

Ramla Bay - An Ecological Gem with an Economic Contribution

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Introduction

Ramla Bay is one of the last unspoilt sandy beaches on our islands. It is the venue for thousands of visitors, especially during the summer months between July and September. Locals and tourists alike, in an attempt to escape from the oppressive summer heat, flock down to Ramla to enjoy the combination of sand, sea, and the unspoiled natural surroundings of the ideal 'holiday brochure' beach.

Rich in biodiversity

Ramla Bay is very rich in biodiversity and supports a number of endemic and threatened species. According to the State of the Environment Report, between March and July 2000, around fifty-eight species of plants were identified as well as around thirty-eight varieties of insects, some of which are endemic to the Maltese islands and include some only found at Ramla.

There are several species of molluscs, arachnids, crustaceans, reptiles, mammals, and birds. The beach itself is naturally replenished by the valley system which lies between the two plateaux of Nadur and Xaghra.

The valley leads to the site of the largest sand dunes on the Maltese islands. The Ramla Bay sand dunes themselves have enormous ecological implications as they are the largest in the islands and the only dunes left in Gozo. There are only three dune systems left in the Maltese islands, which originally housed many more. Many sand dunes have been built over to cater for the tourist industry and so, sadly, very few remain.

The beaches need a valley system behind them in order for them to regenerate and many are now threatened. The sea will simply continue to wash away the sand without it being replaced until the beach disappears completely.

Unfortunately, many people are not aware of this reality and the majority of the Maltese people do not appreciate the importance of sand dunes.

Cultural heritage

The bay also has a rich cultural heritage which includes Roman ruins, the remains of a blockhouse of the Nadur Battery, an underwater sea wall built in 1715, and a statue dedicated to Our Lady of Hope.

A survey carried out by the present author in 2005 among persons visiting Ramla Bay showed that around 68 per cent of respondents were aware of some of the important cultural features at Ramla Bay. The Roman Villa remains are perhaps the best-known of these. Other cultural assets are not so well known. Only around 23 per cent of respondents to the survey were aware of the existence of the underwater sea wall.

Recreational appeal

The recreational appeal of Ramla is undeniable. Again, referring to the survey carried out by the present author in 2005, almost all the respondents said the main reason for going to Ramla was, unsurprisingly, to swim and soak up the sun.

During a week in August 2005, the average number of people on the beach at noon was about 500; in spite of the fact that on two of the seven days there was an infestation of jellyfish and on another the wind was so strong that there were only approximately sixty-five people on the whole beach brave enough to enter the water. On one day in the last week of August 2005, between 9:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m., no fewer than 2,172 people visited Ramla in spite of the occasional sighting of jellyfish. At 7:00 p.m., however, many local people, were still on their way down to the beach to have their evening meal on the sand or to enjoy a barbeque, taking advantage of the cool breeze before the sun went completely.

The restaurants attract many people who enjoy the calm, quiet atmosphere of eating next to a beach which is so isolated from the hustle and bustle of so many of our other coastal sites: so many people in fact that it is often wise to pre-book a table, especially at the weekends.

The main attractions of Ramla for the respondents in the survey were the sandy beach, clean water, and natural, uninhabited surroundings. When asked what they would like to see happen to Ramla in the future, 70 per cent responded that it should remain untouched as it is. The rest only suggested that there should be in place better toilet and shower facilities and the presence of lifeguards, emergency, and medical aid facilities. Only 3 per cent suggested the presence of water sport facilities, bars, and nightclubs.



View of Ramla Bay from Il-Mixta Caves.

The economic value of Ramla Bay

Placing an economic value on such a unique site is important for various reasons. Ecosystem services have a value as without them the Earth's economies would all be brought to a standstill. However, they are often given very little credit for their provision of goods and services and policy decisions are often made with a lot of weight being put on manufactured capital and economic services without giving much thought to natural services. Economic valuation of the environment therefore is important as it can be used for deciding and justifying how public spending on preservation, conservation, and restoration projects should be allocated while at the same time taking into consideration the values of the public and in promoting public participation in

environmental projects.

Valuation can also be used to compare and contrast different environmental programmes so that a priority can be made on restoration and conservation issues where environmental benefits can be maximized for each unit spent.

Over the past couple of decades, there has been an increasing awareness regarding the state of the environment and the resulting problems arising from increases in pollution and loss of natural resources and habitats. Public concern over such issues has grown as it has gradually become aware that the negative effects of environmental degradation are beginning to have a harmful and a damaging effect on human well-being.

Within the market-place, goods and services have a market value – consumers can see the price tag attached to each item and can thus choose according to their preferences or values. Consumers in the market place therefore can reveal their particular choices by comparing the price of the good or service to their willingness to pay for it.

Unfortunately environmental goods and services do not have such price tags attached to them and so more often than not their true value is uncertain and underestimated, and excess demand and degradation ensues. Most environmental assets often fall into the category of being public goods and as such it is hard for a market to develop for such goods and services.

Visitors to this beach put a high value on assets which do not have a market price such as the clean water, sandy beach, practically untouched natural surroundings, and ideal sun worshipping conditions. I believe that the underlying value of Ramla Bay is very much understated. Sadly, as is often the case, we may only appreciate the true value of such a site when it is too late.

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