

## Drop in tourism linked to closure of countryside pathways

George Cini

Tourist arrival figures for February, showing a drop of 11.5 per cent over the same month last year, indicated that whatever was being done to attract visitors in the shoulder months was not having the desired effect, Ramblers' Association of Malta president Lino Bugeja said yesterday.

The data, published by the National Statistics Office, show that arrivals plummeted by 45,053, compared to February 2004.

"I am saying this because the extensive feedback the association has received since it was set up last month is highly indicative of the hassle and bewilderment of visitors when they go for walks in the countryside.

"The countryside provides an excellent vista during these months when all sorts of wild flowers and plants carpet most of the land that is still not spoilt by buildings.

"The authorities need to come up with a definitive map of the public pathways allowing walks and trekkers to enjoy their pastime free from verbal abuse by gun totting persons who claim ownership of countryside pathways. The countryside is dotted with passage ways marked 'Private' and 'Keep Out'.

The association has found the full backing of other NGOs including Nature Trust, Din l-Art Helwa and Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna and looks forward to working with other organisations on common ground and ideas.

The association is working hard to trace maps of the Maltese islands to be able to draw models for pathways that will be accessible to the public.

One map the association has traced back to 1897 is preserved at the National Archives in Rabat. The legend on the map is worth pointing out because the details give testimony, if any is needed, of the importance of public pathways the RAM is so strongly campaigning for.

The legend includes the following detail: "Foreshore open to the General Public subject to be reoccupied by the War Department for purposes of Imperial Defence and Privilege of Way in certain localities reserved for the Civil Population, always to be kept public".

Association secretary Alex Vella said the RAM's ad hoc committee was fine tuning the association's statute and would soon present a petition to the Prime Minister calling on the government to recognise and promote the benefits that can be had from countryside walks both for locals and tourists.

Comments and inquiries to the Ramblers Association of Malta may be made on ram205@gmail.com.