

Ramblers' Association of Malta  
Annual General Meeting, Sat. 2nd February, 2008  
held at Din I-Art Helwa, Valletta

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## President's Address

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Friends and Colleagues,

In reviewing the past year from the environmental point of view I look back, not in anger, but with mixed feelings of joy and despair, elation and frustration, satisfaction and disappointment as we strive to achieve our aims and objectives, some with a measure of success, namely ; the promotion of rambling activities as a means of a healthy life style. Yes, we have gone a long way in this regard but no room for complacency.

We are contributing towards more awareness and empathy towards the natural beauty and the cultural heritage of the Maltese islands.

And we are immensely satisfied with the organisation of country rambles by voluntary leaders, walks which have proved so popular... and effective to promote rambling as a way of life. Of course we are victims of our success as "restricted walks" are fully taken up as soon as they are announced. In fact we will welcome suggestions how to improve this sector.

These have been our crumbs of comfort as we face an uncertain future in our efforts to establish and to preserve the right of access to the open countryside and the coastal zones. Our attempts to ensure the net-work of public footpaths in the countryside officially propped up by a definitive map of the Maltese Islands, have drawn a complete blank. Pristine bays of great natural, scenic and geological importance, like Fomm ir-Rih remain virtually closed. Yes, together we can achieve as in a democracy there is nothing as powerful, nothing as potent as PEOPLE POWER.

Furthermore this year we intend to raise our campaign for the protection and preservation of items that embellish our countryside with its wayside chapels, archaeological remains, vernacular art and architecture as well as other features such as corbelled huts (giren), bee-hives (mgiebah), aedicules (free

standing statues and niches –like Ruh fil-fjamma), items that make our walks so colourful and unique. It is most saddening that certain rubble walls are disappearing at a faster rate only to appear at a different locality benefiting from EU funds. Rubble walls built according to the statutory height are part of our landscape and much heavier penalties and enforcement have to be imposed... since with modern machinery a whole stretch can be eradicated and transported elsewhere in a matter of minutes. LET US STOP THE ROT NOW BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE.

It is with great satisfaction that I record the great upsurge in environmental awareness shown in the last months by all section of the Maltese and Gozitan populace in the full realisation that our beloved country deprived of its beautiful countryside and coastal zone would be a grey and dismal place. I am sure that RAM'S massive campaign for the opening up of the countryside as well as the enormous task of our "Walks Commission" to organise various hikes of all types (scenic, adventure, archaeological, historical) are bearing fruit. A recent E.U. Survey reveals that an overwhelming majority of the Maltese (85%) are seriously worried about the rapid loss of the countryside and coastal zone and they feel that the protection of our natural environment is a moral obligation to be undertaken by all. Many Maltese are saddened by the fact that at this alarming rate of land loss, the time will soon come when there will be no environment for us to protect.

Judging by past events I suspect that Malta's economic achievements since independence have not been buttressed with a spiritual regeneration in the form of genuine love of country.... A country so generously blessed with great natural beauty and rich cultural and historical heritage. This responsibility should be shared by all of us if we want to check Malta's rapid decline down the morass of its philistine shambles as illegal developers, land-sharks, squatters, trappers and unscrupulous speculators usurp land that belongs to us all. At the heart of the problem is money and the Oliver Twist syndrome, a chronic malaise that is savagely encroaching on our countryside and coastal zones to the extent of depriving us of our archaeological heritage and

vernacular architecture that have endured the ravages of time for thousands of years.

