

The Ramblers' Association of Malta

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Newsletter No. 17 - June 2010

This is the first Newsletter I am sending as the new secretary of the Association, so I hope you will forgive me if I do not follow the usual format very closely.

ANNUAL SUMMER DINNER: We are holding this annual event at the
VICTORIA HOTEL
in Borg Olivier Street, Sliema
on Friday 23rd July at 8.00.

A varied menu has been prepared for our members that includes a welcome drink to start off the evening and a coffee before we leave. A glass of wine or a soft drink is thrown in as well; and parking is free at the Hotel's underground car park. The appetising menu, at €22-00 per head, is attached. We expect to see most of you and that for this occasion, our main social get-together of the year, you will try to bring along friends. Children are welcome at half price for those under 13 years of age. Please book early in order to make a success of the event just like in previous years. A small gift will be handed out to all participants of this event. To boost our resources a raffle will be held on the evening for which many attractive prizes will be on offer.

Kindly fill in the attached form and send it together with your payment at your earliest convenience.

NEW MEMBERS: I will begin with the good news: so far this year our Association has enrolled 85 new members. It might come as a surprise to most of you that only some 25% of our members do actually join our walks, the rest are supporting members who believe in our cause and want to help us morally and financially. Our strength in furthering our aims rests on two mainstays: the number of members and our finances. We need the backing of members, if we wish to lay any claim to speaking in the name of civil society. As for legal advise and court expenses we still have not found any millionaire to foot the bill for us.

WALKS: These are by far the most popular of our activities. After 5 years they continue to attract new faces of young and less young members. Age difference does not seem to matter at all during the walks; as a matter of fact the older members are glad to share their acquired knowledge with the new ones; and socialising is indeed an important aspect of this activity. You will have noticed that this Spring, Romano, helped by our generous walk leaders, prepared 12 walks of very varied interest. They were all well attended, with an average participation of about 60 members. Obviously the harder and longer walks, attracted fewer, though not necessarily the younger, participants.

Summer walks? Well, we have already had four so far; and, yes, we will probably have some ad hoc walks in July. Not in August and September though; normally these are months which ask for a break. Still, watch out for our short-notice e-mails.

In the last two months our branch for Student Ramblers (mostly from University) organised two walks: one to Delimara, Peter's Pool area, and another to the Ta' Baldu, Simblija, Wied Liemu area.

The former was very well attended and we also had foreign participants; the number proved helpful when four individuals tried to bar our path over the Hofra z-Zghira. The most remarkable thing about these two walks was that very, very few of the participants had ever been to these places before.

OVERSEAS TOURS: A very popular activity in our yearly calendar for the last three years has been our venture abroad. Last March thirty members spent a fantastic week walking in the Ligurian highlands in the company of the Italian Rambling group that had visited Malta the year before. Our Italian friends organized a full programme of walks around the famous Cinque Terre region which all enjoyed. It is our intention to put on another trip abroad in October on the occasion of the European Ramblers' Association general conference which will be held in Foligno. Details later.

PRESS RELEASES: These last three months we have issued a number of these, most of them in collaboration with other fellow NGOs among which BirdLife, Flimkien ghal Ambjent Ahjar, Friends of the Earth (order strictly alphabetical). We have expressed our views on various issues: the Mepa decision on the Dwejra Boathouses, the issue of a 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.

THE RAMBLERS' CORNER: The Maltese papers ILLUM and L-ORIZZONT, as well as THE MALTA INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY were the only three papers that accepted our request for a monthly space to write on environmental issues and activities. Our first article appeared in Illum on Sunday, 30th May and our second on the 27th June. Our first features in L-Orizzont appeared on the 26th June and will be appearing every last Saturday of the month. The Malta Independent on Sunday has been contacted only recently and is still to publish our first article.

AN APPEAL: We do appreciate the support you give us with your emails and by word of mouth. Yet we appeal to all of you to make your voices heard with more active participation in the press: by sending in letters on environmental issues and adding comments to the online editions and blogs. You cannot imagine the effectiveness of such interventions on your part. We also appreciate being informed whenever you make a formal objection or complaint with Mepa or else when you inform us of any issue you would like us to take up ourselves with Mepa. We cannot promise much, given our very limited resources, but we will definitely try to take up what we can manage.

MEPA MATTERS: Some three months ago we were promised by Mepa that we had been given the privilege of downloading from their site, free of charge, a number of reports. We obtained the necessary e-id card and then made several attempts to download reports. No luck. We inquired to see if we were doing anything wrong; apparently we were not, but still no luck and no new instructions were given. We tried phoning Mr Peter Gingell, Mepa Public Relations Officer, several times but the man is always, inevitably, unavailable. Our President even brought the issue up with Mepa CEO Mr Walker, but apparently the persons the CEO asked to take care of the matter did not do so. These are everyday hassles for the committee members. For the reports we obtained these last 3 months we had to drag ourselves to the Mepa Offices, and pay for them. Not to

mention the number of reports we tried to order on the internet and got only the “file damaged” reply. And there are MANY damaged files at Mepa; you’d better believe it.

