

## Biodiversity, conservation and management and the role of Natura 2000 in Malta

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The Maltese archipelago which occupies an area of about 316km<sup>2</sup>, consisting of the inhabited islands of Malta, Gozo and Comino and several other uninhabited islets and rocks. In spite of their restricted area, the Maltese Islands have a huge population density and more than a third of the islands is built-up; this results in intense human pressure on its biodiversity. Notwithstanding this, the Maltese Islands support a very diverse terrestrial and freshwater biota, of which various are considered as endemic to the islands or the central Mediterranean region.

The most characteristic terrestrial ecosystems are those represented by the Mediterranean scrubland, of which various Mediterranean maquis, garrigue and steppic communities occur, some habitat types also being also endemic to the islands, like the Maltese phrygana community and the Maltese *rdum rupestral* communities. On the other hand, evergreen sclerophyll woodlands are restricted to only four forest remnants. Marine communities are those typical of the Mediterranean region, but also include various habitats and species, including communities with the endemic Maltese top snail and the deepest known red coral reefs in the Mediterranean.

Being an island archipelago, the main threats and pressures on the islands relate to habitat loss due to competing land and sea uses and the impact of alien species, although natural catastrophes, desertification and land degradation as well as climate change, also pose a threat. In order to protect the biodiversity of the Maltese Islands, Malta has enacted various legal instruments, which included in recent times the first Environment Protection Act of 1991, which was later replaced by more ambitious Acts of Parliament.

Under the Environment Protection Act, various subsidiary legislations were issued, culminating in the setting up of the Environment and Resources Authority and the enactment of the first consolidated biodiversity legal instruments in 2003. This led to the setting up of the first National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan; the protection of various habitats and species, including all endemic and possible endemics; provisions on the control of invasive alien species and environmental awareness and information; the declaration of a number of protected areas; and the set up of the

National Ecological Network. The latter includes the Council of Europe's Emerald Network, the United Nations Network of Specially Protected Areas of Mediterranean Importance (SPAMIs) and the EU's Natura 2000 Network, through which as much as 15% of the land territory and about 30% of Malta's waters are protected.

Management plans and conservation orders have been set up for all terrestrial Natura 2000 sites, and a national marine monitoring programme has been established, both of which are being implemented with national and EU funds. Additional scientific studies are also ongoing, to gather more information on Malta's biodiversity, particularly, but not limited to, the marine environment. Marine management measures are also being developed, with a Programme of Measures for Maltese waters established in 2017 and marine conservation measures for existing marine protected areas expected to be in place by 2020.