Calls for better protection of Dwejra are being made after a group of divers felt threatened by a fishing boat deploying a trammel net in a popular diving spot last week.

The Ministry of Resources and Rural Affairs says the activity is legal but marine biologist Alan Deidun, a former Nationalist MEP candidate, insists it goes contrary to the action plan for the area.

When trammel nets are used they cover an entire cross-section of the bay, trapping everything and posing what divers say is a serious threat to them.

Dr Deidun was diving in the same spot with some colleagues just an hour before he spotted the fishing boat. Quoting the government’s Dwejra Heritage Park Action Plan, he said the trammel nets were prohibited on the site, just next to Crocodile Rock.

He decried the “complete lack of enforcement by the authorities” and warned that divers could easily get entangled in the nets.

“Dwejra was recently listed as one of the top dive sites in the Mediterranean. Tourism authorities are constantly paying lip service to diving tourism as a niche market and environmental authorities are always paying lip service about the need to bolster local environmental conservation in the marine environment.

“The reality is that local marine protected areas are just toothless tigers that exist only on paper," he said, pointing out that in Lampedusa and other nearby islands such areas had tough laws and camera surveillance. Gozo Tourism Association secretary Mark Busuttil agreed and pointed out that tourists constantly complained about dwindling numbers of fish over the years.

Even fishermen complained, he said, adding that many were starting to realise that proper protection would also safeguard the sustainability of fishing.
In Italy, Spain and France, opposition to strict enforcement died down since fishermen began seeing results, Mr Busuttil added, pointing out that some areas had experienced a 400 per cent increase in the number of fish.

“We have been working with the Malta Environment and Planning Authority and the Malta Tourism Authority but nothing has materialised,” he said.

“It’s crazy that we’re not protecting the site. We should have been doing so 20 years ago,” he said, adding that the entire site should be no-go for all types of fishing.

A spokesman for the MRRA said the activity was legal and the part-time professional vessel photographed was both registered and allowed to fish with a trammel net. “Crocodile Rock in Dwejra is neither classified as a marine protected area nor marked with stone pillars, so fishing with trammel nets in the area is legal.

“The only restriction for the use of trammel nets is that they cannot be deployed at sea from February 15 to July 15 inside the imaginary line between the stone pillars in certain bays.”

But Dr Deidun insisted that trammel nets were not included in the list of fishing techniques allowed under the action plan. Crocodile Rock lay on the boundary of the “secondary zone” and “general purpose zone” of the marine protected area, neither of which permitted trammel nets, he said.

He said the ministry was quoting outdated legislation, which was drafted when there was no notion of marine protected areas or diving tourism.