, and spatial organization can be attributed to Ayvalık's coastal geography and ecological vulnerability. However, the nature and impact of these ruptures have evolved considerably in recent decades (Figure 2).

In the 18th century, the population was predominantly Turkish. However, by the 19th century, the influx of Greek migrants dramatically shifted the demographic composition (Balci Akova, 2011; Yaman-Kocadağlı, 2011). Nationalist sentiments following the French Revolution contributed to uprisings among the Greek population, and the first major rupture in Ayvalık's socio-environmental history was the 1821 Greek Revolution. While this period was devastating, historical accounts emphasize Ayvalık's resilience and subsequent recovery (Sağlam, 2022). Later crises included a destructive earthquake in 1866 and, nearly fifty years later, the turmoil and abandonment caused by the Turkish War of Independence (1919–1923).

The 1923 population exchange between Turkey and Greece marked a fundamental transformation, permanently displacing the original Greek inhabitants and replacing them with Turkish populations from Lesvos, Crete, and Thrace (Anastassiadou, 2012, as cited in Sağlam, 2022). This exchange drastically altered the city's social, spatial, and economic structures (Balci Akova, 2011; Yaman-Kocadağlı, 2011). According to the 1927 national census, Ayvalık's population had dropped from 31,894 in 1914 to 16,873, reflecting the effects of war and forced migration. Two additional earthquakes in the 1940s marked the final major crises in the town's pre-contemporary history.

Periodic uprisings and interethnic tensions in this once multi-religious, multilingual, and multiethnic town disrupted both its economy and built environment. The aftermath of the population exchange triggered a period of stagnation, as the newly settled communities faced challenges adapting to the existing social and economic structures. However, by the 1960s, Ayvalık entered a new phase of development. While agriculture and agro-industrial activities remained important, tourism began to play a growing role in the town's economy. Investments in accommodation facilities, beaches, and coastal infrastructure increased tourism revenues (Yorulmaz, 1997, p. 127). After 1963, the Turkish government provided financial support for coastal tourism development, and in 1969, Ayvalık was designated a priority area for tourism investment (Cantimur, 2011). This sector expanded significantly after the 1980s, becoming central to Ayvalık's urban and economic trajectory (Yaman-Kocadağlı, 2011).

The increasing influence of tourism created an urgent need for a structured development plan in the second half of the 20th century. A 1/1000-scale development plan was prepared in 1972, but its implementation was limited. Proposed developments on Cunda and Lale Islands were not realized due to low construction demand (UNESCO World Heritage, 2017). A major initiative from this plan—the relocation of olive oil factories outside the city—was implemented in the 1980s. During this time, Ayvalık and parts of Cunda were designated as Natural and Historic Conservation Areas in 1976, followed by temporary development regulations in 1978. Until 1982, the plan was revised and partially applied outside the conservation zones (Şahin Güçhan, 1986, pp. 28–35; UNESCO World Heritage, 2017).

The Protection of Cultural and Natural Properties Law (Law No. 2863), enacted in 1983, brought Ayvalık under the jurisdiction of the newly formed Bursa Regional Conservation Council. In the late 1980s, the boundaries and regulations of the conservation zones were revised. Regional development plans were approved in 1990 for non-conservation areas, and in 1994, an urban heritage conservation plan was adopted and remains in use (Şahin Güçhan, 1986, pp. 28–35).

Between 1976 and the mid-1990s, new developments were permitted only outside urban conservation zones, leading to the construction of low-density summer houses and tourism facilities. The relocation of polluting industries helped mitigate some environmental issues, but also left many industrial buildings unused. However, since the 2000s, there has been renewed interest in preserving these structures through local initiatives involving businesses, the municipality, and civil society organizations. These efforts contributed to a more organized heritage conservation strategy in Ayvalık (Cantimur, 2011; UNESCO World Heritage, 2017).

