

# **The Ramblers' Association of Malta**

## **ADMINISTRATIVE REPORT**

**1st February 2008 TO 6th February 2009**

The new committee elected last year included two new members: Mr Joe Agius who took over the duties of Public Relations and Mrs Rita Buhagiar, who inherited finances from Mr Andre Catania. The committee chose Dr Louis Vella to assume the position of Vice Chairman and Mr Joe Bugeja was co-opted back into the committee. Otherwise the positions remained unchanged from those pertaining for the first two years in the life of RAM.

There were eleven committee meetings since the last Annual General Meeting of the Association held at the Din L-Art Helwa premises on the 31<sup>st</sup> January 2008. Save for one occasion all decisions taken were by general consensus of the committee members. Meetings were not held during the summer months of July and August. Attendance was very satisfactory with the exception of two members who declared outright that they were pressed for time and would do their best to attend. However their lack of attendance and contribution was direly felt and the committee decided to co-opt new blood. The co-opted members who attended the January 2009 meeting were Marie Louise Muscat Azzopardi and Jane Farrugia. Two other members who attended the February meeting are Marianne Bugeja and Sandro Bugeja. It is hoped that the administrative workload which fell mostly on the secretariat will be shared more equally now especially that a permanent office has been acquired and is being adequately furnished and serviced.

As I hinted just now RAM possesses adequate premises at the National Swimming Pool Complex in Tal-Qroqq, which frankly speaking, have not been utilized yet except for holding our last two committee meetings. It was planned to hold the present meeting there but we were informed at the last minute that the conference hall was not within the same complex that housed our premises and parking was difficult. We thank the executive of The Phoenicia Hotel for letting us use this central place, at short notice, to hold our AGM for this year, as well as for hosting our committee meetings prior to the acquisition of the premises at Tal-Qroqq.

A big thank you goes to those volunteers who heard our call to do up the new office. Some ten members turned up on the appointed dates and efficiently carried out the maintenance and cleansing that was required. Special mention also to member Marcel Pisani for his valuable contribution in maintaining our Xerox photocopier in good order and helping directly in printing our Newsletters and Walks' Programmes.

New members continued to pour in throughout 2008 but regrettably quite a number of paid up members did not renew, either through negligence or willingly. Fortunately this drop-out was nowhere as marked as the previous year. Although reminders sent out were always effective with members renewing every time, it was sad to note that some did not pay up but attended our activities nonetheless. It has been decided to take more strict control of the situation this year. Presentation of the membership card has been requested already on some of our walks. In fact some members who failed to pay for 2008 have now remedied for 2009. We will exhort the

walk leaders themselves to request the presentation of cards at the start of walks in the absence of committee members.

Also gaining in popularity are the walks that are organised by the Association. With good reason too, as the programmes of walks are progressively getting better, even with the very limited factor of land that is getting smaller by the day as more ODZ gives way to development of every sort. The present programme for the first quarter of 2009 has recently been augmented from 10 to 13 walks with novel initiatives to boot. Those already held were well attended and very satisfactorily received, even the weekday walks led by Mr Gunter Jacobs who this time last year offered his services as walks leader. Since then he has led more the fifteen walks and become our most prolific leader. I take the opportunity to thank Gunter on behalf of all ramblers for his enthusiasm and his diligent preparation to make the walks most interesting and informative. Appreciation is shown by the good attendance that he generates for the walks, the most recent ones of which gathered around 80 ramblers.

At this point may I remark that the shorter walks organised to satisfy demand by some older ramblers and slow walkers were not well attended by the members who asked for them, and it was the usual walkers who provided the numbers to carry them out. We will include more on our next programme and will mark these clearly in order that there is no excuse next time.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> RAM Gozo weekend went well once more last February, and in May the visit to Comino filled the ferry to capacity. It is intended to repeat the walk on Comino this year too, and the 4<sup>th</sup> RAM Gozo Weekend at the end of this month is fully subscribed, indeed overbooked, and promising to keep up the happy rhythm.

I quote from my report of last year: “RAM calls on the Prime Minister to pass from words to action by bringing legality and respect to civil rights in what remains of Malta’s open spaces, and to ensure their preservation..... The task facing the incoming executive is to optimise the force that RAM has grown to be for getting down to the raw basics of removing barriers, institutional and those on the ground.”

