

The Ramblers' Association of Malta

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ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING ADMINISTRATIVE REPORT FEBRUARY 19th 2011

During the last administrative year our membership stood at about 400 of whom nearly 100 were newly enrolled. Since last February's Annual General Meeting the committee met 11 times, with a more than satisfactory attendance by the members, and dealt with as many issues as we could hope to cope with.

As in past years our activities were many and varied and I find it difficult to divide them into primary and secondary ones. But pride of place will have to go the rally, preceded by a forum at the Hotel Phoenicia, held in Valletta last March by five environmental NGOs. The theme was "Give Law a Chance" to highlight the lack of law enforcement, by both MEPA and Government, to protect the environment generally, with consequent deterioration to the quality of life of the Maltese. Of that rally we were major promoters and it was no small satisfaction seeing the turnout despite the heavy rainfall.

1. This being a Ramblers' Association I will start with the **Walks**. This last year Romano organised no less than 36 walks, all very well attended, some of which attracted as many as 85 participants. It therefore behoves me to thank also our generous Walk Leaders: Antonia, Bertus, Felix, Godwin, Gunter, Marie Louise, Mario, Michael, Rita, Simon and Tess Hoey (strictly in alphabetical order). Four committee members also led some of the walks: Alex, Sam, myself and, of course, Romano himself.

Romano also organised walks requested by the Hotel Phoenicia and the Inspire Foundation.

To these we have to add the walks during the Gozo Weekend where Antonia did her share of leading, and we also had Romano and Simon, and non-members John Mizzi, Victor Galea and Mario Saliba during past Gozo Weekends (not necessarily the last one).

We had hoped to recruit yet more Walk Leaders with the competition we announced for members. I will not hide my disappointment at the fact that despite the prize offered there were no entries at all.

2. Then we had our **two overseas ventures**, one in the Cinque Terre (Liguria) in March and the other in Foligno (Umbria) in October. In the latter one Romano and Sam also represented our association in the European Ramblers' Association (ERA) Annual General Meeting.

3. Five other walks were organized by the **Student Ramblers** whom we have nurtured and who are now seeing an increased number of participants with every new walk. This branch has now changed its name to Youth Ramblers to include several non-students who would rather walk with the under-30s.

4. Yet more walks are being organised in our **Schools Project**. This scholastic year we are visiting six Primary Schools, giving a one-hour talk with a power-point presentation leaving a copy of the CD in every school. Subsequently we take a group of pupils from each school on a countryside ramble. We are carrying out this project in conjunction with Kunsill Malti għall-iSport and with the help of two B.Ed. students, Ms Marica Pisani and Ms Stephanie Wilkinson, supervised by Prof. Paul Pace.

5. Perhaps even more demanding than the above activities were the various **Press Releases** we issued, most of which conjointly with friendly environmental NGOs. It is with great satisfaction that we note the great cooperation we have found in this regard especially from Flimkien għal Ambjent Ahjar (FAA) and Friends of the Earth (FoE, Malta); and this in the face of attempts by Mepa and others to divide us eNGOs.

The topics we dealt with include: the Dwejra Boathouses, the issue of the permit to 'Il-Bukkett' on Qala ridge, the Hondoq ir-Rummien Project, the Mepa hearing on the Hondoq Project, the Re-opening of the Spring-hunting season, The Piano Project, The Health Hazards of the Extension to the Power Station, Air quality, the Armier Squatters, the Mosta Stables (read 'Bungalows'), Parliament's Public Accounts Committee regarding the extension of the Delimara Power station, safeguards from toxic emissions and disposal of toxic waste; development in the Wied tal-Marga in Qala, on illegal dumping in Malta and Gozo, the Dwejra filming debacle, etc..

Very important to us were the letters we wrote to Dr. David Lowe, Head of the Secretariat of the Petitions Committee and later to the EU Commissioner Potochkin regarding the Rationalization exercise and another letter to Mme Marie Claude Blin and Mr Peter Koller of the EU Infringements Office on various cases we have been complaining about in vain with government ministries.

