

In the footsteps of Ecuador



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The South American country of Ecuador is an elusive backwater to many since it does not normally hog the global media limelight, other than the fact that it hosts the inspirational Galapagos archipelago. Inspirational because low-profile Ecuador was the first country to amend its Constitution in 2008 so as to enshrine the rights of Nature to exist.

Yes, that's right... the Ecuadorian Constitution recognises that Nature, in all its life forms, have the rights to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles and that the people have the legal duty to enforce these rights on behalf of Nature, which may even be designated as a defendant. Many have hailed this as a change in paradigm... in layman's terms, it could be described as a game-changer or a change in mindset.

In an anthropocentric society where the right of any natural, cultural or architectural amenity to persist in the face of looming development is justified in terms of its monetary value or asset value to humans, such a Constitutional entrenchment seems preposterous at worst, and incomprehensible at best. Malta's Labour Party has not gone so far but during the recent electoral campaign it proposed that it would entrench the human right to a healthy environment in the Constitution.

This same proposal is consonant with one of the green proposals submitted by environmental NGOs to local political leaders on May 22. The same NGOs will be vigilant that the new PL government lives up to its word and that no watered-down and toothless version of such an entrenchment is waved through Parliament. This is closely coupled with a strengthening of the Public Domain Act which, despite its ample promise of change, has so far failed to fully deliver.

Getting plastic out of the equation

World Ocean Day, celebrated annually on June 8, draws some welcome limelight to the plight that the coastal and marine environments are currently facing, with a myriad of challenges gnawing at their integrity, such as the increasingly insidious presence of plastic in marine ecosystems, over-fishing and the impacts caused by climate change, including the influx of alien species, ocean acidification and the increasing frequency of harmful blooms of algae and jellyfish. On a global scale, the equivalent of a refuse-truck full of plastic is finding its way into the sea each minute, with ubiquitous plastic litter finding itself even in the most far-flung corners of the ocean.

Everyone acknowledges the problem but, tangibly, very little is being done to address the issue. For instance, on any stroll along Malta's coastline, one will see discarded plastic cups, cutlery, plates, bags and whatnot peppering our coastline and being blown out at sea. Waste disposal facilities, even on Blue

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Flag beaches where they are mostly available, do not seem to encourage beach-goers from painstakingly recovering all their litter before it enters the sea. This might signal the need to adopt a more extreme approach – that of prohibiting the provision of any form of plastic utensils by catering outlets (the so-called HORECAs, Hotels, Restaurants, Cafeterias) in coastal areas, in favour of carton or retrievable metal ones.

The scheme should be initiated at the Blue Lagoon, given that Comino is pretty much isolated geographically, with obvious benefits for enforcement and monitoring of efficacy. Each bathing season, wave upon wave of gleaming plastic originating from the Blue Lagoon kiosks is blown inland and dispersed throughout the islet. Certification schemes could be introduced to encourage compliance of catering outlets but, as always, enforcement of adequate fines, would really carry the day.



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Next October, back to back with the Our Oceans conference, the University of Malta is organising the annual EMSEA (European Marine Science Educators Association) conference. Such conferences aim to promote ocean literacy in the wider community. Further information about the conference, which will kick off with a teachers' seminar being held on October 7 at the Malta National Aquarium, may be gleaned from: <https://www.um.edu.mt/events/emsea2017>.

Ocean literacy is an umbrella term, expounded through seven cardinal principles (<http://oceanliteracy.wp2.coexploration.org/>) and which incorporates all the tools and methodologies used in formal and informal education to bolster awareness about the various roles played by the ocean.

For instance, it does not immediately spring to mind that the oceans deserve credit for every other breath we take through the oxygen released by minute drifting plant cells known as phytoplankton, or that the oceans absorb 30 per cent of the carbon dioxide released by humans through their activities. Unesco has called for the designation of the 2020-2030 decade as 'The International Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development'.

Sweeping away darkness

As one of the photos accompanying this column amply illustrates, a row of monolithic street lamps has recently been installed along a country lane on the outskirts of Buskett, flooding the previously darkened site with bountiful light pollution. Given the backwater status of the lane in question, located in a very unfrequented part of our road network, one questions the need for such largesse given that the location literally skirts the boundary of the Buskett Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

The negative effect of artificial light on nocturnal and diurnal fauna has been extensively documented, but it seems that local environmental authorities were not consulted prior to this unilateral move.