

Musing on maritime Malta



The opening of the first marine environmental education centre in Dwejra, Gozo, was a red-letter day for ocean literacy in the Maltese islands. Photo: Adam Gauci

European Maritime Day (May 21), which was celebrated in Malta last year, is the perfect red letter day to reflect on the oft-overlooked marine and maritime legacy of the Maltese archipelago.

In an island state like ours, whose territorial waters are almost 14 times bigger than the islands' miniscule area, and whose coastline is almost 300 kilometres long, one would take it as a given that Malta fosters a maritime vocation. And yet one gets the impression that, bar for a small intrepid fishing community, the Maltese have always been introduced to, and taken out to sea by their colonisers, with the Phoenicians, the Knights of St John and the British being the most prominent in sharing their naval prowess with the native Maltese.

Since Joe Borg's term as EU Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, the European Commission has sought a more comprehensive and sustainable exploitation of European seas, and with sound reason too. The numbers are very compelling. Out of the 28 EU states, 23 have a coastline, 41 per cent of the EU population, or 206 million citizens, live in coastal areas, and marine and coastal activities in the EU account for an estimated gross value added ranging between €330 and €485 billion, employing between 5.4 and seven million EU citizens.

The EU's thrust towards the sea has crystallised in the Blue Growth strategy, which was formulated on the back on the Limassol Declaration signed by all EU countries during the Cypriot presidency in 2012. The declaration, which has paved the way for The Blue Economy for Smart, Inclusive and Sustainable Growth, involves a pledge by EU countries to enhance innovation and marine and maritime research, to work towards the effective development and accessibility of marine knowledge, to support the integration of maritime surveillance and the improvement of marine governance, to support the implementation of marine spatial planning (MSP) and integrated coastal zone management (ICZM) and to assist in the implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD).

The latter is the flagship EU directive when it comes to holistic monitoring of marine ecosystems and is the culmination of a long process that started way back in 2006 with the release of the Green Paper on an Integrated Maritime Policy (IMP), followed by the release of the Blue Book on the same theme a year later.

The intense jostling for marine space by competing users currently taking place in our limited shallow-water area shows need for Malta to enhance its efforts to implement MSP. The development of a tailor-made marine spatial plan seeks to minimise conflicts between users by allocating areas for specific activities. The plan should be dynamic and adaptive and continuously revised to reflect the situation in the field.

In fact, within the 30-kilometre stretch between the marine area off Delimara to waters to the east of Comino, competition for space is cut-throat. The competitors include at least six aquaculture operators and an offshore aquaculture zone, at least four bunkering and conveyance zones, two port approach areas, vessel waiting zones, numerous wrecks and other

scuba diving sites, at least one spoil ground for the dumping of inert waste at sea, a reef (Sikka l-Bajda) earmarked for possible offshore wind farm development, an Armed Forces of Malta firing exclusion zones and extensive coverage by seagrass meadows (*Posidonia oceanica*), protected under the Habitats Directive as a priority habitat.

This competition for space is intensified due to the lack of shallow depths in Malta's extensive territorial waters. In fact, only 11 per cent of these waters are less than 50m deep, which places severe constraints on activities such as bunkering and offshore renewable resources, although technology is fast coming to the rescue, especially for the latter type of activity.

To tighten the noose even further, not all this shallow water is readily available for economic activities, with no strings attached. In fact, 31 per cent (145km²) is dominated by seagrass meadows and 38.5 per cent (180km²) falls within one of the five MPAs designated in local coastal waters.

If anyone needed any convincing on the economic importance of the various local maritime sectors and on the conservation importance of the marine area hosting these sectors, here are a few eye-opening statistics:

- Malta's shipping registry is the largest in the EU and the seventh worldwide, with a total of almost 52 million gross tons being registered under the Maltese flag as of December 2013.
- There are over 100 shipping agents and brokers in Malta servicing shipping companies, employing a total of 3,000 workers.
- About 40,000 workers, or 24.7 per cent of the total Maltese workforce, are employed in the coastal tourism, fisheries, sea sports and ship repair sectors.
- According to the Net Mari Med project, the marine and maritime sectors are thought to account for 14.7 of Malta's GDP, and its contribution to GDP is expected to rise to 18 per cent by 2039.
- Malta already exploits its strategic location along the major east-west oil traffic transit route in the Mediterranean through extensive fuel conveyance services offered in its six bunkering zones, which together cover almost 60 square kilometres, with Hurd's Bank being one of the largest such offshore area in the Mediterranean.

Malta has the potential to become an ocean literacy platform for the southern Mediterranean

One of the cornerstones of the Blue Economy is a bolstered ocean literacy, and several funding calls in the EU's Horizon 2020 programme are specifically geared towards its promotion. The International Ocean Institute-Malta Operational Centre at the University of Malta has managed to achieve concrete headway on this subject through its participation in the Panacea project. This project led in the opening of the first marine environmental education centre in Dwejra, Gozo, the filming of three underwater documentaries and the publication of popular science material on marine ecosystems and species aimed at students and the public.

While ocean literacy initiatives undertaken locally to date have been fragmented, Malta has the potential to become an ocean literacy platform for the southern Mediterranean. The marine hub concept could incorporate this consideration.

In terms of ocean literacy, both formal and informal avenues are being developed. Formal means include the designation of ad hoc Master's courses at the University, including the multi-disciplinary Master's in Applied Oceanography ([https:// www.um.edu.mt/ioi-moc/msc](https://www.um.edu.mt/ioi-moc/msc)) which is being offered by the IOI-MOC as from October to train the next generation of Maltese maritime professionals.

This is in addition to the Master's in Ocean Governance, another inter-disciplinary programme of studies that the IOI-MOC has been offering since last October (www.um.edu.mt/imp/courses/master_of_arts_in_ocean_governance2).

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Conference on addressing the jellyfish phenomenon

To commemorate this year's European Maritime Day, the IOI-MOC is organising a conference on May 20 and 21 entitled Addressing the Jellyfish Phenomenon to Safeguard Coastal Tourism and Fisheries: Research, Innovation, Management and Education, as part of the Med-Jellyrisk project (<http://jellyrisk.eu>).