

Dwejra – A Coastal Nature Park

Introduction

Dwejra is an important and very popular site in the Maltese Islands found on the North West coast of the island of Gozo. The site is famous for its natural beauty and Landscape Value.

The same popularity of this site has been in a way the reason for its deterioration resulting from human activity. Such activities include quarrying; since the only good stone for building in Gozo is found around Dwejra, tourism; where about 750,000 tourists visit the site every year with another 100,000 of locals who come to the site for enjoyment and relaxation and diving; making another 60,000 visitors per year as Dwejra is considered the third most popular site in the Mediterranean. Apart from this Dwejra has seen many illegal activities such as dumping, parking on fossil remains, degradation of the people beach by the boat ride operators and diving clubs, introduction of alien species like the toad which started to compete with the local frog and alien plants. All such activities have contributed to irreparable damage.

Over the years the local authorities have acknowledged the importance of this site through various policies covering this area. One such example is the coastal cliffs rising all along the entire western coast of Gozo. However despite all this Dwejra has not had any specific regulations to cover its status as a Natura 2000 site which is a site considered of European community importance. Dwejra has also been a candidate for a UNESCO world heritage site for various years and the same damaging activities have kept it out from making the UNESCO site status.

The situation before the project

Dwejra was open to the public without any control or management of visitors. Thousands of tourists arrived in coaches. Tourists, were brought over to enjoy the site by tour operators, and just left on site for one hour without finding any explanation on the ecological importance of the site. There was no sort of management / supervision. On the other hand, locals and stakeholders operating on the site simply parked their cars on fossil beds, endemic plants and constructed jetties without permits. This resulted in heavy trampling over the fossil beds and the flora and fauna of the site. The habitual picking of what is often rare flora found on site further exacerbated the negative effects.

Many of the visitors also used to climb on top of the 'Azure Window' known by the locals as *It-Tieqa* (The window). This is a geological formation created by wind and

Wave erosion where a part of land still holds on a stake rising from the sea. Human activities were causing an accelerated erosion of the 'structure'. Drastic action was essential to save this loved feature by the locals.

With no surveillance in force, illegal dumping of waste was also on the increase. A few years ago the national environment agency had to take action to stop illegal dumping slowly

finding its way from the cliffs down to the Inland Sea area. Quarries have also been spilling rubble into the valley bed.

The authorities are aware of such problems and had promised to take remedial action. However, it has to be a holistic approach to achieve long term results.

Furthermore, the concept of Marine protected areas is still something relatively new for the Maltese islands. Here, once again, human activity and erosion were the main issues, together with damage to the marine ecology and the fossil beds.

The quarries found near the site, some of which were operating outside the permit limits, emitted fine particles generated by their activities. These particles were often the cause of ecological harm to the area. These quarries were and still are a stark eyesore, and in general have had a very negative effect on the value of the area.

Proper site management, law enforcement, visitors flow management and environmental education were essential and it was these issues that triggered the LIFE project.

The LIFE Project

Way back in April 2002 when Nature Trust was one of the partners involved in the MEPA project for limited restoration works on the area through the EIPP (Environmental Initiatives Private Partnership), the NTM council decided to take this project further and try to have a full conservation plan. Of course the main problem was financial resources. It was for this reason that Nature Trust (Malta) decided to dedicate all its efforts and resources into making a good proposal to the European Union for consideration under the LIFE Third Countries. Months of hard work and long hours of compilation of a proposal followed, till in October 2002, the proposal was submitted to the EU LIFE. In May 2003, The LIFE evaluation team announced that the Dwejra project was one of the accepted projects

The Dwejra Life Project started in April 2004. The main aims of the project were; to reverse the degradation process, conserve the site for the benefit of the environment, provide a better tourist product and aid the economy of the local community, create environmental awareness among visitors and locals and most important get effective legislation in force. Apart from this NTM aimed at having a sustainability plan to take the project beyond the three year period of the project.

The main partners in the Life project were Nature Trust (Malta) as the beneficiary, together with MEPA as the national Environment and Planning Agency and WWF Italy as an experienced partner in natura 2000 site management and Life project, as the main partners. Two major stakeholder were also involved from the very start – these being the Ministry for Gozo and the San Lawrenz Local Council as the Council under which Dwejra was part of

In order to ensure that all stakeholders felt part of the project and in order to address the main conflicts of the stakeholders between themselves, continuous meetings and talks were held with all stakeholders throughout the entire project. The stakeholders included the Ministry for Gozo and San Lawrenz Local Council, the Tourism Authorities of Gozo and Malta, the Diving associations, the boat people, the fishermen, Din L-Art Helwa, the tour operators, the

boat house people, the church other nearby council. This helped create awareness for all the stakeholders utilising the site on the need and importance to conserve such a site that such management will result in long term economic benefits for all.