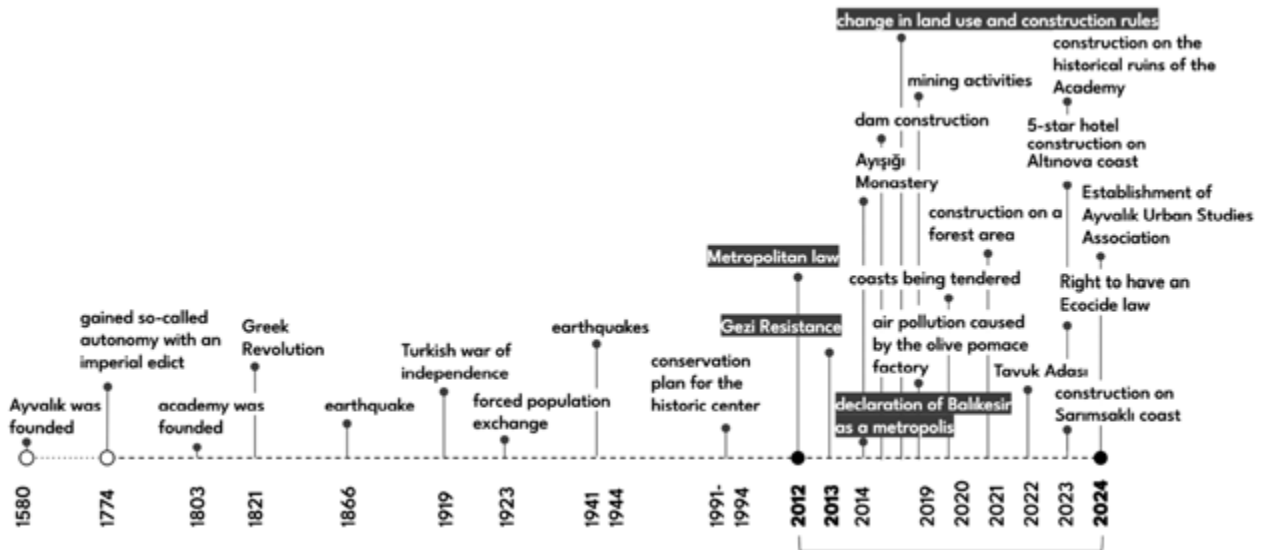


Figure 2. The brief history of Ayvalık. Produced by the author.

The social and ecological crises in Ayvalık—referred to here as “ruptures”—involve abrupt transformations in population dynamics (Balci Akova, 2011), spatial organization (Sağlam, 2022), and urban governance. David Harvey (2011, 2012), in his analysis of urban revolutions, identifies such crises as intrinsic outcomes of capitalist accumulation, noting that urban environments are both sites of accumulation and of resistance. In Ayvalık, these crises have intensified since 2012 with the growing influence of neoliberal urbanism and tourism-driven development, accompanied by the privatization of public goods and services and a consequent decline in quality (Harvey, 2012; Friedmann, 2014). In this context, nature has increasingly been commodified, repurposed as a vehicle for capital accumulation (Smith, 2007), yet these processes have also provoked significant resistance.

Metropolitanization: Planetary Urbanisation Arrives In Ayvalık

Back in 2002, 65% of Turkey's population was noted as urban, with more than half residing within the boundaries of sixteen metropolitan municipalities. Early in its term, the AKP government moved to expand these metropolitan boundaries through legislation in 2004. By 2012, as a result of a series of reforms, 76% of the population lived in areas designated as metropolitan, which encompassed 55% of the nation's land (Arikboğa, 2013; Zengin, 2014). At the latter end, the last regulation in 2012 redefined the metropolitan structure and villages were integrated into metropolitan districts by expanding municipal governance into peripheral areas. This does not only entail the expansion of municipal administration to the peripheries, it also changes the definition of urban with the increasing influence of the periphery in urban politics (Batuman, 2017, p. 110).

Balıkesir was among the provinces affected by these governance and policy changes. With the enactment of Law No. 6360, titled “The Establishment of Metropolitan Municipalities in Fourteen Provinces, the Formation of Twenty-Seven Districts, and Amendments to Certain Legislative Decrees,” which was adopted on November 12, 2012, and published in the Official Gazette on December 6, 2012, Balıkesir Metropolitan Municipality was established, and its jurisdiction was defined as the entire provincial territory (Resmî Gazete, 2012). According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), as of 2014, Balıkesir no longer has a statistically defined rural population due to its designation as a metropolitan municipality. In 2012, however, 61.32% of the population resided in provincial and district centres while 38.68% lived in towns and villages (Balıkesir Büyükşehir Belediyesi, 2024).

