

The Ramblers' Association of Malta

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Introduction

We are happy to present our members with a boon of walks and activities that will hopefully prove to be an improvement over last year. We feel a certain urgency to enjoy our countryside because at the rate it is disappearing, before long there will be no open spaces to enjoy at all. All efforts by our Association to garner due respect for our natural and cultural heritage from the Authorities are proving futile, and it is about time to change tactics. Also this deep sense of frustration is urging us to seek greener pastures abroad, as you will read of tours and plans that are already in hand.

Programme of Activities for Autumn

For this Autumn the committee has decided to increase the social and cultural activities in connection with our programme of walks. The walks will retain their central importance in the promotion of healthy exercise and friendship among members and guests. To add to the social aspect of the walks it was decided that more time is spent together than that spent en route. For this reason the Gozo Weekend is being repeated in November as an excellent means of a relaxed and extended "social get-together". Besides it provides a welcome break in routine. Also, a seasonal meal together is being introduced following the success of last year's lunch in Mgarr. The walk of the 25th October will end with a "Fenkata ghall-frisk" at the Paradise Bay Lido.

It is intended to promote knowledge of our natural and cultural heritage by a series of lectures that will treat different subjects associated with the walks that are programmed. Our Association is blessed with such people like Lino Bugeja, Louis Vella and others who are well versed with the cultural wealth encountered on our walks. It is also blessed with a lot of learned and professional friends who from time to time gladly accept our request to lead walks with specific interests. It would be a waste if such willing fountains of learning are left to drain away. Such educational meetings will also provide social opportunities out of which our members can reap a lot of benefit.

The attached walks programme for Autumn contains some six weekday walks by Dr Gunter Jacobs, who always turns up well prepared to report on the history or description of the sites he visits. It is for the rest of the walks that fall on weekends, when more people can spare the time to walk leisurely, that the series of lectures are intended. Our thanks to all our experienced walk-leaders who kindly volunteer to kindle our love for the country.

Rambling Tours:

A second walking tour abroad will see a group of ten members leaving for the Canary Islands on the 29th September, transiting in Madrid. The tour promises to be interesting as Canarian ramblers will be leading walks for their counterparts from different European countries, first on the island of La Palma, then hop to three other islands of El Hierro, La Gomera and Tenerife. The 40th Conference of European Ramblers will be held in La Palma during the first three days of October, and our Association will be taking part for the second year running.

A third tour is planned by the Association for March 2010. This will be a week-long tour to Liguria di Levante and will be led by the Italian ramblers who had walked with us in Malta last April. Again our Italian guests felt so obliged towards RAM friendship and organisation that they have offered to reciprocate by taking care to organize a programme for us. It is an opportunity to ramble the renowned “cinque terre” with locals who know their way around. Our group will fly to Pisa on the 20th and returns on the 27th March 2010. Look out for news and details very soon.

More “ad hoc” foreign walking tours will be announced from time to time. It is intended that small groups are organized to take walks in Italy, the UK, Scandinavia or Spain. The benefit of cheap flights will be taken to ramble in places where dumping, illegal construction and such malpractices that in Malta cause heartaches to lovers of the countryside, are non-existent or better controlled and certainly less conspicuous. Such special tours will be notified by email or sms to members.

Polo Shirts.

Good quality Polo Shirts have been ordered displaying the RAM colourful logo that will be embroidered on the front. The shirts will come in four sizes and should be available for distribution by November. The idea is to have members of RAM recognizable when activities such as walks and protests are organized. They will have a very affordable price so members are encouraged to wear them distinctly.

Membership

The end of the year is fast approaching and members are encouraged to pay up their membership fee of €10 during the last two months of the year. Renewal of subscription fees will not be accepted during walks as this has given rise to discrepancies and mistakes in the past. Payment can be made by cheque made out in favour of the Ramblers’ Association or else by direct transfer to HSBC bank account No. 068045921001. For direct or electronic transfers it is important that notice of transfer is given by email on ram205@gmail.com. Please also include your ID number in the notice.

Editorial

Unfortunately the RAM executive is consuming much of its time and energy in opposing infringements and irregularities that slowly but surely nibble away continuously at the scarce natural resources that remain in Malta and Gozo. Unless the NGOs remain vigilant on the very people and authorities whose duty it is to protect and preserve the countryside, very soon it will be no fun at all to take country walks. Ramblers who have an eye for detail and feel for the land find that most of our walks are marred by the

insensitive development and careless disrespect to nature all around. “Legal” and illegal constructions of every kind imaginable in ODZ have never been so rife. Construction of “stables”, heightening of rubble walls, erection of gates on public paths, dumping of assorted material including vehicles, illegal vehicle yards, removal of arable soil, destruction of natural surfaces and the like are the order of the day. Rumours about the stripping down of an already-feeble environmental enforcement unit at MEPA encourage anarchy to prevail, both within MEPA and out in the countryside. Reform at Mepa is conspicuous by its absence as consolidation of unaccountability, vicious old habits and obscure policies are wreaking such heavy devastation to our ODZ as has never been perpetrated so intensely in the past.

