

Our islands' potential for eco-tourism

For a long time, tourism was considered a 'white industry' with no need to point out its impact on the social, cultural and ecological environment. Criticism was first voiced in the 1970s, with the same voices of dissent being heard for the first time in Malta roughly 20 years later.

Quoting verbatim from the corporate mission statement of the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) - "to advance the economic and social activity of tourism in the national interest by working with all stakeholders to develop a sustainable industry for current and future generations". The word sustainable is heavily underpinned in such a statement.

In 2000 tourism accounted for a direct employment complement of 9,659 or 7% of the national workforce, and an estimated employment complement of 40,000 through the multiplier effect. In addition, tourism earnings reached almost Lm300 million.

In spite of all this, tourist arrivals and guest nights have been gradually declining, while tourism's importance is decreasing relative to other sectors. An annual average of 66% of the total beds in our hotels were occupied last year. Taking the impacts of tourism on our natural resources into consideration, almost 82% of the accessible coastline is dominated by tourist-industry related development and another 14.0% is occupied by maritime activities.

Our islands have a tourist density of 3,797/km², compared with figures of 86.6/km², 110/km² and 78.5/km² for Italy, France and Spain respectively. Our country has also the unenviable reputation of being the only European country listed by the World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC) as having a "very high" tourism "pressure" on the biodiversity of the coastal areas.

All these indicators show us that we don't need further beacons of "conventional tourism" (i.e. hotels), but we need alternative tourism magnets.

We have heard several statements that Maltese tourism needs some urgent surgical restructuring and a facelift to cater for changing tourist priorities. However, positive steps in this regard are slow to come by.

By definition, ecotourism is nature or culture-based travel that conserves the visited resource, benefits the local community, and educates the visitor. Although our islands are shorn of charismatic megafauna, such as elephants or lions, or of enthralling stream rapids or mountain faces, they too are endowed with ecotourism highlights.

Some of these immediately come to mind, such as the potential for diving enthusiasts. The Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) estimates that 38,500 divers visited Malta during 2000, 1,800 divers (or 5%) more than the previous year. To those who doubt the economic contribution of visiting divers, the following may be heartening: 36% of visiting divers represents repeat visitors and 48% of divers visit Malta during the winter and shoulder months.

With so many diving schools in our islands, one may be tempted into saying that the diving sector is well-gearred for the future. However, one must remember that we have no Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), which are the real meccas for the observant diver, in Malta despite the myriad of underwater wrecks.

Diving is one of the elixirs of sports tourism in our islands. Such a form of tourism in our islands can have its negative side too - golf courses, totally unsustainable in terms of land and water usage for our islands are a glaring example of this. The abnormal increase in the number of yacht marinas needed to cater for the prestigious sailing Louis Vuitton Cup and America's Cup is yet another example, although sailing (on a scale commensurate with our islands' dimensions) can be hailed as a positive ecotourism attraction.

Other ecotourism initiatives in our country are not so obvious. Some of them are even more laudable since they came from the private sector. Two cases in point are the "Heritage in Limestone" and olive-pressing industry.

Based in a disused quarry in Siggiewi and run by the son of the president of the Quarry Owners Association and the daughter of a prominent building contractor, the venture is an innovative way of reaping dividends from local expertise in limestone extraction and building. Spread out on 0.33 hectares, the venture is a practical expression of how the switch from unsustainability to sustainability in the quarrying industry is not rocket science after all. And surely, the raw material for other similar ventures in Malta and Gozo is not lacking.

Agricultural ecotourism in Malta is still largely unmapped ground, despite the great existing potential. With all our Mediterranean counterparts being peppered with olive trees (olive tree bark is used in many artefacts in Tunisia, for example, besides the use of olive oil), it was only natural for us to start mitigating the deficit in olive trees our islands are plagued with.

Sammy Cremona's venture at Wardija (accompanied by his wife Matty's book on cooking with olive oil) and the numerous appeals by local councils, like Nadur in Gozo, and free distribution of olive trees by the Ministry for Agriculture, are splendid incentives to stimulate agrotourism through the use of indigenous tree species. Food for thought is provided by the suggestion of turning the centres for honey production (especially around Mellieha) and prickly pear liqueur into tourist attractions.

Agrotourism is widespread in countries like Italy, especially in Tuscany. Although we are not blessed with large haciendas or ranches, we resort to exploiting our farms (especially in Gozo) purely for the conventional tourist - i.e. the tourist seeking swimming pools. This trend, partly fuelled by Maltese tourists, is resulting in the conversion of traditional farmhouses into state-of-the-art swanky villas with the consequent pillage of the cultural and traditional legacy which they have to offer. Hence, the conservation of such farmhouses should not limit itself to their exterior but also to their interior.

Vineyards are mushrooming all over our islands; besides olive groves, these could be a good catalyst for developing this sector of ecotourism. San Niklaw Valley in Mellieha, as illustrated by Alfred Psaila, can also act as a hub for agrotourism with its traditional irrigation techniques.

The major difficulty facing ecotourism in our islands is hiking and trekking. Although some ecological walk guides have already been published by MTA (one on selected walks in Gozo and one focusing on Malta, compiled in collaboration with Nature Trust), walking routes for rambblers have to skirt "RTO" signs, local hunters, makeshift countryside dumps, disused quarries and the general languor in which our rural areas lie.

Rambler associations are numerous abroad. In the UK, for example, one finds the European Ramblers Associations. An interesting development would be the setting up of the first Maltese rambblers' association to add yet another pro-environmental lobby in this country.

"Orthodox" cultural tourism (that targeting historic buildings in our urban cores) has also recently been given a boost by placing the accent on the rehabilitation of these urban cores, such as at the Harbour area, with the holding of tailor-made conferences and with financial incentives, for example, being forked out to promote the conservation of wooden balconies. The conservation of vintage stone balconies in Gozo should also receive such attention.

The disparity between the Maltese ecotourism sector and the ones abroad clearly emerges by quoting some statistics from the Fact Sheet Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs in Washington, DC. Depending on the definitions used, ecotourism generates between \$19-33 billion annually in international tourism receipts (about 4%-7% of the total international tourism receipts of \$475 billion (in 2000, World Tourism Organization statistics).

As an indication of the economic value of wildlife to a local community, the US Fish and Wildlife Service reports that in FY1995, people visited refuges more than 27.7 million times for recreation and environmental education. Their spending generated \$401.1 million of sales in regional economies. As this spending flowed through the economy, more than 10,000 people were employed and \$162.9 million in employment income was generated.

Ecotourism is a specialised market of sustainable tourism. Hence, it can be our bulwark to preserve our flagging natural and cultural assets. More creative thinking (whilst avoiding excesses such as holding the America's Cup event) is needed to spawn even more specific niches in the sector. Of the three hallmarks characteristic of ecotourism and quoted previously in the definition, while no doubts exist regarding the benefits to the local community and education of the visitor resulting from an increase in ecotourism in our country, the degree to which ecotourism is actually bolstering the conservation of visited resource is a bit more murky.

In fact, proactive intervention by our tourist authorities is needed in safeguarding the archaeological firmament, such as prehistoric and Punic tombs and cave dwellings, scattered around our islands and which has not received adequate protection as signature remains, such as Mnajdra and Hagar Qim. In addition, urbanisation and quarrying activities should be curbed in the vicinity of gems such as Dwejra and Mdina.