

Management of coastal recreational resources: beaches, yacht marinas and coastal eco-tourism



The Fungus Rock at Dwejra, Gozo. Nature Trust president Vince Attard explained how the entire Dwejra area has been earmarked as a marine protected area with the help of a EU LIFE grant.

Between October 20 and 23, the Euro-Mediterranean Centre on Insular Coastal Dynamics (ICOD), which forms part of the University's Foundation for International Studies (FIS), based in Valletta, organised the first international conference on what has become a bone of contention in many countries today - coastal recreation.

The conference was intended mainly to study the adverse impacts of ill-planned tourism on environmental quality and, conversely, the dependence of tourism on a well-managed environment.

Tourism Minister Francis Zammit Dimech (his ministry was one of the conference sponsors), in his opening speech, highlighted the slew of daunting challenges facing coastal managers in this country, such as the need to identify alternative yacht marina sites (Malta currently has just 1,700 berthing sites) to complement activities such as the Middle Sea Race, etc.

To say that tourism is our sacred cow would be an understatement. With 3.4% of our GDP being channelled as help to the sector (compared to an EU average of just 1.9%) and in return the same sector contributing 24% of GDP (even higher than the Cyprus figure of 22%), the sector plays a pivotal role in the local economy. At the same time, over 96% of the accessible part of our 270 km-long coastline is committed to tourism and industry.

The Mediterranean itself, with its 46,000 km-long coastline (the largest enclosed sea in the world), bears the brunt of staggering coastal tourism - 220 million tourists a year, a figure set to double by 2050. A direct consequence of all this is that 25,000 km of the sea's coastline are already under concrete. Over 25% of the world's oil sea transits take place in the Mediterranean since it provides three major sea routes - through the Straits of Gibraltar, the Sea of Marmara/Istanbul Straits and the Suez Canal.

Dr Francis Zammit Dimech more or less promised in his opening speech that hotel beds are not to increase any further after projects now under way are completed. At the same time, he raised the curtain on other potential bombshells, such as the development of the Qawra coastline for recreational purposes and the shortlisting of coastal sites for golf courses are coastal ones.

Some presentations

As Dr Anton Micallef, ICOD's director, explains, the conference has been a platform upon which all those with a vested interest in the coastal zone, be it researchers, project managers, infrastructure investors, staff from the public and private sectors or non-governmental organisations (NGOs), could mingle and exchange experiences.

The 43 academic works presented were divided into three cohorts - beach and dune management (providing the lion's share of works - 18), coastal ecotourism (12 works) and yacht marinas (13 works).

Dr Allan Williams, in his keynote address as chairman of the beach and dune management sector, gave the global human perception of beaches and their financial contribution to local economies. For example, beaches are the key element of US travel and tourism, with a single beach (Miami Beach in Florida) reporting twice as many tourist visits (21 million) as the combined reported tourist visits to Yellowstone (3.4 million), the Grand Canyon (4.5 million) and Yosemite Park (3.4 million) in 2001. Malta is no stranger to this trend, with 85 per cent of tourists visiting our beaches.

Yet another presentation in this section was the one by the undersigned and Professor Patrick J. Schembri, whereby the impact of human use of four local sandy beaches was addressed in terms of repercussions on sandy beach fauna.

Many representatives of the tourism sector at the conference were actually quite slack-jawed at the fact that fauna inhabits what appears to be bare sand at first glance, with a few hundred species of psammophiles (sand-specific species) being recorded to date from local beaches (unpublished data).

Such a study concluded that even though human presence is not directly correlated with species richness and individual abundances, human presence seems to impinge on faunal composition, with Ramla in Gozo showing the highest percentage of psammophiles and the lowest percentage of ubiquitous species (like many ant species) since it was the least disturbed.

Dr Pereira da Silva expounded on quite a thorny issue - the carrying capacity concept - with many different researchers citing several different figures for beach carrying capacity. Such a concept may be construed as "the level of recreation use that an area can sustain without an unacceptable degree of deterioration of the character and quality of the resource and the recreation experienced". Ancillary to ecotourism (2002 was the UN's World Ecotourism Year) are other closely-related activities, such as agrotourism.

John Ebejer from the Malta Tourism Authority homed in on the beach nourishment exercise at St George's Bay, where 7,000 tons of crushed sand from a Jordanian quarry were deposited during the first phase of the project to augment the beach area by 4,000 square metres. The beach, which is managed by the MTA, hosts about 800 visitors at peak times.

Phase two will entail the construction of stormwater culverts and other facilities to ensure the beach's long-term welfare.

One should remark that provisions should also be made to earmark 'non-managed beaches' in remote areas, such as Xatt I-Ahmar in Gozo and White Tower Bay in Malta where *Posidonia* banquettes are allowed to settle and pile up as a natural beach nourishment and dune stabilisation exercise, besides being a unique habitat in themselves.

A quick kaleidoscopic review of remaining works reveals a strong accent on coastal ecotourism, with ecotourism being defined as "the travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people". In particular, CBET (community-based ecotourism) is well-g geared towards preserving local biodiversity while channelling revenues towards the local community, a concept which is well embraced in developing countries.

Vince Attard from Nature Trust expounded on the NGO's EU LIFE grant to develop Dwejra in Gozo in a marine protected area, J.A. Schembri dwelt on historical sites in Malta's coastal urban areas, C. Cardona focused on the potential of ecotourism development in Wied Babu in Zurrieq while K. Curry and C. Hopkinson elucidated further on artificial reefs and dive tourism, a sector which is currently being closely reviewed locally.

The yacht marinas kettle yielded works such as the one on human perceptions of development in St Thomas Bay (by M.G. Spina), plagued by illegal boathouse building and dumping and beach erosion, the identification of recreational conflict at the waterfront (S. Buhagiar) and the role of eco-management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) for sustainable coastal tourism (v. Boragno et al.).