Friends,

Amongst the most urgent environmental issues plaguing the Maltese islands is the ever-increasing misappropriation of pathways and coastal zones. ... a situation so detrimental to the much vaunted "a better quality of life" slogan. Since its inception the Ramblers' Association has been campaigning for better accessibility to the countryside and the fore-shore with very little success as HOSTILITY AND HARASSMENT by presumed owners are on the increase. A few weeks ago while at Simblija, limits of Dingli, an area of exceptional scenic beauty, the site of a medieval settlement, I was sternly warned by a "farmers' representative" that the Simblija pathway was exclusively for the farmers of the area. It is inconceivable that this unique site, recently restored by the government, assisted by EU funds, should be barred for hikers and trekkers. In this regard RAM has been strongly recommending that all signs that have mushroomed all over the countryside and coastal zones such as "No Entry", Riservato, or Private, should be accompanied by an officially-numbered permit so that the public would be able to check the validity of such dubious signs.. Our members love walks and we want their children to grow up with easy access to the joys of the Maltese countryside. In view of the deteriorating situation RAM will be considering the organisation of Protest Walks in specified areas to highlight the difficulties encountered by its members and the public at large.

Fully conscious of the deteriorating situation, RAM submitted an aide-memoir to the Prime Minister in May during the Process of Consultation prior to the Budget. Our submission reminded the Prime Minister of the recommendations outlined by the National Commission for Sustainable Development 2006-2016 which state inter alia that:

Measures need to be taken so that access to the coast is possible, WHETHER THE LAND IS PRIVATE OR GOVERNMENT-OWNED. ( Section 3.1.7)

Places that combine leisure with enjoyment of the natural environment could be a source of improved health and therefore accessibility to such places should be improved. Due to various issues, the enjoyment of the countryside is very often seriously impaired with negative impacts also impinging on the tourist industry. IT IS THEREFORE DESIRABLE THAT FOOTPATHS ARE IDENTIFIED IN THE COUNTRYSIDE AND FALSE CLAIMS TO LAND TITLE CHECKED. PATHS THAT ARE ABUSIVELY CLOSED TO THE PUBLIC SHOULD BE OPENED. (3.1.11).

These recommendations are fully endorsed by our Association which has been clamouring for their immediate implementation.

Friends and ramblers, the Ramblers' Association of Malta intends to "keep to the path" both literally and metaphorically but in the final analysis it is PEOPLE POWER that will determine our path of action as the trend towards outdoor life gathers momentum and more members, both local and foreign, join our Association.

Sat 2nd February, 2008 Lino Bugeja

President

## Administrative Report

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FOR PERIOD 3 February 2007 TO 31 January 2008

There were nine committee meetings since the last Annual General Meeting of the Association held in these same premises on the 3rd. February 2007. Again all decisions taken were by general consensus of the committee and the need never arose to take a vote. Meetings were not held during the summer months of June, July and September, although the need was felt to meet up in August to discuss some urgent items among which there was the Walks Programme for the last three months of the year. There was no change in the composition of the committee and with the exception of one member who fell out on attendance for the last three meetings, attendance was very satisfactory.

Although there was goodwill from all members the administrative workload fell mostly on the secretariat and the public relations co-ordinators and it is thanks to their continuous liaison through email communication that most things got done. Other initiatives taken by the various commissions will be reported by the respective coordinators following my report.

Sadly, there is nothing new to report on locating adequate premises to house RAM. We thank the executive of Din l-Art Helwa for letting us use their place to hold our AGMs, and for their open offer for any other similar events. In the meantime consideration is being given to accept the offer kindly extended by the executive of the Council of Women to make use of their headquarters in Gwardmangia, for holding our committee meetings there. I appeal to the relevant authorities that once the elections are over attention is given to allocate to the Association adequate premises in a central location from the numerous that are presently unused or under-utilised, which RAM then undertakes to keep in a good state of maintenance.

Membership continued to increase throughout 2007 and paid up members numbered just over 500 at the end of the year. It seems that renewals are picking up again now that the fee in the new currency has been established. It

is good to note also that the appeal and the incentive given in order that 5-year renewals are preferred to annual subscriptions is paying dividends, with administrative work being cut down considerably. My appeal to the incoming committee is to seriously review the subscription fee. I consider the amount of work that goes in the organisation of the walks and all the other activities is being unjustly subsidized by the few volunteers that take the full load. It is even more unjust that non-members join in the fun without having the decency to join the club. Advice has been given on recent walks that with the introduction of the Membership Cards there will be a stop to free rides very soon.

