


## OPINION &amp; LETTERS

# Those elusive rain clouds



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**W**e may be just over three months away from the end of the current rainy season but it's certainly not premature to reflect about what is fast becoming a cliché – “yet another dry year”.

In fact, for the third year running, rainfall falling on these islands during what should be the most plentiful period, November to December, has been below par. Last month, in particular, normally the kingpin of our rainy season, has seen little more than a quarter of its customary bounty, with a damp squib of a monthly total amounting to just 35.3mm, equivalent to just 30 per cent of the average for the month of December since the 1930s.

The total volume of rainfall recorded so far during this rainy season (which, for recording purposes, kicks off on September 1) amounts to roughly 210mm, which is just 40 per cent of the average total for a whole rainy season.

Given that rains normally subside in this part of the world by the end of March, it is highly unlikely that this season's rainfall will come anywhere close to the average total of 520-550mm, making 2017-2018 the third dry season in a row, following 2015-2016 (in which total rainfall was below 300mm) and 2016-2017 (total rainfall was below 400mm).

To compound matters further, a blistering wind has billowed at sustained speeds of over 20 to 30km/h for weeks on end, removing any surface moisture that the island's topsoil might have absorbed and reducing our terrain to a tinderbox well ahead of springtime.

When reporting on such a dismal state of affairs, no reference is made to any potential scarcity in potable water, given that Malta can afford to splurge on that through the largesse provided by its three desalination plants. No thought is spared on the plight of farmers, whose livelihood is inherently dependant on the whims of the weather.

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It is not just farmers who find themselves holding the short end of the stick with such weather but also the country as a whole. The desertification of the island will gain traction in these arid conditions, with the reduction in the topsoil's productivity over time, the stunting of plant growth and a fewer roots compacting soil particles together.

But the persistent dry spell has another, often overlooked victim – wild flora and fauna. Local freshwater communities, such as those found along watercourses, and those associated with freshwater rock pools and semi-natural wetlands, such as Ghadira, Simar and Maghluq, cling on to a precarious existence in a semi-arid climate such as ours. They face the brunt of reduced rainfall, which will be felt most once summer kicks in.

The general dearth in natural vegetation, and in blooming come next spring, will reverberate on other food web components, including insects and pollinators, effectively resulting in a vicious cycle for plants.

Mature trees are perhaps the best harbinger of what's in store for natural communities if the current drought persists. Each summer witnesses the shrivelling up of scores of mature trees, including Aleppo pines, almonds and even carobs, whose death occurs unnoticed as we speed past during the daily humdrum.

This gradual recession in tree cover as a result of the island's aridity has also been documented in the eastern Mediterranean over the past few decades. And in California, drought-stricken for four consecutive years prior to 2017, there are renewed fears of a resumption of drought conditions as a result of current negligible snowfall.

When will we finally realise that our dependence on desalination will not spare us completely from the ravages of changing climatic patterns?

## Churning back what we throw into the sea

The persistent inclement weather lashing the Maltese islands over the past few weeks has also invariably whipped up the sea into a frenzy, and has churned up onto our beaches some of the litter we regularly dump into the sea, providing us a snapshot of how dismal the situation on the seabed really is.

Massive agglomerations of litter, ranging from nylon rope tangles to canvas sheets and the ubiquitous plastic bags, have smeared our shorelines in recent days, especially along the northwestern fringes of the islands, casting the spotlight once again on the bane of marine litter.

Concrete action to mitigate the incessant flow of litter into the sea is needed. The recently-imposed tax on plastic bottles is positive, but it is just a start. Innovative and bold initiatives are called for, including incentivising fishing for litter initiatives while trawling for benthic litter, and using small vessels for floating litter. Similar pilot actions have been conducted in Maltese waters over the past few summers by private sector companies, including firms involved in gaming and aquaculture. Also, litter-sucking technologies (such as SeaBin) have been deployed in local harbours and yacht marinas which normally act as repositories of surface litter before it actually sinks.

Additional audacious measures could include the deployment of drones to prioritise coastal cleaning efforts, the engagement of coastal wardens during the summer season to guard against the wanton discarding of litter into the sea, and the introduction of plastic-free beach pilot studies.

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Empty Chadwick Lakes: Malta is in for a third consecutive dry year but many are unaware of the serious implications this will have on the island's natural wild flora and fauna and on agriculture.



Marine litter: The recent storms have given us a snapshot on the real scale of the marine litter problem around the Maltese islands.

