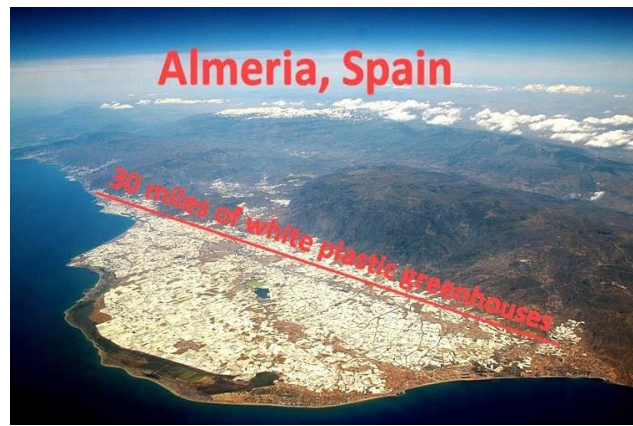


Europe's Dirty Little Secret: Moroccan Slaves and a 'Sea of Plastic'

They call it a “Sea of Plastic” and the “vast expanse of polytunnels.” Driving through Almeria into the city of El Ejido, I started thinking of it as the apocalypse. But the visual onslaught is the least of the problem—news articles have reported on the issues with the greenhouses many times, environmental groups have tried to address the problem and governments have launched efforts to mitigate it.



Greenhouses cover every square inch of land, more than 165 square miles of land around Almeria, Spain.

As I drove along, the smell of plastic and chemicals permeated the car and offered the first scent of the larger environmental problem. The greenhouses are almost all hydroponic—growing vegetables in water, air and a chemical stew of fertilizer, herbicide and pesticide. Due to the hot and extremely difficult working conditions inside the greenhouses, almost all of the human labor is imported, much of it slave-like from Africa.

The growth in greenhouses started in the late 1970s as a local response to an economic opportunity to provide vegetables to the European marketplace. The transformed landscape has also transformed the economy from a land of farmers struggling in dry rocky soil in the 1970s to an economy of extremely wealthy greenhouse owners. By 2004, thousands of small landowners had turned their entire property—every square inch—into greenhouse farms as the vegetables started appearing in grocery stores and restaurants across the European continent. In the 2000s, immigrants from Africa—many with no legal papers—were shipped in by the hundreds per boatload to work in the plastic greenhouses.

By 2011, a news report in The Guardian said that more than 100,000 workers toil away inside the greenhouses, many living in "inhuman" slums and laboring in the chemical stew. The report noted:

- "Migrant workers from Africa living in shacks made of old boxes and plastic sheeting, without sanitation or access to drinking water.
- Wages that are routinely less than half the legal minimum wage.
- Workers without papers being told they will be reported to the police if they complain.
- Allegations of segregation enforced by police harassment when African workers stray outside the hothouse areas into tourist areas."

A 2013 documentary film, *The Moroccan Slaves of El Ejido, Spain* chronicled the plight of the migrant workers toiling inside the hot greenhouses as well as their difficult lives outside of work.

In 2014, amidst a large controversy, a Spanish TV station created a fictional crime drama, *Mar de Plastico* that highlighted much of the crime, labor and environmental chaos surrounding the greenhouse farms.

A 2015 report in *NaturPhilosophie* noted that, in addition to the massive human rights problems, the area is plagued with depleted aquifers, the largest desalination plant in Europe to keep water flowing into the greenhouses, and rising cancer rates due to pesticide exposure among workers.

Waste from the "farms" is reported to run off into the Mediterranean Sea, including the chemical waste, plastic waste and human waste of the workers. Entire industries have popped up in the area simply to make the massive amount of plastic for the greenhouses which has a short lifespan and is sometimes discarded, strewn across the landscape or washed into the sea.

Some observers call it a \$1 billion "miracle economy," while others call it the "exploitation of cheap labor with no rights" and "environmental devastation." The swath of greenhouses is massive enough to be seen from space and has been described as a "Dystopian Sea."

Lähde: Ecowatch

<https://www.ecowatch.com/europes-dirty-little-secret-moroccan-slaves-and-a-sea-of-plastic-1882131257.html>