Walks that are organised by the Association remain to be the magnet that attracts most of the new as well as established members. With good reason too, as the programmes of walks are progressively getting better still, even with the very limited factor of land that is getting smaller by the day as more ODZ gives way to development of every sort. The programme for the last quarter of last year contained 10 routes most of which were new. All were held satisfactorily except for one that had to be cancelled because of the indisposition of the leader that day. Two walks were held mid-week with the others falling on weekends or public holidays. They were well attended with the restricted walks oversubscribed.

Other activities that were organised during the year included the Gozo weekend and the first-time trip to Scotland. Thankfully both events had a very favourable outcome, and demand for more of the same outstrips supply of places as proof of their popularity with members. The number of walks organised for the six months ending in June as well as the number of foreign groups of ramblers that have asked for our help and co-operation for walks in Malta and Gozo leaves little possibility to get another trip abroad organised.

Although it has always been hammered out loud and clear that walks are not the end but the means to achieve a more noble purpose – to open up the countryside and foreshore for all equally - it is the popularity of the walks and the other activities that RAM organises that captures the imagination of the members. It is sad to note that many members pay little or no attention to

issues of importance that threaten the places where they want to roam. On the other hand the importance that most members attach to the RAM outdoor activities is exactly what makes our Association one of the most active NGOs in Malta. To be fair it must be said that the number of RAM members taking part in the National Protest in Valletta last June against the development at Ramla l-Hamra was encouraging and far higher to the previous protest held.

The task facing the incoming executive is to optimise the force that RAM has grown to be for getting down to the raw basics of removing barriers, institutional and those on the ground.

On the ground our courageous walk leaders have challenged routes that have long been declared out of bounds. Though verbal encounters verging on the offensive have been faced, our way prevailed literally and walks were never abandoned although slight change in direction was sometimes needed to prevent escalation.

Institutionally, pressure with the authorities has led to the OPM sending one of its officers, Mr Robert Cutajar, to view abuses and possibly encounter other notorious characters that stand in the way, then to act for their solution. Very little headway was made but Mr Cutajar responded positively and issued a couple of warnings. Also RAM was most honoured to host the Prime Minister and Mrs Gonzi on one of the walks last summer, where he also got to experience first hand the beauty of our countryside paths as they are interspersed with offending signage, shameful barriers and rude coercion that ramblers have to suffer in pursuit of their simple hobby. This was an encouraging start of a promising process, which sadly came to an abrupt end because of recent official activity at Castile and because of the forthcoming elections.

This is far from enough and pressure must be brought to bear for the removal of all barriers that are fastidious to bona fide ramblers in the countryside through steadfast and appropriate legal measures. RAM calls on the Prime Minister to pass from words to action by bringing legality and respect to civil

rights in what remains of Malta's open spaces, and to ensure their preservation.

There has been a lot of other hidden work done in collaboration with the other environmental NGOs on the various issues that threatened ODZ and the National Heritage. Suffice it to say that only yesterday a meeting was held with the Prime Minister and the Minister of the Environment about the alarming rate of building and sanction applications in ODZ areas that were presented during the festive period. It is estimated that over 30 percent of all applications over the period involved land that lies outside the development zone, over signatures of architects notorious for their influence at MEPA and their disregard for the environment. Noteworthy also was the recent amendments to the Development Planning Act that Minister George Pullicino is moving in Parliament prior to its dissolution before the general elections that are due soon. Those amendments were agreed upon between the Ministry and the NGOs at meetings held over recent months, and RAM considers them one small step in the right direction and hopes that they will not fall by the wayside like so many other regulations before them that are never enforced.

