

Addressing Mediterranean problems

The Mediterranean and Black Sea coasts have, since the earliest of times, been the cradle of a whole myriad of different civilisations. As a result, these very same coasts have borne the brunt of intensive human development and settlements.

These two ancient sea crossways are now among the world's top tourist destinations. About 100 million tourists arrive every year in the Mediterranean basin alone, most of them enticed by the region's coastal recreational assets.

This number is expected to reach 260 million by 2025. In addition, some 40 per cent of the indigenous Mediterranean population (roughly 130 million people) lives in the coastal zone; this figure is expected to double by 2025 (UNEP, 1996).

This sobering scenario was one of the catalysts behind the inception of the MEDCOAST entity, which is today celebrating 12 years since it came into being in 1991.

MEDCOAST aims to contribute to coastal and marine conservation in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, through improved coastal management practices.

The methodology used to pursue such goals includes the enhancement of scientific and professional collaboration and networking among individuals and institutes in Mediterranean and Black Sea countries.

Although the MEDCOAST Secretariat is based in Ankara, Turkey, the entity embraces other institutions and universities, including the University of Malta, represented by Dr Anton Micallef from ICOD.

The list of competent entities brought together in MEDCOAST is impressive and includes universities from all over Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, Mediterranean Action Plan (UNEP/MAP), the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission and the International Ocean Institute (IOI).

MEDCOAST activities

The highlight of activities carried out by MEDCOAST is the biannual conference, held since 1993. Previous venues for such a conference include Turkey, Spain, Tunisia and Malta (Qawra, 1997).

In its 10 years of operations, the entity can boast 16 volumes (comprising over 11,000 pages) of proceedings emanating from its scientific international meetings.

Besides international scientific gatherings, such as conferences and workshops, MEDCOAST also organises regular training programmes on coastal management issues.

The enchanting Italian city of Ravenna on the Adriatic Sea hosted the latest MEDCOAST conference from October 7 to 11. Against the backdrop of world-renowned cultural legacies such as mosaics, icons, bell towers, cathedrals and other Byzantine monuments, over 300 researchers converged together to provide solutions for the ailing Mediterranean coastline.

Mingling with participants were students and stakeholders, such as planners and site managers, and vibrant discussions ensued even throughout coffee and lunch breaks.

The conference programme included visits to the Po delta, the Comacchio lagoons and two national parks. Besides rigorously scientific banter, the conference was also an opportunity for people hailing from different cultures to intermingle as has occurred for centuries along this ancient sea crossroads.

To address the multi-tiered study of the coastal environment, a number of workshops were held.

Topics included: coastal dunes and their management; the management of lagoons and river deltas; mariculture (including the implications of tuna penning); oil transport, pollution and control; beach management; the importance of training and education in coastal conservation; coastal governance; marine protected areas (in collaboration with WWF Mediterranean Programme); integrated coastal zone management (ICZM); geomorphology and coastal erosion control; water quality management and the use of remote sensing in conservation efforts.

The breadth of the conference's scope is testified through such a variety of interests.

Our country's beacons at the conference in Ravenna were four scientific contributions, which is quite significant in terms of our limited resources.

Malta has a long tradition of pro-active participation in such conferences, which for us 'hit home' since they address the welfare of the Mediterranean Sea.

All this buoys future prospects for Maltese researchers by extolling their credentials on the international stage, while underpinning our country's resolve to actively participate in any initiative aimed at safeguarding the welfare of the Mediterranean region as a whole.

The following are the scientific contributions presented by Maltese researchers at the conference: An innovative sand dune restoration project from Malta (Alan Deidun, Adrian Mallia, Patrick J. Schembri); MAMA - a regional network for ocean forecasting in the Mediterranean (Aldo Drago, Matthew Scerri, Joanna Borg); Monitoring beach stability on the Mediterranean island of Malta (Anton Micallef); MAP Camp over Malta: A benchmark for Maltese environmental planning and management (Avertano Rolè and Christine Tanti).

The circumscribed approach at addressing local coastal and marine issues through the nature of work presented at the conference bodes well for scientifically-backed conservation efforts of Maltese coastal and marine resources.

In addition, the conference provided a useful forum whereby the Maltese reality (which can almost be considered as a microcosm of the entire region, with overdeveloped coastlines and dwindling natural coastal habitats) could be relayed to our neighbours.

The forthcoming MEDCOAST activity is the International Training Programme on Integrated Coastal Management in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea in Dalyan, Turkey (August 31-September 14, 2004).

One only augurs that future marine, and coastal, oriented regional and international meetings are attended with similar vigour by local exponents.

A benchmark currently being aimed at by the MEDCOAST Secretariat is the establishment of the MEDCOAST Foundation, a non-profit scientific and environmental organisation.