



OPINION

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Shilly-shallying on conservation areas endangers divers and damages industry

THE diving community is irate at the lack of decisiveness to properly protect the conservation areas around Malta's shores and the welfare of the thousands of divers that visit them.

The immediate shores around the Maltese islands have 15 sites recognised as conservation areas, a handful of which are larger than two football pitches. These are mainly situated around a variety of wrecks, consisting of ships that were scuttled as diving attractions, World War II airplanes, and other wrecks that ended up at the bottom of the sea for different reasons.

Many of these near-shore sites are an essential part of Malta's diving industry product, as well as recreational places for local divers. In contrast to other diving destinations around the world, easy access to these dive sites enables tourists to make the most of their time when visiting the islands.

In the summer period, many of these sites are marked with special buoys that require vessels to keep a safe distance. Despite the short period of time in which these buoys are present, the sites are visited all year round. What makes matters worse is that the safe distance requirement is frequently ignored by boats and jet skis, with divers regularly having to report dangerous manoeuvres, excessive speed and near misses.

The problem is compounded by the fact that these dive sites are subject to inadequate or non-existent management and enforcement measures concerning fishing. While recognised as conservation areas and most often forming part of Natura 2000 Marine Protected Areas, the sites around wrecks and artificial reefs at times constitute a free-for-all.

Political irresoluteness

This sorry state of affairs is due to a long-standing lack of political will to properly conserve these areas. The absence of robust legislation has meant that half-hearted measures continue to be the order of the day.

In 2007, George Pullicino



claimed that the government was considering the introduction of legislation to protect these areas, but nothing to that effect has happened since then. Over the years, stakeholders from the diving community issued statements lamenting the continued allowance of fishing using trolling lines in these dive sites, as well as the fact that illegal fishing practices were going on unabated.

In 2022, Transport Malta and the Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture were unable to specify the number of enforcements conducted in these conservation areas, with department officials pretending not to understand which sites were being referred to in the FOI request.

In a surprise move, in November 2023 the authorities issued a notice to mariners that banned all forms of navigation and fishing in conservation areas. The diving community sang Hallelujah! It was assumed that the authorities had finally seen the light of day and the repeated calls for the implementation of this measure had finally been answered. Maybe the case of

Christian Degabriele, who was killed after being hit by a boat propeller, had helped convince them that this was the most sensible thing to do to prevent such accidents at sea.

However, common sense was short-lived. Just two weeks later, the authorities made an unbelievable U-turn by issuing a new notice to mariners which stated: "Surface fishing including trolling line (rixa) and angling for pelagic fish is permitted within the Conservation Areas, subject that a safe distance is maintained from the position of the wrecks."

What they mean by "safe distance" is anyone's guess and will likely continue to lead to irresponsible and dangerous behaviour.

Endangering lives and industry

Most of the diving community is aghast at the authorities' inability to fully safeguard Malta's conservation areas and the welfare of the divers who visit them. Given the influence of the fishing lobby, it is perhaps no wonder that the decision to do what's right with respect to these sites was quickly overturned.

The contradiction that the government seems incapable of admitting to is that while the success of Malta's diving industry is regularly celebrated for its contribution to quality tourism, such obscenities are sanctioned by the authorities even though they damage the conservation areas and the local diving product.

The spinelessness of the authorities tasked with protecting these areas and the safety of those who use them is bewildering. Their lack of comprehension of what a conservation area is meant to be is astounding.

One of the purposes of such areas is that of re-populating the surrounding seas through a spill-over effect. As David Attenborough points out, the idea of having marine protected areas that include no-fishing zones is vital "because it stops us doing something we should never have begun to do – eat into the core fish stocks, the capital of the ocean."

But who cares what Attenborough thinks? In Malta, we do things differently. Suffice to say, that one of ERA's targets is to

have just one fish revival area by 2026. This ignores the fact that healthy levels of fish stock in conservation areas make a dive site even more appealing. The same fish that divers 'shoot' with underwater cameras is sold many times over and provides indirect marketing of the dive destination through social media.

If fish don't matter, at least one hopes that the welfare of divers does. There is no economic rationale for allowing any form of fishing in conservation areas that can justify the danger posed to divers and the damage wrought on the diving industry. The moment a diver is hit by a boat or ensnared in fishing lines and nets, the news travels around the world, further damaging a lucrative albeit vulnerable industry.

Prevaricating on sensible protection measures for Malta's marine environment comes at a massive cost. As long as the authorities remain in the grip of a powerful fishing lobby that continues to pull the strings with respect to what happens in the country's sea, conservation areas will not be as bountiful or as safe as one would wish them to be.