There is no time to list the numerous other official meetings and discussions that took place with various ministries, authorities and departments. Hope springs eternal that some day some RAM will bring its mission to fruition. This is only possible if we keep our mission in clear focus. Through experience it has been learnt that a new enthusiastic organisation such as ours is easily distracted by scandalous issues environmental that are hot and topical. Considering that work is voluntary and that volunteers are in short supply, it is counterproductive to take up more issues than can be managed. However noble it is to tackle crimes against our urban, rural and cultural heritage we must make sure that the issue of free access in the countryside never plays second fiddle.

I conclude by thanking all members of the executive team for their positive working attitude! I repeat it was a pleasure working with you and enjoying your company. Thanks also to the hundreds of ramblers who have given us their

trust during the last two years and who join us in the walks. I congratulate them for their always-courteous behaviour which together with their sense of humour makes every walk a pleasant encounter. It is their encouragement that drives me and my colleagues to volunteer our time and effort on very the frustrating labour of love.

Thank You.

Alex Vella

### **Legal Affairs Commission Report for 2007**

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During 2007 the Legal Affairs Commission continued with its efforts to assist the Executive Committee in its defense of our countryside from overdevelopment, especially in Outside Development Zones and other sensitive areas. We also did our best to safeguard or reclaim right of passage through public land and access to the foreshore for members and non-members alike. This was done through the interpretation of the relevant legislation and the suggestion of amendments, where necessary, to clarify such interpretation and close possible loopholes.

But perhaps the subject, which really took up most of the Commission's time, was the examination and criticism of the NGOs bill during its passage through Parliament. This subject was taken up directly with the relevant authorities as well as through letters and articles to the press where the position of our Association was made abundantly clear. In particular, we emphasized our real fear that the bill, as originally envisaged, could easily lead to the loss of the NGOs' independence and freedom of action in disputes with Government. We also contended that the Commissioner to be nominated by the Minister would have had almost absolute powers including that of removing all the democratically elected representatives of an NGO.

We are pleased to note that our efforts in this respect were not in vain and that during the bill's committee stage, several amendments were effected which put our minds at rest especially in watering down the powers of the Commissioner. In fact, art. 35 of the new Act now lays down that the Commissioner has to act in consultation and with the assistance of an ad hoc Council made up of eleven members. These will be made up of a Chairperson appointed by the Minister, the Commissioner ex officio as his deputy and the other nine members to be selected from among and to represent the voluntary sector. The Act also creates a Board of Appeal made up of three members, one of whom, the Chairman, has to be a lawyer with at least seven years experience. According to art. 23 the Commissioner has to act through this Board of Appeal in deciding

to suspend an enrolled voluntary organization or before cancelling an activity of such organization. This Board of Appeal will hear appeals from NGOs who are aggrieved by any decision of the Commissioner or Council and investigate complaints relating to the workings or interpretation of the Act. The decision of the Board can be appealed to the First Hall of the Civil Court whose decision would then be final and binding.

All in all, the NGOs Act is an important piece of legislation which will give legal status and recognition to NGOs and pave the way for registered NGOs to enjoy new privileges and financial assistance not only from the Government but also from the EU. On the other hand, the Act also aims to regulate and supervise the activities of NGOs who will be required to render an annual account of how they acquire and spend their funds. Of course, all these controls are necessary in every civilized society and should not be too burdensome if well intentioned and administered. It is now up to all NGOs to register under the Act and do their utmost to help make it an overall success.

## Environment/Public Relations Report

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Away from RAM's more visible member-oriented activities – themselves aimed at highlighting various aspects of our heritage but with special emphasis on our natural heritage – RAM has tried its best to get its voice heard on a number of occasions and issues. We will here have a brief look at what we tried to achieve.

Early in the year we highlighted the ongoing disfigurement taking place on our sea-board cliffs when RAM opted to have one of its Gozo walks going over recently laid concrete at the Sanap Cliffs. This was followed by a symbolic protest in front of the Munxar Local Council offices – with active participation from Ramblers who were present and a formal letter of protest was handed in to the said Council.

