

COMMENTS AND LETTERS

Diving: where's the action?

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The government's strategy for the future of Malta's multi-million euro diving industry was published with great fanfare in May last year. However, progress on its implementation has moved at a glacial pace, if at all.

The strategy is meant to enhance the quality of the country's diving product, boost the sector's international competitiveness and make Malta a far more attractive destination in the eyes of divers from abroad.

People within the diving industry have been critical of the lethargy with which the actions related to each one of the strategy's five objectives are being implemented. In the case of certain actions, progress has either stalled or failed to materialise.

The strategy's first objective is to upgrade the essential infrastructure at the country's dive sites. This is meant to be partly achieved through infrastructural improvements at shore sites.

However, while minor improvements have been registered at certain sites, nothing much has changed in most places over the last year. Signage, CCTV, basic kitting up facilities, portable toilets, handrails, access ladders and pathways remain either non-existent or were not maintained properly over winter in line with the strategy.

While the Professional Diving Schools Association (PDSA) installed ladders and handrails at specific sites in Malta in preparation for the summer on behalf of the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA), challenges still remain in Gozo, where the EcoGozo directorate has left popular dive sites like Reqqa Point without a ladder for long periods.

Another means by which the first objective is meant to be implemented is by assessing what is required to establish permanent mooring buoys at the most popular boat dive sites. Apart from the wreck marker buoys placed by the PDSA on behalf of the MTA at around 10 sites between May and October every year, there are no indications of whether this aspect of the strategy is being planned for in other sensitive places, such as those within Natura 2000 sites and historic wrecks that are also war graves.

The strategy's first objective is also meant to be implemented through an assessment of the shore-based infrastructure that is required to support boat diving. Instead of improvement, though, protracted works at Buġibba and Marfa have meant that boat dives departing from the north have been limited to the use of the jetties at Fekruna,



The strategy, launched in May 2022, is meant to enhance the quality of Malta's diving product. PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Sirens or Ċirkewwa. These jetties have other uses that are sometimes in conflict with diving requirements.

The strategy's second objective is to improve the protection and management of the country's dive sites and diving resource. It is meant to be implemented through eight separate actions, on which progress has been registered only with respect to three of them.

In relation to the establishment of marine parks, the publication of a draft management plan for the Ċirkewwa Marine Park in January 2023 is a laudable initiative. Nonetheless, the fact that there have been no major updates suggests a sense of unwillingness to proceed to the next step of legally formalising the park's status.

The second objective is also meant to be attained through the promotion of environmental stewardship within the diving industry. While the organisation of a voluntary training course

for seasonal dive guides shed light on the potential impact of their activities on the marine environment, no progress was made with the development of a code of practice and standard operating procedures for the industry and local divers.

An attempt to raise awareness of the regulations in force at shore dive sites was made through a seasonal social media campaign by Transport Malta but this has had very little reach and effect, as attested by the frequent contraventions by boat operators.

The remaining five actions forming part of the second objective have not started being undertaken. This means that the country's official dive sites have not yet been formally designated and the appointment of a single entity with overall responsibility for the provision and maintenance of infrastructure at shore sites is still to take place.

Delay on this front makes it impossible to ensure the year-round availability of infrastructure for safely entering and exiting the water at these sites. In fact, MTA and EcoGozo have informed diving organisations that the policy of not recovering and replacing lost ladders in winter has been continued, irrespective of this strategy objective.

The last three objectives of the strategy are to improve, support and diversify. They have seen minimal or no action.

For instance, there has been no progress on improving the regulation of the diving industry by strengthening the enforcement of the provisions of the Notice to Mariners. Hence, it is

still difficult for conservation areas and 'no stopping areas' to be safeguarded.

To some extent, the objective to support the industry in the training and recruitment of staff was touched upon through the delivery of the voluntary course mentioned previously. However, stakeholders need to be clear that, for training to be effective, it needs to be of a recurrent nature.

While one could argue that the objective to diversify Malta's diving product has been partially attained through the provision of a new dive attraction, it is worth recalling that the scuttling of the *Hephaestus* in Gozo was in the pipeline long before the publication of the strategy.

Moreover, the attempt to improve the country's diving offer by using web-based technology at popular shore dive sites was short-lived. Underwater CCTV at tug boat Rożi was installed for a brief period in the summer/autumn of 2022 but footage was not streamed online for long and few individuals got to see it working.

Diversifying the country's diving product is also meant to be achieved through the development of the technical diving market. While two successful conferences aimed at this segment were organised by international bodies earlier this year, the promised working document on how Malta can grow this sector further has not yet seen the light of day.

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