

Exposing underwater devastation



Snapshots of the utter devastation being wrought to life on the seabed at Sikka I-Bajda as a result of ongoing bunkering activities on the reef. Photos courtesy of Mario Camilleri and Raniero Borg

The thumbs down recently given by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority board to the proposed offshore wind farm at Sikka I-Bajda is still a vivid memory. The major motivations behind Mepa's stance include the fact that the site lies near an important bird rafting zone next to the Yelkouan shearwater colony at Tal-Madonna cliffs.

Sikka I-Bajda also lies within a Natura 2000 site – the Northeast Marine Protected Area (MPA). One of the inevitable environmental impacts of offshore wind farms is the smothering of seabed communities which happen to fall under the footprint of the turbine foundations. Since Sikka I-Bajda is covered by seagrass (*Posidonia oceanica*) meadows, the logical conclusion to reach was that the environmental impact on marine and bird communities would be considerable.

At this juncture, one can safely conclude that the planning process has simply taken its course and that environmental considerations prevailed at the end of the day, and rightly so, of course.

However, the situation at Sikka I-Bajda is more complex. As the appropriate assessment (AA) study for the proposed windfarm at Sikka I-Bajda highlighted, the reef is currently being used as one of the Malta's six offshore bunkering sites. In fact, it is the second largest such site after the massive Hurd's Bank.

Bunkering involves the stationing of vessels for a temporary period ranging from hours to days in a relatively shallow marine area while waiting to be refuelled. The economic importance of bunkering is supported by the Maltese islands' strategic geographical location flanking the Malta-Sicily Channel – one of the most important oil transit routes in the world.

The five bunkering sites in Malta's territorial waters add up to almost 60 square kilometres, or roughly 1.5 per cent of the total extent of these waters, or more than half the total built-up area of the Maltese islands. The figures rise further if one considers the so-called 'waiting one', a large marine area about five nautical miles off Marsaxlokk Harbour, where vessels anchor while waiting to be granted access to harbour facilities.

In 2011, just over 3,000 vessels bunkered in Maltese waters. This is equivalent to an average of eight vessels a day.

Sikka I-Bajda (literally, the 'white reef') owes its name to the white surf and foam generated as a result of the turbulence and shoaling of waves it generates due to its shallow depth. The reef, whose depth ranges from four to five metres at its shallowest point to a maximum depth of 25 metres, has been a popular haunt for amateur fishermen – especially those hailing from St Paul's Bay – and divers alike, in view of the prolific fish populations it used to support.

But with increasing bunkering activity on the reef, all this has changed and only the most intrepid of divers still venture in the reef's waters. A couple of these – Raniero Borg and Mario

Camilleri – recently dived at Sikka I-Bajda and photographed the utter devastation being caused by anchored vessels on the reef.

Basically, bunkered vessels impact the seabed in two ways – through anchoring and through crabbing, with the latter involving the dragging of anchors along the seabed when vessels need to shift position in the bunkering area. Both actions have a detrimental impact on the seabed, with so-called ‘halos’ being left behind in seagrass meadows as a result of massive anchors being dropped on the seabed. The anchors in question are juggernauts in size. For instance, the weight of a 26-metre-long vessel is expected to range between 55kg and 110kg.

Seagrasses are not the only living things bearing the brunt of anchoring and crabbing. Sessile (non-motile) protected species, such as the Noble Pen shell, the star coral and the purple starfish, all recorded at Sikka I-Bajda, are smashed to smithereens by the weight of such anchors. The wake of a crabbing action resembles that of a trawling site, with a swathe of the seabed being cleared of most forms of life and converted into a semi-barren landscape almost overnight.

The accompanying underwater photos, taken just a few weeks ago, reveal the onslaught on the seabed of the Sikka I-Bajda reef. The divers noticed that extensive parts of the rock surface had collapsed and saw considerable barren swathes in what were once dense seagrass meadows. Sikka I-Bajda is perhaps the most accessible of local bunkering sites – one shudders to think of the underwater destruction going on in the other less accessible bunkering sites which have much higher vessel densities, most notably Hurd’s Bank, and where no one is looking underwater.

If the Mepa board drew a line in the sand with respect to the proposed offshore wind farm at Sikka I-Bajda, presumably to safeguard the marine communities supported by the reef, similar action should be taken to curb further damage by bunkering activity on reefs that are colonised by protected habitats and species.

To achieve this no one is proposing any draconian measures, such as the cessation of all bunkering activities in local waters. Rather, the benthic communities in all five local bunkering sites should be mapped and vessels be instructed to stick to the seagrass-free zones in the sites. Such a measure would need to be constantly enforced at sea, and there are already some sore lacunae in such enforcement.

Alternatively, Sikka I-Bajda should no longer be used as a bunkering site in view of the dense seagrass meadows it supports. After all, the reef falls within a Natura 2000 site and an MPA. Such a decision would constitute the first tangible sign of action being taken by Mepa regarding this MPA, which to date seems to exist only on paper.

My gut feeling is that at the end of the day, financial considerations will prevail, and even sound arguments and photographic evidence will not manage to sway the status quo.

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