In addition to Balıkesir, in the provinces of Aydın, Denizli, Hatay, Malatya, Manisa, Kahramanmaraş, Mardin, Muğla, Ordu, Tekirdağ, Trabzon, Şanlıurfa, and Van, metropolitan municipalities were established under the same name, with their jurisdiction defined by the provincial administrative boundaries (Resmî Gazete, 2012). Consequently, the existing provincial municipalities in these areas were restructured as metropolitan municipalities. With the legislative amendment, the number of metropolitan municipalities in Turkey has reached 30.

The regulation became effective in 2014 with the local administration general elections held on March 30. Since that time, Balıkesir has been governed as a Metropolitan Municipality. In the days following the elections, public statements began appearing in the media, emphasizing plans to transform Balıkesir into an "attraction center." It was announced that numerous new projects would be introduced to achieve this goal. These projects ranged from infrastructure developments, such as wastewater treatment facilities to reduce marine and environmental pollution, and the construction of overpasses and highways, to large-scale investments aimed at making both the city center and its districts key attraction points. These included tourism centers, ports, a regional hospital, an airport, shopping malls, and new residential developments. The Balıkesir-Çanakkale Planning Region 1/100,000 Scale Environmental Plan also provided a higher-level framework supporting these large-scale projects and investments. Additionally, the invitation and brochure for the 7th Emerging Cities Summit, held on May 6-7, 2015, described Balıkesir as the "shining star of the Marmara region," highlighting its central location at the intersection of major highways and positioning it as a prime destination for investors (Özerk, 2017). During presentations at the summit, Balıkesir's strategic location—close to major highways and metropolitan areas—was emphasized to attract investment for planned projects. Meanwhile, numerous so-called "visionary projects," promoted under the goal of making Balıkesir a "brand city," began to receive extensive coverage in both print and digital media (Özerk, 2017).

The delineated concentration of production, population, and infrastructure within the metropolitan area serves as a driving force for capital accumulation and transformation of locations, regions, and landscapes across various spatial scales (Soja, 2000; Krätke, 2014; Scott et al., 2015). As previously discussed and presented in earlier sections, contemporary forms of urbanisation are already disrupting and redefining the traditional boundaries of cities, including those of major metropolitan areas, as they alter existing regional arrangements and increasingly blur the distinction between urban and non-urban areas (Brenner, 2013; Brenner et al., 2014). The metropolitan law on the other hand has adopted a disruptive approach, accelerating and evolving the process and drawing its own boundaries. In this sense, legal and regulatory changes have been politically instrumentalized within the context of urban spatial reproductions to find new ways of capital accumulation.

Ayvalık was deeply affected by the changes in metropolitan structure. In 2012, Balıkesir was declared a metropolitan city, and Ayvalık's local administration saw changes in its authority. Similar to what has been argued with the thesis of planetary urbanisation, the Metropolitan law can be considered to crystallize the explosion and expansion of the urban, leading to the autonomy of small and medium-sized cities, transforming them into the 'virtual colonies of the metropolis' (Schmid, 2014, p. 69). In this sense, Ayvalık became liable to be conceptualized as a 'virtual colony' of its neighbouring metropolitan cities, namely Izmir and Istanbul, considering the established trade network settled primarily on olive.

Upon examining the urbanisation process following the change in administration in Ayvalık, urban projects tendered or proposed by the Balıkesir Metropolitan Municipality have been brought forward. Following this decision, what is frequently emphasized is the revival of numerous proposals, which were previously planned but reportedly suppressed in the past due to strong opposition from the local municipality. In addition, one of the most significant challenges currently facing the local community is the lack of sufficient attention and support from the metropolitan municipality towards local issues. The ongoing socio-ecological issues of Ayvalık are being marginalized by the metropolitan municipality, eliciting apprehensions regarding the prevailing perception of an unattended local voice.