The main objectives of the project were to:

- Develop a management plan of the area.
- Restore of the area which is considered to be of significant ecological, geological and historical importance
- Establish a framework for environmental management enabling integration between governmental agencies, institutions, local communities and stakeholders
- Strengthen the current Administrative and law enforcement capacities plus providing additional training resources.
- Create environmental education and eco tourism
- Use the project as an example to other local and Mediterranean future projects
- Create a coastal nature reserve in line with objectives of Coastal Zone Management Subject Plan as well as the Structure Plan for Gozo.

The project actions included:

- Carrying out a detailed study of the various wildlife, flora, geology and marine ecology as well as the pressures currently affecting the area.
- Identifying those negative pressures having most impact on the area and thus minimize such pressures.
- Bring together all the stakeholders involved in the area to set up a closer framework of collaboration leading to better administration of the area through meetings, seminars and workshops.
- Involvement of all the stakeholders in the drawing up of the conservation and management plan. (NTM, MEPA and WWF provided the basis through the Steering Committee to the compilation of such data)
- Identifying the short term and long term priorities necessary for the restoration of the area.
- Providing training sessions to those involved with the maintenance of the site.(Capacity Building).
- Restoration of the historical heritage and creation of a visitors centre to provide added value to the Dwejra experience to the visitor with educational material, exhibition and guided educational walks.
- Setting up a marine protected area to protect the ecology area and provide value for the foreign and local divers as well as help the fisheries close to the MPA.
- Introduction of signage and interpretational panels to provide further information to visitors, and encourage more visitors for the benefit of the local community
- Draw up a sustainability plan to take the project beyond the three year phase of the LIFE grant
- Study environment friendly energy ways for the use of resources in the area.

The area covering this project was an ambitious one as this was the biggest conservation project even embarked up – that of 8 square kilometers (5.5 Km squared of terrestrial and coastal park and 2.5 km squared of MPA) . One is to point out that with an area having so much concentration of activity raging from recreational, tourism and business, the problems that arise are bound to be significant.

The project problems can be classified as follows:

- Lack of funds (Life, MEPA and NTM aid to start project) Sustainability plan to help take project further beyond date (Considered as medium problem)
- Conflicts between stakeholders – Environmental, commercial and personal interests. (Solution - Meetings and workshops to bring together all stakeholders to give the feeling of ownership to the project and see benefits). (considered relatively High problem)
- Quarries and the degradation of the habitat and scenic asset. Find how these can minimize effect and benefit economically. (considered as Medium problem)
- Lack of law enforcement (illegal off roading, camping, bird trapping and hunting, illegal buildings, illegal dumping etc) Project to train and set up wardens (considered as Medium level problem)
- Identify all stakeholders. Seek help from Local Council and Ministry for Gozo. (considered as a Low problem).

Project stages

The total cost of the project was of Euro 321,000 with Euro 211,000 funded by the European Union, Euro 72,000 by MEPA and EUR 38,000 by Nature Trust (Malta).

The project was carried out in four main stages.

Stage One

Stage one commenced with the consultation stage. All stakeholders were brought together, and meetings on the way forward were held with all. Nature Trust aimed to make all stakeholders feel that they owned the project and feel part of the success while at the same time appreciate that such a project would be of economic benefit to those sectors who make a living from the site. MEPA, as the authority concerned, also play an important role at this stage.

This was not easy for two main reasons; first Gozitans, as in all minor islands depending on the mainland or bigger island saw Maltese as interfering with their free way of life. It was not easy and it took the project Coordinator over a year to obtain the trust of the gozitans. However once the trust was obtained communication was smooth. Second, MEPA being a government agency, was not trusted by most as many citizens have more trust in NGOs. The friction between stakeholders and MEPA was sometimes rather high and the beneficiary had to act as the mediator or bridge in such issues

The discussions helped for example,

- the Diving clubs to realise that as the site is a nature reserve and a marine protected area more quality diving tourists would visit it to enjoy its marine ecology.
- the fishermen would realise that outside the MPA zone the fish population will increase as has happened in other MPAs run by WWF around Italy.
- the tour operators will feel that the site offers value for money with guided tours and interpretation panels, etc encouraging more eco tourists

- the boat ride people will see higher quality tourists in a way that their operation would improve economically.
- the locals would realise that the long term sustainability of the project, as being proposed, will enable them to continue enjoying the beauty of the site for many years to come and, it will also have positive commercial spill-over effects, as it will continue to be a prime attraction for quality tourism.

With this site, being the first Nature Reserve on the Island of Gozo, schools would also be able to make use of the site for environmental education events. With Nature Trust now the FEE co-ordinators for Green Flag, this site will be used as an example of nature conservation for Gozitan school children in the EkoSkola project.

