

## Seagrass banquettes - wrong public perception



Beach cleaning during the low-tourism winter months should be stopped for various ecological and even economic reasons

Although Government announced the setting up of a ministerial committee on the environment, some ministries seem to be unaware of this, to say the least. The Wied il-Kbir, Ghajn Rihana and Salina works, all conducted without an MEPA permit, although right in the middle of ecologically sensitive site, bear testimony to this.

The Ministry of Tourism laudably sponsored the ICOD conference on coastal resources last October (reported in The Sunday Times last week), during which the importance of beached seagrass banquettes was stressed. In the same vein, the same ministry is responsible for beach cleaning activities, which remove all traces of such debris from our seaside, with the tacit approval of hoteliers and operators of such a service.

I need not delve any further on the pivotal role played by tourism in our country - however, why are our beaches 'cleaned' (quite a misnomer) in winter? Why can't the beached seagrass debris be allowed to accumulate during the low-season winter months and then removed in April/May? In response to the question "why should we allow such debris to accumulate at the seaside?" asked by the ministry official, here are some scientific facts which I hope he can assimilate:

- the water near the banquette usually contains floating leaf debris which also is a good combination in reducing wave strength as it approaches the shore (De Grissac et al., 1989) - hence, mitigates sand erosion, at a time and age when beach nourishment (as at St George's Bay) are the fad.
- collection of leaf matter from the beach using machinery also accelerates erosion processes and changes the topographic profile of the beach by removal of sand together with the leaf debris being cleaned away.
- seagrass debris is important in the formation and subsequent stabilisation of dunes (Hemminga and Nieuwenhuize - 1990).
- beached seagrass debris is considered as an ecosystem in itself, with many species being restricted to such a transient habitat and to the strandline (psammatoiphiles).

In addition, the grooming of our beaches is actually illegal. Article 20 of the 2003 Environment Regulations provides for the protection of all endemic species, together with their habitat. Dr Paul Gatt, an eminent local dermatologist and fly (diptera) specialist, recorded two endemic species (i.e. *Chersodromia anisopyga* and *C. suda*) from *Posidonia* banquettes, together with the very rare species *Rachispoda caudatula*, which is known from just a few specimens in Malta, Tunisia and Italy. Will Article 20 be fully enforced by stemming beach grooming or are such regulations just spineless?

The Green Point published daily in The Times and compiled by the Environment Directorate of MEPA last Tuesday aptly stated: "In autumn and winter the amount of leaves shed by the seagrass *Posidonia oceanica* increase and thus the amounts washed ashore consequently build up vast banquettes. These banquettes protect the coast from erosion and support a very important ecosystem".

In addition, one of the Sunday Mass prayers issued by the Church Green Commission highlighted the ecological importance of such beached debris. Hence, are our ministries the last to awaken to scientific realities in this country? Or is the political urge to provide employment for those involved in beach grooming activities stronger than ecological considerations?

With the country clamouring for a crackdown on littering, wouldn't it be wiser to deploy such manpower in this area rather than in dabbling with sites of ecological importance, using construction industry trucks, such as at White Tower Bay? What is the financial advantage to be gained from clearing the seagrass debris from Xemxija during winter? Is this a major bathing spot?

Fortunately, responsibility for such beach grooming activities is bound to change hands - from the Ministry of Tourism to the Ministry of Rural Affairs and the Environment (MRAE). One expects a more circumspect approach to the issue.