On a ramble through Mizieb in November we managed to overcome a little more the image of this woodland being the sole domain of hunters. These days the hunting lobby is vying more with picnicking families for the terrain. Leading 170 ramblers through the ridge-top grove on a trek from coast to coast included some environmental activities which meant leaving the place even better than we found it. It is hoped that such activities will continue to enhance our enjoyable countryside forays and establish RAM as a beneficial force for the environment.

Other walks had specific aims at raising awareness of our less well known heritage artefacts –

One can mention here a well attended archeologically themed walk of the Burmarrad environs led by Timothy Gambin, while Alex Vella led Ramblers around lesser known outer fortifications of Valletta and Floriana.

The tensions between the decision makers at MEPA and the environmental NGO's came to a head in the heat of June over the issue of a permit for 23 villas overlooking Ramla Bay in Gozo. RAM is proud to have coordinated and

cooperated fully in the organisation of one of the largest environmental protests held in recent years. On its own initiative RAM also organised a night vigil at Calypso's Cave in conjunction with the NGOs' protest. Whether due to political expediency or not MEPA eventually backtracked and revoked the Ramla permit on a technicality. One still has to see whether future development proposals on this (and other) sites will still be entertained.

We also gave our input and comments on the proposed Marina and other holiday related structures at Hondoq ir-Rummien – a project which worryingly seems to be favoured (to a larger or lesser extent) by both major parties. We remain concerned at the very possible loss of some of the most pristine bathing water in Gozo, as well as the increased encroachment on the remaining undeveloped areas of our coastline.

In spite of the promise that the 2006 extension of the development zones was meant as a once-for-all extension and that henceforth extensions outside boundaries would not be considered favourably we have once again witnessed a sad reversal of this policy when MEPA last year approved a new service station at Buqana – a rural area in the vicinity of Chadwick Lakes. RAM together with other NGOs once again made its objections heard. It has to be pointed out here that while MEPA's policy to relocate service stations away from town/village cores to their periphery has its merits, erecting such amenities a mile or so outside of built up areas is hardly what one thinks of as peripheral in the Maltese context.

We voiced our concern at what appears to be the wanton destruction by burning of large swathes of garigue and other cliffside habitats – this year manifestly seen at Ras ir-Raheb and in the vicinity of Miger Ilma. Our press release on the subject elicited a promise from MEPA that the authority would be monitoring the Bahrija area more closely. Although welcome on its own merit, the Bahrija area remains by and large an area where environmental infringements of all sorts keep being reported with nauseating regularity. One such case brought to our attention was the smothering by debris of a large area of very important garigue in the Wied Rini area. Incidentally RAM had

previously reported on this very same stretch of garigue at Wied Rini but all that was elicited from MEPA was an acknowledgement. MEPA once again demonstrated its ability to “act” way after the horse had bolted.

Then we had the reversal of the golf course plan at Xaghra I-Hamra which we welcomed unequivocally. Moreover we involved ourselves in discussions and gave our input about possible walking trails in the proposed park. At all stages we lobbied hard for minimal intervention and the quick removal of around 65 illegal trapping hides and other assorted structures on this government-owned site. At the same time declarations by the Malta Labour Party for plans for three new golf courses in areas as yet broadly unidentified raised our concern which we again voiced.

In 2007 we also had the pleasure to host the Prime Minister and Mrs. Gonzi on one of our walks after the PM showed an interest in joining us in his personal capacity. We are proud in having accompanied our Prime Minister to a remote corner of our magnificent southern seaboard – an area which the PM admitted he had never visited before. On our part we explained the various difficulties encountered in visiting such areas. We hope that whoever is Prime Minister after the forthcoming elections will also find the time for another informal ramble with us.

Steven Bonello

Anne Zammit

12th January 2008

## Education Committee Report

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The Education Committee was set up soon after the last AGM of the RAM and is currently the responsibility of Victor Martinelli. The EC has undertaken two activities this year.

The first undertaking was writing up a series of articles for Sagħtar magazine. The first two articles have already been published, a third has been submitted for publication and a fourth is being written up. The idea is to introduce the concept of rambling to young readers and to highlight the benefits of the activity.