We have been present in the press not just with the contributions I have just listed. We also had to deal with a number of letters to the Press which concerned us directly. These included a hostile one by Peter Gingell, Mepa's Public Relations Officer, and one on Il-Mument with an unprovoked and unjust attack on us. We reacted to an article by architect Robert Musumeci on Malta Today, to one by Dr A Deidun on The Sunday Times, to another one on The Independent on Sunday reporting incorrectly our stand on the Ta' Cenc extension project, and quite recently to an article by the Din l-Art Helwa president on the Times. And there were others; the topic was different in each case so I will not bother you with the details; the list I gave is just meant to give you an idea of the number of issues and the kind of persons we had to deal with.

Last year we asked all local **newspapers** to allot us a space to report on environmental matters; only three accepted our offer: the first one was 'Illum' which has been publishing our monthly article since May, and the other two were 'l-Orizzont' and

‘The Independent on Sunday’. Taking care of these three papers are myself, Alex and Michiel respectively.

We also have a fortnightly 30 minute slot in Lilian Maistre’s programme ‘**Familja Wahda**’ on Radju Malta in which Alex, Sam and myself take part. Earlier this month we had an offer by the Kummissjoni Ambjent tal-Arcidjocesi ta’ Malta which we had to miss because Alex was abroad, I was still unwell and the other members were unavailable. And only last week arrangements were made for Lino Bugeja to begin making a monthly contribution to the online paper IL-GENSillum.

Unfortunately we have received only one offer to appear on television but it was a special one: one hour on Favourite Channel, a face to face between Alex and Austin Walker, Mepa chairperson

6. As in previous years we have lodged various **objections, complaints, and requests for investigations with the MEPA.** These include: the granting of a permit for a winery at-Tas-Salib and for a development at Bingemma (both completely vindicated by the MEPA Auditor’s reports) which we are not allowing to go unchallenged); on the extension of a building in Triq l-Gharreqin, Mdina (Auditor’s report still not received) – on development at Ras il-Wied, near Wied Qannotta, against a request to sanction the building of an illegal floor at Ta’ Baldu, on developments in Hal Ghaxaq (Bur ta’ Ras il-Wied) and at Maghtab; on drystone walls which do not follow traditional building methods or are higher than allowed by law; about a room that was being rebuilt near the Madalena chapel at Dingli (we were told it is was under an Enforcement Order and later that a request for sanctioning had been made).

7. Our year planner was kept well-stacked with appointments for **meetings:** with Parliamentary Secretary Dr Mario de Marco on the drawing up of a National Environment Policy, with Parliamentary Secretary Dr Jason Azzopardi on various issues we have been discussing with practically no results at all, with officials from the Lands Department practically with similar outcomes, monthly meetings with MEPA officials on the MEPA reform, with the MEPA Auditor Mr Joseph Falzon, with the Malta Tourism Authority, with the owner of the Ta’ Cenc hotel and his architect, on the Hondoq ir-Rummien project, just to mention the more important ones.

In October together with other six eNGOs we participated in a meeting with Mme Marie Claude Blin and Mr Peter Koller of the EU mentioned earlier on. In this meeting we had the role of drawing up the minutes by coordinating with all the NGOs taking part.

8. We naturally have to be present for the sittings of our ongoing two **court cases:** one against the Mepa on the granting of the permit for the development in Bahrija by ex PN president Dr Victor Scerri and the other against the Government on the 2006 Rationalisation exercise. Joining us in the latter suit are FAA and FoE.

9. Last December we nominated a sub-committee to take care of our **social events.** We are grateful to Marie Louise Muscat Azzopardi and Hendrik Kalka who gracefully accepted and have been lending a hand to Alex in the organisation of the tour to the Loire

Valley. They will also soon be working on the Annual Summer Dinner. But we are looking for another volunteer to join the team. Will someone please come forward?

I will end by thanking all those who have lent a hand during this year, amongst whom are our auditors Hendrik Kalka and Joe Scicluna who have done a really meticulous and professional exercise; Lino Bugeja who not only steps in when asked to but also volunteers for other work and still furnishes us with novel ideas; to all those who write letters or online comments to the press in favour of eNGOs, to those who just join us for our walks and Annual Dinners, and to those who pay their membership fee just because they believe in our cause.

Our Association's thanks go to the management of this prestigious hotel which has always been very generous in meeting our requests to use this hall for our meetings; and granting this for free.

Finally our thanks go to you for the encouragement you give us by being present here today.

Joe Agius (Hon. Secretary)
19th February 2011