

Gozo as an Ecological Island - Some Proposals

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A Definition of 'An Ecological Island'

The Maltese Government is committed to transform Gozo into 'an ecological island.' Is it just a fashionable buzz phrase to attract a growing environmentally conscious electorate? Is it another word to condemn Gozo as a 'presejju' (static crib) for the Maltese to enjoy during visits on weekend breaks and for Gozitans to migrate to find jobs? Is it the right way forward for a sustainable Gozo ...with all the complications sustainability poses? The latter option carries a mammoth task and a monumental change! Can Gozo really be turned into such an island? How far is the government willing to enforce changes in the Gozitan traditional lifestyle to reach this goal and in reality is it too late to reverse certain decisions, change or alter physical and structural developments which would hamper the attainment of such a goal? It depends on what definition is adopted by the government as the meaning of 'an ecological island'.

A strict definition of an 'ecological island' relates to the protection of the natural micro-habitat ecosystem of an area, in our case an island, from the reintroduction of non-native species. This definition would place nature before human needs.

Another wider definition of the word, 'ecological' may include the open-ended debated word, 'sustainable development' which encompasses and brings into play the economic, environmental and social needs of present and future Gozitans. Here a delicate balance is to be sought between the needs of Gozitans today and tomorrow and the natural micro-habitat ecosystem.

A Sustainable eco-Gozo?

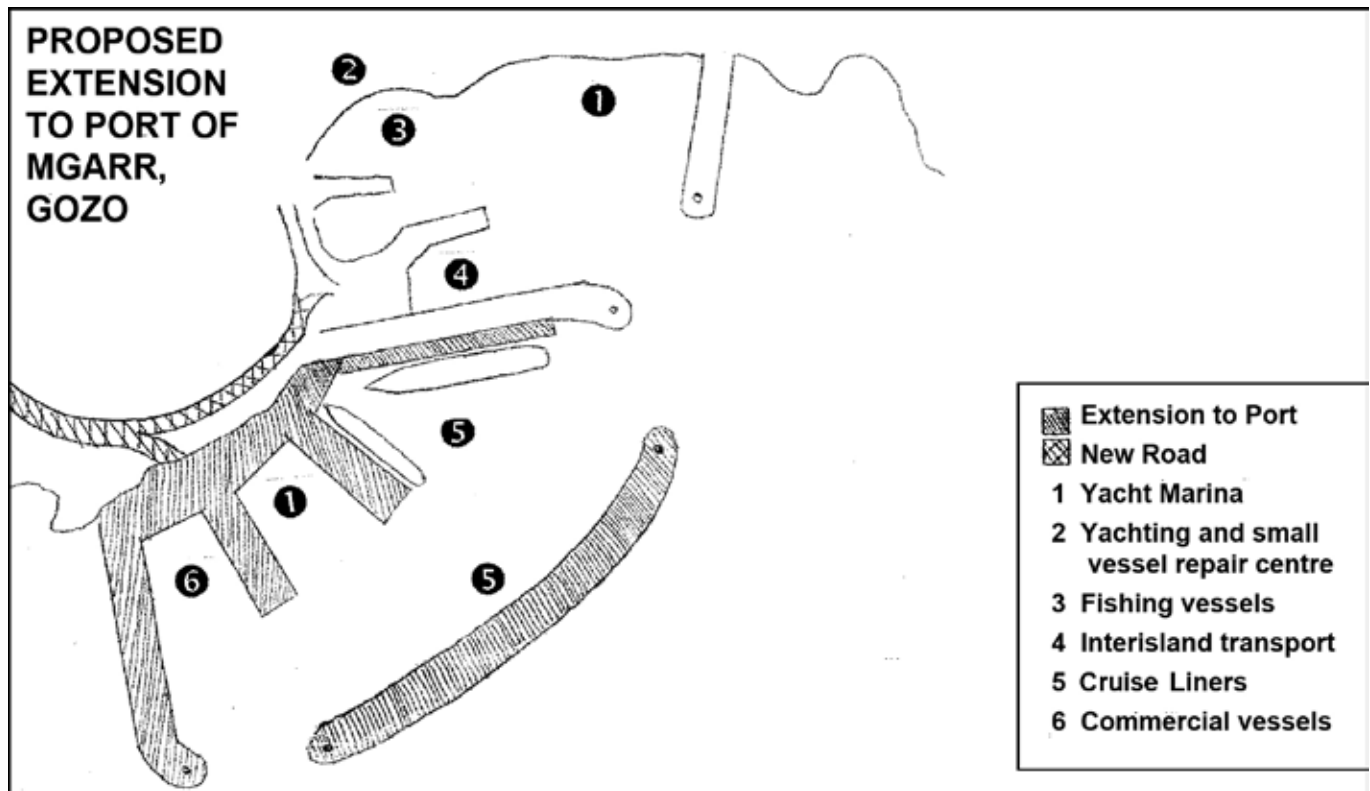
The latter definition is more acceptable to me. An eco-Gozo can be attained by means of a number of measures in the following areas:

The enhancement of Gozitan ecosystems

1. All foreign flora and tree species which are scientifically causing damage to the soil/soil moisture of Gozo should be substituted by endemic trees such as olive, citrus, palm, carob and a number of other endangered tree and plant species;
2. Each village in Gozo should have one or more public parks similar to those being pioneered at the Grunju area by the Qala Local Council and at the former Qortin landfill in Xagħra;
3. Coastal tree and plant afforestation 'defences' should be planned to halt the large quantity of top soil erosion into the coastal waters after every heavy rainfall;
4. Water encatchments in major valleys should be constructed to sustain the remaining agricultural patches around the island and the growing number of olive groves, vineyards, parks, etc.;
5. Light pollution is a major problem in Gozo and this can be reduced by using specific face-down lamps in residential areas and low-light in other selected areas so as not to negatively affect flora and fauna;
6. An island-wide programme for the reconstruction of Gozo's largest patrimony, its stone-cobbled walls, including changing limestone walls along streets where possible. These walls are the habitat of most of our fauna;
7. The Department of Agriculture in Gozo should be the catalyst in nurturing the above changes needed especially in fostering the much needed awareness of Gozitan and Maltese endangered plant species and spearheading their dissemination around the island.

Sustainable economic growth

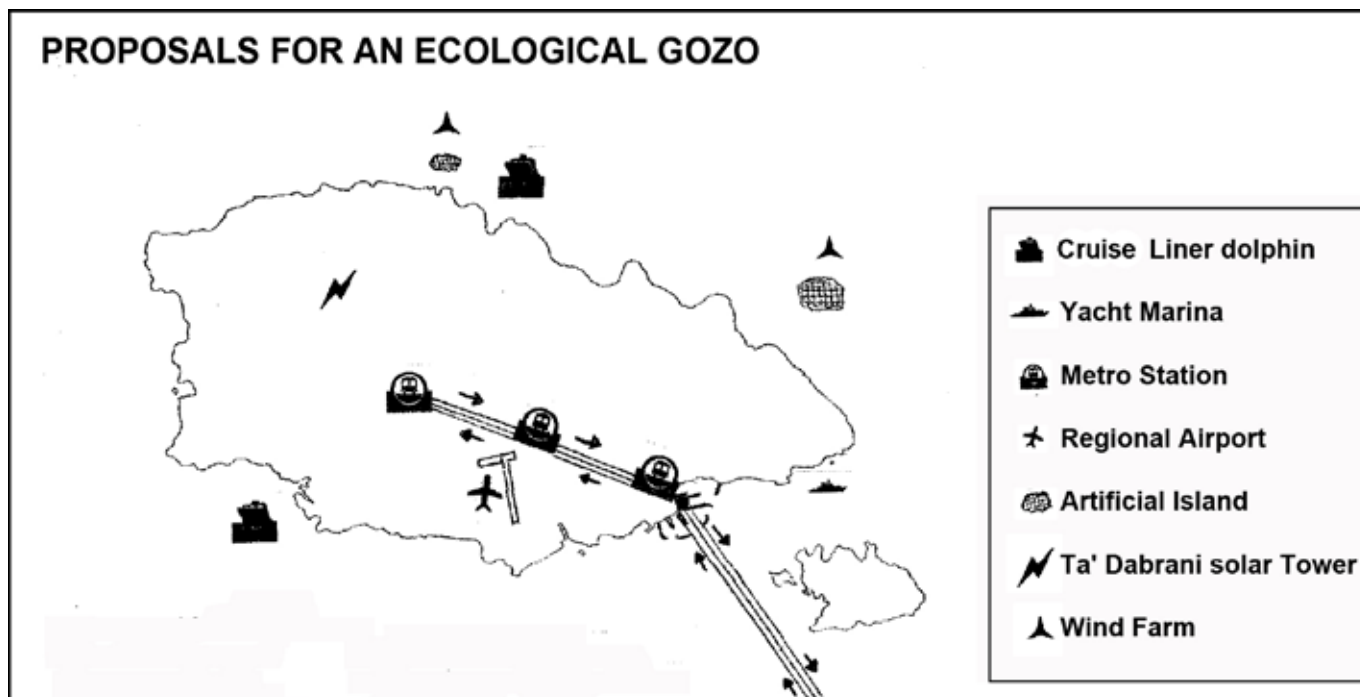
1. Gozo urgently needs an economic stimulus to reduce the higher unemployment levels and halt the constant need for migration to Malta and abroad. This can be achieved first and foremost through the creation of a regional airport between Xewkija and Għajnsielem and attracting regional and low cost airlines to the island;