Furthermore it was hoped that the Quarry owners would appreciate how they can make alternative use of their existing quarries by turning them into tourist attractions, as was the case on the mainland where lime stone heritage parks were created.

Stage 2

Stage two involved the compilation of data and evaluation of existing data. This stage was very interesting as much more information on the site was catered. It also gave the project team an excellent idea of the whole site. This process made the compilation of a five year management plan simpler. The plan also focused on taking the project beyond the three year of the LIFE contract. The Management plan was drawn up with all those directly involved in the area. In this way all stakeholders felt they were all the time part of the project and made them feel proud that they were doing something for the area. Even the Hunters and trappers were approached during this process. It was not easy but in the end a balance was found and hunters finally accepted that the bird protected area within the reserve was being increased.

Stage 3

Stage three focused on the actual works on site covering the conservation of the site, cleaning of rubble, restoration of rubble walls and the creation of a fully fledged visitor centre to offer the Dwejra experience to all who visit the site. The zonation of the Marine Protected was identified.

It was at this stage that the first stumbling block occurred as MEPA decided to prolong the consultation process and the actual finalisation and approval of the management plan. This sent the project targets off by 12 months and created some friction between the beneficiary and one of the partners. As MEPA is the national agency responsible for such permits, the Beneficiary could do nothing more but try to push the project and reduce the delays impact. In fact once the approval was granted and go ahead given all works focused on trying to gain as much of the time lost and keep with the project targeted end date. All efforts and extra hours done on a voluntary basis by the beneficiary gave positive results as project was finished within the time frames.

NTM had also proposed the use of the Dwejra Tower again as the main visitors centre till the issue of the other visitors centre was solved by MEPA especially since due to this delay the beneficiary had reached an agreement with the land owner that the visitors centre expenses

would be carried out by third parties. This allowed the beneficiary to use the Life funds for the centre in getting the tower fully set up till all issues were solved. The Dwejra tower today offers information to visitors, two DVD projections on the park, booklet, and exhibition panels. To keep also in line with EU consideration on Climate Change the energy to run the centre is today 100 percent solar generated. This added to the educational pillar in demonstrating that renewable sources were possible for the Maltese Islands.

Stage 4

The fourth and final stage was the creation of signage, interpretation panels, organisation of the visitors' flow, exhibition for the centre, a video, education leaflets, training of wardens and on site guides. During this stage a sustainability plan was compiled to take the project beyond the March 2007 date and into the future. As the project was still developing due to the delays in the implementation stage, the report kept changing especially with regards to the car park facilities since these were still being set up in parallel with the plan

Lessons learned

The entire project has been considered as a major learning curve for all in the team especially the beneficiary which already managed 5 other sites in the Maltese Islands. The project has given us all an extensive overview of project management with regards to environmental management. One of the main issues considered fundamental was that one should not take all partners for granted and that when a constraint is identified contingency plans should be made

The main benefits in the projects with regards to the learning curve was

- Consultation and dealing with various stakeholders
- Dealing with the authorities especially during tight time frames
- Getting to know more EU directives such as the birds and habitats directives
- Dealing with eco tourism issues
- Conservation in a large area
- Marine Protected areas

The main frustrating issues were

- Delays beyond the coordination control
- Stakeholder inter conflicts
- Pressing for enforcement
- Not having enough time (due to initial delays) to monitor success of project

The positive moments of the project were

- Obtaining the shareholder trust
- Seeing birds fly into the park and remain there without being shot or trapped
- Getting to positive feedback from visitors
 - Having the Life flag flying in such a site as this shows EU support was given

Successful results

- The site is finally being managed
- Visitors are not degrading the area

- More collaboration between stakeholders
- Species within the site have a higher level of protection
- The set up of one of the first MPAs in Malta
- More response from the enforcement units
- Environmental education activities on site
- Promotion of eco tourism
- Higher attention from national authorities
- Interest by farmers within the site for more environment friendly agricultural activities
- Support by the Tourism authorities

Conclusion

Nature Trust (Malta) now looks forward so as to continue with this challenge to conserve one of Malta's richest ecological site and hopes that now thanks to the EU Life instrument Dwejra conservation has been completed, Dwejra will classify as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. NTM feels that with the support of MEPA, WWF Italy and all stakeholders involved, all targets were finally reached. This project has not only fully protected and conserved the area, but will provide value for money for the tourism sector, and enjoyment to all who visit. The project has also provided capacity building to the NGO who is heavily involved in site management in Malta. This will help NTM to improve in its work and become more professional.

LIFE, has also given the opportunity to NTM to mature in its work. This project can now be used as a case study for other NGOs to follow.

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