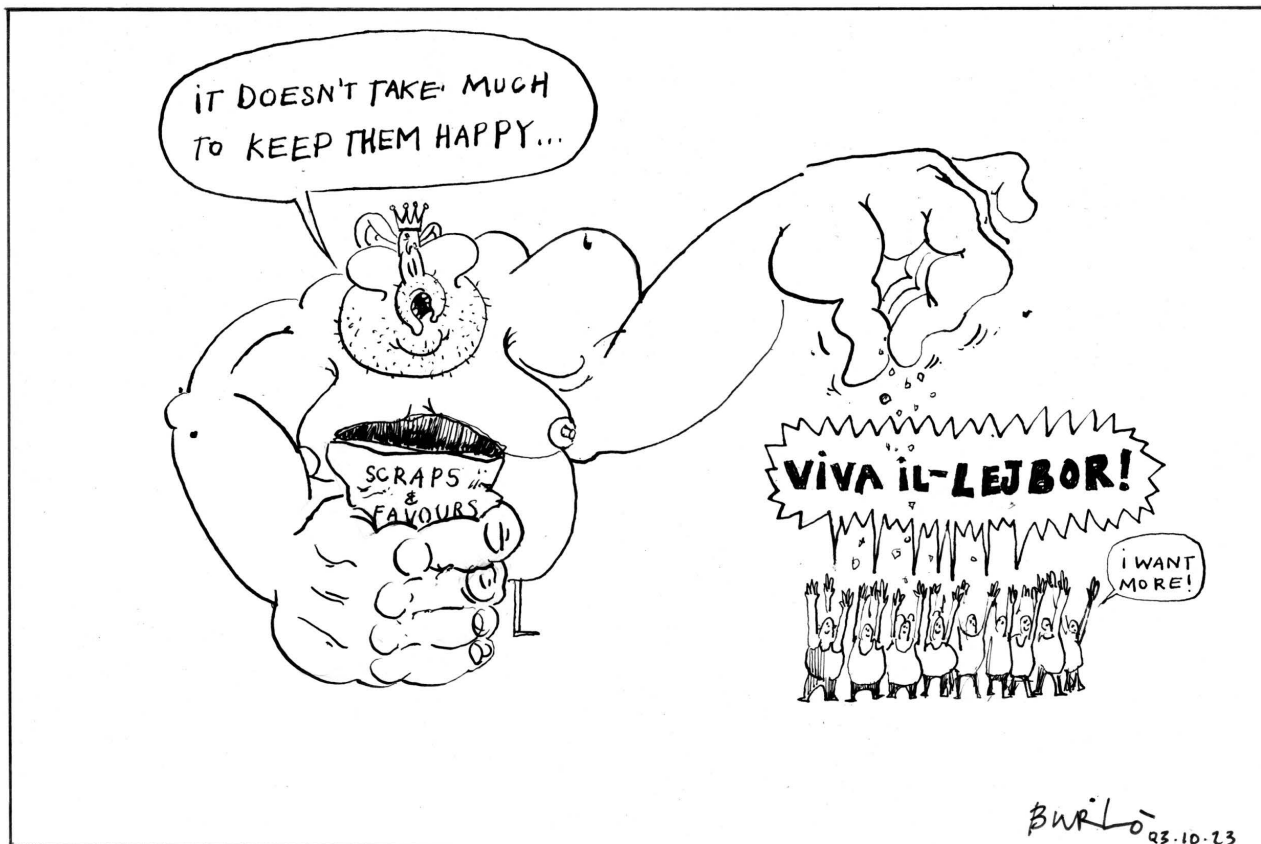


COMMENTS AND LETTERS



Close to the people

Let young people go diving

DANIEL XERRI



There are major concerns among stakeholders in Malta's scuba-diving industry that fewer young people seem to be taking up the sport.

For the Professional Diving Schools Association (PDSA), this worrying trend is the result of several causes. The main one consists of people's misconceptions about how safe diving is as a sport. When diving incidents and fatalities are reported on the media, some people tend to assume that diving is an extreme sport that poses a high likelihood of injury or death.

Over the decades, the global diving industry has developed standards and procedures that enshrine the chief value of safety. Diving certification agencies have designed courses that do not solely equip people with the knowledge and skills needed to dive but also with what they require to do so safely.

Stephen Muscat, the clinical lead of the hyperbaric unit at Mater Dei Hospi-

tal, said: "Most of the diving incidents that occur are entirely avoidable. If one practises safe diving procedures and avoids engaging in risky behaviour – such as drinking alcohol and getting dehydrated before a dive or doing multiple dives without a proper surface interval and adequate decompression – it is perfectly possible to enjoy this sport without putting oneself in peril."

Diving is also an opportunity for family members to share meaningful experiences together. Having recently returned from a week of diving in the south of Egypt, Anthony Wareing and his 14-year-old daughter, Patricia have been diving together for some time now.

Even though none of Patricia's friends dive, her love for the sea and her curiosity about what lies beneath it motivated her to take up the sport four years ago. Instead of allowing his fears to get in the way, Anthony decided to learn how to dive together with Patricia. For them, diving is a means of doing something fun and spending quality time with one another.

According to Alan Deidun, a marine biologist and Malta's Ocean Ambassador, "scuba diving is a sustainable way of enjoying the marine environment and instilling a greater awareness of the bounty which lies beneath the waves. Diving opens up a new viewpoint on marine bio-

diversity by providing an insight into the damage that can be wrought by humans and on the vulnerability of marine ecosystems to the same impacts."

Scuba divers are some of the fiercest proponents of marine conservation. Becoming a diver from a very young age helps nurture a strong environmental consciousness that lasts throughout one's lifetime. If we want young people in Malta to care about the environment and to adopt sustainable lifestyle practices, encouraging them to learn about what lies beneath the surface of the sea that surrounds our islands is one of the best ways of achieving this goal.

Diving allows young people to visit wrecks and other archaeological sites that are not typically seen by those who never venture beneath the sea. Timmy Gambin, a maritime archaeologist, stated: "Diving beneath the waves opens up new and otherwise inaccessible

worlds. Young people can explore and enjoy the natural and cultural gems present in Maltese waters. The underwater world is also ideal to learn about the interaction between humans and the sea."

Given how much young people in Malta can benefit from scuba diving, the PDSA expects the government to give this sport more recognition by including it in the list of activities that are supported by the campaigns, assistance schemes and programmes of Sport-Malta, the national agency responsible for the promotion and development of sport.

While young people should be encouraged to go diving, there are a number of considerations that need to be taken in the case of children. These include their pulmonary and bone development, inner ear and sinus issues, emotional stability and maturity.

The authors of a review of studies in paediatric medicine conclude that scuba diving is a relatively safe recreational activity for children as long as medical limitations and contraindications are acknowledged.

Once a child is deemed fit to dive, they can take up the sport by following one of the specialised courses offered by most diving certification agencies.

Daniel Xerri is a diver and educator.



Diving opens up a new viewpoint on marine biodiversity