Proposed extension to Mgarr Port, Gozo

2. Expanding the Mgarr Port facilities towards ix-Xatt l-Aħmar to provide port space with six sectors (1) for interisland transport; (2) for commercial vessels; (3) for cruise liners; (4) more yachting space; (5) yachting and small vessel repair centre and (6) local fisheries vessel space.
3. Public transport in Gozo needs a complete rethinking. Malta should start thinking of constructing a metro line connecting Victoria to Valletta (via seabed placed tunneling) extending in a number six shape to connect all important strategic points. In 15-20 minutes you could be on the other side of the country instead of today's travel time of 3 hours!
4. Gozo's energy needs can be easily satisfied if a combination of solar and wind sources are tapped. A solar power plant one-tenth the size of the solar tower system of Seville in Spain that is, utilizing an area the size of one football ground (top of Ta' Dabrani Hill) can provide clean energy for all 15,000 Gozitan households while any excess energy produced could be sold to Malta or the future European grid.
5. Artificial islands on shallow water spots along the northern Gozitan coastline (with 300-320 days of wind) can not only solve the construction dumping problem but serve as a base for wind-turbines and provide much needed clean energy;
6. The need for three cruise liner berthing facilities: one at Mgarr (cruise liner sector of port), one outside the bay of Xlendi and another at Marsalforn;
7. Besides the Mgarr Port yachting sector another port should be identified to cater for the growing demand from the yachting industry for more berthing space – the Qala Creek project is an option;
8. A need for a foreign university in Gozo (other than the University of Malta) to attract foreign students with all the multiplier effects brought about on transport, accommodation, etc.;
9. Five cluster industries should be developed in various localities in the east, centre and west of Gozo in the areas of (1) agrotourism; (2) call centres; (3) health and well-being sector; (4) precision engineering parts and repairs; (5) information technology services;
10. Gozo should have a regional government to act as a liaison between central government ministries and the cluster of local councils on a number of well-defined areas and services. Also to act as a liaison between central government ministries by means of having a Gozitan representative on all existing boards, MCESD, public corporations, etc.; and,

PROPOSALS FOR AN ECOLOGICAL GOZO



Proposals for an ecological Gozo

11. The sixth Euro Member of Parliament should be elected from Gozitans to represent Gozo at the European level.

Giving Gozo a facelift

1. Half of the public electricity lamp posts can be removed by the introduction of solar powered lamp-posts similar to the ones used in Switzerland and Germany, eliminating all aerial wires and at the same time Gozo will face a much lower electricity bill;
2. All newly built arterial, distribution and secondary roads should have adequate side paths with walking and cycling lanes to encourage more walking, jogging and exercise besides bike transport;
3. Main local squares and the main road of every locality should be pedestrianised, tiled, and duked with street furniture;
4. Particular attention to detail finishings and a maintenance programme for each project from a simple side path to the largest project; and,
5. A small alteration in roof areas to allow for the hiding of items such as solar heating panels, water tanks, gas tanks and others.

Government Needs to Act Fast

In order for Gozo to achieve its sustainability in all its aspects (economic, social and environmental) both the strict definition and human requirements of an ecological island, need to be taken into consideration. Vital political structures such as regional government and Gozo's one MEP still need to be established. Gozo needs representation on all political levels; local, regional, central and European to attain not only proper governance but also to achieve sustainable development.

Dr Raymond C Xerri obtained his PhD in 2002 from Victoria University in Australia. His area of research was Social and Cultural Inquiry concentration on Gozitan Identity and Migration.