

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS
TO THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE RAMBLERS' ASSOCIATION OF MALTA
held on Saturday 19 February 2011

2010 was a very important year in the development of the Association because it experienced the most drastic change of the people at the helm since its foundation five years ago. In truth change is inevitable but personally speaking I was wary to take the position of President of the Association following the withdrawal of the charismatic Lino, knowing full well that my ability and dedication are appreciably short of the attributes that made Lino the kind of charismatic leader that all admired.

Fortunately however I was supported by some of the old guard who safeguarded continuity and consistency in upholding the aims and objectives of our movement with the same determination of before. I was also encouraged by the new blood that has shown dedication and enthusiasm in varying degrees. I can vouch that Joe Agius and Romano managed to keep the show going through their yesteryear experience in committee affairs, while Sam Grech proved as adequate to master all the duties thrown his way with attention and efficiency. The new faces in the committee, starting with our new Treasurer Mark, and members Josette, Michiel, Ingram and Claire, have put forward expertise in their sphere of knowledge that is slowly starting to show. I am positive that with more confidence and experience this team can lead the Association to new heights.

While I want to start by expressing my appreciation for the collaboration of all my fellow committee members, I urge them on to show more of the same love and dedication that our founder members have set by example. Like them may we be inspired by the ideal that not all is lost of the natural beauty and cultural wealth of our countryside. In spite of our limited resources may no effort be spared to defend and safeguard what remains. We owe it to our forefathers as well as to our heirs.

Change did not only occur from within but it also came from outside. And it was not accidental. Although only six years young our Association can safely take credit that it was instrumental in bringing about what was the positive aspect of that change. I am referring here to the Mepa Reform that was finally achieved with much anguish. Without the pressure put up against the inconsistencies and blunders of the Planning Authority, without the protests and manifestations organised against the irrational decisions taken there, without the calls for investigations by the Mepa Audit Office that always vindicated our claims of arbitrary rulings, dubious interpretations and blatant irregularities by different Mepa boards or officers, the Mepa would never have been reformed. Of course we were with other NGOs, but our share was decisive.

Not that the RAM considers the Reform as an end. Far from it. We are just hoping that it will prove to be a useful means to an end. Certainly the recent decisions taken by the Mepa board have come a long way already along the road of reason. We are finally seeing common-sense prevail at the point where it counts.

However there is still a lot going on irregularly that does not see the light of day because it is detrimentally concluded without making it to the Mepa board. What with cases where case-officers deliberately mislead the deciding board either by omission or commission, like the Winery at Tas-Salib? What with malicious manipulations of the Local Plans years ahead of a pre-schemed plan, like the Scerri il-bukkett development? Who can tell how many of these have escaped the amateur scrutiny of the NGO part-timers. And what with decisions led by political exigencies, like the 2006 Rationalisation Scheme?

The possibilities to go round the law are endless. And we can easily be rendered helpless. We acknowledge this and it is what makes our efforts seemingly worthless. The situation is not dissimilar to that of the Mepa Auditor. His reports expose the wrongdoing but that is where they stop. The Chairman of the Authority is always conspicuous by his failure to pay heed to these reports.

So we looked elsewhere for solutions, making good use of the dutiful work of the Mepa Auditor.

Following the recent film-shooting debacle by Mepa at the Dwejra Natura 2000 site, we decided to prepare and send a presentation to the EU Environment Directorate regarding other Natura 2000 sites and protected areas in ODZ that were abused by the local Authorities. We substantiated with five Auditor reports which all condemned the applications granted. These concerned the Natura 2000 sites at Bahrija and at Ta' Baldu, the protected sites at Tas-Salib, Bingemma, and the Mosta Agricultural land. We also submitted a report of the situation prevailing at the other Natura 2000 site of Fomm ir-Rih.

Today I am pleased to report that following an assessment of our letter concerning the alleged abusive treatment of Natura 2000 sites in Malta the said Directorate has registered our letter as a formal complaint in the Commission's CHAP database, and assigned a reference number to it – CHAP(2011)00267. We are informed that further information has already been requested from the Maltese authorities in order to clarify the factual and legal situation in relation to the issues raised in our complaint.

This is very much in line with our committed policy to follow matters to the end. The Fomm ir-Rih issue is being chased after with the PS Dr Jason Azzopardi, and far from forgotten. And you all know that we have taken Mepa to court over the Bahrija valley development. For the sake of brevity we will not mention the other issues currently being followed with the authorities concerned. Nobody is going to blame the RAM executive for not trying its best to protect the Maltese natural and cultural heritage.

Our rambler members can ramble to their heart's delight. Our intent is to protect and preserve the cultural heritage in its natural ambience as the ultimate destination of the God-given right to ramble.

Alex Vella 18 Feb 2011