

## The age of misinformation



The beach of Ramla l-Hamra in Gozo is unique and should not be managed.

Despite the recent increase in the number of University science graduates and intermittent public educational campaigns, crass misinformation seems to be the order of the day when it comes to environmental management. Two cases illustrate this point.

Advocacy for heavy-handed human intervention at Ramla l-Hamra in Gozo is slowly but inexorably increasing. First it was Xaghra local council, which clamoured for a general clean-up of the bay, lamenting that the beach environs was in shambles. The council took special exception to the beach being peppered with stones and pebbles.

However, the cherry on the cake must surely be the letter to the editor by Alfred Cini from Nadur (The Sunday Times, May 9), who called for the use of a rock crusher at Ramla l-Hamra to do away with the nuisance posed by the rocks in one fell swoop, since, in his words, "the pebbles and stones have occupied the space of the sand, which is being lost due to the wind". Why not ask for a batching plant while we are at it? Truly unbelievable!

This must be music to the ears of all those who, like some in the Works Division, are intent on 'cleaning' the beach and bringing it 'up to scratch' using the most mechanised and least laborious means. The risk of creating a sterile environment devoid of all life is one they are willing to take.

Did it not strike anyone that, although they are the bete noire of many, the stones and pebbles in question are actually part and parcel of the natural sediment balance of the bay, and that removing them, especially through mechanical means, would wreak irrevocable damage to the sensitive beach ecosystem?

Has it not dawned upon anyone that we are currently marking the UN's International Year of Biodiversity, and that Ramla supports a unique range of beach organisms, in many cases restricted to just this beach?

For this reason, any human interventions on the beach must be preceded by in-depth studies spanning at least a couple of years to factor in inter-annual variability in sediment transport.

Tourism authorities are treading carefully at Ramla because they know taking any action at the site not sanctioned by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority would constitute an infringement, and consequences would follow in view of Ramla's ecological importance. Someone from the tourism authorities should stand up and make a statement to this effect to help debunk the many myths being perpetuated.

The lack of public outreach is to blame for the evident public ignorance of the natural assets our coastal areas still support. For example, Ramla l-Hamra is virtually the last haunt for the isopod *Tylos europaeus*, a fact that is being overlooked by those who are duty-bound to educate the younger generations.

Why not install the occasional panel on site, besides running a sustained media campaign, to inform the public of the ecological sensitivity of Ramla l-Hamra, so as to quash calls, such as those of Mr Cini, to treat this beach like any other?

The second case is no less gobsmacking. As rightly decried by Mark Anthony Zammit in another letter published last Sunday, recent herbicide has been extensively applied along part of the fortification walls of the Ċittadella in Gozo. This despite the fact that the location supports populations of two locally-rare and protected species of plants - Maltese Toadflax (Papoċċi ta' Malta) and the Golden mayweed (Kamumilla nana).

The former species is known to exist only in Malta and the Pelagian islands, and both species are listed in countless pieces of legislation, such as the Habitats Directive, Bern Convention and Legal Notice 311 of 2006. However, it seems such listing has served the species little good. The role of decision-makers is not to buckle under public opinion and go for environmental management by mob rule. The occasional letter in the press from a misinformed individual should warrant an informed reply, not knee-jerk, brash action aimed at abating contestations. A modicum of scientific rationale should justify any decisions taken.

These two deplorable instances underpin the dire need for scientific and professional environmental management, backed by a sound public educational campaign to avoid media backlashes.

## **CIESM congress**

The acronym CIESM might not be familiar to many, but it constitutes the ultimate showcase of cutting-edge Mediterranean research in the marine sciences.

It stands for the International Commission for the Scientific Exploration of the Mediterranean, whose origins date back to 1908, and which organised its 39th triannual congress on Venice, Italy, last week.

Only countries, not individual institutes or universities, can be members of CIESM, and there are currently 23 member states. Prince Albert II of Monaco, the current president of CIESM, raised the curtain on the Venice congress, following in the footsteps of his great-great grandfather Prince Albert I, who had presided over the first ever CIESM congress in Madrid in 1909.

CIESM congresses are renowned for their evocative locations and the Venice one was no exception. It was held in the exquisite Palazzo del Cinema and Palazzo del Casino, both centred on the Venetian Lido, a 12km-long sliver of island that shields the Venetian lagoon from the ravages of the sea.

The CIESM website, [www.ciesm.org](http://www.ciesm.org), is a trove of downloadable information on aspects of marine science, appealing not just to marine biologists, chemists and oceanographers but also to policy makers, decision makers and the media.

Some of CIESM's most referred-to works, which may be easily con-sulted on its website, are the various atlases of exotic species it has published and continuously updates.

Currently, three such atlases exist, documenting crustacean, mollusc and fish species; a fourth atlas on non-indigenous algae is being prepared. Such atlases constitute a constantly updatable database of over 700 (and counting) alien marine species recorded to date in the Mediterranean Sea.

Over the past few years CIESM congresses have enjoyed a grounds-well of popularity. Over 700 marine researchers registered for the last congress in Istanbul, while this year's Venice congress was attended by over 1,000 researchers.

Two eye-opening statistics gleaned from the congress which still reverberate in my mind are that by 2050, 90 million are expected to inhabit coastal cities along the Mediterranean, and that the concentration of paracetamol in coastal waters can reach the equivalent of half a standard panadol per cubic metre of seawater due to its presence in the discharge from sewage plants.

I presented two works at the CIESM congress, addressing aspects of sandy beach ecology, including the population of the rare beach isopod *Tylos europaeus* found at Ramla l-Flamra. At least five other marine researchers from the University of Malta presented posters or delivered talks.

These presentations are evidence that, despite the paucity in research funds and general lack of public endorsement, marine biology and other marine sciences are alive and well in Malta. We are perhaps the only maritime nation in Europe to lack a research vessel or even a single marine station, and the utility of such research locally is invariably gauged in terms of employment generated.

It has been proven time and time again that our country can reap disproportionate dividends if it takes the plunge and invests a modicum of funds in the marine sciences sector. After all, when one considers that Malta's territorial waters are some 20 times that of its land area, such an investment is more than warranted.