

THE PATH HOLISTICALLY TRAVELLED

When Rudolf Ragonesi finally shut his commercial law books in 1997, rolled up the sleeves of his plaid chequered shirt and donned a pair of green wellies, he was walking into a sense of mission. Not just an empty field of grass, but a feeling “of something worthwhile doing”, creating a pilot project of a ‘sustainable society’ within our lifetime.

The Gaia foundation, set up in 1994, together with founder member David Marinelli is the prototype. The mission statement of the foundation (Gaia means mother earth) reads: ***‘To promote and implement ways through which human beings can interact meaningfully with their environment without denying future generations their right to do the same.’***

As a student, Rudolph wanted to focus on community issues and saw law as a “useful tool to help in service oriented work”. Combining a strong need to be outdoors, he got involved in the environmental movement, identifying a missing link where it came to actual hands on environmental management specifically related to the coastal zones. “Malta’s main environmental resources you can say are located on the coast itself”, he states in his languid flowing voice, but because the initial idea was to look at community issues in general, the foundation’s brief doesn’t just focus on conservation. In fact the scope of the foundation has grown to encompass 14 different projects. Each project bears a Greek mythological name reflecting the essence of its outreach. Thus project *Odysseus* (Homer’s way-ward traveller) promotes sustainable tourism, whilst project *Galatea* (a great sculpture, created by Pygmalion, king of Cyprus and brought to life by Aphrodite) focuses on cultural restoration.

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. 1998 saw the birth of project *Elysium* (the name given to the famed luscious green fields enjoyed by the righteous after death), encouraging bio-diversity, landscaping and tree planting. This was followed by a management contract for ir-Ramla in Gozo, endorsed by the Department in December 2000. During the same year Gaia, established its own nursery, the first of its kind, specialising in indigenous and endemic plant species, allowing the foundation “on the basis of economy of scales to produce again far more than we would have been able to purchase.” Bolstered by European funding, the next step was sustainable agriculture and the commissioning of a report on organic farming assessing soil quality, crop rotation, companion farming, pest management and control. Project *Persephone*, was launched as a result, an organic club incorporating five other producers (two from Gozo and three from Malta) and consumers. “The idea is for it to be a living example to other producers who would be encouraged to take up organic farming and also to increase public awareness.”

“There shouldn’t be a difference between what you do as a job and your life. Your career becomes your lifestyle. When I gave up the general legal practice to get involved in this, in a sense it was a big move not just from a work front but to a general lifestyle front.” Rudolf gets his buzz from seeing something come to fruition. “We are in the process of setting up a system to allow and facilitate people not just to talk about a better environment but actually to set up systems for a more sustainable lifestyle. This blends itself to the possibility that the individuals like me will be able to live that alternative lifestyle, not simply because I am working in an environmental project or an alternative project but because we are providing those tools which would make your individual personal sustainable lifestyle possible.” On a practical level, the foundation’s vehicles run on bio-diesel, they have a waste separating facility on the beaches and at the visiting centre where Gaia members may bring their waste. The foundation sells vegetables (in transition to organic), produced on their farm, organic cleaning detergents, toothpaste and deodorant, preserves, and fair trade commodities. Although finances remain ‘every NGO’s nightmare’ – the obvious thing is that if we had a large budget we’d have more personnel, – Gaia is aiming to establish its own ‘core-funding’ which is not dependent on outside

grants. Besides the sale of organic produce, funding comes in the form of sustainable tourism, (providing much needed feedback) and company sponsored tree-planting projects. The foundation also organises one to three day workshops for schools, focusing on both “the educational and outdoor experience” incorporating sports, nature walks and night hikes and also hands on participation in the project. “We promote it by informing schools through circulars, our website, or through word of mouth. Sometimes we go to them directly, sometimes they come to us.”

The foundation employs between four and six members of staff, most of whom work on a part-time basis. However a large number of volunteers, mostly foreign, on long stays, contribute greatly to Gaia’s many branches, which are structured in such a way for anyone to focus on one or two projects. “The long term idea for each project to develop on its own merits, large enough to have a national impact”, enabling Rudolf to take a well-deserved “Sabbatical”, away from his sundry responsibilities to the foundation, staff and funders. Juggling his time between Gozo and Malta, he’d “like to take time off to go back to learning languages, maybe even use the time to network with other projects, to get experience with a project overseas,” he sighs, his mellifluous laidback tone in keeping with his slim, long, and rangy appearance. “The thing that motivates me is a sense of meaning, growing and learning” he states emphatically. “I think what is interesting is that people tend to forget that we keep growing. When they’ve finished their studies and get into work mode, the learning curve has come to an end.”

“What I enjoy most is seeing the projects up and running, from their germination stage, making the drudgery of the first two or three years before their flowering, worthwhile because there is a lot of hard work, a lot of patience that goes into it... We set out to be groundbreaking, but then you need to keep up the good example and maintain a good standard.” Letting off steam, Rudolf indulges in a “combination of intense physical and intense mental aspects” playing football and other sports, and reading voraciously. “I thought I’d be working more outdoors, but at the end of the day you spend most of the day behind a computer or on the phone... I read a lot on, history, current affairs, political affairs, health and environment issues, philosophy, archaeology. I don’t allocate my reading time to fiction and literature anymore.”

Rudolf will be doing less reading this June, as the foundation gears up for ‘Gaiafest’ a festival of holistic living at the ‘Elysium Visitor Centre’ in Ghajn Tuffieha. Taking on where the well-received ‘Body, Mind, Spirit’ Fairs left off, ‘Gaiafest’ promises to be a fun filled outdoor cornucopia, with stalls selling organic food, natural health products, services and fair-trade goodies. In addition to the external events, practical demonstrations, seminars and informal discussions 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.

“The idea is for people to come for a stroll to a place where there is entertainment, information, education, food and live music, and soak up the general experience” says

Rudolf and the plan is for this festival to become an annual fixture.

Gaiafest will be held on the long weekend in June, from Friday the 3rd to Tuesday the 7th, which is a public holiday. Doors open at 18.00hrs. Entrance fee 75c. For those wishing to take part in this festival or for a comprehensive programme of events please contact the Gaia foundation at admin@projectgaia.org Tel: 2154473/4, website: www.projectgaia.org.