We have also made objections or complaints on developments in Hal Ghaxaq (Bur ta’ Ras il-Wied) and at Maghtab. Last month we asked the Mepa Audit office to investigate the granting of a permit to the winery at-Tas-Salib. As we write, the investigation has not been finalised. We are also waiting for the Mepa Auditor to grant us an appointment.

COURT CASES: The saga of our two cases, one against the Government and Mepa over the Rationalisation exercise (in this suit we are joined by Flimkien Ghal Ambjent Ahjar and by Friends of the Earth) and one against Mepa and Dr Victor Scerri over the construction of the latter’s dwelling in Bahrija Valley. You will have read that the European Parliament and the European Commission have rejected the protest on Rationalisation made by Alternattiva Demokratika. The EP and the EC said that Government acted correctly; but we are convinced otherwise and our court action goes ahead. The Bahrija case is still in the initial stages so far because the other part is contesting our right to file this case, namely on grounds of the Association’s juridical interest and statutory power as an association.

MEETINGS: We had a cordial, though not too happy a meeting with high officials of the Land Department in which we were informed:

a) that the contract recently discovered by the lands denied us access to Ta’ Baldu Grotto. We are not thoroughly convinced of this and, besides, we hold that there are other reasons why access should be allowed. Lest any of you think we have been acting rashly, we hasten to add that in 2006 the Dingli Local Council received a letter from the Lands Department saying that the path to the grotto was government property. In December 2009 another letter from the same Department to the same Council said that the path was the property of the new owners.

b) that in the last meeting these high officials had with the owners of Fomm ir-Rih they could not reach any agreement on the laying out of a safe pathway to the beach which the public has a right to by virtue of a 1983 contract.

c) On Wednesday 26th May president Alex Vella appeared in an hour’s discussion with the MEPA CEO Austin Walker on Favourite Channel.

d) Last month we asked for a meeting with Dr Jason Azzopardi, Parliamentary Secretary, and are still waiting for a reply.

e) Three committee members attended the hearing on the EIS for the Hondoq ir-Rummien project. The hearing was held at the Qala Primary School, Gozo.

f) Four committee members and four members of RAM went to Ta’ Cenc Hotel for a briefing on the new Ta’ Cenc project given by architect Martin Xuereb and hotel owner Victor Borg.

PROJECT WITH EKOSKOLA AND KMS:

We shall be repeating last year’s activity with a few schools: giving them a talk on the environ-ment and then taking a group out for a formative, informative and enjoyable country walk. Next year we will be doing this in collaboration with the Kunsill Malti ghall-Ispirts, as last year, and we are very happy to announce that Ekoskola, thanks to Prof. Paul Pace (its chairman) interest, will be joining the venture.

LIBRARY ACQUISITIONS: The committee has enriched its library with new acquisitions. These books and pamphlets are not meant just for the enrichment of the committee members; all members are invited to borrow our books, especially those who wish or would like to give the Association a hand by acting as Walk Leaders. Do you feel not quite up to it? After the first time it is a piece of cake.

OUR WEBSITE: Coopted junior member of our committee Ingram Bondin (Asst Secretary), something of a computer whizz-kid, has been fundamental in taking over the management of the site after our great benefactor J.C. Sullivan could not continue the job and our contract with the old server expired. Ingram was up to the task and is continually working at it, in his spare time, because he is now reading for his M.Sc., in IT of course.

SOME BAD NEWS: It may not be a good ending to this newsletter, but I have chosen this spot as a parting shot because usually it is the item best remembered. We began by writing about the new members, now we talk about those who have failed to renew their membership, even despite our reminders. Not many, it's true; but even a few is a disappointment for us. We would really like our members to be proud of their contribution to our cause. And so we would be very interested to know the reason for not renewing. Have we disappointed you? In what way? Are you no longer fit enough for our walks? But then, do you no longer believe in our cause? Do you consider our membership fee too high? How would you like us to improve?

CONCLUSION: Well, you did not really believe I would leave you with a piece of bad news, did you? Here's the good news: those who have not renewed or who are not yet members of RAM can renew or enroll by paying next year's membership fee (€10) together with one euro for every month left of 2010. So, if you pay now it is only €6 euro for July – December 2010 and €10 for 2011 = €16 Good enough news I should think.

I sign off wishing all of you and your families a very happy cool summer and happy early, or late, rambling.

Joe Agius
Hon. Secretary