

## Seeing red at Ramla



Beach management a la maltaise, at Ramla l-Hamra, courtesy of a ministry, Mepa's upper echelons and even the Gaia Foundation. We are meant to believe this was all worth it, in the name of having a clean beach.

Many have understandably been gobsmacked at the high-handedness resorted to Ramla l-Hamra to address the 'problem' of pebbles on the beach.

Ramla is supposedly protected by a series of environmental designations (the site has been scheduled since 1995 and is currently a Natura 2000 site/Special Area of Conservation); so the last thing one would have expected is for a bulldozer to drive down to the beach, excavate a huge pit in the sand (to bury the cleared pebbles), just inches away from the Tamarisk trees, the watercourse and, possibly, even the ruins of the Roman villa on site. Yet this is what happened on Sette Gugno at 4am.

*When faced with popular ignorance fuelled by an ignorant political class, one is left speechless*

I will not even attempt to elaborate on the ecological importance and sensitivity of the Ramla beach and dune system as the authorities often consider these arguments as extremist. Just one example of this ecological importance is the isopod *Tylos europaeus*, which is strictly a sand-burrowing species, and which in Malta is almost exclusively (with just one exception) restricted to Ramla l-Hamra.

The Blue Flag status recently (less than a month ago) bestowed upon Ramla l-Hamra was awarded on four criteria, with 'environmental management' being one of them. When rummaging through the detailed explanation of the criteria of the Blue Flag status, one finds the following statements:

"Some sites at/near the Blue Flag beach may be very sensitive and require special management. In these cases, the beach operator is strongly encouraged to consult an appropriate conservation organisation or expert for advice on how to manage these sites.

"Where areas require special management, at the time of application, the applicant must provide confirmation that this consultation has taken place and that a management plan will be implemented."

"Regulations pertaining to issues relating to coastal zone planning, environmental management, waste-water legislation, environmental legislation, and others must be met for the beach to receive and maintain Blue Flag status."

A 'conservation organisation' had been consulted – namely, the qualified individuals in the former Environment Protection Department (EPD), who drafted an extensive list of permit conditions the operator had to abide to when carrying out the works on site for the simple

reason that Ramla l-Hamra is a very sensitive site. But this list of conditions was almost completely disregarded by the upper echelons at the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (namely the chairman and CEO) who rubber-stamped the permit with very few strings (conditions) attached. The upper echelons at Mepa did this under duress – they were under unequivocal pressure from a particular ministry which would not take no for an answer.

Representatives from the Blue Flag programme will visit Malta next week to investigate the case but it is unlikely they will be allowed to speak to EPD officials or see the list of conditions they had originally compiled.

It is highly contradictory and ironic that Mepa's arm was twisted into giving its go-ahead for the works following sustained pressure from a ministry, which instead should have been at the forefront to safeguard every Blue Flag status Malta's beaches are awarded, especially in view that the majority (not all, fortunately) of those employed in the tourism sector do not give high priority to ecological considerations.

It is also highly ironic that environmental authorities should sanction actions that might lead to the removal of the pebbles which offer potential protection against sand erosion.

In numerous beaches around the world, it is illegal to remove pebbles from a beach. On beaches along the southern fringe of Adelaide, Australia, such as Okaparinga City, one can be fined AUD185 (€132) for driving on or removing such pebbles. Compare that to what happens here!

Even more disconcerting is the fact that those promoting this action latched on to the fact that environmental monitors – namely, members of the EPD and Gaia Foundation, the NGO which manages the beach in question – were invited to attend the proceedings. Undertaking the action at 4am on a public holiday is hardly encouraging for third parties to cross over from Malta to see what was taking place.

Gaia volunteers did attend, and at least unofficially, I am sure they were petrified by what they saw. Officially, the foundation issued a blinkered press release saying that "the ecological integrity of the site was not affected", that no intervention took place in the dunes, and that public facilities on the beach would have been on risk had such works not been conducted.

Since when is an environmental NGO more concerned with preserving public facilities than the environmental integrity of the site? And is Gaia's bold statement based on some in-house technical expertise it can bank on, which is enough to counter the technical arguments against such works drawn up by the qualified biologists at the EPD?

Gaia's statement that the pebble clearance has been performed with Mepa approval for the past 13 years is also unfair, since previous clearances were always monitored closely by Mepa and were always subject to stringent conditions, unlike this year, where such conditions were thrown out by the Mepa chairman's office.

One can sympathise with NGOs that are dependent on government funding to continue to survive, and thus face Hobson's choice – do they speak out and lose out on funding and management of certain sites (and have to eventually close shop) or stay mum?

The million dollar question that is boggling the mind of many is: why were the 'works' conducted at 4am? So as not to disrupt visitors to the beach, some might say – this would hold water if only other 'disrupting' activities, such as watering of roundabouts, were not routinely carried out during rush hour. I don't want to rush into conclusions but some explanation is in order here.

Why weren't the pebbles removed manually and why weren't the pebbles used to build elevated beach footpaths, for example, if the need to clear the pebbles was so pressing?

Before deluding ourselves that environmental awareness is taking root finally in Malta, just get a grip on reality by trawling through the online comments on timesofmalta.com when the story first broke out – a large number expressed relief that "at last, we have a clean beach at Ramla".

When faced with such popular ignorance, fuelled by an ignorant political class, one is left speechless. Such unilateral, roughshod actions, simply to pander to uninformed sections of public opinion, is a disgrace to those on whose watch this was allowed to perpetuate. Ramla l-Hamra is an ecological gem whose value in the local natural patrimony can never be underestimated.

## **4G technology for the price of Dwejra**

Mepa's recent approval of a 30-metre (roughly, nine-storey) mast at Dwejra, Malta, was considered a fait accompli, since an outline permit issued in 2006 gave the applicant an acquired right (namely the Mepa board was obliged to issue the full development permit or else it would have been liable to possible legal redress in court).

This anomaly (namely the issuing of outline permits that dictate Mepa's subsequent decisions) has since been repealed, then but Mepa has nonetheless 'endowed' Dwejra with a 30-metre sore thumb that will be visible for miles, as can be seen in the photo montage by photographer Daniel Cilia.

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Even more baffling is the fact that the original siting of the mast was destined for Siġġiewi but, despite the Malta Communications Authority saying the mast could be sited in Marfa, Mepa suggested Dwejra as a location.

The main motivation for the mast, as explained by the applicant's engineer, is legitimate – Malta's telecommunication infrastructure has reached full capacity and Malta would lose out upcoming technologies, such as 4G, unless it invested to upgrade this infrastructure, which could take the form of a single mast or numerous other roof transmitters.

But why did we have to sacrifice one of Malta's most scenic hills, frequented and cherished by thousands every Sunday, instead of opting for areas that were more committed, especially considering that the approved site in Dwejra is a private one?

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