Following Balıkesir's declaration as a metropolitan city in 2014, Ayvalık experienced negligible advantages. The top-down management style of the metropolitan municipality was unable to adequately address the local needs. (A representative of ATP)

With the changes in jurisdiction, the Water and Sewerage Treatment Plants were transferred to the metropolitan municipality. In the past, we saw that these treatment plants were not being operated before the election. We organized many protests and made significant efforts to get the treatment plants running, but we couldn't achieve any results. The Metropolitan Municipality Law has also become something that exacerbates such problems and disruptions from an ecological perspective. I believe it was entirely created out of political concerns (TİP Balıkesir Provincial Administration Ecology Officer)

Giving the decision-making power to higher levels of governance undermines the autonomy and effectiveness of district municipalities. This shift in power diminishes the decision-making capacity and active participation of local governments, which are best suited to manage and respond to the immediate needs of their communities, such as waste collection and maintaining clean streets. Governance should be grounded in the local context, where the management of daily life is most effective, and where resources, personnel, and decisions can directly address the specific needs of the area. Centralizing authority not only disrupts the functionality of local governance but also weakens the direct connection between the government and the community it serves.

Delegating governance to a higher level inherently means bypassing the local will. It restricts decision-making capacity, reduces agency, and diminishes participation. In essence, it strips the locality of its governing power. A district municipality operates at the smallest scale—handling tasks such as waste collection, street maintenance, and addressing community needs. Governance must be approached from within the flow of everyday life; it cannot be effectively managed from a different scale. Managing the district requires establishing a framework that aligns with its budget, personnel, and tangible presence in daily life. (Group member of AKVG)

The shift in the governance model shows the indicators of metropolitanization and how planetary urbanisation have arrived in Ayvalık through different modes of reshaping urban space and nature. Whether through appropriation or degradation, and whether under protection or without, nature remains central to capitalist strategies, which seek to integrate it into the circuits of capital accumulation, often without regard for the resulting socio-ecological consequences (Cortes-Vazquez et al., 2019). In this sense, employing a historically and geographically grounded approach to the study of urban nature production allows for a critical understanding of the unequal power relations shaping these processes, which also guides the potential transformation of these power relations (Swyngedouw, 2006). In the case of Ayvalık, the changes in authority and legislation embark on the socio-ecological exploitations, which have also manifested themselves through several cases within the contemporary capitalist form of urbanisation patterns embedded in the urban realm.

Despite Ayvalık having confronted various instances of social and environmental disruption in the past, including earthquakes, the Greek Revolution, and the population exchange between Greece and Turkey, it has never experienced such heightened socio-ecological degradation as it currently faces in the present neoliberal era. The AKP government has demonstrated a distinctly exploitative approach toward nature (Çoban, 2019). Since 2002, the government has worked hand in hand with capital, depleting both human and non-human aspects of nature to sustain and expand a capitalist accumulation regime. However, the environmental destruction caused by the AKP government is not a new phenomenon in Turkey. This phenomenon is not limited to the advanced economies of the West but is even more pronounced in emerging centres of capitalist expansion, such as China, Turkey, and India. The restructuring of urban and natural environments plays a pivotal role in the accumulation and circulation of capital in the contemporary era (Karakayali et al., 2014). As history has shown, wherever capitalism exists, environmental degradation inevitably follows (Çoban, 2019). Nevertheless, Ayvalık endeavours to resist and firmly preserve its pre-established urban and ecological identity which is characterized by designated urban and natural conservation areas, alongside first-degree protected islands and nature parks. Despite efforts to preserve Ayvalık's established urban and ecological identity, current urbanisation trends are largely shaped by ongoing changes in governance, planning, and legislation. The dissolution of district municipalities, modifications to urban plans, and shifting regulations have created conditions that enable capitalist-driven environmental exploitation, exerting a dominant influence over the region's development.