I am happy to say that our efforts are bearing the first desired results although these are preliminary. You may probably have read our last Press Release last month which in fact attributed credit where it was due, in the laps of Dr Jason Azzopardi and Dr Chris Said, respectively PS for Land Management and Revenue and for Local Councils, and the Ministry of Rural Affairs. Meetings had been held with Dr Jason and Dr Chris and the response was immediate and quite a relief. At last we started seeing direct action being taken to remedy matters in the countryside – tons of vehicle carcasses, long abandoned in the countryside, were removed, carted away and sensibly disposed of to fund the exercise. The Fomm ir-Rih case was lodged in court albeit without much headway so far. Not to be outdone, the Ministry of Rural Affairs, who also carried MEPA and the Environment during the previous administration, promptly resorted to direct action by lowering some rubble walls to their proper height.

In our recent Press Release we expressed satisfaction at the “change in attitude” for the reason that Direct Action was resorted to, not just declared. When MEPA was under the George Pullicino Ministry we begged that MEPA use its powers of Direct Action to remove obstacles and to fine abusers. Outrageous excuses were given as to why Direct Action could not be resorted to during meetings with MEPA directors and executives. We used to come out of such meetings frustrated and angered by the passive and negative stand, and this is why we acclaimed the “change in attitude.”

You will be amused to learn that MEPA felt grieved by our Press Release and fastidiously wrote to RAM thus:

I noted with interest your latest media release whereby you praise and applaud the efforts of certain government ministries for the bold work they are putting in, through the various direct action operations that are being carried out in the countryside across the Island. For the record I would like to bring to your attention that most, if not all the initiatives, that are mentioned including the latest publicized direct action operation in Selmun, were and are being led and carried out by MEPA. It is only MEPA, that has the legal right and power to demolish or confiscate illegalities on government land or third party property.

While we appreciate all the efforts your organisation contributes towards the awareness of our countryside MEPA will keep dedicating its resources and its commitment to continue with its efforts to ensure that the national countryside will one day be freed from all illegal development while safeguarding the country from the loss of biodiversity.

Thank you and regards  
Peter Gingell.

To which we all cry out loud: ABOUT TIME TOO THAT MEPA USES ITS POWERS TO ACTION LEGALITY IN THE COUNTRYSIDE. ABUSE TAKES OTHER FORMS THAT REQUIRE MEPA TO RESORT TO DIRECT ACTION, LIKE OBSTACLES TO FREE ACCESS AND ILLEGAL CONSTRUCTION.

All of this is far from enough. So many other eyesores and barriers that are fastidious to bona fide ramblers in the countryside need to be removed. We will continue to support these initiatives in order to render the respect that is due to Mother Nature for the beauty it has bestowed upon this ungrateful nation.

Again there has been a lot of other hidden work done, most in collaboration with the other environmental NGOs, on the various issues concerning our natural and cultural endowment. The salient ones have already been referred to and remembered by most of you. Our protest at Fomm ir-Rih prompted the PS Dr Jason Azzopardi to seek us out and we briefed him on the state of affairs there which was typical of all Maltese countryside. With other NGOs a list of proposals regarding the Reform of MEPA was presented to the PM in November. Our own list of proposals was handed to Dr Chris Said regarding the Reform of Local Councils, some of which we happily note have already been applied. There is no time to list the numerous other official meetings and discussions that took place with various ministries, authorities and departments.

The committee will continue its efforts to bring RAM's mission to fruition. We have kept our mission in clear focus during the past year, and have not diverted as much as the previous year to meet other challenges. We learned that it is counterproductive to take up more issues than can be managed. However virtuous it is to tackle crimes against our urban, rural and cultural heritage we must make sure that the issue of free access in the countryside never plays second fiddle.

Like last year I conclude by thanking all members of the executive team for their positive working attitude. Gratitude is due to the new co-opted members who accepted our call for assistance. Thanks also to the hundreds of ramblers who have given us their support and who join the walks. Their presence makes every walk a pleasant encounter and experience. It is their encouragement that drives me and my colleagues to volunteer our time and effort to this labour of love in spite of its frustrating nature.

Thank You.  
Alex Vella  
Hon Secretary  
06.02.09