

THE CAVES OF THE RETHYMNON LITTORAL ZONE: AN ARCHIVE OF THE PLEISTOCENE ENDEMIC FAUNA OF CRETE. A PROPOSAL FOR ITS FORMAL PROTECTION

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Along the coast west of the town of Réthymnon there is a series of cliffs in the Neogene limestone of the region, formed by the erosional action of the sea. The cliff face hosts a great number of small to middle-sized caves, several of which are important from a palaeontological and archaeological point of view. The caves are generally horizontal, tunnel-shaped, with limited calcitic deposits, and clay fillings of variable thickness and extent. The latter preserve in many cases archaeological finds and/or remains of the Pleistocene endemic mammalian fauna of Crete. A highly diversified deer population (eight distinct morphotypes attributed to one — *Candiacervus* — or more genera, according to authors) constitutes the main faunal elements, accompanied by endemic elephant species, a dwarf hippopotamus, rodents and an otter (van der Geer et al., 2010). The Réthymnon littoral zone includes some of the most important sites of the Cretan endemic fauna, as the caves of Geráni bay, Bate, Simonelli and Koumbés. Their close proximity to each other makes them a unique area of palaeontological interest that can serve as a scientific, educational and touristic attraction. However, the rapid industrial development of the area during the last decades threatens their preservation, and they need to be protected as soon as possible. We propose the formal protection of the littoral zone by the extension of the Geráni Archaeological Site to the East, and the subsequent planning of small-scale works, which will facilitate the pedestrian access to the caves and will provide information about the caves, their fossil fauna and their archaeological content.

Reference:

Van der Geer A., Lyras G., de Vos J., Dermitzakis M. (2010): *Evolution of island mammals: adaptation and extinction of placental mammals on islands*. Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford.

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