Recent developments, especially over the past five years, serve as indicators of the impact of neoliberal urbanisation in Ayvalık; every part of the city bears the results of various exploitations (TİP Balıkesir Provincial Administration Ecology Officer)

The urbanisation of Ayvalık has not only altered its material and administrative configuration but also transformed its socio-political landscape. As urban expansion reaches peripheral territories, existing environmental conflicts have intensified, while new socio-spatial tensions have emerged. These developments reflect broader patterns of socio-environmental inequality and undemocratic spatial change, hallmarks of the neoliberal urban condition (Cortes-Vazquez et al., 2019). In this context, resistance movements have acquired an urban ecological character—rooted in the localized defence of nature yet shaped by planetary processes of urban transformation. These movements challenge rent-seeking urban development and centralized governance while articulating alternative visions of ecological stewardship, spatial justice, and democratic agency. Additionally, as cities increasingly become arenas for financial speculation, urban spaces have emerged as primary sites of contestation, where struggles focus on preserving and shaping the fundamental conditions of human life—including public spaces, neighborhoods, and natural landscapes (Karakayali & Yaka, 2014). In this context, within the framework of consciousness towards the democratic ‘rights’—the right to the city and nature, as the activists have frequently stated—the accumulation of socio-ecological challenges in Ayvalık has originated urban ecological movements. Furthermore, resistance in these areas acquire a potentially radical and transformative nature, as it directly challenges the urban and environmental transformations that have become central to capital circulation in the neoliberal era (Karakayali & Yaka, 2014).

Urban Ecological Movements In Ayvalik

The interaction between urban spaces and natural environments has become increasingly complex, particularly in contemporary capitalist relations. In cities like Ayvalık, where commercial activities and tourism largely depend on natural resources and a capital-oriented approach to urbanisation is prevalent, the city, and nature are simultaneously contradictory and mutually reinforcing. The expansion of the urban, in this sense, can also be associated with the exploitation of natural resources, significantly altering the relationship between cities and the environment. It is driven by economic imperatives, where both nature and urban are reconstructed by the forces of capital. This process of reconstruction was argued to be defined as urban interference towards nature, in which the transformation of nature into urbanized environments reflects broader trends in neoliberal development. In this section of the study, I will exemplify nature that has been intensely subjected to urban interventions driven by dominant urban and environmental policies.

A considerable number of areas in Ayvalık, particularly those located in the coastal region, have been experiencing a process of spatial and ecological degradation as a result of urban interventions, which are primarily driven by profit-oriented projects. These environmental issues have become focal points of resistance for volunteers, residents, and civil initiatives, leading to the recreation of both urban space and nature, as well as the adoption of new social practices. In this context, spaces shaped by the intersection of environmental degradation and collective opposition begin to constitute what can be described as oppositional landscapes—geographies marked by contestation, grassroots activism, and alternative imaginaries of urban-nature relations.

While these oppositions have been spatially grounded in Ayvalık, their roots lie in a broader trajectory of ecological activism across Turkey. In particular, in the Black Sea, Marmara, and Aegean regions, numerous local and civil initiatives are actively organized in opposition to the planned energy investments. These mobilizations have been so effective that they have led to a stay of execution (Kadimbeyoglu, 2005; Gönenç, 2022). In this context, the concept of ‘counter-hegemonic flows’ (as conceptualized by E. Turan & Aydın, 2023) has experienced a resurgence as local ecological struggles have expanded opposition to renewable energy in Turkey. Although environmentalism provided the most effective critique of neoliberal urbanisation in Turkey, its influence declined significantly after the 2011 elections, as evidenced by the failure of environmental activists to get most hydroelectric power plant (HPP) projects cancelled (Batuman, 2017). However, the Gezi Park protests in 2013 marked a critical turning point, revitalizing environmental activism and broader urban struggles. As a defining moment, Gezi not only lend impetus for collective mobilization against neoliberal urbanisation but also introduced a new vision of urban social movements in Turkey, bringing environmental concerns to the urban agenda (Karakayali et al., 2014) by fostering new political imaginaries that connected and reinforced various grassroots and political mobilizations that had preceded it (Erensü et al., 2017). While some studies have pointed to the absence of a cohesive environmental movement and limited political representation, along with the financial constraints hindering rural communities from engaging in sustained activism (Duru, 2013; Paker, 2013), the past fifteen years have nonetheless seen significant civil society efforts and government-led initiatives opposing large-scale investments at both local and national levels. The impact of the Gezi protests extended well beyond its time, with the so-called ‘Gezi spirit’

continuing to inspire opposition movements and shape Turkey's cultural landscape and political discourse (Erensü et al., 2017, p. 2). Consequently, the urbanized conditions of Ayvalık have come to delineate new forms of resistance shaped around the accumulation of urban crises and the extension or spread of the urban resistance agenda, gained during and after the Gezi Park protests.

