


OPINION
Daniel Xerri
Daniel Xerri is an educator

The tuna industry's greenwashing tactics

A few weeks ago, news outlets carried articles lauding the sea clean-up campaign conducted by Malta's tuna industry over the summer months. While these pieces enabled the sector to brag about the 500 kilograms of waste collected daily from the sea, they were nothing but a classic example of greenwashing.

Greenwashing involves deceptive marketing tactics aimed at making people believe that an organisation is environmentally friendly and that its practices are sustainable. When we look at the 10,003 tonnes of tuna caught in the wild in 2021, one realises that sustainability is far from being the hallmark of Malta's fish farming industry.

What many people fail to realise when they hear the term 'fish farm' is that bluefin tuna is not bred in a pen. It is first caught wild by means of purse seines somewhere in the Mediterranean or eastern Atlantic, transported to Malta and fattened up in offshore farms before being harvested and sold for a hefty profit. In the meantime, though, the stock of wild tuna continues to be depleted as a result of overfishing practices.

The articles published by newspapers and other media organisations were a reworking of a press release distributed by Aquaculture Resources Limited, the operating arm of the Federation of Malta Aquaculture Producers. The press release was a thinly veiled attempt to divert attention away from the negative impact that the tuna industry's actions are having on the marine environment.

The press release sought to convince the public that the sector cares so much about the sea that it was willing to invest in a costly clean-up campaign.

Just like the campaign itself, the objective behind the press release was mainly that of influencing people to have a more positive view of the industry's effects on the sea. This comes in the wake of a series



of summers in which bathers were outraged at being unable to enjoy popular sites because of the disgusting sea slime generated by fish farms.

In publishing the tuna industry's press release, media houses largely adopted an unquestioning stance.

For example, the wholesale use of the self-congratulatory language that the sector employed in its press release can be seen in the articles produced by Lovin Malta and Malta Daily.

Both of them chose headlines claiming that the tuna industry "sets the standard" with its summer clean-up.

Those familiar with the work of NGOs like Żibel and Coast is Clear, diving clubs like Atlam and Calypso, and activists like Raniero Borg have a different understanding of what setting the standard entails. Their re-

lentless clean-up efforts are motivated by a genuine sense of care for the marine environment rather than by a dubious need to persuade the public of green credentials.

The tuna industry's press release reported its spokesperson as saying that the clean-up "is not simply a reactive mission, but a committed belief in playing our part in ensuring the health and cleanliness of our waters".

No one possessing a measure of logical reasoning is likely to be hoodwinked by such a claim.

Despite the fact that the tuna industry used the press release to pat itself on the back and make some preposterous declarations about its "environmental stewardship", media houses seemed incapable of doing anything but happily give it a platform from which to do so.

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While reworking a press release is sometimes vital in enabling the public to engage with what an organisation might consider newsworthy, readers expect serious news outlets to avoid churnalism.

This is especially so when a powerful lobby group uses a press release to mislead the public.

Maybe instead of reproducing a large part of the press release's content verbatim (and in the case of Lovin Malta and Malta Daily even its Q and A format), news outlets could have tempered the conceited tone used by the tuna industry in making some of its outlandish statements by weaving in a more critical stance. In this way, it would have been called out for its posturing on the issues of sustainable fishing and the safeguarding of Malta's marine environment.