

## **Environment Report – RAM 2008**

Building on the rambling season of 2007, this past year the Ramblers Association has further established itself as an active non-governmental voluntary organisation on the environmental front.

RAM has spoken out on issues of encroaching development in the countryside, the stamping ground of this Association. Building permits outside the development zone, blots on the visual landscape and misguided designs for roads where no road should go, have all been on the agenda this past twelve months.

At times in league with other NGOs, and at times individually, Ramblers has not let the environmental challenges of the year go by without comment, plea or good counsel. The Rambler year started with an objection to the eyesore framework of a structure on the ridge at Dwejra in Gozo, a permit which had already been refused by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority several times until overturned.

This was followed in April by an objection filed against towering development at Mistra Ridge which, while not so much an expansion of existing footprint, will bring visual pollution to the skyline in this area of high scenic beauty.

Another shock we received during the year was the news of proposed villas... an extension to the Mellieha Bay Hotel building development, in an area designated by the environment section within MEPA as ecologically sensitive. Ramblers duly filed an objection.

In June Ramblers expressed our strong objection to pre-election gimmickry of government's quiet consent to sanction illegal occupation of public land on the coast at Armier which was taken up by illegal "boathouses" - as they are called.

In the heat of July the Association did not hesitate to hold a protest walk at Fomm ir-Rih over irreversible damage being done to this site blessed, but only on paper, with Natura 2000 protected status.

In this area a military road to the pebble beach (public property) was closed at first to vehicles - then even the approach on foot was illegally denied. Reinstating this constitutional right of way to the public is an ongoing battle. It has been a landmark campaign for RAM over the past year.

Our Honorary President produced an extensive White Paper highlighting the placing of Malta at the bottom of the EU environment league. In this document it is noted that "The rural landscape is gradually disappearing with illegal structures mushrooming all over the Maltese islands from Delimara to Ras il-Wardija in Gozo."

In August, Ramblers joined other bona fide environment organisations, namely Nature Trust, Din L'Art Helwa, BirdLife, Light Pollution Awareness Group, Friends of the Earth Malta, Gaia Foundation and Flimkien għall Ambjent Ahjar in requesting that MEPA place updates to development proposals for Ta Cenc online in keeping with the minimum requirement of public consultation procedures.

September saw concern expressed by the Ramblers Association toward the changes at Hagar Qim while it is acknowledged that some – but by no means all - of these changes may be necessary to prolong the heritage of the prehistoric stones.

A plea was also made to incorporate historical military features present on the Smart City site into the overall design. On a wider front RAM expressed its worry over the extent of impact such a massive development would have on energy requirements – the association's nod to Climate Change which is increasingly becoming an over-arching issue where environment is concerned.

Ramblers did find it in its heart to comment positively when a MEPA decision to uphold public access at St Thomas Bay hit the news although from feedback we had on this there is always much more going on behind the scenes than meets the eye. We realise that the good efforts of some conscientious individuals in the environmental section inside MEPA are often quashed at board level. These mute elements still deserve our support and encouragement to fight a system which still appears to be smeared with corruption in one form or another.

RAM also sent its comments on Local Council reform at this point.

In November RAM united with the Nature Group in opposition to a possible future decision which would destroy the landscape at Ghadira. One of the alternatives being proposed here would degrade the ridge behind Danish Village. Of course the route to Cirkewwa is a major artery and RAM understands the importance of good roads – but please: no more roads ploughing through the little environment we have left.

In the new year, RAM issued its first media release for 2009 in which praise was showered on those responsible for cleaning up the countryside and pulling down rubble walls over the legal height. More continuous and extended action is required in this area especially in relation to illegal scrapyards springing up all over the countryside.

Our comments were also sent to MEPA on a quarry extension at Santa Katerina which is set to eat into more pristine agricultural fields when recycling of stone for building has long been advised.

So it has been an active year. We expect the path ahead to be no less interesting as the Ramblers Association forges ahead to do what it can in defense of the urban and rural surroundings on which the leisure sport of rambling depends.