In the wake of the 2014 local elections, a substantial part of the coastal area in Sarımsaklı Beach was leased to the Metropolitan Municipality with the intention, as expressed by the municipality, of capitalizing on and incorporating it into the market to promote Ayvalık as a global brand and boost tourism (Durgun, 2023). The initial proposal according to this intention was unveiled in 2015, however, postponed due to strong oppositions from the community of Ayvalık. Nevertheless, as of 2021, Sarımsaklı coast has been reclassified from a 'public beach' to a 'sustainable protection and controlled utilization area', rendering the existing plan ineffective. Based on this, the construction on the beach has started following the proposed design. The natural environment was attempted to be instrumentalized as an accumulation strategy. It is defined as an urbanized intervention that has led the way for the further construction of Sarımsaklı and the marketing of Ayvalık under the name of tourism. As discussed earlier, alterations in the conservation status of areas in Ayvalık, influenced by top-down decisions, are dominant factors shaping the condition of 'natural' spaces within the current neoliberal urbanisation dynamics.

This change in Sarımsaklı coast has paved the way for construction under the label of 'Recreation Area,' marking the final step of a long-planned project. Despite claims by authorities that the ongoing construction on Sarımsaklı beach is situated in a degraded sandy area, this assertion does not align with the actual circumstances. Since the enactment of the Metropolitan law, district governance has been marginalized in addressing this dimension of the socio-environmental crisis. In addition to this, despite repeated claims by Balıkesir Metropolitan Municipality that the process was conducted with public participation through field research in 2022, the project has encountered significant opposition from both the local populace and resistance groups; the criticisms mainly pointing out the deviations from coastal law, planning and urbanisation principles, and public interest.

The social practices that have emerged in response to ongoing spatial and environmental interferences in Ayvalık manifest in the form of petition campaigns, press statements, and organizing demonstrations; the sites hosting these movements show the differentiated modes of urbanisation by looking at the emerging social practices. The resistances that we would like to specifically mention in this section are the 'Beach Towel Revolt' that took place in Sarımsaklı beach and the coastal resistances mobilized with the frame of "We are all on the coast," reclaiming the coastal areas by demanding the right to the city and nature.

The most recent protest in Ayvalık concerns the privatization of the coasts and demanding the implication of existing coastal laws; it has spatialized in various points locally and nationally encompassing the other coastal towns, i.e. Bodrum, Datça, Çeşme, Fethiye, Burgazada, Daylan, etc. The struggle has evolved into an urban ecological movement because of the reason for it and the connections established among the national sites of resistance. The interconnectedness of sites of protest emphasizes the powerful potential of environmental issues to resonate with one another, making it easier to achieve collective unity in the resistance. In this regard, while Sarımsaklı Beach stands as a protest site that overlaps directly with the object of contention, other instances in Ayvalık illustrate how spatial strategies of resistance can also unfold in more symbolically charged or centrally located public spaces.



Figure 3. Excavator traces on sand, Sarımsaklı. Photographs are taken by the author in January 2024.

The ongoing construction on Sarımsaklı Beach (Figure 3) and the restriction of public access have manifested in a form of protest rarely encountered in an ‘urban’ context, as part of broader urban and environmental activism by the local people and resistance groups. In response to the call by the Ayvalık Initiative for the Protection of Cultural and Natural Heritage (Ayvalık Kültür ve Tabiat Varlıklarını Koruma Girişimi – AKVG) and Ayvalık Nature Platform (Ayvalık Tabiat Platformu – ATP) under the ‘Beaches Belong to the People’ movement, residents of Ayvalık mobilized in streets, squares, and beaches symbolically using ‘beach towels’ to claim the right to the city and reappropriate the contested urban space through bodily engagement. Soon after the actions and press statements of activists from the ATP, environmental volunteers, and the AKVG began to be organized at Sarımsaklı Beach, the area was transformed from a site of daily life into a space for activism. These individuals, institutions, and initiatives, characterized by their opposition, played a crucial role in the spatial transformation of the beach by organizing activities that intertwined with the ordinary flow of daily life at the beach—events that would otherwise be considered unusual and extraordinary at any other beach.