Lino Bugeja, our revered President has expressed it clearly: “There is a fever in the land that is systematically numbing our sensitivity to the natural landscape as we sadly witness the populace losing its sense of awe and bewilderment at the destruction of our pristine valleys and prime agricultural land. A new form of Green Capitalism is emerging with Malta’s present mullahs often endangering public pathways, creating unauthorized parking areas disturbing the whole serene environment with noise and light pollution. This outrageous disrespect to our countryside is unacceptable and continues to undermine public trust in politics.”

With limited human and material resources active members of the RAM executive find themselves on the defensive all the time and without any energy left to be creative and progressive. Even the programming of walks has to be hastily done in between objections and complaints with Mepa, meetings with Ministers and Secretaries, organising protests, replying to malign media letters, court sittings on the Rationalisation Scheme, etc. Personally speaking, playing my part in running the RAM has become nerve-wrecking and frustrating and far removed from the ideal of idyllic walks in secluded and serene rustic surrounds. Malta is no Arcadia anymore.

Noble plans entertained by the RAM committee, such as the Mapping of Walks and the Task Force for hands-on action to improve paths and clean up valleys have been laid aside while we fight individual battles in the acrimonious war against the environment. True, Bahrija has been saved momentarily like Ramla il-Hamra and Ta’ Cenc before it, but vigilance has to remain active there, as by no means have these cases been completely settled since the political will to resolve them is lacking. In the meantime many other prized landscapes such as Ta’ Baldu, Wied Liemu, Is-Simblija, and others become threatened either by usurpation or by illegal development. Battle fronts are opened all the time while successful fronts still need to be guarded. However both the task force and the mapping will be taken in hand with the beginning of the season of walks this October, and the committee is preparing for the implementation of both initiatives.

It is also for this reason that the present committee is presently engaged in drawing up statutory amendments to our constitution which are intended to meet the various exigencies generated by the sorry state of affairs that our country has found itself in due to Mepa lapses and lack of enforcement. Vigilance must be maintained but not at the cost of our worthy plans. Engraved in our constitution our remit is to take on the challenges as

best we can. It is necessary to adapt our structure to secure that our limited human resources are employed to optimal efficiency to meet such challenges.

In the circumstances the Committee has set two objectives for the immediate future: first to augment the limited human resources by recruiting more members who have expressed willingness to help; second to alter the structure of the executive in such a way that specific duties are delegated to the individual members forming it, whose job it will be to form subcommittees from the new recruits to carry out those duties.

It is understandable that members have their own work to do to earn their livelihood and their life to live as they please. However many have expressed their willingness to take on a few hours of voluntary work in their stride. For this reason we appeal to members to come forward who can offer some time on administrative work in general. Computer skills are direly needed while the setting up of a functioning office and the start-up of a library are waiting for the right personnel to come forward. Anyone with some knowledge of the workings within Mepa, ready to spare time in researching and keeping a watchful eye on ODZ applications, will be an asset. We are also reviewing the original forms of members and will be contacting those who marked their willingness to help.

At the next General Meeting in February the proposed amendments to the Statute will be moved with the intention of structuring the executive to meet modern demands on the Association, and give it power to garner help from members. The Association may end up with a smaller number of executive members but each leading a subcommittee made up of a number of helpers. This is as much as can be revealed at the moment because the issue is still in its embryonic stage.

While on the subject of recruits it is worth observing the lack of new walk leaders over recent years. The programme organizers have singled out many potential leaders among our walking members. These have not yet found the courage to carry the banner. So our hearty appeal is for them react positively when approached. Others who consider themselves up to scratch for the purpose are kindly requested to approach me or Romano. They will be given the necessary help to gain the confidence and skill for leading walks.

It is expected of every member to contribute as best he/she could to keep the Ramblers' Association in the forefront of the Maltese environmental NGOs. Unless the attitude of our political leaders is corrected towards the preservation of our natural and cultural heritage, unless the DCC boards find the will to apply Structure Plan policies to the word and in the spirit they were intended, unless the Environment Protectorate Section uses its enforcement and direct action powers with the determination that the law gives it, our vigilance should be kept on full alert.

At the same time ramblers have to make their presence felt frequently and in the most exemplary way in the countryside to stop illegal developers and other usurpers from taking over what is not theirs by right. Ramblers will continue to protect rights of way in and free enjoyment of the countryside and coastline for all Maltese and foreigners alike. They will challenge all forms of discrimination and unlawful possession as are

represented by gates, high walls, dogs, signs and other obstacles that are intended to shackle freedom of movement, which is protected by the Maltese Constitution
