

AGM Report - Environment Commission

It may come as a surprise to many of you here that it was never our intention to organise walks as such - and the setting up of RAM had its origins in various appeals made in the press about the inaccessibility of the countryside - a phenomenon we are all familiar with - various signs warning you not to venture here or there - RTOs painted on walls, rocks and sometimes cheekily enough on public surfaced roads as well. In our first year of inception under an adhoc committee we made various representations with our so-called concerned authorities but all seem rather queasy of answering our one innocent question - where can we walk ?

There came a time when we felt this situation cannot go on unchallenged - it is unthinkable that in the year of Our Lord 2007 in a country with supposedly full European credentials one cannot enjoy the countryside without the fear of being turned away by a myriad of unscrupulous and selfish " users " of these same open spaces. We can now say we have walked all over Malta and the surprises are many - public surfaced roads closed off at both ends... a historic palace one cannot visit when quail are migrating.... a part of the coastline where you are supposedly only allowed entry if you are going fishing ...a Bronze Age site advertised on an MTA walk but walled off nonetheless.....and being turned away from a part of the very public Victoria Lines " if you are a member of Birdlife " ...so our reaction was to challenge this situation bit by bit by walking in these places and in a way making them our own...not by putting up walls all around them but by opening them up to so many people who have never ventured on their own because of the inhibitions explained above. The reaction from the public has been overwhelming and some of our walks have resembled more like country marches than casual rambles. Nonetheless we have also felt the pressing need of avoiding damage to our environment and we now cater for smaller groups when we visit off road sites of ecological importance. This is not an attempt to turn people away but facing up to our responsibilities as an environmental NGO. Our open spaces are a fragile jewel and we should be the last to be accused of irresponsible trampling. We have emphasised especially our right to the foreshore with visits to some memorable places - Miger Ilma ..Rdum Majjesa ...are some of the places where we humbly claim a first for organised ventures.

Things have not been so rosy on all fronts however. Our various attempts to establish our rights through various meetings with various authorities have admittedly not produced very much - invariably what we get is verbal encouragement to persist in what we are doing but nothing has been done so far in the way of any proposed legislation. We have also repeatedly reported various infringements in the countryside but damage has rarely been repaired and perpetrators apparently never brought to book. However persistent representation and research by RAM did finally get Ministerial assurances as to the public right of access in two highly scenic disputed coastal areas - namely Il-Munxar in the south of the island and Ras ir-Raheb in the west.

More worrying at times has been the apparent lack of interest shown in preserving what remains of our countryside by so many of our members. Together with various other NGOs we were at the forefront in opposing the opening up of the development zones last summer but our various appeals for members to join in this legitimate opposition was not very apparent in the two protests organised. Although both protests were very well attended we feel that members of RAM could have come out in greater numbers. Invariably in future we will all be negatively effected in our quality of life by this negative governmental decision and we may yet be sorry we did not stand up to be counted when circumstances called for us to do so.

One other major disappointment was the introduction of a forum on our website which was left almost unutilised for three whole months before we finally decided to dismantle it altogether. This forum could have formed the basis of communication among members with similar interests or aspects of rambling. It is ironic that a call on the forum to form a small group to start some exploratory rambling on remote areas in Dingli cliffs went completely unanswered when by and large our walks to remote and inaccessible areas are among our most popular ! We feel this was an opportunity our members capriciously lost. It is because of this that we appeal today for members to visit our website regularly and participate in any polls that may be online at the time - it is only through your feedback that we can move forward. We are

lucky to have a very dedicated webmaster - who although not based in Malta - strives very hard to update the site regularly. Not every NGO is so lucky.

Still when we look back on our past and very eventful year we have every reason to be satisfied - we have beaten a track in many areas largely thought of as inaccessible if not completely forgotten or overlooked for one reason or another ; we have brought people of similar interests together ; we have raised the issue of freedom to roam to mean a little more than just mobile telephony jargon and we have attracted a very healthy membership in the Association which now numbers over 450 people. It is up to each and every one of us not to sit on our laurels but to build on this strenght with the specific aim of keeping the countryside freely accessible for all.

Steven Bonello