Through their practices, Sarımsaklı Beach has been transformed and differentiated, becoming a place where political activism has become an ordinary part of everyday life. This illustrates how the daily routine in a space where urban and non-urban intersect is momentarily disrupted by the dynamics of differential urbanisation, transforming the beach into both a site of protest and a site of resistance (Dinçer, 2016). Therefore, while Sarımsaklı Beach is ecologically significant due to its endemic plant diversity and holds importance as a popular tourism and holiday destination, it can be said that the activism on the beach has further emphasized its distinctiveness distinguishing it from other beaches.



Figure 4. A photograph taken during an urban ecological movement happening in Sarımsaklı. Source: Archives of Ayvalık Nature Platform

What sets Sarımsaklı Beach apart is the intertwining of daily life with political activities in a space where the effects of environmental destruction and neoliberal urban and environmental policies are most clearly observed. Notably, the Beach Towel Revolt transformed the most common activity on the beach—sunbathing—into an expression of protest, making protest a natural part of life at the beach (Figure 4). This convergence and integration mean that the beach is seen as more than just a site for demonstrations; it allows the potential for individuals from the flow of everyday life at the beach to participate in the resistance. Thus, resistance becomes a practice that can be experienced within daily life, even at the beach, allowing anyone to become an actor in collective activism. Here, the ease and perceived ‘safety’ of participating in resistance efforts with an environmental aspect, compared to other types, undoubtedly has a significant impact.

I find the ecological struggle to be somewhat successful because it is one of the forms of activism that people find most comfortable and easy to participate in. They start out with a love for nature and animals, and it doesn't necessarily require a serious political consciousness at first. That political awareness develops throughout the process. (TİP Balıkesir Provincial Administration Ecology Officer)

These actions occur as practices that do not interrupt the ongoing daily life at the beach, but rather integrate into it. Political activities and sunbathing, along with swimming, occur in the same space, becoming intertwined. Yet, the protest was not limited to a certain site; with resonance on social media among locals of Ayvalık, it also evolved into action to protect public areas under the Coastal Law. These protests highlighted the socio-ecological exploitation occurring in an area previously designated as a 'Public Open Beach,' now reclassified as a 'Recreation Area.' Hence, the ongoing socio-environmental exploitation and urban ecological movements in the Sarımsaklı coast exemplify the urbanized interventions during the period of neoliberal urbanisation.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has examined the socio-ecological implications of Law No. 6360 through the lens of Ayvalık, highlighting how centralized governance mechanisms reshape the urban-rural interface under the conditions of planetary urbanisation. By extending the jurisdiction of metropolitan municipalities, the law not only redefined legal and administrative boundaries but also restructured material environments and social relations across previously rural territories. According to the analyses it is observed that in Ayvalık, these transformations have intensified land commodification, environmental degradation, and socio-spatial inequalities—revealing the deep entanglement of ecological and political crises within the contemporary urban condition.

Framing Ayvalık as a metropolitan hinterland has allowed us to trace the uneven geographies of state-led urbanisation, where peripheral spaces are subsumed into the urban regime while remaining politically marginalized. Yet, these same geographies have become sites of contestation, where grassroots actors engage in ecological resistance not merely to preserve landscapes, but to reclaim decision-making power, assert local autonomy, and articulate alternative spatial imaginaries. These movements expose the contradictions of capitalist urbanisation and challenge the symbolic and functional erasure of the rural under centralized rule.

By foregrounding the relational production of space and nature, this study contributes to a growing body of work within urban political ecology that seeks to re-theorize urbanisation as a socio-natural process. It suggests that attention to peripheral, administratively urbanized territories can reveal important insights into the workings of state power, the material politics of planning, and the emergence of new forms of environmental activism. In doing so, it calls for planning and governance frameworks that are ecologically informed, territorially sensitive, and democratically accountable—capable of recognizing the situated knowledge and lived experiences of those who inhabit urbanizing landscapes.

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