



Published in The Times of Malta, June 4th 2005

Travel and tourism can have profoundly negative effects on local culture if poorly managed. The intensive resource use often associated with this industry can harm local communities in several ways. For example, the overuse of water, energy, and other resources can cause pollution, which will be experienced by the resident population as the degradation of health and quality of life. If resources are used non-sustainably by Malta's visitors, fewer will be available for the country's residents both now and in the future. Additionally, travel and tourism within Malta can lead to "wear and tear" on the environment when visitors leave the roads and trails in vehicles or on foot. Aside from the environmental effects, travel and tourism can have profound social implications when guests are uneducated about or fail to respect local customs or if staff feels disempowered by guests or by hotel management.

Finally, hotels can educate guests regarding their potential environmental and social impacts, letting them know what they can do to leave the country as healthy as or better than they found it.

Broadly defined, ecotourism is "Tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific object of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural areas."

While still relatively small, ecotourism is one of the fastest growing segments of the tourism industry and presents special management challenges. According to a study carried out in the US by the Ecotourism Society in 1997, international ecotourists numbered 317 million with direct economic impact of \$250 billion.

In most countries, there usually is no coordination between programs that promote and market tourism and those that manage coastal and marine areas. Integrated coastal management often tends to be done within environmental or planning agencies. The Gaia Foundation set up in 1994 to protect Malta's environment and serve as a prototype for a sustainable society, is trying to bridge the gap. In August 1996 the foundation entered into a contract with the Environment Protection Department to manage the Ghajn-Tuffieha coastal area, and enforce regulations against off-roading, camping and bushfires. "Malta's main environmental resources you can say are located on the coast itself", says Rudolf Ragonesi, Gaia's executive director. However the scope of the foundation has grown to encompass 14 different projects, amongst them an organic farm, a nursery specialising in endemic and indigenous plant species and a visitor's centre. Each project bears a Greek mythological name reflecting the essence of its outreach. Thus project Galatea (a great sculpture, created by Pygmalion, king of Cyprus and brought to life by Aphrodite) focuses on cultural restoration, whilst project *Odysseus* (Homer's way-ward traveller) promotes sustainable tourism.

This latter project seeks to integrate eco-friendly activities such as horse riding, sailing, windsurfing, surfing, paragliding and trekking with the conservation of the Ghajn-Tuffieha and Ramla coastal zone areas. The sandy beaches, so popular in the summer are secondary to the cliffs and clay hills offering sheer vistas and opportunities for outdoor activity in the winter.

“The word eco-tourism, is a bit of a misnomer for Malta”, Rudolf concedes, “because eco-tourism is more the idea of being immersed and treading very lightly in nature, which considering the over-use of land and the density of the local and tourist population in Malta, would be overstretching the imagination.” We prefer to use the term sustainable tourism and of course specifically within the coastal zone which has been taken up so much by tourist related activities.” On a practical level, the Gaia Foundation (Gaia means mother earth) is working on the organisation of walking trails, with appropriate maps and interpretation points, through the conservation areas. Visitors to the sites are made familiar with the features of ecological, geological and archaeological importance without contributing to their degradation.

Gaia aims to “encourage those types of tourists looking specifically to have more of a natural holiday, something a bit more outdoors, more nature and culture oriented.” Rather than marketing eco-tourism on a large scale, the foundation encourages individuals, via the Gaia website, to combine a holiday with a volunteering experience on one of their many projects. Volunteers usually come for three or four months. They are given accommodation; bicycles for transport and use of the organisation’s vehicles run on bio-diesel. Whilst contributing to the foundation’s work they may avail themselves of organic produce and a waste separation system. The idea, Rudolf says is to “provide those tools which would make an individual’s personal sustainable lifestyle possible.” Other ‘eco-tourists’ come in the form of school children, participating in one to three day workshops organised by the foundation. Educating the minds of tomorrow, the workshops, rope in sports, nature walks, night hikes and also hands on participation in the project.

This June, the Gaia Foundation will be launching ‘Gaiafest’ a festival of holistic living at the ‘Elysium Visitor Centre’ in Ghajn Tuffieha. The festival, an extension of the Odysseus project, marketed in its own right as a viable form of eco-tourism, endeavours to bring various aspects of human lifestyles under one roof. In addition to stalls selling organic food, natural health products, services and fair-trade goodies, practical demonstrations, and talks will be held in the centre’s conference hall which seats up to 70 persons. The topics cover diverse themes such as: complementary therapies, ecology, philanthropy, nutrition and diet, martial arts, animal welfare, the environment and respect for life. Gaiafest, Rudolf stresses is “about living lives that are not disjointed, about becoming aware of how our bodies, the products we buy and use, our collective inner journeying, and the landscape we live in are interrelated.” The plan is for this festival to become an annual fixture.

Recognizing the importance of sustainable tourism, Malta’s Tourism Authority has developed an eco-certification program for tourism accommodation establishments. The program, begun in 2002, aims to help hotels reduce their waste by up to 50% while lowering energy costs by 15-35% and water use by 15-45%. Incorporating both environment and social issues, into every facet of a hotel’s activity, The *Malta Green Hotels Guide*, a US collaboration between ‘Sustainable Development International Corp.’ and James Madison University (Virginia), lets guests know what they can do to help hotels commitment to becoming ‘greener’, whilst encouraging them to protect local eco-systems.

Guests who are new to Malta and its cultures might have little knowledge of the country’s local customs and environment resulting often inadvertently in activities that harm Malta’s sometimes fragile environment, leaving it more vulnerable to degradation and less beautiful for future visitors. These tips are as relevant to Maltese visiting foreign countries.

The guide, available on the Gaia website downloads page, has the following suggestions to make for the conscientious ‘sustainable tourist’. During your stay:

- Purchase eco-friendly products and services during your visit. Avoid local products or services made from endangered species.
- Turn off room lights, televisions, and other electronic equipment when they are not being used. Turn off air conditioners where possible and open windows for ventilation.

- Save energy and increase your summertime comfort by closing window shades before leaving your room during the daytime.
- Notify Housekeeping when you want linens and towels changed rather than changing them automatically on a daily basis.
- Save water by turning off the water while shaving or brushing your teeth.
- Walk, bicycle, and use public transportation in order to prevent or reduce pollution.
- Noise can stress wildlife. Stick to specified Walking trails to ensure that native plant and animal communities are not trampled. Do not off-road.
- Don't litter. Use glass-bottled water instead of plastic. Separate waste, where facilities are provided
- Enquire about your hotel's commitment to greening, and ways in which you can contribute.
- Refrain from picking plants, collecting or hunting wildlife, and any activities that might cause erosion, reduce the country's biological diversity and compact soils.
- Ask your hotel about local environmental laws that might affect you and Local customs, which you should be aware of.