

# Ecotourism at Ghajn Tuffieha

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Ecotourism, while still relatively small, 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 817 million with direct economic impact of \$250 billion.

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".

In most countries, there usually is no coordination between programmes 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, among 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, while project Odysseus (Homer's wayward traveller) promotes sustainable tourism.

The 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



Ecotourism: Travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated areas while admiring and studying the scenery.

secondary to the cliffs and clay hills offering sheer vistas and opportunities for outdoor activity in the winter.

"The word ecotourism is a bit of a misnomer for Malta", Dr Ragonesi concedes. "Ecotourism 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 ecotourism 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. While contributing to the foundation's work they may avail themselves of organic

produce and a waste separation system. The idea, Dr Ragonesi says, is to "provide those tools which would make an individual's personal sustainable lifestyle possible."

Other "ecotourists" come in the form of schoolchildren, 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.

Yesterday the foundation launched 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 ecotourism, endeavours to bring various aspects of human lifestyles under one roof.  
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