Last year I posited the idea of working actively with one or two secondary schools with the aim of taking out small groups of interested students on a ramble with members from RAM. This activity as such has not been implemented but an even better one has thanks to the contribution of our colleague and fellow Commission member Mr Joe Agius. The Education Commission has launched a project entitle "Dan Pajjizna" the goal of which is to encourage schools to conduct a number of walks in their geographical area or the confines of the local council and register natural features, buildings and artefacts of interest among others. An exhibition is to be held by the participating schools that need to observe a number of criteria how best to present an account of the walks through multimedia presentations among others. We have had a relatively healthy response and have something like thirteen schools participating from the State and Independent Sectors. The project should be completed around the end of March-April and prizes offered to the best performing three schools, whilst all schools taking part will be awarded a certificate of participation.

Like last year, I would like to appeal for more members on the Commission simply because manpower is always an issue and the more hands on board, with some reservations, the better will be the product that we can offer.

## **Minutes of the Annual General Meeting**

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Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on Saturday 2nd February 2008 at the premises of Din L-Art Helwa, Melita Street, Valletta.

Committee Members present:

Lino Bugeja, Romano Cassar, Andre Catania, Victor Martinelli, Frank Spiteri, Alex Vella, Carmen Vella, Louis Vella.

Excused: Stephen Bonello, Anne Zammit, Joe Bugeja.

Some seventy five members attended the AGM. This number was not enough for the quorum established by the statute (half of the paid-up members) at 10am, the published time of the meeting. However, it was more than enough for the quorum of twenty members required "after the lapse of 15 minutes", so the AGM could go ahead.

The order of proceedings followed the Agenda established by the Statute.

The President opened the meeting by addressing the members present and giving a general outline of the achievements of the association, an account of RAM's lobbying with the authorities, and future policy priorities. The President's address is attached.

This was followed by the administrative report, read out by the Secretary.

The Treasurer then read the Annual Statement of Accounts that had been vetted and approved by two Auditors, in terms with provisions of the statute. Their duly signed Report was also tabled. The same Auditors, Mr Joe Agius and Mr Charles Calleja, were re-appointed as Auditors for the forthcoming year.

The Education report was then read by Dr Victor Martinelli, followed by the PR/Environment report, read by Romano Cassar on behalf of Stephen Bonello and Anne Zammit. Dr Louis Vella then read the Legal report.

As this AGM marks the end of the 2-year term of the current committee, a new President needed to be elected.

The following persons were proposed for the committee:

Person	Proposed by	Seconded by
Lino Bugeja	Alex Vella	Joe Agius
Romano Cassar	Alex Vella	Joe Agius
Alex Vella	Alfred Camilleri	Saviour Grech
Rita Buhagiar	Victor Martinelli	Tessie Camilleri
Victor Martinelli	Alex Vella	Jane Bone
Louis Vella	Joe Agius	Alex Vella
Joe Agius	Francis Spiteri	Victor Martinelli
Carmen Vella	Lino Bugeja	Romano Cassar
Anne Zammit	Lino Bugeja	Romano Cassar
Andre Catania	Lino Bugeja	George Buttigieg
Francis Spiteri	Joe Falzon	Andre Catania

As the number of person proposed for the committee was equal to the required number, no election was required. In addition, the following persons were co-opted:

Nathalie Doneo	(secretarial work)
Stephen Bonello	(environment and PR)

After the reading of reports, there ensued a general discussion on the various aspects of the association. Some comments were made on the organisation of walks, especially the restricted walks. The point was made that, with more voluntary walk leaders, more walks (restricted or open) can be offered.

Several persons offered their help as walk leaders:

Maura Marlow

Ian Hlland

Saviour Grech

Gunther Jacobs

Bertus Zuijdgeest

Andrew Said (as assistant walk leader)

No other matters were raised, and the AGM closed at 1220.